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University of Nevada, Reno

**Gone: A Short Story Collection**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
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by

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## Abstract

Point of view is analyzed in seven of my own fictional short stories. Both first person and third person limited points of view are used in the stories. Three are written in third person limited point of view and four are written in first person point of view. Similar examples of point of view from published, notable fiction are compared to the stories in the collection. The thesis explores how point of view works in each story in terms of character and plot, and why each point of view works differently than another point of view. The seven stories follow the introduction, which discusses the point of view choices and comparative examples. Collectively, the introduction and stories provide a creative examination of point of view.

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## Introduction

In her book on craft, Janet Burroway writes, “Point of view is the most complex element of fiction” (Burroway, 300). To understand the intricacies of point of view as a fictional element, the writer must understand the basic ideas behind point of view. How does a writer decide which point of view to use? How does point of view work to the advantage (or disadvantage) of the story or novel as well as the characters therein? And why do authors choose one point of view over another?

These questions may never be answered concretely. However, by studying examples from published short stories and novels as well as examples from creative pieces in this thesis, I will explore both first person and third person limited points of view and how they are implemented within my short stories.

There are three types of point of view: first, second, and third. There are variations within those categories, but most notably there are the discretions in third person point of view: omniscient, limited, and objective. In this thesis, I consider only two: first person and third person limited point of view. Limiting point of view in these stories provides a more in-depth look at two point of view choices, without having to analyze all (six) point of view options. Seven creative pieces comprise the short story collection. Three of the stories are told in third person limited point of view, while the other four are written in first person. For each of my short stories I will include similar illustrations of points of view from notable, published fiction. I will explore how the point of view works in these stories, and why one point of view works differently than another point of view. Finally, examples of published fiction will be juxtaposed

with my own creative pieces in terms of what choices I made regarding point of view, and how I made these choices.

Let us investigate the first person point of view. According to Van Cleave and Pierce, “There is no distinction between narrator and main character in first person because with this point of view choice, they are the same” (165). The narrator is a character in the story. The way a character narrates the story can reveal attributes that may be harder to convey in third person.

Take, for example, a passage from the short story “Dall” by Pam Houston:

I am not a violent person. I don't shoot animals and I hate cold weather, so maybe I had no business following Boone to the Alaska Range for a season of Dall sheep hunting. But right from the beginning, my love for Boone was a little less like contentment and a little more like a sickness, so when he said he needed an assistant guide I bought a down coat and packed my bags. I had an idea about Alaska: that the wildness of the place would enlarge my range of possibility. The northern lights, for example, were something I wanted to see. (85)

Here is a character whose narration suggests justification. She wants to explain why she followed this man out into the wilderness when she knew she should not. If this story were written in third person, it could sound like the narrator providing the reader with information rather than revealing something about the character herself: she knew she should not do something and she did it anyway, and now she feels she must justify that choice. Rather than have a separate narrator determine whether the character's choice should be warranted, the character herself offers to explain her actions. Thus, the reader can glean that the character is telling this story about herself for a reason, and that something about this story affected her, not just as the

character but as a narrator. LaPlante says, “Whose story is it when we have a first person narrator? The answer with an involved first person narrator is easy: the narrator. It’s about him or her. Look at the narrator for clues as to what the story is really about” (261).

Compare the example from Houston to the short story “Coyotes” in this thesis. Near the end, the narrator comes to a conclusion:

And then I couldn’t remember who was who. Was it the lawyer or the cop who liked cats? Who was it that gave me yellow tulips on my birthday? And why did it matter? It didn’t, I realized. They were both men with different faults and different virtues, and I wanted the one I couldn’t have because he wasn’t around to demonstrate his faults. Because somehow it would be better if I could have the unattainable one, the one that got away. And that made me wonder about women, and the unhappiness that we blame on men but really is rooted in our choices. Because there is always a point at which we chose. When love does not cloud our minds or hearts, when clarity steps in and we say, “I really don’t want him, do I?” (page 93 of this thesis)

The first person narration allows the reader to experience the realization at the same time as the character. Like the main character in “Dall,” the narrator of “Coyotes” displays the need to rationalize her decision—in this case to leave, not follow—her boyfriend. She is character who can express her epiphany—or sudden realization—and how she came to it without the aid of a third person narrator. The strong, independent, outspoken female voice comes across in both of these characters’ narrations.

How did I choose first person point of view for this story? The answer for this story and all the others in this collection is the same: I did not do it consciously. Judith Mitchell explores

this unconscious choice authors make in an essay following her short story, “A Man of Few Words” contained in Van Cleave and Pierce’s book on craft:

When I sit down to write a first draft of a story I rarely ponder craft issues. It’s only later, sometimes during revision, oftentimes not until the story is published that I’m willing to analyze why I wrote the way I did. Even then, I rarely analyze my own work unless I’m asked a specific question by a student or a reader or the editor of a creative writing textbook. But once asked, even though my choices were instinctive, intuitive, I usually find those choices fairly easy to justify or at least explain. When a story works, it’s because we’ve stumbled upon the right way to tell it. (207)

This instinct Mitchell refers to is how I reflect on my own point of view choices. When I began writing each piece I did not sit down beforehand and determine which point of view I thought would be best, at least not in any deliberate way. I do, however, see the unconscious choice reflected to the benefit of my characters.

Why is Margene in “Coyotes” telling her own story? Because she is an outspoken character—someone who has just told her boyfriend that she does not love him, in those plain terms. She is also reflective and inclusive, placing herself among other women and their unsuccessful relationship choices. A third person narrator could not make this inclusion (the grouping of Margene with other women) in such a profound way. It is one thing for a narrator to make an outward observation, it is another thing for Margene to make this connection herself. It is central to her epiphany in the story, and the epiphany becomes one of the reasons Margene shares her story—because she, as a character and a narrator, perceives that her current situation applies not only to her, but to womanhood.

Another example of how first person point of view is “Wild Ones” by Anne Bardaglio. This story uses first person to give the reader the narrating character’s perception of another character through the recounting of a story:

She first told me about him when I was eighteen. I was biking home from work on a summer evening and I was late, so she came looking for me. She was anxious, and I had barely loaded my bike into the trunk when she began talking, almost yelling, trying not to cry.

She told me how she was in her early thirties, driving through Lord’s Valley in western Pennsylvania, when a car behind her signaled to pull over. Thinking it might be an unmarked cop, she did. She cracked her window and watched the man approach. He jammed his hand through the crack and grabbed her by the throat. (95)

The reader does not get the mother’s story through the mother, or through a third person narrator—who might be more objective—but through the character of the daughter. Thus, the story can only be told through her lens, with her own thoughts and perceptions attached. The narrator reveals that at the telling of the story her mother was anxious, but the reader does not get to see why right away as she might if there was a third person narrator or if the story was narrated by the mother. It is true that a third person limited point of view could also attach the perceptions of the daughter upon hearing her mother’s story, but the first person narration allows the reader to experience the revelation along with the character. Moreover, her choice as a narrator to tell this particular story about her mother suggests the dramatic impact the story has had on her character and a compelling desire to tell it. The desire to tell her mother’s story would be ambiguous if the story were told in third person. The reader would be unable to successfully discern whether it

was the desire of the narrator or of the character for the story to be told. First person narration allows for this desire to come across clearly. Because if she did not want to tell her mother's story, she would not. Whereas in third person, her character may not have a choice about whether the narrator tells the story or not.

Similarly, in "Desert Cats" the narrator makes a choice to tell a story about a tiger attack on his brother's property:

The tiger flinched when the water hit his face and then moved to her other leg, tore the muscle from her calf, tendons dangled free of flesh. And while he gnawed her calf, he looked me in the eye. The look was familiar, not even frightening when separated from the situation, because it was the same as if he were eating a steak. Nicole opened her eyes briefly when the new pain began, tried to turn over and crawl but she was losing too much blood, going into shock. Her dress was bunched up around her stomach, its hem and her panties soaked in blood. (page 85 of this thesis).

What Dale notices during this scene is ultimately what he relays in his telling of the story. He remembers the look in the tiger's eyes, the way her dress bunched. These details, recounted in first person, tell the reader what details are imperative to Dale as a character and as a narrator.

The way Dale tells this story suggests that the attack is very important to him, that he remembers details, that he wants to tell it his way. The recounting shows something about Dale's character, the fact that he is able to recount this story suggests he is a character who needs to retell information to process it, especially traumatic material. This scene, told through first person point of view not only reveals a significant part of the plot but also reveals imperative parts of Dale's character through his own descriptions as the narrator.

The previous examples are first person narratives written in the past tense, meaning the narrators are telling their stories from some point in the future. There is a certain amount of safety involved with first person past tense, because the reader is able to determine that the narrator must still be alive at the end of the story. There is no guarantee of a narrator's safety in present tense, because, ultimately the narrative could end with the death of the narrator without violating the contract made between the author and reader in present tense versus past tense. This element of present tense adds more suspense to the narrative. First person present tense also creates the idea that the narrator is not reflecting as they would be in past tense, but processing the story as it is happening to them. An example exists in Chris Coake's short story, "Solos":

In the late afternoon of my husband's fourth day of climbing, his base camp calls me via satellite phone. The news is not so good. After climbing straight through the night, Jozef is now two-thirds of the way up the west face of Shipton's Peak. He has come farther on the face than anyone ever has. But now his radio is malfunctioning. (61)

This character presents her story urgently, because she is processing, not reflecting. At the start of this narrative, she does not know whether her husband will be okay or not. If this story was written in first person past tense, the character would be privy to the information as a narrator regarding her husband's survival. As it stands, the reader must process what is going on at the same time as the character. This first person present tense phenomenon also occurs in my short story, "Real Cowboy."

I don't like the look on my new wife's face as we ride into camp. She's the kind of woman who goes along with something at first and complains about it later. I attribute this particular look to soreness, from her saddle, which is new and stiff. Her mare is also

short stepping and I guess the twelve mile ride wore a good ache into her seat and legs.

The look she gives me from across her horse's neck as she dismounts is one I discount, the way you do when you first fall in love. (page 24 of this thesis)

As in the first example, the narrator does not know how the weekend with his new wife—camping out in the brush—will end. All he knows as a character and as a narrator is happening in the present narrative, and it is not starting well. He begins to contemplate what it might mean for their relationship if the weekend does not go as planned, and tries to come to conclusions about what his wife is feeling without asking her directly. In short, he is processing his present condition. What is unique about first person narrators in the present tense is that they are the kind of characters who are willing to tell their stories, but they may not be the type of characters to reflect or to dwell on past happenings, which is why their stories are told in the moment rather than in the future. This is the reason “Real Cowboy” is written in first person present tense, because Bart is not the kind of character to brag about himself, or to dwell on things later on; however, he is inclined to think things through, and, as an open and expressive character, he is able to narrate his own story in the present. This choice reflects that the story is about the way he attends to situations and other characters and the decisions he makes in the moment because of these inward processes.

One of the stories in this thesis collection differs from traditional first person point of view. “Morning Chores” is a first person address. The first person narrator is addressing another character in the story as “you.” Lydia Peelle wrote “Sweethearts of the Rodeo” with this same point of view choice:

We dare one another to do dangerous things: You dare me to jump from the top of the manure pile, and I do, and land on my feet with manure in my shoes. I double-dare you to take the brown pony over the triple-oxer jump, which is higher than his ears. You ride hellbent toward it, but the pony stops dead, throwing you over his head, and you sail through the air and land laughing. We are covered in scrapes and bruises, splinters buried so deep in our palms that we don't remember they are there. Our bodies forgive us our risks, and the ponies do, too. We have perfected the art of falling. (64)

In this story two preteen girls spend the summer at a horseback riding stable. The first person narrator addresses her friend, another character, as “you.” This implies that the relationship between the narrator and her friend is central to the story. The character addresses her friend directly because nothing about this story is as important as what she has to say to that friend about the summer they spent together. At the end of the story, the friend, the “you,” has a riding accident and winds up in the hospital. There, the man who runs the stable is holding her hand. The narrator perceives a change as her friend growing up, moving on, and becoming more interested in boys than their friendship. Thus, the progression of the relationship through the events of the summer described in the story becomes significant enough to the main character that she wants to speak to her friend about it. The point of view choice allows the main character to do that. As a result, the reader can perceive just how important the “you” is. If the story were written in typical first person, or in third person, the relationship between the two girls would not be emphasized as much.

My goal for “Morning Chores” was similar. I wanted the first person narrator to speak to another character without narration getting in the way. Here is a section of that story:

There was a time—was it weeks, months, years ago?—when you would have picked up on this, felt my frustration and left the group to ride with me. You wouldn't have talked, no, that's not what twin brothers are for. But you wouldn't keep laughing, keep shouting, keep riding ahead despite the tug of energy pulling you back to me. You wouldn't leave me behind because I was a girl, or for any other reason.

You wouldn't leave me behind. (page 23 of this thesis)

In this story, the main character feels the separation between her and her twin brother. Because the two characters are emotionally close, the main character feels comfortable addressing him throughout the story, ultimately saying, “hey, we’re drifting apart here.” This point of view choice allows for an intense intimacy between the characters, and suggests that their relationship is changing.

The three stories in the collection that have yet to be discussed in terms of point of view are written in third person limited. In her guide to creative writing, LaPlante describes third person limited point of view:

The knowledge of the narrator has been limited in some way. A limited third person narrator is not omniscient—she or he does not have unlimited powers. He or she might only be able to see what one character is thinking or feeling; or may only know what characters are thinking, not what they are feeling; or may have knowledge of the past, but no knowledge of the future. There are all sorts of ways that a narrator's knowledge can be “limited.” (268).

In third person limited there is a relationship between the narrator and the main character; most third person stories are limited in some way to the perspective of the main character. The story is

told in third person, as opposed to first person, because the characters in the story are unable to narrate their own stories and must have a third party to do it for them. For example, the novel *Crazy Heart* is written in third person limited with a close psychic distance, meaning that the narrator is restricted to the thoughts and feelings of the main character, Bad Blake. Because of this limitation, the narrator does not divulge information that Bad himself would not be forthcoming about. Both the narrator and Bad cannot come to terms with the destructive nature of his drinking, which is his downfall. The closeness between the narrator and Bad can be seen in the following passage:

He is trying to shake a dream. At a rest stop in New Mexico he dreamed he crouched before a low stone wall. Behind him was a man with a gun. On either side was one of his ex-wives. Bad understood they were to be shot, slaughtered like pigs. He wanted to run, but he could not decide whether to run or try to save one or both of the wives. He could not decide and he could not run. He remained crouched and waiting. He can still feel the pressure on the tendons in the backs of his legs.

He goes for his Pall Malls. The pack is nearly empty, loose and slick with sweat.

(Cobb, 3)

The narrator is unwilling to disclose anything about what this dream might mean, or whether Bad has had this dream before, because the narrator is limited. If the narrator was omniscient, then the narrative would speak differently about Bad's dreams, thoughts, and actions, perhaps enlightening the reader with insightful, authorial information. However, in third person limited point of view, the narrator, the character, and the reader are bound in a close knit relationship. Burroway, in her guide on narrative craft writes about this type of relationship, "The advantage

of the limited omniscient voice is immediacy. In the process, a contract has been made between the author and the reader, and this contract must not now be broken” (303). This contract allows the reader to develop a trust in the narrator that the reader might not otherwise be able to develop with an unstable, unreliable character such as Bad. This type of unstable narrator, assisted by a third person perspective can be seen in the short story “Daughters”:

On the drive home from the doctor’s office Janice pops gum into her mouth, chews it brutally. It is stale and she spits it out the window. She stops at a gas station and buys American Spirits. Back in the car she smokes one and feels sick, then crams them in the glove box under receipts and napkins.

When she turns off the highway onto the long dirt driveway of the ranch the unwavering mountain sun illuminates the doctor’s prescription sticking out of her purse. More injectables, more hormones. It remains unfilled though she passed several drug stores on her way out of town. Her mother, Tracy, often forgot to refill prescriptions, leaving the tiny slips with unreadable doctor scrawl in bathroom drawers. (pages 44-45 of this thesis)

The narrator is willing to admit that Janice passed several drug stores without refilling her prescription for pregnancy hormones because Janice is thinking about how her own mother used to forget to refill prescriptions. Ultimately the story reveals circumstances in which this is important to Janice’s development as a character. In this passage, though, the narrator is only willing to admit what Janice admits to herself; she passed the drug stores on purpose, and to Janice avoiding the pharmacy is related to her mother’s past discrepancies with medication. Like

Bad Blake, Janice is a character unwilling to address personal flaws, so a third person narrator must assist in the telling of her story.

These two characters cannot tell their stories reliably, but they also *will not* tell their stories, which is another aspect of third person limited. Bad Blake would not tell his story, because in the end, he is a drunk deadbeat lying in a ditch after wrecking his car. There is no glory there, only disappointment. The story is still about him, just as it would be in a first person story. But the difference between “Crazy Heart” and one of the first person stories “Coyotes,” is that the main character of that story wants to share her revelation in the wake of her failed relationship. It is more optimistic, but it is also a story that the character herself would feel comfortable sharing because of the conclusion she comes to. Bad Blake comes to no such optimistic conclusion, so it is left up to the narrator to fulfill the contract with the reader and share where Bad ends up and how he gets there.

This same idea can be applied to “Daughters.” While Janice does not end up drunk in a ditch, she comes to the rather sad conclusion that she will never have children, and she missed her chance to have children because of her dissenting relationship with her mother, and the troubled relationship she’s witnessed between her mother and grandmother. In addition, Janice, a quiet, determined character is not forthcoming about her faults and failures. She could not tell the story of her failed motherhood without the help of a third person narrator.

There are times, though, when the author feels it appropriate to deviate from the third person limited contract. In “Bullet in the Brain” Tobias Wolff shifts from third person limited to a slightly more omniscient narrator. The shift can be seen in the following passage:

Anders burst out laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, “*Capiche*—oh, God, *capiche*,” and at that the man with the pistol raised the pistol and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders’ skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of iron transports and neuro-transmissions. (203-204)

The reader begins the story limited by Anders’ perspective, but when the bullet hits the brain, the narrator takes over completely, filling in the gaps that Anders’ perspective can no longer explain because that perspective of the world is unalterably changed. This shift is justified when Anders becomes physically unable to continue in the limited perspective as a character, and the final pages of the story recount the last memory he has as the final neuro-transmitters fire. Wolff makes the decision to give his narrator more power than might typically be allowed in third person limited point of view because of the story’s ultimate desire to explain what happened in the final moments of Anders’ life, and how the final moment of life might be a memory forgotten forty years ago, something so trivial yet so profound that it is unimaginable.

I, too, make the decision in my short story “Red Dancers” to break my established third person limited point of view. Eugene is the main character to which the perspective is limited throughout the beginning of the story. The narration stays with his thoughts and actions without shifting. However, during the scene in which Eugene must auction off the mustang he has trained

during his stint in prison, my narration shifts to be omniscient. Eugene's father—a major component in his character development—decides to attend auction day, but Eugene will not know this until years later. The specific point of view change comes in this passage:

The man stood near the back of the grandstand during the presentation in the large arena. The prisoners each presented their horses, showing what they could do, standing on the saddle, doing backflips from the horses' backs. The grandstand marveled at the spectacle of prisoner turned horse trainer, mustang turned bomb-proof mount. The man watched as a prisoner entered the arena on a red roan mustang. He watched as the pair moved in tandem, as the grandstand whooped and hollered at the man galloping around the arena without a bridle and then sliding off over the rear-end of the horse. He watched, then slowly turned and hobbled to his car.

Years later, when it was all entirely too late, Eugene would receive a letter, handwritten in a nurse's feminine scrawl. The letter would describe a May morning during the years of Eugene's incarceration and Eugene would smile, knowing that the old man had stood silently, in his stubborn way, and watched as Eugene's horse brought in the day's highest auction bid. (page 108 of this thesis)

After this section, the point of view shifts back to Eugene. Why do I make this shift instead of staying in Eugene's limited perspective the entire story? To me, the justification lies in the scene during which I chose to shift point of view.

This story is ultimately a redemption story. Eugene becomes incarcerated. In prison he trains a wild mustang to trust people, in turn Eugene learns to trust another living being, and what seems like a punishment—his incarceration—helps him build his character. The scene where

the mustang is sold embodies this redemption as Eugene sees that his work is worth something to the rancher who buys the horse, and to the horse itself, which will now have a job and a life because of the training Eugene has given him. The shift in point of view allows the reader to see this redemption from an outside perspective, because it cannot be seen from Eugene's limited perspective.

The final story in this thesis collection is "Gone." Another advantage of third person limited point of view is that the character can be described in a way that they would not describe themselves, which can give readers imagery regarding not only the character but about setting and plot. For example the first paragraph of Annie Proulx's short story, "The Mud Below":

Rodeo night in a hot little okie town and Diamond Felts was inside a metal chute a long way from the scratch on Wyoming dirt he named as home, sitting on the back of bull 82N, a loose-skinned brindle Brhama-cross identified in the program as Little Kisses. There was a sultry feeling of weather. He kept his butt cocked to one side, his feet up on the chute rails so the bull couldn't grind his leg, brad him up, so that if it thrashed he could get over the top in a hurry. The time came closer and he slapped his face forcefully, bringing the adrenaline roses up on his cheeks, glanced down at the pullers and said, "I guess." (43)

Proulx sets the stage in a way that Diamond Felts as a first person narrator would not be able to because of his focus on the bull. The reader can determine something about the character, how the character interacts and fits into his environment, and how the environment exists around him. The third person point of view gives the author more power to divert from the character to highlight other aspects of the story like setting. Like in this passage, Proulx reveals that Diamond

is in a hot little okie town, on a rodeo night, probably not a thought Diamond Felts would have astride bull 82N. But then Proulx zeroes in on Diamond's perspective, how he is sitting, what he is thinking. She is able to do this in third person limited, but in first person, Diamond might think about the way he is sitting. The why would come as second nature to him and thus the reader would not be privy to those thoughts—at least not from a character like Diamond.

Third person limited point of view allows me to do something similar with the first paragraph in my story, "Gone":

Loretta's belt buckle flaps against her thigh as she treads through the deep dirt of the fairgrounds, boots in one hand, nearly empty bottle of tequila in the other. The morning sun flickers up over the grandstands. She pauses in her assault to set her boots and bottle down on a picnic table and fasten her large, silver buckle. Her jeans are looser than last night, so she tugs her belt tighter. She can see his trailer now. Others are up, loading horses and cattle, packing after the long weekend of rodeo. No one notices her until she bangs on the door of Ed's trailer. Her fist thuds against the door, and she hears beer cans scatter inside. The door opens. (page 110 of this thesis)

In third person I am able to write something about the setting, the deep dirt of the fairgrounds, the sun over the grandstands—Loretta, hungover and unhappy, would not take note of if she were narrating the story. She might notice how dry her mouth is, how her head hurts, how angry she feels, but that is not how I wanted the story to start. I wanted to give a sense of the setting, where this character was at that moment so that the reader could come to understand how she got there. Third person gives me the power to describe the character how I want her described, and also to write details about the setting that are not filtered through the lens of a first person narrator who

wouldn't do a good job describing those details. Loretta as a character is too scattered, too heartbroken over the loss of her father, and too desperate to explain her world in a way that's appealing to a reader. However, by using third person limited point of view, her story can be told in a clear and desirable way.

For the stories that comprise this collection, the point of view choice is rooted in character. If the story is about that character, if it is about how that character perceives themselves and the world around them, then that story is written best in first person. If the story is about the main character, but the character is unable or unwilling to tell her own story, then the story is suitably told in third person limited point of view.

Let the stories and the characters speak for themselves.

## Morning Chores

I hear Grandpa's heavy feet hit the floor in the other bedroom and wait for you to stir.

You keep snoring, and I wait until Grandma turns on our light.

"Time to get up," she says, "time to feed."

You moan, turning over towards the window. I grab your shoulder.

"Wake up."

You swat my hand.

"Come on, Glen," I say, not wanting to start the chores on my own.

I slide down off the tall bed and pull the covers with me onto the floor. Your skinny legs stick out of your faded boxer shorts. Your sleep shirt is one of Grandpa's t-shirts that Grandma shrank when she washed it with her dusting rags.

"Addie," you whine, "stop." You reach behind you for the covers but they're all gone and only then do you sit up, squinting at me through narrowed, crusty eyes. Your hair is messed at the top and I laugh at your expression before going to use the bathroom.

You join me again outside, as I'm pulling on my boots. You already have yours on. I'm thinking about our ride later, after chores and how I saw a skinny kid with Jed's youngest boy last night, riding bicycles too small for them down the big hill at the end of their driveway. I wonder if he's a cousin of theirs, or a homeschool kid.

"It's cold," you say, nose red, teeth chattering.

I tuck my hands deep inside my coat pockets and head to the barn. You follow.

The horses bang their legs against the sides of the stalls, impatient for breakfast. They nicker as I open the door to the feed room. You open the bins and measure grain into buckets.

“I did hay last time,” I complain. The hay gets down into my shirt and now—recently—my bra. It tangles into my hair and I have to pick it out, because if I don’t Grandma will run a bristle brush over my head vigorously until the pieces are gone, scratching my scalp. You don’t say anything so I cut the twine off a new bale and begin counting out flakes. The fence is high enough that I have to heft each flake over my head to make it into the feed troughs on the other side, and a cascade of itchy stems and leaves falls over me as I lift them. I hold my breath to keep from inhaling hay. You’re slow with the grain and as you put it out I go to the water trough to break ice.

It’s so cold that the horses puff clouds through their nostrils. I blow my own breath so I can see it.

I chip away at the heavy layer of ice covering the horses’ water with a hoe. You stand behind me.

“Help,” I say, “why don’t you help?”

You grab the strainer and start scooping the chunks I’m making out onto the ground. There’s a heap already from all the cold mornings before. The top of it looks like knives, but the bottom has fused into a solid mass.

With the ice cleared, we begin cleaning pens. My hands are frozen despite my thick gloves, and my fingers protest the grip I have on the manure fork. My face burns from the air, but I hunch over and begin to muck. You join in without prompting this time, and I smile at your resignation to the morning and chores, as if you’ve finally accepted your fate.

The manure is frozen into piles that have become almost impossible to whittle away from the cold ground. A prong on my fork snaps off, brittle from the strain of chiseling. Frozen

nuggets of poop roll in every direction once I break a whole pile free, and then I chase after each one, scooping them up individually instead of raking them back into a pile, like Grandpa always tells us to do. You move the wheelbarrow from one spot to the next, not asking or expecting me to, and I know it's your way of making up for the hay earlier. As we finish cleaning, the first rays of sun filter through the morning cloud cover and I turn my face towards them, though they are not warm, just bright. We dump the manure at the back of the property line with the rest and then go to catch the horses. Grandpa is outside now. He scans his eyes over the pens and nods to us.

He halts his horse and so do you and I and we lead them all out to the hitching post. I brush my bay gelding, trying to get his thick winter coat to lay flat, with no luck. I pick the frozen dirt and poop out of his hooves, shedding my scarf and hat as the day gets gradually warmer. My gelding is tall, so I grab a stool before hoisting my heavy saddle up over his withers. I don't look at you while I do this; you have grown taller than me in the last months. But not so much taller, because without the stool your saddle only makes it halfway onto your mare's back when you swing it up, and she clenches her muscles until you push it all the way on. You quickly lift it and adjust the saddle blanket, looking back over your shoulder to see if Grandpa or I saw. I warm up the cold, metal bit on my bridle in my gloved hands, pretending I didn't.

Grandpa helps me mount, saying, "One, two, three," as he propels me up into the saddle. You lead your horse over to the fence and scramble on. Grandpa lifts a foot up to his long stirrup and swings aboard. We ride out across the fields. The horses are fresh, so we ease them into a line, side by side, and trot them over the grass. Their hooves crunch, pounding out a hollow rhythm on the hard earth.

We meet up with the other riders, who make their way across the field to us. It's Jed and three of his boys. The skinny kid is with them. Close up I can see he's a big nosed kid on a paint horse that's almost short enough to be called a pony. Jed and Grandpa talk for a minute. I look at you and you're looking at the new kid.

"My name's Pete," he says. And I almost laugh because it's such a silly, perfect name for him.

"I'm Glen," you say, "that's my sister, Addie." You jerk a thumb towards me.

"Are you twins?" The skinny kid asks you.

"Yes," I say, but my voice comes out too quiet, like my vocal chords have frozen over.

"Yes," you say, much louder.

I fall behind as we begin the ride, wanting to be in the back where I can see everyone and no one can see me. The cows are hunched together in the small field to our right. Grandpa gets down to open a gate and we all walk through. Everyone says "thank you" as they pass except the skinny kid. I ride up between him and you while we wait for Grandpa to get back on.

"You're supposed to say thank you when someone opens a gate for you," I tell him.

"Addie, don't," you say.

"Huh?" The skinny kid gives me a weird look and then kicks his horse into a trot after Jed's boys. You frown at me and I shrug at you. You trot after them. I walk with Grandpa and Jed.

We only have to move the cows a short distance, but Jed's boys are whooping and hollering like they're the last cowboys in the United States. You and the skinny kid are quieter. I push from far back, not from the sides where you are. You'll have to deal with drifters, and even

though I'm on the better cow horse, I can tell you want to do it. Once, while you're busy with a cow that's tried to break away from the herd, a big calf balks at the skinny kid's pony and turns around.

"Addie," Grandpa shouts, "get on him." There's no option for laziness or mistakes in the tone of Grandpa's voice. So, I drive my cow horse forward, his ears prick at the chance to work. But before I can get the cow turned, the skinny kid on the paint swoops in front of me, heading him off.

"I got it," he says.

And though I've never experienced it before, I get the strong feeling that he only does it because I'm a girl.

That if I was you, or any one of Jed's three boys, he would have stepped aside and watched. And it's because of this and you, ignoring me, and Grandpa giving me a "you could have done better" look that I again fall to the back, running a rough coat sleeve over my nose, which has started to run.

There was a time—was it weeks, months, years ago?—when you would have picked up on this, felt my frustration and left the group to ride with me. You wouldn't have talked, no, that's not what twin brothers are for. But you wouldn't keep laughing, keep shouting, keep riding ahead despite the tug of energy pulling you back to me. You wouldn't leave me behind because I was a girl, or for any other reason.

You wouldn't leave me behind.

## Real Cowboy

I don't like the look on my new wife's face as we ride into camp. She's the kind of woman who goes along with something at first and complains about it later. I attribute this particular look to soreness, from her saddle, which is new and stiff. Her mare is also short stepping and I guess the twelve mile ride wore a good ache into her seat and legs. The look she gives me from across her horse's neck as she dismounts is one I discount, the way you do when you first fall in love.

She pulls off her leather gloves and looks around the campground, barren and rutted. There's a tree shading a wooden table and the leftovers of a fire pit.

"There's not much to go on," she says.

I point to a place near the pit and say, "We can put the tent on that flat spot, after we clear the rocks."

I dismount and untie my saddle bags. Then undo the rope from the bedrolls on my saddle. Lacy notices her dog is missing and calls him. He comes trotting in, licking his lips.

"Chip found a rabbit," I say.

"That's disgusting."

She grabs Chip's collar, holds him at arm's length and inspects his mouth. Taking the horses, I hobble them before switching their bridles for halters.

"I've never seen a campground like this before, there's nothing here," Lacy says, "Where are the bathrooms?"

"There aren't any bathrooms. I guess you haven't done much camping."

She doesn't answer me then, but instead goes to start clearing the rocks. I watch her reach down to throw the first rocks out of the site, admiring the way her arm muscles flex with each toss. We clear the rocks and put up the tent. Lacy takes our bedrolls and rolls them out once I have the tent up. She lays down on them as I squat in the doorway of the tent, looking in at her.

"I've done a bit of camping," she says, propping herself on one elbow.

"Not this kind."

"How would you know if you never asked me?"

"Have you done this kind of camping?" I ask.

"No," she says, "my uncle had a trailer camper, we stayed in that when I was a kid. And there were bathrooms."

Even though the day's growing short, I crawl into the tent and crouch beside her. Reaching up, she kisses my cheek, and I grab her head and hold it while I rub my day old scruff against her cheek.

"Ouch," she says, hitting my chest, "you know I hate that."

"Got your camera?"

"Yes," she says, "but I just laid down. Don't you want to rest awhile?"

"We came out here so you could take those pictures. Didn't we?"

"I guess," she says.

"Unless you want to take pictures of me," I throw her a lopsided grin, "we better hit the trail and find some mustangs." Taking her hand, I pull her with me to the door and wait for her to grab the camera from the saddle bags.

"What are we going to do with Chip?"

“Tie him up,” I say and toss her an extra rope from my bags.

“Tie him to what?”

“One of the tent stakes,” I tell her, and go to bridle the horses. I see her disappear around the back of the tent with Chip.

“All set?” I ask when she gets back.

“I think so,” she says. I cup my hands below her stirrup and she puts her left foot in my hand.

“One, two, three,” I count, pushing her on three. She swings into the saddle and tugs her denim tank top down over her belt. I flip the reins up over her mare’s neck and hand them to her.

“This will be fun,” I say and mount my gelding. But as I push my hat firmly on my head and look off down the trail, I hear an engine coming up the road leading to the camp.

“A car,” Lacy says.

“I see it.”

I turn my horse towards it so he doesn’t get spooked. Whoever it is, they’re tearing up the road and throwing up a dust cloud. They slow down when they see us and the horses. The car, a beater by the lowest of standards rumbles to a stop and the engine cuts off. A skinny rat looking man steps out of the driver’s side, holding a beer can in one hand and slamming the door with the other. He’s followed by a large Indian lady wearing men’s sunglasses and an oversized t-shirt flaunting a wolf head—one of those things found at museum gift shops. The woman ducks her head back into the car and grabs a cooler. The rat man saunters towards us and pushes his baseball cap out of his eyes.

“Afternoon,” he says.

I get off my horse and take a step toward the man, stretching my hand out for a shake.

“Howdy,” I say and he takes my hand, pumps it once and lets go.

He turns back towards his woman and takes the cooler from her.

“You want a beer?” he asks me.

“No thanks,” I say.

“I’ll take one,” Lacy says from my shoulder. She’s dismounted and pulled off her riding gloves. The rat man smiles at her and hands her a Coors.

“What’s your name lady?”

“Lacy,” she says and pops the cap, “and that’s Bart.” She gestures towards me with her free hand. “We’re camping.”

“Well then. I’m Riley and that there is Abby.” He glances back towards the Indian woman.

“Nice to meet you,” Lacy says and leads her mare over to the wooden table, “you want to sit down for awhile?”

“Sure,” Riley says and follows her, “we’ve been driving around all day.”

Abby and I hang back away from the table but she goes to sit next to Riley after a quick glance at me, so I lead my horse over. I don’t like the look of Riley. Abby leaves her sunglasses on though the afternoon clouds have rolled in for good and blocked out the sun.

“Where exactly have you been driving?” I ask.

“Oh,” he says, “up and down the roads back here, it’s our day off.”

He winks across the table at Lacy and puts his arm around Abby's shoulder. Her back tenses, though I'm the only one who seems to notice, because Lacy takes another long drink of her beer and asks Riley for another. He lifts the cooler onto the table.

"Help yourself."

"Hey, Lace," I say, "we better get going if we want to get those pictures."

She flips her hair at me, and looks up through her lashes. "You are always so busy. Why don't you relax for a second? Why don't we socialize for a while, we have the whole weekend after all."

"Yeah, Bart," Riley says, "have a seat and a beer and we'll bullshit a little."

He pulls out a pack of cigarettes and offers them to me first, I shake my head, hook my thumbs through my belt loops.

Abby and Lacy both take a cigarette and take turns lighting up.

"What do you folks do for a living?" Abby asks.

"I finished beauty school last month, so I've been working at a hair dressing place," Lacy says, "and Bart works on his daddy's ranch."

"I thought your hair looked nice," Abby says, "I can always tell a hairdresser by their hair." She smiles at Lacy. Her own hair hangs down her back in a thick, black braid. "What are you doing up here besides camping?"

"Bart bought me a camera as a wedding present—we got married two weeks ago. I wanted to come here to take some landscape pictures, and pictures of the wild mustangs."

"She's going to decorate the new house with the prints," I say, "Aren't you honey?"

"That's the idea," she says and I get a genuine smile out of her.

“That’s sweet,” Abby says, “don’t you think that’s sweet, Riley?”

“Huh?” Riley says, tearing his eyes away from Lacy, “oh yeah, real sweet.” He stands up. “Sorry folks, but I gotta take a leak.” He walks around the back of a bush behind their car.

I use his absence to pry Lacy away, “I really do want you to take those pictures so we better get going again, maybe we’ll see Riley and Abby later.”

“Yeah,” Abby says, “go with your man there, Lacy. Riley and I better be getting on our way, too.”

“I guess we did plan on going,” Lacy says and stands up as Riley wanders back over.

“What’s all this?” he says, “you leaving already?”

“Yeah,” I say, “we’ve got something planned and we need to do it before dark.”

“All right,” he says, “don’t let us keep you.” He nods toward Lacy, “hope to see you again there Lacy.”

“Bye,” Lacy says as they walk back to the car. I put an arm around her shoulders.

“Come on, let’s go.”

Lacy uses the table as a mounting block, refusing my offer of a leg up. I mount up myself and move at a brisk walk towards the trail. Riley starts up the loud motor of the car and I see them turn back down the road the way they came.

As we ride out of camp I say, “All right, your job is to follow my instructions and take the pictures.”

She shoots me another one of those sour looks and rides ahead. I like the way her hair has come undone from it’s neat bun during the course of the day. It looks best around her shoulders, but she hardly ever wears it down except when we’re at home. I’m not the kind of man to tell her

the way I like it. When she tries on clothes before we go out or at the department store, and asks me if they look okay, I tell her yes every time and she smiles when she knows she looks good and changes when she thinks she doesn't.

“Where are these wild horses going to be?” she asks me, using her hand to grip the seat of her saddle as she turns back. Her mare stops in the trail and sprays urine, but not enough to empty her bladder.

“I've got a pretty good idea,” I say. I know she hates when I don't tell her the plan, but I'm a little put off by her stunt with Riley and the beers and don't feel like enlightening her.

The desert air makes for easy breathing in the late afternoon and I inhale the sage and the dirt, which is soft from rain a few days back. I let the feeling of riding run through me, the rock of my horse's rib cage as it moves back and forth between my legs and the pressure that runs from his mouth to my hands. My heels press into his sides and he kicks up as we break into a lope. My hat flies back, the neck string holding it on as we race past my wife and her mare. We jump a sagebrush and find the trail again. I smile back towards Lacy, who is already a stride behind me. Her mare's ears are pinned and there is a determined look on her face. Running is her favorite part of riding. While we were dating, if I didn't incorporate a run into our nightly trail rides she wouldn't ride with me for a week afterwards, insisting I go by myself because she was busy with learning a new way to cut, color, or style hair.

My gelding has more to give, but I know Lacy's mare is sore from the twelve miles we rode that morning and I don't want her to come up lame so I slow to a walk.

“That was fun,” Lacy says from behind me, breathless, and I hear her pat the mare’s neck. I smile at her as she rides up beside me and we lean forward over our saddle horns to balance our horses up a hill. When we get to the top, I stop and look out over the hills. Lacy dismounts.

“Look at this, Bart,” she says, “look how flat this boulder is.”

I turn from the view and look at the big, flat rock.

“I want to take this home and put it in the front yard and have a picnic on it every Sunday,” she says, leading her mare up to it and sitting cross legged on top of it. “Wouldn’t that be great?”

“That would be great,” I say, “but how exactly are you planning on getting it home?”

She frowns and runs a flat palm back and forth over the smooth surface of the rock.

“I guess we can’t,” she says, “it’s too heavy.”

She goes quiet and looks at the sun that’s thinking about setting. “Well maybe we can come back and have a picnic on it sometime. Doesn’t even have to be a Sunday.”

“Sure thing,” I say.

She comes down from the rock and says, “Now where are these damn ponies?” I turn my horse, pointing to the east.

“See that canyon?”

“Yes.”

“They’re on the other side of it, in that bunch of trees.”

“How am I supposed to take pictures if they’re in the trees?” she asks.

“You’re going to have to cross the canyon, and get up on the ridge above the trees. Once you’re up there, I’ll make a noise to spook them. Wave to me when you’re ready to take the picture.”

“Okay.”

“You have to go on foot, because the canyon is rocky,” I say, “but it isn’t much of a hike.”

She doesn’t look too keen on my instructions, but she nods and slings her camera over her shoulder.

“This better work,” she says and gives me a narrowed-eyed look along with her reins.

“It will,” I say and pull out my binoculars, “I can see them.”

She pulls down her shirt and sets off for the canyon. Saddle soap has left the seat of her jeans brown. As she starts down the closest side of the canyon, I dismount and walk farther up the hill where she will be sure to see me. Standing there, when I can no longer see her descending into the canyon, I get the feeling that this whole thing isn’t going to work out the way I originally intended, but I take a drink from my old canvas canteen and hope for the best.

I’ve never taken her out in the brush; at home we never ride more than an hour from the house. I picked her up about a year ago at an auction where my father was selling rope horses. That’s what I do, train his young rope horses and Lacy had never seen a real cowboy before, or so she said. Though that was hard to believe since her daddy works in the well-drilling business and ranches often need wells drilled. That day at the auction I saw her watching me work one of the horses in the warmup arena. She stood at another pen pretending to pet the horse inside, but I saw her glancing at me from the corner of her eyes. Afterwards when the auction was over she

moseyed over to where I was loading a colt into a trailer and said, “I’ve never seen a real cowboy before.”

So as I watch her scramble up the far side of the canyon, grabbing precarious sagebrush for support, I hope she likes the fact that she married a real cowboy.

It takes her half an hour to make it out of the canyon, and I know the mustangs will spook easier the closer it gets to dark. When she gets up to the ridge, I expect her to wave to me, but she keeps on hiking towards the trees. I get out my binoculars and watch her through them, she has the camera around her neck and the lens cap in one hand. A short distance away she stops and looks to me, but still doesn’t wave. I lower the binoculars and wait for a moment. Then I figure she’s forgotten to signal, because she has the camera to her eye, so I bring my fingers to my mouth and let out a loud, long whistle. The horses spook, erupting from the trees, running in Lacy’s direction like I knew they would because there’s a thicket of brush and the canyon on the other sides. The leaders kick up heels and throw heads as they break out and into a gallop. I count ten of them as they run from the trees in pairs. I look to the ridge in time to see Lacy drop the camera. She squats in the dirt, retrieving it and bringing it to her eye again, swinging it around to get the horses in her sight but they have already gone, their multicolored tails disappear into the desert hills. My wife brushes the dirt off her camera. She places it back around her neck and starts back the way she came.

When she makes it back to me the sun is doing more than thinking about setting, it has almost done it.

“We better get back to camp,” she says and takes her reins out of my hands. She doesn’t meet my eyes, doesn’t give me a look. The way she says it isn’t a reconciliation but a

forewarning of punishment. When I don't mount right away she looks at me, with a face that gives nothing away.

“Did you hear me?” she says, “do you want to stay here all night? Cause I'm going back to camp.”

“I heard.”

She's already pointing her mare's nose down the trail, and my horse starts to worry about getting left, so I mount and give my horse his head, letting my free hand rest on the thigh of my jeans. Halfway back to camp, I think about roping Lacy from where I am to see if I can charm my way back into her good graces with a trick and a line but I think about the girls that kind of thing would have worked on.

It would have worked on Nora. A lot of things worked on Nora, especially her drinking and other men. I thought about a similar ride, two years ago when Nora and I passed a flask back and forth between our horses and before we got home she had fallen off twice. So drunk that she had to ride behind me the rest of the way, while I led her horse, still clinging to her flask saying, “Bart I need more whiskey.” And me, patting her leg and telling her to keep quiet, or to sing me a song and she'd Yankee Doodle in my ear. Nora was a child, and children don't make good wives. Not in my experience, at least. But at eighteen I thought I wanted to be a child for the rest of my life too, thought drinking whiskey would never get old. Thought that the way Nora danced till dawn with me and anyone else who had boots to stand in, the way she didn't know how to cook anything but a TV dinner, and the way she laughed at all my jokes, genuinely laughed, well, I thought that was what I wanted forever.

Now, I realize how different Lacy is from Nora, and all the others. That's why I married her.

The dog doesn't bark as we ride into camp. Lacy calls his name, softly at first and then louder. Lacy is good about knowing when something is wrong. It's a skill she acquired living in what my mother calls a broken home, and what I call an unpredictable one.

After her mother moved to Las Vegas, her father went through multiple girlfriends. The girlfriends were alcoholics, or they wanted their own babies and not Lacy, or they were nondrinkers with their own children but couldn't stick around Lacy's father, who was an alcoholic himself. The front door of her home became a revolving door—revolving because some of the girlfriends came back and left again—and Lacy became good at sensing impending disaster.

I can see through the screen of dusk better as we get closer, and the tent is no longer standing. Lacy and I get off at the same time and I pick up the top of the collapsed canvas. Chip runs out with his tail between his legs and ears pinned. He looks shameful and he also looks bloated. His belly sticks out on both sides of his short body and I dig around the tent until I come up with the empty bag of our food.

“Chip,” Lacy says, pointing a finger at him, “bad dog.”

“Did you tie him up?” I asked.

“Yes,” she says, turning to face me with her hands on her hips.

“Did you tie him up well?”

“I don't know, Bart,” she says, throwing up her hands, “probably not by your standards, no. I probably didn't tie the knot correctly, or I didn't tie it to the right stake or god knows what.”

“That's not what I said.”

“Oh no, but that’s what you meant. I can’t do anything right and now the dog ate all the food and I’m starving.”

I throw the ruined bag down onto the collapsed tent and return to the horses, where I shuffle through my saddle bags and return to her with the canteen and a stale granola bar.

“It ain’t a steak dinner, but it’ll have to do,” I tell her and don’t wait for her to answer before I go to start the chores. I lead the horses down to the stream that runs nearby, down from the canyon, and let them drink. I take my time as the horses eat the sparse tufts of grass by the water. My head hurts and I take my hat off and throw water over my head and face. I rub my eyes and put my hat back on before leading them back to camp where I unsaddle them and give them some grain the dog hasn’t eaten. I hobble them and go to put the tent back up. Lacy is sitting at the wooden table, picking off pieces of the granola bar. It’s dark now, and I find a flashlight in the crumpled mess of the tent. I ask Lacy to hold it for me while I put the tent back up but she ignores me and stares off in the opposite direction so I turn it on and place it on the ground. A little light is better than no light. Chip wanders back to camp after I’ve put the tent back up. Lacy calls him to her and rubs his head, taking comfort in simple forgiveness. We haven’t said anything to each other, since I gave her the granola bar and I think about going over and talking to her, but instead go into the tent to lay down. I’m too hungry to sleep, and I can’t sleep with Lacy outside. She comes in after awhile, takes off her boots and lays down next to me in her clothes.

“What were you doing out there?” I ask.

“Brushing the horses,” she says, “is that okay?”

“Yes.”

We're both quiet then, and there are coyotes yipping in the distance.

"Did you bring Chip in here?" I ask.

"He's over here."

"Good."

I don't know what else to say, so I stay silent, hoping she can sleep. I don't drift off, so I lay awake listening to the sounds of the night. A vibration starts beneath me, making the earth under us seem hollow. I push my bedroll aside and press my ear to the dirt. A drum beat echoes underground, steady as the rhythm of Yankee Doodle. Then the sound comes from the air as I hear the pounding of unshod hooves approaching. Our mare lets out a high pitched whinny and then the air around the tent pulses with the flash of moving horse flesh. The hoofbeats surround us and Lacy sits up in bed, grips my hand across the bedrolls. In a moment the sound of them dissolves into the distance, the hoofbeats receding like the last fading line of melody.

My boots are by the bed and I pull them on. Shining the narrow beam of the flashlight out into the camp I don't see the mare. My gelding is spooked but still hobbled.

"Shit," I say.

Lacy emerges from the tent and grabs my arm.

"What happened?" she asks.

"They took the mare."

"Who?"

"The mustangs," I say, "she was in heat."

"Don't tell me that," she says, "no."

I put an arm around her shoulder and lead her back inside the tent. “We’ll see if she comes back by morning. Otherwise we’ll have to ride double back home and I’ll get Dad to come back out with me to find her tomorrow.”

“Okay,” she says, laying back down. I lay down next to her, wanting to comfort her. Maybe a more sensitive man than me would, but I’m afraid to tell her it will be all right because then I’ll be admitting something is wrong. I reach for her in the darkness, hold my hand across the space, but don’t touch her, instead pulling back and rolling over.

“It will be all right,” she says.

Her words fade into the background of nature’s night time conversation. The crickets chittering is only broken by the long notes of a coyote howl or the trickle of the creek down below us. My sleeping bag has dirt in it. Last time I slept in it was drunk with my boots on. I kick the dirt to the bottom, try to ignore the grinding of it against my bare ankles.

I drift off because when I wake up again, Lacy is shaking my arm.

“Bart,” she says, “Bart.”

“What?”

“There’s someone in the camp.”

I listen and hear them calling outside the tent. It’s a man’s voice. I feel for my boots and put them on while laying down.

“Stay here,” I say to Lacy, and go outside.

There are two people outside and one has a flashlight. I turn my own light on and shine it back at them.

“Our car ran out of gas,” Riley says and waves a hand behind him. He is red-eyed, more staggered than earlier in the day. His face looks distorted in the shadows, his mouth twisted like a mask around the wad of chewing tobacco in his cheek. He spits.

Scanning with my flashlight, I find their beater behind them on the road.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say.

“How far is it to town, Bart?” Riley asks, talking in cursive. The smell of whiskey rolls off of him in waves. Abby shifts behind him and her face comes into view. She is no longer wearing the large sunglasses, there are bruises covering both eyes.

“If you follow the road, the first thing you’ll come to is a gas station. I’d say about six miles,” I tell him.

“See, I told you it ain’t that far,” he says to Abby, “you stay here.”

He squeezes her arm while he tells her this. Lacy comes out of the tent. I try to grab her, not wanting her to approach Riley, but she sneaks her arm out of the way as she passes me to get to Abby.

“Are you okay?” Lacy says to her, tilting her head back and looking at the taller woman’s eyes. Lacy has her boots back on, her hair falls down her back along with the moonlight. I point my flashlight down at the ground.

“She’s fine,” Riley interjects. He moves closer to Lacy, in front of Abby. “But the real questions is, how are you doing? Darlin’?”

“I didn’t ask you,” Lacy says, stepping away from him, “I asked her.” She looks around him to Abby, who nods her head, then shakes it back and forth in warning.

“Bart,” Riley says, moving away from the women and towards me, “you got yourself a real pistol here. I hope you manage your manly duties and keep her in line.” He raises his eyebrows at me, put his hands on his hips and cocks his elbows out. “If you ever need any advice on the womenfolk, you just ask me bud.”

“I think I’ll do fine without any advice from you, *bud*.”

Lacy smiles at me from behind his back.

“Now I think you better be on your way to get that gasoline,” I tell him. I’m taller than him, and I size him up. I’ve fought before, but only with my brothers, who I wouldn’t really want to hurt to no matter what they’ve screwed up. He spits his tobacco again, close to the toe of my boot. Then he turns and starts off with his light bobbing back and forth across the dark dirt road.

“You okay?” Lacy asks Abby again when he’s out of earshot.

Abby laughs a deep laugh, her large breasts moving with her chest.

“I’m fine,” she says, “glad to be rid of that fool.”

“Would you like my bedroll to lay down in until he gets back?” I ask.

“Oh God no,” Abby says. She’s smiling now. Going around the back of the car, she opens the trunk.

“Is it your car?” I ask.

“Yes sir,” she says and slams the trunk, “this is my car and that no good son of a bitch got drunk and used up all the gas.” She comes around the side of the car and stops to look at us, though we can’t see her eyes. “But what he didn’t know was that I had this extra can of gas in the trunk. He was too drunk to check.” With that she flips open the gas tank and pours a can of gas into the car.

Lacy sees her chance to escape and edges away from me and closer to Abby.

“Listen, Abby,” she says, “I know you don’t know us all that well, but my horse ran off earlier and the dog ate all our food, so we haven’t eaten since lunch. We were waiting until morning but if there’s any chance you could give us a ride into town, my husband will pay you for the gas. If it’s no trouble.”

Abby finishes pouring the gas and looks Lacy up and down. “Sweetheart,” she says, “it doesn’t look like you’ve given trouble to anyone in your whole life, and you sure ain’t no trouble to me. Get that dog and your stuff and we’ll be out of here.”

I hand Lacy the flashlight and tell her to hold it while I take the tent down, which she does this time. Once we pack the car with the tent and Lacy’s saddle and Chip there isn’t a place for me to sit, so I say, “I’ll ride behind the car and as long as you don’t go too fast I can use the headlights to stay on the road.”

“That’s a good idea,” Abby says and turns to Lacy, “look at you honey, you got yourself a real cowboy.”

Lacy looks at the ground and says, “Yes, I suppose I do.”

They wait in the car for the two minutes it takes me to saddle my gelding. Then we all start down the road, me riding at a walk—sometimes trotting to keep up with the car as it bounces along the dirt road. My horse is tired and I rub his neck as we walk through the night. The women are talking in the car. Lacy can always make a friend and I’m grateful Abby came along again even if it means a twelve mile ride in the dark.

It reminds me of nights with my father, after we’d spent too long out fixing fence or doctoring calves. Times like that the night pressed on all sides of us when the moon was a sliver,

but we knew our horses and our horses knew the trail home, so we trusted their steps and I would listen to the crickets in the pasture that radiated cool from its grass and I knew that if I got off I would not only smell but feel the dampness of the earth. By the noise of the crickets I hummed songs, and it was easy really, because my horse followed my father's and I would close my eyes and become the darkness and the swaying motion of my horse. My eyes close with the memory, and I feel the same rocking motion, so familiar yet so different with my eyes shut rather than open. It's while my eyes are shut that my horse strays to the left of the road, and I hear him holler. I see him running out into the middle of the road, smacking the driver's side window. He's yelling.

“You fucking cunt, roll down your window.”

He keeps striking the window, running alongside the slow moving car. Abby stops suddenly, and he keeps going for a moment down the road, too drunk to stop short. I see him framed in the lights of the car, then Abby hits the gas and the car jolts forward. In the spotlight of the headlights, his legs buckle and he falls onto the hood of the car and rolls off the side. Abby stops the car again and I grip my reins as my horse jumps at the sharp brakes. He doesn't stay down, and as he gets to his knees he wrenches open Abby's door.

“You dumb bitch,” he says as drags her out by a thick wad of black hair. She screams as he grabs her and half falls out of the car, her hands holding her up. He pulls her the rest of the way out and hits her face. I can hear the smack on her flabby cheekbone. I don't say anything, because a man like that can't be reasoned with. Instead I take my rope from my saddle and work it in my right hand, letting out a big loop. I kick my horse into a lope, and as Riley straightens from hitting Abby to see what's coming I rope him around his scrawny neck and he doesn't

know much after that because he falls flat on his back. My horse aims to stop when he feels the dead weight of a man behind us, but I dally the rope once around the saddle horn and jab his sides with my heels, hollering for him to keep going. He knows I mean business then, and digs into the dirt with his hindquarters and drags Riley twenty yards before I stop and get off. Riley claws at the rope, which is taut around his neck. He's choking but I know he hasn't been choked long enough to kill him so I let him lay there scratching at it with his beady, drunk eyes bulging.

"I don't believe in hitting women," I say. I let him struggle for breath a moment longer before I loosen the rope and pull it off over his head. I kick him in the ribs once, because I think he deserves more than what I gave him. He rolls onto his knees and puts his hands to his neck, taking breaths like he's thankful for them. I leave him there and go to my horse, who is standing quiet. I mount again, coil my rope and turn back to the car, where Lacy helps Abby into the passenger seat.

"Is she all right?" I ask.

"Yes," Lacy says, "she'll be fine. Just a little cut up." She looks at me like she hasn't seen me in awhile. "Did you kill him?"

"He's breathing."

"All right," she says and then she walks up to me, so quick it would have scared my horse if he wasn't so tired, and she puts a small hand on my thigh. With a deliberate pat and a tired smile she says, "Let's go home."

## Daughters

The doctor enters the room where Janice sits on crinkled paper, thumbing the corner of her rough gown, cursing herself for wearing the underwear with printed flowers and mismatched purple bra. He blows his nose, wipes his large bald forehead with the same tissue. He is not smiling. He should be smiling. Or at least trying to hide one. He flips up the top page of her chart, marks something with a vicious stroke of the pen. When he looks up again he does not meet her eyes but focuses on the wall over her head, puts her chart on the counter behind him and sits on the seat designated for guests. Where her husband would be sitting if he had not had an important call to make today, if working at home meant all the freedom it initially promised. A mistake exists that she remains unaware of, though the doctor will enlighten her. But she is not pregnant, never was. Never will be.

“Janice, your home pregnancy test elicited a false positive. This is common for women receiving fertility treatments like you.”

He goes on to explain things about hormone levels measured by pregnancy tests. Janice pretends to listen. She feels disappointed—her husband wants a child and she wants to give him something that can only come from her. She feels relieved. These emotions mingle, familiar to her, expected. Unexpected is the embarrassment. So prominent that her cheeks flush, her palms and armpits sweat. Embarrassed that she even considered it: pregnant at forty. She is glad her husband stayed home.

On the drive home from the doctor’s office Janice pops gum into her mouth, chews it brutally. It is stale and she spits it out the window. She stops at a gas station and buys American

Spirits. Back in the car she smokes one and feels sick, then crams them in the glove box under receipts and napkins.

When she turns off the highway onto the long dirt driveway of the ranch the unwavering mountain sun illuminates the doctor's prescription sticking out of her purse. More injectables, more hormones. It remains unfilled though she passed several drug stores on her way out of town. Her mother, Tracy, often forgot to refill prescriptions, leaving the tiny slips with unreadable doctor scrawl in bathroom drawers.

Grandma Breda convinces Janice to go for a ride, though at fourteen, she wants to spend the day at her friend's house and not with her grandmother and Tracy. The friend has an irrigation pond they use as a swimming hole. On some days, boys drift by in their newly acquired, hand-me-down Ford trucks and strip down to their underwear to join them in the water, complaining about the heat and staring at their breasts. Janice foregoes this possibility at Grandma Brenda's insistence that her horse is, "Not the kind of horse that can sit for a week." Tracy sits at the kitchen table with her right ankle laid across the top of her other knee, spinning the rowel on her spur with one finger.

"She doesn't have to go."

Janice looks at Tracy and then Grandma Brenda, whose lips set into a straight line like the swift stroke of a pencil against a ruler edge.

"But I should," Janice says, "Rowdy needs to be ridden."

"Well then," Tracy says, "let's get a move on." She totters as she stands up from the table, the six-pack she drank before noon catching up to her. She lets the back door snap behind her,

not bothering to hold it open for them. Grandma Brenda follows Tracy out and without looking back at Janice, says, “Get your boots on.”

The ranch house stands in the same spot it always has, but Janice’s husband added a garage with a studio above it a few months after they moved in—when he needed a place to work on his martial arts. Something Janice knows little about except that he frequently leaves to go to tournaments and has long conference calls with collaborators overseas. Janice hates the garage, hates anything that disrupts her comforting nostalgia. She parks on the other side of the house.

The purse is left behind in the car, along with the prescription. The screen door, wobbling on its hinges, smacks shut after her. The details of her childhood survive in the house—the long scratches in the pine floor from when a raccoon chewed through the screen, the wilting wallpaper with blue cows and cats, the uneven row of wooden framed pictures that line the entry hallway, a trail of black and white history. Photographs of unplanned but fiercely loved daughters. Grandma Brenda had Tracy at sixteen, before she was married to Grandpa Joseph. They married after he finished law school and bought the ranch, when Tracy was four. Tracy had Janice at eighteen, then went after the father, who was long gone—mining in Nevada. She didn’t return until Janice was almost ten. And when she did she walked into the ranch house, poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table like she had left earlier that morning and not nine years before.

Grandma Brenda referred to it as tradition. One daughter before the age of twenty-one, and no more children after that. Tracy believed it to be more of a curse. The story went like this: Janice’s great great-grandmother was a full blooded Indian. A beautiful woman who was betrothed to the son of the chief—chief of what Janice never knew, the specific tribe was always

left out of the story, which made Janice side more with Grandma Brenda in thinking it wasn't all true but at least half made up. The great great-grandmother broke the betrothal to follow a white man north to his homestead. The tribe's shaman put a curse on her, no sons to work on the white man's land, only a daughter. Grandma Brenda said her father was the only one that ever told the story, her mother never spoke of it, and she never met her grandmother.

When she was eighteen, Janice fled to Seattle, where the rain and distance from the Montana mountains and thick skinned cowboys left her without an accidental daughter, left her a virgin until twenty— where amidst her law books and classes she was safe from the curse. Though it didn't stop Tracy from calling every day for months before her twenty-first birthday asking the same questions: are you seeing anyone? Is it serious? Are you meddling with birth control? The answers to the first two questions varied but the answer to the third one was always answered with an exasperated “yes, and it's not meddling.”

Now, the door of the office is closed. Her grandfather kept the door open, except when he was seeing clients at home. Said he couldn't think with the door shut, and he liked to hear the noises of the house while he worked. Archie closes the door during his conference calls or while he works on his website. She should work in there more, when Archie is working out in the studio. Shouldn't always have to do her work at the law firm office, her grandfather never did and it's his legacy she's trying to uphold, his legacy that she came back from her rain ridden hideout in the city for. Legacy that she pried her young, urban husband out of his comfort zone for. In a moment of clarity Janice remembers the ranch at its peak, when her grandfather kept the ranch alive with cowboy clients who owed him a favor for one legal action or another. The peak

is why she came back, hoping that she could mimic her grandparents in their rustic romantic life.

But that was another time, another place entirely.

Janice is relieved that Archie is still on the phone; she doesn't know how to tell him.

Shouldn't have told him about the false positive in the first place.

It's her mother who got her hopes up. When she called Janice at the office, in the middle of a client meeting last week, Janice stepped out of the conference, knowing that if she didn't answer her mother would trek into the office in less than an hour.

"Janice, it's your mother."

"Hi, Mom."

"I have a feeling it's the right time."

"Right time for what?"

"A baby," Tracy says, "what else?"

"We'll see."

"Well honey, why else would you have gone off and gotten yourself a husband twelve years younger? Fresh loins, and I think you're smart for doing it."

"Thanks, Mom."

"Anyway, the azaleas in my garden bloomed today and I knew it was a sign. You're pregnant."

"All right, I've got to get back to work, thank you for calling."

"Janice, take me seriously. I know what I'm talking about. Lay off the coffee."

"Yes ma'am," Janice says and hangs up.

The two older women hold off their arguing until every exhaustible sentence has been said about the weather, the trail, and the horses they are riding. Janice didn't expect the forced peacefulness to last this long with the undiscussed topic of her first date, which took place the night before. She keeps Rowdy reined in, though he wants to tromp the heels of Tracy's horse, he wants to run. Black lizards sun themselves on rocks lining the trail. If she caught them she would see their blue bellies, if she grabbed one by the tail it would detach and wiggle even after separating from the lizard's body. Counting them is something she does on rides with her grandfather who also enjoys the quiet. She counts five before Tracy grips the back of her saddle with one hand, turns and says to her, "How was your date last night?"

Grandma Brenda doesn't turn around but slows her horse slightly so that they all have to slow down.

"It was okay, we just went to the movie, not much time to talk except in the car. He's nice." She's nervous thinking about disclosing the details to Tracy and Grandma Brenda.

His immediate suggestion that they go somewhere more private. Then, how he drove up the dirt road that led to the abandoned ranch on the other side of the highway. How they had parked and made out, his tongue slippery and thin in her mouth, his hands traveling under her shirt but not under her bra, afterwards him turning a little shy and stalling his truck twice on the dirt road back to the highway, letting out a low nervous chuckle both times and avoiding her eyes.

"You stay out of trouble with that boy," Grandma Brenda says. "I know what it's like to be fourteen."

"And I don't?"

“I was talking to Janice, Tracy.”

“And I want my daughter to feel comfortable talking to me about sex, Brenda.”

“Oh why? Because you never felt comfortable talking to me? Bullshit, Tracy. You just like the idea of it.”

Janice looks for a chance to escape. Rowdy jigs at her nervousness.

“Can we canter?”

They ignore her.

“You don’t know jack about my ideas, Brenda. Not one goddamn thing because you never asked.”

“I know about my granddaughter, that’s for sure.”

“Why is that? Because you’ve spent more time with her? Is that what you’re getting at?”

“Can we canter?” Janice asks, again, as loud as she dares to yell without spooking her horse.

“What?” Grandma Brenda says.

“Can we canter, please?”

“Janice, your mother and I are having a conversation.”

“Okay, can I canter?”

“If you’re on a ride with other people it’s rude to run your horse when they don’t want to run theirs, it gets their horses worked up.”

“She can go,” Tracy says. “Janice, just go. Wait for us before you cross the creek.”

The creek is roughly a half mile away, which doesn’t provide much room to run, but Grandma Brenda gives Tracy a flat look and nods. “Go ahead,” she concedes to Janice.

Janice gives a relieved whoop and goes to press her heels to Rowdy. He takes off before she even touches him, feeling her shift in energy. The hillside is wide open before the trees at the bottom hide the narrow creek crossing. The trails on the other side lead high up into the mountains. She gives Rowdy his head, letting the absence of her hands urge him to stretch out. They crest the hill at top speed and Janice's heart beats fast. She forgets how much better this is than boys. They start down the hill to the trees. Janice rocks her seat back as Rowdy lopes downhill. She makes light contact with his mouth, helping him balance. The thick leather reins chaff against the inside of her ring fingers, starting blisters.

At the bottom she reluctantly pulls back on the reins. He doesn't respond right away, wanting to keep up the running, but she uses both hands and saws back and forth on the reins until he stops ignoring her and trots. He throws his head at the bit, the kimberwick that earlier, her mother insisted he wear saying, "He's strong and I worry about Janice riding him in just a snaffle when he hasn't been out in a week." Both Janice and Grandma Brenda told Tracy that the horse did better in a snaffle, no matter how hot he was. But Tracy bridled Rowdy before Janice even got the saddle on and held him until Janice got on. Janice figured it was easier to fight with the horse for an hour than fight with her mother. Now, Janice can see that she should have stood up to Tracy at the beginning of the ride. The chain on the kimberwick makes Rowdy more hyped, and he throws his head up more often, sometimes barely missing Janice's face. He is more nervous after the short run, and he neighs at the absence of the other horses who have not made it to the top of the hill. Janice runs a hand up and down his neck, but he throws his head again and she becomes frustrated with him, kicking his sides so that he jumps forward as they enter the trees. At the creek she reins him in, her hands heavier than necessary. Frustration

tightens her muscles so that she jerks his mouth. He paces back and forth, unable to stand still next to the water without the presence of the other horses. Janice cannot see past the thick trees and she wants Rowdy to be still so she shortens her reins until Rowdy braces against her hands and crow-hops into a buck. She has ridden worse, and is not thrown off balance, but Janice is mad now, wanting the ride to be over, and wanting the horse to be still for one second. She pulls back on the reins and kicks him once, hard, in the sides. Rowdy goes up, rearing, and Janice starts to fall backwards, she balances by gripping the reins, leveraging her weight against his mouth and the bit. He avoids the pressure and falls back, into her, on her, pressing her to the earth underneath them. His haunches mash into her groin before the slack in the reins allows him to regain his balance and roll to the side, avoiding Janice.

Janice feels heat rush into her face. She lays on her back, waiting for her breath to come back. Dirt grinds against her scalp, grains work their way into her hair. When her breath comes back it is all she can hear. Then, clarity comes with the pain, her hips hurt, and her lower back, she wonders if she is paralyzed. It hurts to breathe, the pain comes in waves, each stronger than the last. Slowly she rolls to the side, holding her breath, riding the waves of pain. Her back aches, but her hips hurt more, the inside of her legs flame. With each exhale she tells herself, “you’re okay, you’re okay,” waiting for the moment when she thinks she can get up. It doesn’t come. Tracy’s face comes into focus.

“Oh my God,” she says, “Janice stay there. Just lie there.” Tracy holds her hand and says something to Grandma Brenda. Janice cannot hear what it is through the buzzing in her ears.

“I don’t know what happened,” Janice says to Tracy. It is the only thing she can think to say.

Two hours later Tracy is still holding her hand as the doctor hangs up the x-rays. Touches her knee as the doctor, a young man with thick hair and muscles explains that she has fractured her pelvis.

“Thankfully,” he says, “you don’t need surgery, and you have no internal injuries.”

Janice shifts her knee, hoping Tracy moves her hand. She doesn’t. Janice looks hard at the x-rays and the fissures in her bone. Tiny tears that the doctor says take six weeks to heal. Six weeks of crutches. Again he tells her that she is lucky. That she should drink a lot of milk.

“You also have a mild concussion, but it should clear up. Let me know if you experience any of the symptoms I’ve listed.”

He hands her a pad of paper. She cannot read the writing.

“Doctor,” Tracy asks, “this may be a sensitive subject, but will this affect her ability to have children?”

The doctor wasn’t expecting this when he said “Do you have any questions?” Tracy always asks the wrong questions. Janice looks away, looks at the poster on the wall displaying the human body.

“No,” the doctor says, “it shouldn’t.”

Tracy nods, shakes the doctor’s hand and says, “Thank you for your help.”

Janice never thought about motherhood, never thought about how her pelvis could matter. When they get home, Tracy leaves the Hydrocodone prescription in the car. It stays there until Grandma Brenda fills it two days later, after Janice wakes up crying two nights in a row.

Janice goes outside to wait for Archie to get off the phone. The playhouse her grandfather built sits in the back of the house, under a pine tree. The needles have fallen onto the roof, covering it in a natural thatch of pine. Janice steps onto the weather stamped wood of the miniature porch. It is smaller, older than she remembers as a child. She can reach the handle of the door easily. The door creaks open on the emptiness of the small playhouse, though it is packed with gardening tools, shovels, rakes, umbrellas, and an old porch swing. Childhood is missing, imagination. The play table and chairs are still there, though, in the back corner. It would take some digging to get them out. She hears the back door of the house open, her husband's bare feet pad out onto the porch.

“Hon?”

She waves her hand without looking, beckoning him to the playhouse. Turning, she watches him pick his way across the grass and dirt, hopping on one foot when a goat-head sticks him.

“Should have got my shoes, damn it,” he says, “what are you doing?”

“Looking at this. It used to be my playhouse.”

“Did it?”

“Yes.”

“I always thought it was a shed,” he says.

“That's what it is now.”

“How did the appointment go?”

“Not good.”

Archie folds his arms across his chest, waits for her explanation. When Janice stays quiet, tracing the wood outline of the playhouse door with her index finger, he says, “Why was it not good?”

She shuts the door of the playhouse, and heads for the ranch house.

“I need to clean those windows,” she says, “they’re filthy.”

“No one goes in there, what does it matter?”

“It matters,” she says as she opens the backdoor of the house. Archie stands by the playhouse, waits for her to come back with the Windex and paper towels. He watches her spray liberal amounts of cleaner onto the weather stained glass.

“Why was it not good?”

“It was pointless.” Her hands wipe the paper towel back and forth over the streaks of cleaner and dirt, she doesn’t look at her husband.

“Pointless?”

“Yes, pointless.”

Archie grabs the Windex from her, sprays another window, starts to clean.

“What does that mean?”

She turns towards him now, watches him, hands him more paper towels.

“I’m not pregnant, never was.”

He stops working the cleaner, faces her. And she wishes she had kept cleaning when she said it. Or that he had. Because then she would have missed the look on his face. The raw disappointment. His eyes cradle the truth no one will say. She’s too old for children. She missed her chance. Then, it is gone with the moment, and he is putting down the spray, folding her in his

firm, young arms. He says that it's okay. They will keep up with the hormones, they will try again. But the promises are infused with the ghost of hope, not the real thing. For the first time in their relationship, Janice feels old.

It is the Sunday after she breaks her pelvis. They all sit around the kitchen table.

Grandma Brenda has made crab cakes and rice, pineapple for dessert. Grandpa Joseph sits at the head of the table, though really there isn't one, because the table is round. Janice picks at her food, her pain medication makes her nauseous. Half the time she throws up. Her mother tells her not to take them, tries hiding them, but Grandma Brenda finds them, threatens to kick Tracy out of the house if she takes them from Janice again. Janice sits between them, picking the pineapple out of her front teeth that are too close together. The older women argue about Tracy's haircut.

"Why would you let them do that to your hair?"

"I don't know why you make such a deal over it."

"Because it looks horrible," Grandma Brenda says, spooning more rice onto Grandpa Joseph's empty plate. He looks at Grandma Brenda and says, "That's enough, you two."

"I just don't know why anyone would do that to their hair."

"Brenda," Grandpa Joseph says, "leave her alone."

Grandma Brenda stands, unties her apron with the tiny apples on it. She mumbles to herself on her way over to the stove, piles more crab cakes onto the plate from the pan. Janice looks at her mother. She stops picking her food.

"And what about you?" her mother says, "do you like my hair?"

"I like it."

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“I do, but I guess I liked it better longer,” Janice says.

Her mother pushes her chair back from the table, scrapes the legs against the linoleum.

“I don’t really care what any of you have to say about it,” she says, pouring herself a glass of water, “I like it and that’s all that matters.”

Grandpa Joseph finishes his plate, takes it over to the sink where Grandma Brenda scrubs the dishes by hand. She comes back to the table and clears it, strips off the table cloth. The polished wood below gleams in the last light of summer fading in through the bay window.

“I’m going to feed,” he says, “you all lay off each other, you hear me?”

No one answers and the wind slams the back door as he heads to the barn.

“I expect it from your grandmother, Janice, but if you didn’t like my hair you could have kept it to yourself.”

“Goddamnit Tracy. Keep her out of it. She’s been beat up enough lately to worry about your stupid hair.” Grandma Brenda sets a clean dish into the drying rack.

“Oh that’s right. Let’s dwell in the negative. Janice got hurt, so nobody bother her. I got it,” Tracy says, leaning up against the counter.

“She wouldn’t have gotten hurt if you didn’t have to be right all the time.”

“That’s what you think?”

“I think that you shouldn’t have put that bit in that horse’s mouth, and I think you should have listened to Janice and I when we told you not to.”

Tracy goes back to the table, sets her water glass on the naked surface.

“Get that glass off the table without a coaster. You’ll ruin it,” Grandma Brenda says.

Tracy takes a drink of water, makes a satisfied sound in her throat and puts it back on the table. Grandma Brenda drops a plate into the sink, where the water catches it with a splash. She moves quickly for an old woman, body hardened by a lifetime of work and weather. Tracy doesn't turn around. The older woman snakes a hand through Tracy's short hair and yanks it, pulling her off the chair and onto the floor. Tracy yells, tries to twist around. Grandma Brenda takes her down to the floor by her hair, straddles Tracy's waist, jabs her knees into Tracy's inner elbows, pummels her face with a closed fist. Janice scoots her chair away, standing despite the pain in her pelvis.

“Stop.”

It comes out quiet, like she didn't mean to say it. Grandma Brenda grunts with the effort of hitting Tracy. She smacks her with an open hand and Tracy screams, kicks her legs up and hits Grandma Brenda in the back, tries to squirm out from under her. Grandma Brenda won't quit, and Janice begins to think she means to kill Tracy. She hobbles to the backdoor and yells for her grandfather, “Come quick.” But he is hard of hearing. She knows she cannot make it to the barn and back before damage is done. Real damage. So she turns back to where her grandmother and mother struggle on the floor. Grandma Brenda's arms shake with the effort of the blows, her legs tremble with the strain of holding Tracy down. Janice limps over, grabs Grandma Brenda's shoulders, tries to drag her off of Tracy, but her pelvis throbs and she falls to the floor with them. Tracy spits in Grandma Brenda's face, says,

“Get the fuck off me.”

Janice crawls over to them, “Grandma Brenda stop.” And pushes the old woman sideways, knocking her off balance.

Tracy scrambles out from under her, runs to the back door crying, “Dad. She hit me, she hit me.”

Janice looks at her grandmother, who sits against the wall with her legs sprawled in each direction.

“That little bitch.”

Janice cries, sits up at the table and wipes her tears away as fast as they come.

“Quit that crying,” Grandma Brenda says, “I’ve raised you right. Someday you’ll have to raise children, too.” She pushes herself up using the chair Tracy sat in a few minutes before. She takes the glass off the table and plops it into the sink with the other dishes.

“Hope they don’t turn out like that,” Grandma Brenda says.

The night after she tells Archie about the counterfeit pregnancy, Janice spends time on the porch swing. She trails her bare feet across the smooth wood, rocking back and forth. The sun hasn’t set yet, won’t for another two hours. Archie comes outside, sees her on the swing, gives her an apologetic smile and goes back inside. After a few minutes, she goes inside too. Archie reads in his recliner. He has changed out the parenting book he was reading for the past week for a biography on a Chinese martial artist. She tries not think too much about this. She calls her mother.

“Hello?”

“Mom, it’s me.”

“Yeah?”

“Are you busy?”

“Just finishing up dinner,” Tracy says, “what’s up?”

“Want to go for a ride?”

“What kind of ride?”

“Like we used to, with Grandma Brenda.”

“All right, I’ll be over in twenty minutes.”

“Okay,” Janice says.

She saddles the two horses. Two geldings that Grandma Brenda kept after Grandpa Joseph died. The men who work the cattle now bring their own horses to do the work, and the geldings stay out with the cows unless Janice gets the urge to ride. Which she doesn’t, anymore. Even after breaking her pelvis she rode every day, the four months it took to heal felt like a lifetime without riding. But when she moved to Seattle she wasn’t around horses. And back home no one rode the ones that were left, so Grandma Brenda sold them off to dude ranches in the months after Grandpa Joseph died. It seemed fitting to Janice that these two were left, like Grandma Brenda knew Janice would need them. The night Grandma Brenda passed, Janice was drunk at a party, which didn’t happen often. She had just been accepted to law school. She wanted to fly home but her mother told her to stay, there wasn’t anything she could do. Tracy took the ashes and spread them out in the fields, along with Grandpa Joseph’s. There wasn’t a funeral. Janice wondered what the old woman’s last thoughts were before she went, before the cancer that started years before in her ovaries won the war. It didn’t matter now.

The horses twitch as she places saddles on their backs. They haven’t been ridden in months. After they are saddled and bridled Janice stands around holding their reins, toeing

shapes in the dirt with her boot. Tracy shows up in overalls covered in paint. She stuffs the pant legs into her boots and pulls her flyaway hair into a messy bun.

“Ready?” she asks Janice.

“Yeah.”

“Let’s go.”

They mount up with an ease that comes from a lifetime of riding. Their heels settle into place, their backs straighten, hands quiet on the reins.

“Like riding a bike,” Tracy says.

They ride out into the pasture, where the cows graze. The horses are fresh under them.

“Let’s trot out,” Janice says. They let the horses have their heads as they enter one of the far pastures, the hills and mountains rise up in the distance. Janice’s horse breaks into a lope, and Tracy’s horse follows. They race to the large oak tree that spans over the nearest hill. Janice leans forward over her horse’s neck, twines her fingers into his unkempt mane. Her right leg swings forward slightly more than her left. There is a ghostly ache in her pelvis as she rocks back and forth with the canter. The horses remember this game from lifetimes ago and give it their all before pulling up fast before the tree.

They breathe heavily beneath the women, winded from lack of exercise. Janice turns her horse around to get a view, and makes him stand, letting him catch his breath as she looks over the property. The pastures are freckled with the yellow and purple of summer flowers. The heat hasn’t killed them yet.

“Always the best view during the summer,” Tracy says, “spring is too wet.”

“And cold,” Janice says.

“That too.”

“Mom,” Janice says, “I’m not pregnant.”

“I know.”

Janice fingers her horse’s mane, braids the long part on his withers.

“I don’t think I will be, ever.”

“Maybe not,” Tracy says, “you broke the tradition, you know.”

Janice laughs. “I know,” she says. Then goes quiet and watches the upstairs light turn on in the ranch house. It’s dusk.

“Is that what you think it is? Not a curse?” Janice asks.

“You learn a lot as you get older, and one of the things I’ve learned is that there’s no use in believing in things like curses.”

“I wanted to believe you the other day when you called,” Janice says.

“You should stop taking the hormones.”

They watch a calf run after its mother, braying in the shadows of sundown.

“Do you think that there was a time I was meant to have them and I missed it?”

“Maybe,” she says, “maybe not.”

Janice takes her feet out of the stirrups, letting the cramp in her right knee stretch out.

“I don’t think it matters,” Janice says.

“What doesn’t?”

“Whether it’s a tradition or a curse. The outcome is the same, I don’t have a child and probably never will.”

“Do you want one?”

“When I thought I had one, yes. Now, I’m not so sure.”

The calf catches up to his mother, noses her underside to nurse. Tracy looks at Janice.

“What scared you before, when you were younger, was having one. You saw how I was as a mother. Hell, I’ll admit it, I was a professional avoider when it came to being your mother. Really, I thought Brenda could do it better. Not that she was the best mother to me, but she took care of you.”

Tracy stops and looks back to the cows. Janice feels the need to fill the silence.

“She did.”

“So, you were scared of being the mother I was to you and the mother Grandma Brenda was to me. We were both too young to have children. Too young and too full of ourselves. I’m thankful you avoided it. But when you avoid one thing, you avoid another.”

The horses shift from one foot to another. They flick their tails at the awakening mosquitos in the high grass.

“It’s a trade,” Janice says after awhile.

“A trade,” Tracy says, “however unfair it might be.”

Janice looks out over the dusk filled valley, the cows are only shadows now. She takes her mother’s words, and holds them to her heart.

## Desert Cats

Nicole sat with her bare feet pressed against the dashboard, her long limbs folded into a car riding pose.

“You know, there’s not much out here, but I still think it’s beautiful,” she said, scanning the blurred desert scenery.

“Yeah,” I said, “it’s amazing that things live out here.”

“That’s a poetic sentiment for a highway safety engineer.”

I mashed my lips together to keep from saying something dorky, then couldn’t help it, “That’s actually one of the safety projects I’m working on right now, building bridges over locations along the highway so wildlife can cross.”

“Is that a big safety concern? Wildlife crossing?”

I commended her ability to feign interest.

“People get into accidents trying to avoid animals. They’ll risk their lives to save a jackrabbit.”

She nodded. “I guess there’s a certain amount of reflex involved.”

“Sure. And we don’t know how many fatalities are due to avoiding animals, unless there’s a carcass.”

When I met her, I had picked up on a recklessness protruding from under her stringy dancer’s outfit. It intrigued me then, sitting at the bar outside the theater, waiting for my co-worker and his wife to get back from the bathroom, when she squirmed her way into the seat next to mine.

I asked her, “Are you in the show?”

“Yeah, but I’m off for a few numbers.” To the bartender she said, “A dry martini.” To me, “This takes the edge off the rest of the night. As long as my stage director doesn’t see.” She winked, the weight of her fake eyelash slowing the movement.

I asked, “Join me for another when you’re finished?” She downed the few swallows of her martini, laid a hand on my thigh, squeezed gently. Her fingernails were long, with sparkles on every other one; they pinched.

“Now, why would I do that?” She said, placing her empty glass back on the bar and putting a hand on her cocked hip.

“Because I asked.”

“Maybe,” she said, “we’ll see.” But when she walked away, she peeked back over her sequined shoulder.

I slowed down near the turnoff, though there weren’t any markers off highway 95—just a dirt road.

“It’s a little hard to find the turnoff.” It was hidden among the tall sagebrush, its last minute clarity surprising, “Here it is.”

We drove a mile down the dirt road, made a left turn and drove another four miles, my Jeep eating the bumps and dips.

“Good thing you have a four-wheel drive.”

“Yeah. Cars can make it up here fine, though, as long as the weather is dry. Which it always is.”

A mailbox shot up out of the dust, and I turned down the driveway. Large gold statues of lions and tigers germinated out of the desert landscape on either side of us. Nicole took her feet off the dashboard and leaned forward.

“Wow,” she said.

“My brother is a little eccentric.”

She rolled down her window to get a better look through the heat and dust.

“I love them. They’re so unexpected.”

I glanced at the nearest statue, a lion roaring, its teeth coated in dirt, a small collection of muck piled against the back of its mouth.

“They’re something.”

At the gate—a black-iron, monstrous thing with golden cats running along the top—I entered the code, and parked behind my brother’s sports car, a commodity he didn’t use.

“We can try the house,” I said, “I told him we were coming.”

I pressed the doorbell, listened, heard no chime from inside. I knocked, leaned my head close to the door. Nothing. I tried the doorknob; it was unlocked. Nicole followed me into the entryway. “Stay here,” I told her. The entryway was relatively clean except for a dead houseplant near the door.

“Joe,” I called down the long hallway. No answer. I went back through the entryway, “One second,” I said to Nicole, who stood close to the front door, one hand still resting on the doorknob. I went through the kitchen—trying not to stop and examine the extent of the mess, and yelled for him in the garage. Nothing. I went back to Nicole, took her hand, and went out the front door.

“He’s out with the cats,” I said, and pulled her around the house, skirting the discarded remains of past family gatherings: several folding tables, broken chairs, a blue plastic wading pool with the bottom punched out.

“What’s all this?” Nicole asked, stepping over a deflated beach ball. One of our hands was sweating, making our grip on each other uncomfortable.

“Family stuff. We used to come here a lot, before he got so many cats.”

“And now?”

“My parents and my sister moved to Reno when my sister got a job up there. My parents are retired. And Jen has a daughter, Sandy, so they wanted to be closer to her, to take care of her while Jen and her husband are at work. I visit them when I can.” I lowered my head, embarrassed that the remains of my family history were on display. The ruins of my niece’s fifth birthday, my parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary, the Sunday dinners and the late night card games.

“How often do you visit?”

“Once every two months or so,” I said, though it was more like every four or five months.

I could see him as we neared the first set of enclosures, standing in the center aisle, watering.

“Dale,” he called when he saw us, startling the cougar in the nearest cage. “There’s my little brother.” He shut off the water and came to us, clapped a hand on my shoulder and gave me a hug. “Gosh. How are you doing?”

“Joe, this is my friend, Nicole,” I said. “She’s the one I told you about.”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook her hand. “I’m so glad you came,” he said, “I have so much to show you.” He started back down the aisle of enclosures, waving for us to follow.

“Hold on tight,” I told Nicole, “it’s going to be a wild ride.” She laughed and followed in Joe’s wake.

“You came at the best time, Dale, I have babies,” Joe said, turning a corner and heading for the outer edge of the enclosures.

“More?”

“Wait until you see.” His smile was infectious. It hurt me to see him this excited, this deprived of visitors.

“Does Joanna still come out and help you during the week?” I asked.

“No, she got a job in Vegas. A desk job. I manage by myself though, don’t worry.”

“I’m sure you do.”

He stopped in front of us to open an enclosure.

“You can come in,” he said to Nicole and me. I followed Nicole inside, where there was a small plastic play set and a baby pool, both of which belonged to my niece. In the pool were two white tiger cubs.

Nicole took to them right away, holding them, laughing when they pounced and played with each other. She couldn’t stop smiling. She reminded me of myself, the first time I had seen one of Joe’s babies.

It was my senior year of high school—Joe had graduated the year before but was still living at home. My mother screamed when he opened the large cardboard box in the kitchen and the lion cub poked her head out. My father cussed from his chair in the living room at my mother’s scream, but before long we were all sitting in a circle on the lawn, taking turns throwing cat toys for her, and feeding her from a bottle. It was then, as I watched my sister, Jen,

feeding the cub, looking at her like she was a baby, that I realized they cast a spell. And it wasn't that they were cute, though they were as adorable as any puppy or kitten I had ever seen. It was that when they grew up, they were lethal. And for a moment, we could capture that danger, tame it and play with it, feed it in our laps, knowing that in a few years we wouldn't dare go near them. But we did. Both Joe and I, because they put me under their spell, too.

I sat on the ground with Joe and Nicole, watching. Nicole moved like them, graceful and swift. Muscles toned from years of dancing, she could jump like them if she wanted to, move quickly with strength and purpose. The young male tiger found a bug crawling across the ground, wiggled his butt and pounced, his eyes shifting from playful to practicing. He brought the beetle to his mouth with his claws, mouthed it lightly at first then bit it, shaking his head at the taste. Joe and Nicole laughed and cooed at him. The female came and rubbed her head against my hand, chuffing. I rubbed her head, smiling. Nicole caught my eye and smiled too.

“What are their names?” Nicole asked.

“I just brought them home yesterday, so I haven't named them.”

Joe passed her a ball to throw for the cubs. “Would you like to help me?”

“I would love to.” One of the cubs swatted at her hand.

“Ouch,” she said.

“They do have claws,” Joe said with a short laugh.

“It's a tiny scratch.”

“I'll go get you something for that,” I said to her.

“I think there's some band aids in the guest bathroom,” Joe said.

I squeezed Nicole's shoulder.

"Be right back."

"Okay," she said, taking my hand for a moment.

The disrepair of the house had worsened in the three months since I last saw Joe. I passed through the kitchen on the way to the bathroom. In the fridge were two mismatched beers, mustard, and thawing meat for the cats. The freezer housed a half-used bag of peas and more shelves of meat, one of which contained clear Ziploc bags marked 'roadkill.' Sprawled across the kitchen table were hand written receipts for cats, some of which he had sold, and some that he bought. There were shipping bills, feed bills, bills for a new enclosure.

His money from Vegas ran out years before. The only income since then were picture jobs with the cats. People paid big money to have a tiger in a photo shoot. But it seemed that those jobs were in decline as well, his last printed invoice dated two months prior.

Photographs from the shows in Vegas hung in the living room, uneven rows of dusty photos with Joe and the cats—and me. Tigers jumping through hoops, lions roaring on cue. Joe and I in the center of all of it, smiling, endearing, loving—a team. I retrieved the band aid and went back outside.

Nicole stood next to the nearest enclosure, watching Joe inside. Zora, one of his female lions, was rubbing her head back and forth on Joe's palm. Both her paws wrapped around Joe's torso, as he kneeled on the ground in front of her.

And, as Joe coaxed Zora to lay down, Nicole moved closer, into the mystifying calmness, hooking her fingers through the chain link like claws. None of them noticed me, so I watched a few yards back.

She said, “Seeing you in there makes me think I’ve missed out on something in life.”

Joe stroked Zora, letting his hand smooth the fur and flesh on her head and neck. He stopped, raked his eyes over Zora’s long body, fingered one of her curved toes.

“That’s how I felt, at first. Our mother never liked animals—but our father did—of course, he wasn’t around much— I’m sure Dale told you.”

“No,” she said, unhooking her fingers from the fence and sitting cross-legged outside the cage.

“Oh, well, he was in the Navy,” he said as if that explained everything, “but whenever he was home for more than a few days he would take us to this place by our house. It was something like a zoo, but more like a sanctuary for big cats. Dale and I volunteered there.”

“Did you ever want to do anything else besides the cats?”

“Not really. I wanted to work at the sanctuary and never really saw beyond that until I took another job with the cats.”

Nicole nodded.

“But,” he said, “I did act. All through high school and on the big cat shows in Vegas. I even had the chance to sign with an agent. But then I bought this place. Sometimes, I wonder what would have happened, if I had stuck with it.” He laughed. “But I guess everyone wonders about something like that.”

“I think we all end up doing what we can’t help but do,” she said, “even all those people who hate their jobs, they can’t help but do it.”

A silence followed, which Zora broke, leaving Joe’s side to rub her head against the fence in front of Nicole. Zora sat back, opened her mouth briefly, showing her long front teeth, then

stood on her back legs, snaring her claws into the fence. Nicole's face darkened in the long shadow of the cat. She turned her face up, gazing at Zora's underbelly. She said, "Oh," quietly.

I approached them then, and Zora jumped down at the same time Joe and Nicole stood up.

"Dale," Nicole said, "this is incredible." I looked at my brother, kissing his lion on the head, while Zora closed her eyes in eerie, human-like satisfaction.

"Good girl," he said. He smiled at me, "You're just in time to help us feed."

"No thanks," I said, "we should probably get going." I handed the band aid to Nicole.

"You used to help," Joe said in a way that sounded neutral but still accused.

"I'd like to see it," Nicole said, "the feeding."

"Okay, let's go," I said. Nicole grabbed my hand, wound her fingers with mine.

"I'm enjoying this," she said, "thank you for bringing me."

"You're welcome," I said.

During high school, Joe and I got volunteer jobs at a cat sanctuary near our house. Randy's wife left him with the cats, she was an animal rights activist who housed everything from bears and tigers to bunnies and lizards. If it was lost, abused or abandoned, she adopted it. Randy wheezed around the place, smoking Pall Malls and hauling his oxygen tank behind him. He never did anything with the cats himself. That's why he had us, but he stood behind us while we worked, rasped and said, "Don't you fuckers ever think about going in there. He'll bite your little heads off."

We nodded and said, "Of course not, Randy."

“I can see you thinking about it,” he said, then wandered back to the house.

After about a month, Joe and I were filling water troughs when he said, “Let’s go in.”

“What?”

“Let’s go in there, with him.”

“With the tiger?”

“Yeah.” Joe turned off the water, went and unwound the long chain from the gate.

“Are you crazy? Joe, don’t.” I looked around for Randy, could see him through the large back window of his house, sleeping in his lazy-boy.

Joe worked his way in through the gate. The tiger lounged on top of his plywood house. He stared back over his large hump of a shoulder at Joe.

“Hey, guy,” Joe said, and approached him. Joe’s shoulders relaxed, he breathed evenly, his pace was calm, neither hurried nor slowed, his body told the tiger, “I’m no threat.”

When Joe was close enough to touch him, the tiger lolled his head down onto the house and continued his nap. Joe reached out a steady hand and rubbed the tiger’s shoulder.

“C’mon,” Joe said to me. I hesitated, then walked through the gate. The fur was rougher than I anticipated, a coarse thatch of stripes. As I placed my hand on him, I could feel the breath of the cat, heavy in sleep. He was so big, so striking.

Under a section of each cage was a slight gap between the fence and the ground, large enough for a big cat to swipe a paw under to get the meat we dropped. My brother considered this a safe and practical way to feed the cats.

“You have to be mindful,” he said to Nicole, “about the feeding gap. As long as you watch where your feet are, and where the cats are, you’re okay. Anyway, they can’t reach far enough to grab anything but the meat.” Nicole held a large piece of raw steak in her hand. Joe showed her where to place it. Zora swiped her paw underneath and clutched the meat, bringing it through and tearing it with her teeth. Nicole jumped back when Zora pushed her paw under, but then leaned in closer to the cage, watching her eat.

“Your turn,” Joe said to me. I took a piece of meat from the wagon Joe was pulling. It was another hand-me-down from our niece. The tiger I was feeding was the largest male on the property, weighing somewhere around 580 pounds. He saw the wagon and jumped down from the top of his house, paced back and forth over the feeding gap, opening his mouth at me and making a sound deep in his throat like an ancient chant.

“Here that sound?” Joe said to Nicole, “He’s chuffing. Lions roar, tigers chuff. When a tiger is chuffing he won’t attack, it’s a greeting sound. But the chuff only lasts a second.”

I let go of the meat, and the tiger’s massive paw shot through the gap, claiming his dinner. It felt normal for me to be back with the cats, though also dangerous, foolish. I didn’t want it to feel as good as it did.

The moment I decided to leave the cats wasn’t dramatic. It wasn’t horrific or life threatening. It was peaceful. The theater held a full audience; I could see the outline of the heads, but the lights blurred them into shadows. I stood on the edge of the stage, watching Joe hold a hoop in the center. I gestured for the next tiger to go through, waving my hand at him. He looked at me, climbed lazily off his pedestal, and came to me instead of continuing the act. We had

practiced this trick for months, the tigers had all done it dozens of times in performances. He didn't attack, he didn't bite. He just decided that he was going to do something different. He rubbed his head against my hand—the audience cooed, and when I moved my hand to signal him again, he trotted off and through the hoop like nothing had changed. As I saw him do it, and beckoned to the next tiger, I realized I had held my breath from the moment that I first waved him on.

I exhaled.

The week after we visited my brother, I called Nicole and asked her to dinner. She said yes.

“But I'll have to leave around 7:30. I have something to do.”

“Fine by me,” I told her.

We met a couple hours later at a Mexican restaurant well off the strip in an attempt to avoid tourists. She wore a black skirt over a leopard print leotard.

“Sorry,” she said, tucking the skirt under her legs as she slid across the booth from me, “I came straight from rehearsal.”

“That's okay, how was it?”

“How was what?”

The waitress came by, and Nicole glanced at the menu then ordered a water with lemon and said she'd be fine with chips and salsa. I ordered a margarita.

“Make that a pitcher,” I said, and the waitress left. “Rehearsal, how was rehearsal?”

“Fine.” She didn't look at me but shifted her eyes quickly between the other tables.

“Aren’t you hungry?” I asked.

“No, not really. We had a big lunch.” She crossed her arms and thumbed her paper napkin in one hand. I doubted it, dancers weren’t exactly big lunch kind of people, especially in groups.

“Where are you going later tonight? Back to rehearsal?” I leaned forward, rested my hands flat on the table, so she would think I was interested in her day.

“No, I’m going to visit a friend.”

“What friend?”

She fluttered her hand dismissively, “Oh, you know, just an old friend.”

“An old boyfriend?”

She looked me in the eyes for the first time that night, and said, “No, nothing like that.”

When her water came, she used a fork to juice the lemon, then stirred the ice in her water. I drank the pitcher of margaritas, considered ordering food, but after several more tense replies to my increasingly neutral questions I decided against it and called a cab well before 7:30. On the ride home, I didn’t think about who Nicole was going to see as much as why she had agreed to see me first.

When I got home, I drank the last dregs of a long ago opened bottle of whiskey in the back of my freezer. I chased it with a tall glass of tap water. Once that settled in, I sat on the edge of my bed. My closet door was open, and the shapes of my clothes became ominous figures, potential home invaders. I turned on the light and went into the closet. My hands trailed along the fabric of my shirts, and then standing became too much work, so I sank to the floor and shifted through my shoes until I found the old shoebox, which I hadn’t remembered was there. Inside were two tiny photo albums that my mother gave me. They were baby pictures mostly, of

me, Joe, and Jen. I flipped through them quickly. The last picture was one of Joe and I—he couldn't have been older than seven, me—five. He was hanging off the side of our jungle themed bunk bed, his long hair hanging down in his face, a tiger stuffed animal clenched in his fist as he roared it in my face. And me—screaming in fake, ecstatic horror, no doubt a piercing scream that made my mother cover her ears after snapping the pictures and say, “Je—sus Dale, Jesus.”

The next day I left work and drove to my brother's. I called him on my way out of town, asked if I could bring anything.

“Beer,” he said.

I stopped at a liquor store, bought a thirty-six pack of Corona and limes and planned on staying through the weekend.

When I turned off highway 95 onto the dirt road, I took a Corona from the case and popped the lid. It was almost dark as I turned down Joe's driveway and I finished my first beer.

In the driveway was a car I didn't recognize, and I couldn't see Joe anywhere close, but one of the dilapidated tables was propped up with newspaper under its short leg, and had a table cloth laid over it with three chairs around it. I opened another beer, and went to go look for Joe. There was a woman behind the house, she was at the water spigot closest to the back door. Her back was turned to me, but she was shaving familiar legs. With my brother's razor. She looked back over her shoulder.

“Nicole,” I said.

“Dale. Hi.” She turned off the water and flicked the razor back and forth in the air.

I set my beer on the table. She looked around, like she had just woken up.

“I–uh–I’m not sure where Joe is right now.”

“He’ll turn up,” I said, “he has a knack for avoiding awkward situations.”

“This is a little awkward, isn’t it?”

I let her squirm for a second, as she decided what to say and where to put the razor. She settled on balancing it on the water spigot.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping Joe could tell you,” she glanced toward the enclosures again, considered waiting for him. “I’ve been coming out here, to help Joe with the cats.”

“To help Joe with the cats,” I repeated, “and that involves using his razor to shave your legs?”

“Well, not really, but the shower’s broken, and they needed to be shaved.” She shrugged.

She wore a sun dress, a deep shade of green that looked nice against her tan, firm skin.

“You look nice.”

“Thank you.”

Needing to break the tension with contact, I stepped forward and hugged her. She tensed, then wrapped her arms around my waist. Her hair pressed against my nose, tickling my nostrils. She exhaled, pressing her chest against mine and relaxing into the embrace. I pulled back to look at her face, her eyes were worried.

I took her chin between my thumb and index finger.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, taking a step back, “it’s just that the last time we were together I was so distracted, I forgot how much I like you.”

I remembered her coldness at the Mexican restaurant.

“You did seem a little distracted, the last time I saw you.”

“I don’t blame you for not calling,” she said, “I was a bitch.”

I shrugged. “I thought you were moving on. But it’s good to see you.”

“I agree.”

Joe came around the other side of the house then, holding a plate full of chicken. Cooked chicken.

“Hope you’re hungry,” he said and slapped my back. “Glad you’re here.”

“I brought beer.”

“Thanks,” Joe said and cracked one open with the ring he wore on his right hand. He handed that one to Nicole then opened one for himself.

“I’m going to cut up these limes and get the salad,” Nicole said. She took the bag from the table next to me, and went into the house. Joe watched her.

“She’s great man.”

“Well I’m glad I could introduce you.”

“You seem irritated.”

I sighed, sat down at the table, looked up at him.

“Is that a question or a statement?”

He shrugged, “Both.”

“I don’t know. Why didn’t you say anything about her being here when I told you I was coming out?”

He sat down next to me at the table, leaning back in the flimsy plastic chair, “We’ve never been that good at talking about those kinds of things, have we?”

“I guess.” I thumbed the label of the Corona, peeling its corner.

He looked at me, eyes bright in the dim light of the porch lamp. “I’ve missed you, brother.” He started peeling the label off of his own beer bottle. “I love my cats, but man it gets lonely out here. That’s why I’m so thankful for Nicole. And the cats love her, absolutely adore her.”

“I’m sure they do.”

He looked at me, took a long swallow of his beer. “I just wanted you to know that I appreciate you coming out here. You’re the only one that does anymore.”

“You’re welcome,” I said. And we sat together, smelling the grilled scent of the chicken, waiting for Nicole to come back.

The sun was setting over the desert mountains, up behind the enclosures. It highlighted the sparsity of the landscape in variations of shadow and light.

Nicole came back with the limes, popped a wedge into both of our beers. Her dress was low cut in the front, and I felt a familiar rush, a desire for her lean body to press against mine. I finished my beer, despite the fresh lime and opened another.

We ate dinner, made small talk about the incredible heat of the previous week and the food until the conversation moved in the inevitable direction.

“Nicole is doing really well with the babies, she’s playing and handling them for almost four hours a day.”

“I love them,” she said, keeping her eyes on Joe.

“I’ve been teaching her handling techniques with the bigger cats so that when the cubs are older she can still spend time with them. They think she’s their momma now.”

“Wait,” I said, looking back and forth between Joe and Nicole, an identical smile on their faces, “she’s going in with the big cats?”

“Well, just Zora for now. You know Zora always loved women, and I trust her more than the others.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little dangerous, Joe?” I asked. “I mean, I’m sure Nicole’s great with them but she doesn’t have any formal training.”

“We didn’t have any formal training either,” he said. I cleared my throat.

“So, Nicole,” I said, “what about your dancing?”

She said, “Oh,” as if she hadn’t really thought about it. “Last week was our last week of shows, so the troop will be leaving next week for New York.”

“Have you been there before?”

“No,” she said, and shrugged, “I won’t be going this time either. I’m staying here.”

“Actually,” Joe cut in, leaning across the table, “we were going to talk to you about the best way to get a loan. We’re thinking about starting a cat show in Vegas, if we can score a venue and come up with an act. With both of us being performers, it might work out. And, honestly, I’m up a creek here with the money situation.”

“You really think that’s your ticket out of debt, Joe? Another show?”

“We can try,” he said, “by myself it wouldn’t be plausible, but with Nicole we might be able to swing it.” He piled more salad onto his plate. “What do you say?”

“What do you mean what do I say? Are you asking me to help you get a loan or to give you a loan?”

“Whichever,” Nicole said, “I have some money saved up from this gig on the strip but that will run out soon.”

“Unbelievable,” I said, and pushed my chair back, snapping one of the flimsy legs, “you two are absolutely un-fucking believable, you know that?”

“Dale, look—”

“The answer is no.”

“Okay,” Nicole said, putting both her palms up towards me, “we didn’t mean to upset you, it’s okay. We’ll find another way.”

I flipped my chair over to stick the leg back into the bottom of it, then sat back down. Nicole looked apologetic.

“Nicole,” I said, “those cats are dangerous.”

One of her hands rested on the table, and I laid mine over it.

“I feel safe with Joe,” she said. She wiggled her hand away, but touched my leg briefly under the table. The drink and adrenaline rushed through my body. She was delusional, and I wanted her away from my brother.

“Well you shouldn’t. Has he told you about our niece, Sandy? What happened to her, Joe? Why don’t you tell Nicole what you let happen to our five year old niece.”

I spit the words at him and waited, staring him down.

Reluctantly, he looked at Nicole, “There was an incident once.”

Confusion swept across Nicole’s face.

“He put our niece in danger, because he underestimated his control.”

“I handled it, Dale,” Joe said, his voice raised in defense.

“You,” I said, pointing at him, “you are seriously messed up. You think the situation was handled? Sandy went to the hospital, and your family never came back here. I’m the only one stupid enough to see you.”

He looked down at the table.

Nicole leaned back from the table, and said, “Look, you guys obviously have some stuff between you that I don’t want to get in the middle of.”

I felt her slipping away from me. The Nicole in my memory of the last few weeks had a different face than this one in front of me. The eyes were different. These were darker, tighter, more feline.

Joe got up and said, “I’m going to feed.”

Nicole moved to follow him. I took hold of her arm. “Stay here with me. So we can talk.”

She softened, turned towards me.

“I don’t know, Dale.” She glanced at Joe, who was already starting to throw meat for the first aisle of enclosures, “I think I’ll go feed.” She smiled, touched my shoulder. “I wish you would come.”

“No, thanks.” I said, avoiding her eyes and touch.

Nicole headed towards the tigers with the meat wagon, and Joe headed for the back of the property, carrying a few bags of thawed meat.

I watched them disappear, sipping my beer, my buzz gravitating into drunkenness. Which, I realized, was the only way to salvage the night.

I went over to talk to Zora. She had been there the longest, had been with us during the shows. I put my hand up to her enclosure, and she rubbed her head against my palm. I slipped my fingers through and rubbed her ears. She licked my hand.

“You’re a good girl,” I said, “I’m sorry that your daddy didn’t feed you yet.” She sat down, looked at me, jumped and put both paws up on the side of the enclosure, kneading her paws on the fence. On her hind legs, she was taller than me.

I went back to the table, where a couple small pieces of chicken were left on Nicole’s plate. I took them and threw them towards the feeding gap. Zora made a deep sound in her throat and grabbed for the meat.

I watched her eat, then sat back down at the table. Before they left to feed the cats, Nicole looked at me, back over her shoulder as she pulled the meat wagon, a wanting expression in her eyes. That expression prevented me from leaving.

I heard a noise, a high pitched scream. I tried to place it as one of the cats—no, a coyote. It grew louder. I stood up. It was a woman screaming.

I started running. As I headed for the tiger enclosures the screaming became piercing. It was unbearable when I couldn’t see her, didn’t know why she was screaming.

But I did know.

The meat wagon sat abandoned in a side aisle, half empty. I dodged it and turned toward the big tiger’s cage. Nicole lay inside the fence. Her face contorted as the tiger ripped into her leg, covering her entire thigh with his mouth. When he came up with a piece of her between his teeth, a puncture in Nicole’s thigh gushed blood, arched like the slow stream of a water fountain.

The blood from the wound was brighter than the blood already puddled under her. The worst was happening.

“Help,” she yelled, “oh God, oh God.” As she saw me, she reached both hands up towards me like I could lift her out of the cage, like I could save her that easily. And in that brief action, stretching her arms up towards me, she looked like a dancer.

I turned around, searched for a water hose. I found one that wasn't on the spout. As I twisted the hose on, the tiger crunched her bones. His tongue lapped the blood, and her screams turned to moans.

“It's okay, Nicole,” I said, though I didn't think she could hear me anymore, “I'm going to get him off you.” Her face had gone pale, whiter than any human should be.

The tiger flinched when the water hit his face and then moved to her other leg, tore the muscle from her calf, tendons dangled free of flesh. And while he gnawed her calf, he looked me in the eye. The look was familiar, not even frightening when separated from the situation, because it was the same as if he were eating a steak. Nicole opened her eyes briefly when the new pain began, tried to turn over and crawl but she was losing too much blood, going into shock. Her dress was bunched up around her stomach, its hem and her panties soaked in blood.

“I'll be right back,” I told her, and left to get the only gun on the property, in the garage. I passed Joe on my way. Panic spread across his face.

“What's happening?”

“Call 911. Right now. Nicole's being eaten over there.”

He made a distraught sound— a whimper,—as I passed but I saw him pull out his cell phone as he headed back towards her, her moans faint and erratic.

The run to the garage took what was left of my breath, but I found the shotgun behind the toolbox where my father had stored it years ago. I checked the chamber, grabbed a handful of shells and loaded the gun as I started back to Nicole. When I got there, Joe was beating the fence of the enclosure with the hose, yelling at the tiger. Nicole had turned over, facedown in the dirt now. She was no longer making noise, no longer moving. The tiger tugged at the back of her thighs, plucking skin. I pushed Joe aside, and aimed the gun at the tiger's head.

"No," Joe said, grabbing the gun, "no, please. I think she's already dead."

"Joe," I said, "the paramedics are going to have to treat her. If she's in there with a live tiger they won't be able to get her out." He sobbed. "Joe, it's either I do it or the cops do it."

He looked at me, searched my face for another option, trying to find a hole in my resolve. Finding none, he let go of the gun, nodded his head, turned, and walked away. I aimed, steadied the gun as best I could, and prayed I wouldn't hit Nicole. I pulled the trigger and the gun kicked back into my shoulder, the tiger let go, staggered away and laid down. I'd hit his neck, and could see the dark hole of his blood against his fur. He offered a weak chuff, tried to rub his neck on the ground, not understanding the pain, or why, then laid still. I entered the enclosure, undoing the chain that held the gate shut. Leaving it open, I went to Nicole. She was pale, unresponsive. Her legs mangled beyond recognition. I flipped her over and dragged her back through the gate, cringing as dirt worked its way into the wounds, as pieces of her flesh were left behind. I closed the gate and left her, running to find Joe. He was sitting against an enclosure wall, head in his hands. I put the gun down next to him, grabbed his shoulder.

"I'm going to flag down the paramedics," I said. He nodded, wiping his cheeks.

Necessity executed my movements. High beams turned on, I could see a little ahead of me, though I hit my head on the top of the Jeep a few times, going too fast to avoid the bigger dips. When I made it out onto the highway I put my hazard lights on, and stepped out of the car. Standing in front of the Jeep, I waited to see headlights.

The length of the highway stretched in either direction, going to places I had never been. Places I would never go.

I knew Nicole was dead. She was dead when I left her, but I had to get the paramedics. They had to confirm it, to take the body. I did not save people like them. I designed highways, like the one I waited on. Tried to make them safer.

Without cars the highway intruded on the landscape, but the desert accepted the road like a scar on its already dry and dirty skin. Nicole's voice came to mind, "That's a poetic sentiment for a highway safety engineer."

The road was bringing help.

The red lights of an ambulance flashed like a mirage on the highway. It took me a moment before I remembered that this was what I was waiting for. I jumped up and down, waved my arms. They pulled over to the shoulder and I pointed out the turn off, they sped away, not waiting for further directions. I got back in the Jeep, roared after them, and barely caught up, before the left hand turn. I blew past them, and they followed me down the driveway and onto the property. They parked the ambulance and I got out of the Jeep.

"This way," I yelled to them, starting back at a jog. They followed carrying a stretcher.

Joe sat next to Nicole on the ground, holding her hand.

"The paramedics are here," I said. And they swarmed her, one helping Joe out of the way.

“What happened?” One of them asked as they lifted her onto the stretcher and began carrying her back to the ambulance.

I said, “I think the tiger pulled her through the feeding gap, he had her in there for about ten minutes maybe. I killed him.”

“Feeding gap?”

“It’s where we drop their meat.”

“Okay, sir. We’re going to take your friend now. You can follow us to the hospital if you’d like.” I got the name of the hospital from one of the female paramedics as she closed the back doors with a bang. Then I loaded Joe into the car, the ambulance already gone.

The doctor who came to talk to us in the waiting room was a short Hispanic man who smelled of antiseptic and onions, when he talked he looked at the wall behind our heads.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “her injuries were too extensive. She lost too much blood and we couldn’t save her.”

My brother put his face in his hands, massaged his eyes with his knuckles.

“No,” he said over and over, “no, no, no.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” the doctor said, he stared at the wall, “is there anyone you need us to contact?”

“Her family,” I said, “we’re just friends. Her family doesn’t know, can you call them?”

“Yes, I’ll have a nurse look them up.” He looked at me finally, “Also, you should know we have to report an animal mauling. There will be a police investigation.”

“Thank you,” I said, “we understand.”

The police came shortly afterward. Took our statements, asked their questions. Scheduled a time to investigate the property the next day. I answered all their questions, Joe silently weeping next to me.

Then I took my brother home, helped him undress and climb into bed.

“Will you stay here tonight?” he asked.

“Yes, I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Okay but stay in here for awhile. I can’t fall asleep right now.” I sat on the edge of his bed, felt him shift under the blankets to press his leg against my back.

“He thought she was meat,” he said. “I don’t think he knew what he was doing.”

I said, “Probably. I don’t know.”

I wanted to tell Joe that the animal was a full grown male tiger who was never meant to come in contact with humans, who was never meant to be fed through a gap under a fence. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

“Will you help me bury him in the morning, before the police get here?”

“Joe, we can’t bury him before they get here. He’s part of the crime scene. It will look like we’re hiding something.”

“It kills me.”

“I know.”

“Will you help me bury him after then? When they’re gone?”

“Yes,” I said. “We’ll find a spot for him.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Joe quieted, and eventually I heard the heavy breathing of sleep. I went outside. Moths fluttered around the porch light, adjusting its weak illumination into undulating shadows. I turned it off, and sat on the back steps in darkness. The warm night indulged me, allowing me to pretend for a moment that it was a normal night under the desert sky, patterned with stars.

The images came without order. Joe's horror when he saw me with the gun, Nicole's face as the paramedics placed her on the stretcher; her mouth open like she was getting bad news over the phone—the shape of her lips hauntingly beautiful, the confused lurch of the tiger when the bullet struck his neck, the water dripping off his whiskers as he nosed a piece of Nicole's thigh.

And the blaring declaration, like a soundtrack playing to the images—*Nicole is dead, eaten alive.*

I closed my eyes and listened. The tiger cubs shuffled as they wrestled into the night, paws paced on compacted dirt, tongues lapped water. Low chuffs sounded back and forth.

I listened.

All I heard were the cats.

## Coyotes

I was halfway to the barn when the door of the house slammed behind me. I had no doubt he'd come after me, the lawyer didn't walk away from a fight. He was most passionate when we were fighting. Sometimes, when he'd spent a lot of time working on a case, I would leave the cabinets open in the kitchen or the bed unmade so that he would have a reason to fight with me.

"Margene," he yelled after me, "don't walk away from me."

I was wearing the dress boots I had cleaned earlier that day, but I made a point of walking through the mud in them.

"Stop," he said, "stop, now."

I kept walking. He grabbed my shoulder and tried to spin me around but I shoved him off, and turned to face him on my own.

"What?" I said, throwing my hands up, "what do you want?" He looped his thumbs through his belt loops, stuck out an alligator skinned boot.

"I don't know," he said, "why don't you tell me?"

"Because I don't know what to say to you," I said, letting my hands hang at my sides.

"Was it the dinner?" he said.

"No, dinner was fine."

"I wasn't flirting with the waitress."

"I know," I said, shifting my eyes to the ground, "it's not that."

"Then what?" he said, "what is it?"

"I don't love you," I said, "that's it." And there they were. The words that in the past months had come so often to my mind during Friday dinners with his firm where I felt out of

place in my boots and jeans and he picked out his teeth at the table while his secretary watched him through alcohol glassed eyes. And his mouth closed, and he didn't say anything after that. He nodded once, because he knew I wouldn't miss it, and then turned and walked back to the house and I walked into the barn. I went to the feed room, poured some grain into a plastic bucket and shook it. The two horses trotted in from the pasture, ears perked at the sound. Rupert made it to his stall first, and Lila came in after him. I let Rupert have the grain after I slid a halter over his nose. I patted Lila, she always went a little sour when I didn't pick her for the ride. She was young, though, and wouldn't understand the urgent energy in my legs and the firmness in my hands. Rupert would. He stood quietly as I tacked up, sliding leather through buckles and wiping the dust from the seat of my English saddle. I ignored the protest from my right knee as I mounted, and my joints softened as I settled into my seat. I shortened my reins, and Rupert raised his head. He trotted out down the road, moving with the hum in my legs and hands. I looked back once at the driveway and saw the lawyer on the porch, watching me go. I didn't wave. Neither did he.

The fading heat of the day felt good against my bare arms. When we hit the dirt trail I raised up out of my seat and Rupert rocked into a canter, tucking his head and waiting for the cue to move out. I waited until the sand turned soft, when hoofbeats were lost and all that remained was silent motion. I clucked to my horse and he stretched out his neck and dug into the sand. I knotted my hands into his thick mane, felt his sides move against my legs with the gallop. Out here there was no lawyer. There was motion, air, energy. Exuberance built at the base of my spine. I asked Rupert for more as the sagebrush flew by and we entered the dried creek-bed. He

churned his hindquarters at the gentle pressure of my leg, and I felt the energy in him that horses don't have to give but do. The power that they offer when they don't have to run, but want to.

It was between the two low, dirt crumbling walls of the creek-bed that they came. The power of Rupert's gallop shifted from desire to necessity. A fear crept into his breathing. I glanced over my shoulder, where a pair of coyotes ran ten feet behind. They were playing, nipping at each other in their chase. They had manic smiles on their faces, more like hyenas than scrappy coyotes. And I realized that though they looked like they were playing, because they couldn't have seriously believed that they could take down a horse, they were still pursuing us through predatory hope. They were chasing us until something easier came along, or because they had nothing else to do and they were hungry. I turned forward to watch the sage and dirt melt together.

I let Rupert outrun them. And then as the coyotes ran behind us, I thought: I haven't loved anyone since the cop who changed more tires than he wrote tickets, though the kindness I loved sent him running back to his cheating wife. The lawyer hadn't done anything wrong. It was just him. It was the way he talked with arrogance around his coworkers but expected tenderness from me when we were alone. It was the way he slept with a pillow over his head so that to wake him I had to wrench it from his grip to talk in his ear. It was the way he liked all cats, some dogs, and no horses.

And then I couldn't remember who was who. Was it the lawyer or the cop who liked cats? Who was it that gave me yellow tulips on my birthday? And why did it matter? It didn't, I realized. They were both men with different faults and different virtues, and I wanted the one I couldn't have because he wasn't around to demonstrate his faults. Because somehow it would be

better if I could have the unattainable one, the one that got away. And then I wondered about women, and the unhappiness that we blame on men but really is rooted in our choices. Because there is always a point at which we chose. When love does not cloud our minds or hearts, when clarity steps in and we say, “I really don’t want him, do I?”

I felt Rupert’s breathing become labored, and knew I should slow down. We passed a sagebrush housing a rabbit and the rabbit took off. The coyotes smelled the prey and fell out into the brush. I slowed Rupert to a walk. And, as I turned towards home, I knew that the lawyer wouldn’t be there when I got back. In the distance, the coyotes yipped.

## Red Dancers

The mustang collided with the metal paneling of the round pen. His eyeballs rolled back to show the white that flared against the dark brown of his irises. The muscle that rippled along his chest and flanks propelled him away from the origin of his panic. The man stood silently in the center of the pen, his hands dangling at his sides. He bowed his head to examine the desert dirt, his red hair flashing like a beacon in the sunlight. Such stillness did not come naturally to the man. The dust from the mustang's frenzy settled onto the man's blue inmate uniform, his newborn patience becoming harder to maintain as the minutes ticked by. Still, he trusted Hank; the man knew about horses. He had told Eugene that it could take hours for the horse to calm down. His voice came back through the agitated dust and flurry of flesh.

“Don't lift your head when you're in there. Wait for him to settle. The vet that gelded him said he's just about four years old and judging from his scars, he was a bachelor stud. Don't go in there thinking I gave you an easy one your first time around.”

This was the longest string of words Eugene had ever heard Hank speak, so he knew he better damned well pay attention. With his downcast eyes, he watched the mustang bolt along the outskirts of the pen. The agility and stamina protruded from every vein on his red roan hide. The horse was not particularly pretty; he had a large scar that ran down the middle of his long face and smaller ones tattooed across his body. Someone had painted his head and rump first, running out of red paint when it came to his midsection; the middle of his body blended to a subtle white with dappled red.

Though he remained alone with the horse in the round pen, Eugene could sense someone watching him. He glimpsed Hank observing from atop a nearby fence, the man's cool green gaze

permeating the distance between them. Eugene returned his eyes to the dirt and relaxed his shoulders. The mustang slowed to a steady circular pacing. The ear closest to Eugene twitched back and forth, very quickly, listening for any sound from the man. Another twenty minutes passed while Eugene delicately examined the stitching on the toe of his new cowboy boots. The light thread of the stitching dove in and out of the darker leather it held together, reminding Eugene of the way a caterpillar crawls. In front of him, the animal slowed to a walk, flaring his nostrils with each exhale; sweat ran down his flanks in small rivers. His ear twitched back once more. Eugene remained motionless, his back to the horse as the mustang stopped pacing. The energy tingled on his skin like electricity. The horse edged forward, one step closer to the center. The moment suspended itself in the air, the breach of animal and human contact tangible in every breath. Eugene felt it rush into his chest. He would get no further today. The small victory followed him to the gate of the round pen which he opened and slipped out of, leaving the mustang standing inside the enclosure. The horse watched him go before resuming a steady pace around the perimeter.

Diego was the first to greet Eugene as he walked back to the cell block for lunch.

“How’d it go?”

“Slow,” he said.

“That horse you got there’s gonna take some time, man. You can’t just go taming that kind of wildfire with no magic wand, you know what I’m sayin’ Eugeney?” Diego let out a hyena laugh.

“Yeah, I know.”

Diego's face often twitched on the left side in a way that reminded Eugene of his father. The meth lab the feds discovered in Diego's trailer no doubt contributed to the facial contortions. Eugene lowered his eyes in response to the twitch, a reflex generated by years of ignoring his father's facial tic: a spasm that scrunched the old man's face together over and over like a wrinkled balloon. The last time he had seen his father's face through the lens of faded prison glass, it hadn't moved at all.

He was the only visitor Eugene received during his imprisonment at Northern Nevada Correctional Center. It was roughly two weeks after he had arrived when Eugene looked into his father's eyes and watched his old man look through the glass, through him.

"You know why I came here?" his father said.

"To tell me I fucked up?"

"Pretty much." His father shifted forward towards the glass.

"Right about now I don't have much to say to you other than don't be coming around when your time is up. Our customers don't pay to have my convict son working on their vehicles."

"All right."

"You know Eugene, you're a goddamn disappointment, just like your mother."

Eugene paused, cracking his knuckles with both hands, the phone receiver wedged between his cheek and shoulder.

“I don’t know why you care so much. You were just some guy she fucked, and I’m just some kid she accidentally had. I didn’t want any part of her cookie-cutter stucco house and her forgiving-through-Jesus husband. You know I did better around the shop.”

“Yeah, well...” His father turned his face away from Eugene and looked at the floor.

“Guess that’s about it then, isn’t it Pops?”

“Guess so,” he considered Eugene one last time, his face frozen.

Eugene was eleven years old when his dad gave him his first job on a car: changing the oil on a Toyota Camry that was in the shop overnight for a windshield replacement. As Eugene checked the dipstick one last time, he heard his father’s heavy boots behind him.

“Eugene, find something on that car to fix besides an oil change. We’re a little short on rent this month.”

His father pawed him on the shoulder before walking back to the office. Eugene searched for an hour for something to repair on the car. There was nothing. The headlights, brakes, steering, alignment, tires, and engine all checked out fine. Even the air conditioning filter was clear. Eugene clutched the filter in his hands, wishing for it to be ripped or dirty. His first job and he couldn’t find a dirty air filter? The blood rushed from his tight fingers to his face, reddening his cheeks. Eugene chucked the air filter into the back wall.

“Fuck,” he yelled, surprising himself at his volume.

His father slammed open the door of the office and widened his eyes at Eugene, who stood near the front of the car.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” His father demanded.

“I can’t find anything wrong on that stupid. Fucking. Car.” Eugene said, breathing heavily after each word. Eugene’s father looked at him and chuckled.

“That’s all? Eugene sometimes I swear you don’t have a brain in that fat head of yours.”

His father strode over to a workbench.

“If there isn’t a problem, we make one.” He pulled a nail from an empty coffee can.

Eugene watched as his father took the nail in one hand and a hammer in the other, placing the sharp point against the tire. The hammer slammed the nail into the rubber and the hiss of escaping air filled the silent shop.

“Now, change that tire and we’ll tell them they picked up a nail on the way in.”

Eugene found that working with the horse was a lot like working on cars. For everything to go right, he had to work slowly. Once he fixed one part, another would usually break. And much like Eugene’s father, Hank was always right.

At the end of the first week, Hank quietly shadowed Eugene as he walked out to the mustang’s pen. The horse stood sideways as Eugene approached him, a weary look in his dark eye. Eugene carried the halter behind his back, his arm slack behind him so that the end of the lead rope snaked through the dusty soil. The gelding flicked his ears at the approach but didn’t bolt. He stepped backwards when Eugene approached, so Eugene stopped and waited for the ears to flicker again. The gap closed in this manner. The horse’s flesh twitched violently at the touch of Eugene’s hand on his shoulder, the body alerting the mind of this foreign contact. Eugene brought the halter over the horse’s nose and reached a tan arm around the horse’s neck to bring it over the ears. Despite the blaring knowledge that he was caught, the horse remained motionless.

Eugene glanced over at Hank who by now hovered over the top rail of the enclosure like a perched hawk, the large-rimmed hat he always wore shadowing his face from view.

“That’s it?”

Eugene didn’t reply.

“Well, all right.”

Hank patted the top rail once with a flat palm, lowered himself to the ground, and moved on to the next pair of horse and prisoner. Eugene removed the halter and perched himself on top of the narrow metal fence. For an hour, he studied the stitching on his slightly worn boots.

When he was twelve, Eugene went with his father to a titty bar. It was after a typical day at the shop in which one woman refused to pay for the work done on her Corvette because she insisted that one of the shit-heads that worked for his father had scratched her driver-side door. A silver flask fell out of her blouse as she fished in her purse for her keys which were already in her hand. After she left, Eugene’s father insisted everyone go home early and then he looked at Eugene who was stacking tires in the corner of the garage. The kid was tall, lined in pure adolescent muscle and despite his red hair and smattering of acne, he looked older than his age.

“Wanna go somewhere fun?”

Eugene threw the last of the tires on the stack, shrugged, and said, “Sure.”

They walked four blocks in the cold dry air to Ruby’s, indicated by a crooked neon sign and a painted black door burrowed between a bar and an Indian smoke shop. Once inside, darkness filled Eugene’s eyes, accompanied by the waft of whiskey and sweat. A counter surrounded the stage in the center of the dark room and a bar stretched along the right side of the

space, the scintillating bottles of booze glinting on the wall behind it. A few men sat at the counter, drinking tall, foaming glasses of beer and one man with a mustache and ponytail slept in the corner of the room, a burned out cigarette dangling between two grubby fingers.

Eugene had encountered girls at school. They were all the same skinny, snotty prepubescent girls who refused to wear anything less than name brand t-shirts and if they weren't that way, they wanted to be. The figure that moved on the lighted stage was nothing like those girls. Her body twisted like a python to the pulsing music, full hips and large breasts mesmerizing her few drunken spectators. She wore nothing but a thin, red pair of underwear and, at first, Eugene couldn't look away. His father ushered him over to the bar and bought a drink for himself, not pushing the bartender to get anything for Eugene but ice water.

"You can have a sip of mine," he told Eugene as she scampered off to the other end of the bar to pour his scotch.

Scotch and water in hand, they sat down at the foot of the stage. A man next to them blinked his glazed eyes and tossed a dollar bill in the direction of the dancer.

He glanced over at Eugene with a fat pig face and sneered, "Wohooo there ginger. Don't you look a little young to be watching this here show?"

"That's none of your goddamn business," Eugene's father replied.

The man got up and moved to the other side of the stage next to a younger man wearing a university t-shirt. Eugene drank his water while his father drank three more glasses of scotch with very little soda. Eugene didn't really watch the women. When they had first sat down he looked at the first dancer, who had long black hair. As she turned in her swivel towards them, grinding against the pole erected in the middle of the stage, he glanced at her face. Her deep

brown eyes were lined in black makeup, but it didn't hide the fact that she wasn't very pretty. Her thin mouth smiled occasionally at the men who threw her tips or whistled, but it was drawn, tight, business like. She didn't really like dancing for the men and so Eugene looked at his glass of water and his hands. Somewhere around the fourth scotch, his father fumbled in his jean pocket for his wallet, drawing out two worn dollar bills. He shoved one towards Eugene.

“There, give that to her when she comes closer, stick it right in her undies.”

Eugene's father laughed in his raspy, unfrequent way and swallowed the last bit of alcohol from the short glass. The dancer was a younger one now, with short blonde hair and blue tassels over her nipples. Eugene took a drink of his water and she snaked closer, thrusting her hips in their general direction.

“Go ahead Eugene, give her the damn bill.” His father nudged him with his elbow.

Eugene stared at the dollar and then placed it on the stage near the dancer's feet. Her toenails were painted red with some kind of white flower on the big toe.

“Is that it?” Eugene's father asked.

Eugene looked into the lap of his bluejeans.

“All right.”

Eugene's father threw the money toward the dancer; it fluttered against her flat stomach and then glided to the stage. He turned on his heel, staggered to the front door, and groped the handle as he exited. He didn't turn to see if Eugene followed or not.

The day Eugene rode the horse, the wind rolled off the mountains in waves. The March sun shone wide beams through heavy clouds that covered the sky, and the dry air hit Eugene's

nostrils with the traveling scent of sage. The horse stood in the center of the familiar round pen as Eugene swung the heavy saddle up over his back. The leather emitted a small groan as it settled against the horse's spine. Eugene reached under the horse and tightened the cinch, so that the mustang felt the leather tighten gradually under his belly, a steady pressure rather than the jerk many cowboys accentuated. Eugene lifted his left foot up to the stirrup, gripping the saddle horn with a calloused hand as he cautiously balanced his weight across the saddle. The horse side-passed as Eugene shifted his weight and brought his right leg up over the horse, settling it on the other side. The horse moved forward, trying to make sense of the disturbance. Eugene squeezed his grasshopper legs around the horse and they began a steady trot around the circular edge. The horse tossed his head a few times, jerking Eugene's hands and then settled into a rhythm that steadily picked up speed. Soon the horse was cantering and Eugene grabbed for the mane, twisting the red hair between his knuckles. A gate clanged shut somewhere in the distance and, sensing his opportunity, the horse jumped sideways and spun on a hind leg. Eugene gripped his legs around the horse like a vise and shoved his heels down, preparing for the buck that would surely come. Instead, the horse went sideways again and then sucked back, sending Eugene over the horse's shoulder to the dirt. Eugene heard the crack of his index finger more than he felt it. It absorbed his weight against the pressure of the earth and snapped like a dry wishbone.

Afterwards, as Hank unsaddled the mustang and Eugene held his finger awkwardly to his chest, Hank asked him something; "You ever dance much?"

"You mean with women?"

"Yeah."

“Maybe a little in high school.”

“Well riding a green horse is a lot like dancing with a woman,” Hank hefted the saddle back to the shed where the inmates kept their tack and Eugene followed in his wake.

“You have to ask them real nice and then you have to know what you’re doing once you’re out there. You have to lead and the horse—the woman— they’ll follow if they respect and trust you. And I’ll tell you something else, fear isn’t a part of getting either one of those.”

A week after he arrived at the prison, before his father came to visit, Eugene sat against a tree in the prison yard. He stared at the tall wire fence that would enclose him for the next three years and beyond it, he saw the mountains that truly indicated the barriers of the world. Eugene lowered his gaze and traced a circle into the dirt with his index finger. Diego made his way over to Eugene’s tree, walking in short jittery steps.

“Eugeney, I heard you gonna start the mustang training program the next go round.”

“Yeah, I used to rope calves in the rodeo. Back in high school.” Eugene shrugged, “It’s something to do at least.”

Diego laughed. “Aye man you don’t gotta be telling me. Horses are the only thing that keep me sane in this place.”

When they returned to their cells that afternoon, the guard came to let Eugene know he had a phone call. Eugene shuffled to the phone, mashed the plastic receiver up to his ear,

“Hello?”

“Eugene, it’s Loraine.”

“Lorraine.” He heard her take a drag of her cigarette. He could smell the memory of menthol-laced breath.

“I’m moving out of this goddamn apartment Eugene. I never signed up to be dating a criminal, and you know I deserve better than your sorry ass anyway.”

Eugene paused. “Yeah, all right.”

“All right? Is that all you’ve got to say about it?”

“Just about.”

“Well, I’m taking Buck, he’d be no good with your daddy and he’s gotten attached to me now that you’re gone. Don’t bother finding me.”

The dog had only one eye and his father would have kicked him around anyway so Eugene thought he’d be better off with Lorraine. If the woman had a soft spot in her heart for anything, it would be animals. True, she was selfish and manipulative, but she was clever and downright talented in the bedroom. He missed her and the way she made eggs in the morning, her bare feet flat against the linoleum, and right then he could picture her pink lips and the smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes.

But Eugene didn’t say any of that to her.

What he said before he hung up was, “Fuck you.”

Eugene pretended he hadn’t seen the lithe shadow under the tree, peering at him from across the top of the round pen. Two weeks until the auction and he had made considerable progress with the horse. He smiled to himself as he saddled the mustang. Eugene mounted, feeling his long legs straddle the horse and anchor into position. The responsiveness of the

animal beneath him hummed through his body as he turned the horse with a touch of a hand or leg. He deepened his seat, feeling the weight of his back settle into the saddle and the horse stopped. A small pressure from the heels of his boots, and the horse stepped backwards, sensing what Eugene wanted. Due to his cumbersome brace that still held his broken finger in place, his hands were a bit too heavy, but the horse didn't protest this awkwardness; his mouth was soft and receptive, molding to Eugene's hands. Eugene halted the horse and took his feet out of the leather stirrups. He placed one foot on the saddle, a grip on the saddle horn steadied him as he placed his other leg underneath himself and stood, his boots placed firmly in the middle of the saddle. He stood that way for a moment. It was easy to breathe up there; it was the easiest thing in the world. He reckoned that was the proudest a man could be, standing on the back of a horse that weeks ago wouldn't let a hand touch him. He lowered himself backwards into the saddle and slid off over the horse's rump. He walked to the head of the horse and stroked the soft, flat cheek and the horse nodded his head into Eugene's chest, blowing gentle puffs of air from his dark nostrils.

Eugene looked over the rail to Hank and detected a crooked grin under the wide-brimmed hat.

The night Eugene hit the stripper he drank five glasses of scotch with very little soda. He sat in the middle of the bar like he had many times after work, ignoring the strippers who danced behind him, giving the bartender an extra quarter every time she brought him a drink. One of his friends from high school came in to finish paying off a tab. The friend's name was Wayne and they talked about their high school rodeo days. They talked about the bay-colored horses and

bulls and big-haired women that filled their past with their absence and when they were done Eugene paid his tab and went out to his truck. He pulled out of the parking lot and turned right onto the street that ran in front of Ruby's Strip Club. The woman stumbled into the street between two dark cars and didn't even glance at the truck before it smashed into her. Eugene hit the brakes when he saw the shape emerge, but it only lessened the impact. Afterwards, she lay in the street and complained that her fucking leg hurt and Jesus Christ call a fucking ambulance. Her right leg was bent up underneath her torso at an odd angle, and the blood oozed from where her head hit the pavement. Eugene knew she was a stripper because he had seen her dancing in her knee-high leather boots when he had walked into the club. The red lights of the emergency vehicles flashed as the ambulance hauled her away, the paramedics predicting a broken femur. The police handcuffed Eugene and bowed his head into the back of the patrol car.

As the handcuffs dug into the skin of his wrists, Eugene wondered if she would ever dance again.

The public filed in via the road that led out of the prison gates. They wore anything but the color designated for the condemned, which was blue. There were children with cowboy hats and oversized boots who kicked up dirt as they walked. There were women with hard lines on their faces and large belt buckles, and the men who followed them, checkbook in hand, as they flitted from pen to pen regarding the horses. Some arrived towing trailers, some in small cars. One man had come to buy a saddle horse for his cattle ranch two states to the east in Colorado. He was short, stout, with a small belly and clawed hands. His walk was bow-legged from years in the saddle, and his heart was broken from years of disappointment. He spent most of the

morning near a pen containing a red roan-colored mustang who's name read "Tango" on the third page of the program.

There was another man who came during the morning walkabout, flipped through the program and moseyed over to Tango's pen. The man's baseball cap hid his thinning red hair which by now was streaked with grey, and his cane supported him as he limped along. He looked at the horse, then shielded his eyes from the light as he gazed upwards, his face twitching madly as the sun scorched his wrinkled skin.

The man stood near the back of the grandstand during the presentation in the large arena. The prisoners each presented their horses, showing what they could do, standing on the saddle, doing backflips from the horses' backs. The grandstand marveled at the spectacle of prisoner turned horse trainer, mustang turned bomb-proof mount. The man watched as a prisoner entered the arena on a red roan mustang. He watched as the pair moved in tandem, as the grandstand whooped and hollered at the man galloping around the arena without a bridle and then sliding off over the rear-end of the horse. He watched, then slowly turned and hobbled to his car.

Years later, when it was all entirely too late, Eugene would receive a letter, handwritten in a nurse's feminine scrawl. The letter would describe a May morning during the years of Eugene's incarceration and Eugene would smile, knowing that the old man had stood silently, in his stubborn way, and watched as Eugene's horse brought in the day's highest auction bid.

Eugene watched the paddles fly into the air as he held Tango in the arena. The horse's coloring made for higher bids. The bow-legged man standing near the front of the crowd stuck

his paddle into the air after every other call from the auctioneer. At \$1350, the man glanced over to a woman with a silver braid that ran down to her hips who was the last person bidding against him. Without breaking his gaze, he stuck up his panel. At \$1500, the bidding stopped. The woman calmly browsed through her program like she hadn't been participating. Eugene led the horse back to his pen and waited for the rest of the bidding to be done. In the course of 120 days, the mustang had become a rideable, workable animal. When he looked into the horse's dark, trusting eye, Eugene saw salvation.

The rancher's name was Jeremy Wells. He shook Eugene's hand with a calloused palm and commended his work.

"Thanks Eugene, I really appreciate getting a horse that's already been under saddle. I'm getting too old to start colts anymore."

Typically, ranch owners were quiet and solitary, beaten but too stubborn to give up. It was an attribute that came with the territory of trying to make it in the the luckless industry of ranching. But this man's eyes sparkled despite the disappointment lurking behind them. Eugene turned the corners of his mouth up, "It's no problem."

"I really like the way this horse responds to you, Eugene. I'll tell you what, I don't know your story, I don't know why you're in here. But I know that horses reflect our souls. So when you get out, feel free to look me up."

Eugene nodded and shook the man's hand once more. He patted Tango on the neck, watched Jeremy load him into a long stock trailer and drive down the prison road, a dust cloud billowing behind them. Afterwards, Eugene sat on the top rail of Tango's empty pen and studied his well worn leather boots.

## Gone

Loretta's belt buckle flaps against her thigh as she treads through the deep dirt of the fairgrounds, boots in one hand, nearly empty bottle of tequila in the other. The morning sun flickers up over the grandstands. She pauses in her assault to set her boots and bottle down on a picnic table and fasten her large, silver buckle. Her jeans are looser than last night, so she tugs her belt tighter. She can see his trailer now. Others are up, loading horses and cattle, packing after the long weekend of rodeo. No one notices her until she bangs on the door of Ed's trailer. Her fist thuds against the door, and she hears beer cans scatter inside. The door opens.

"Loretta?" He rubs the hangover out of his eyes, runs a hand through his hair. He's naked except for his jeans.

"Where's my money?" Loretta says, squinting past him into the trailer.

"Money for what?" Ed says.

"You know damn well for what, for the bucking horse your guys loaded this morning."

"I paid you."

"The fuck you paid me," Loretta says and pushes past him into the trailer. A barrel racer stirs in his bed, her blonde mass of hair sticking out of the sheets. "Ever try sleeping with a brunette?" Loretta says as she digs through jeans on the floor, looking for his wallet. She spots it on the floor next to the bed, on the barrel racer's side. She reaches for it.

"Nope," Ed says and lays down on the bed, pushing the blonde over. "You ain't gonna find anything in there." Loretta finds a condom and a dollar bill. She throws the wallet at him.

"You owe me for that horse, Ed. I didn't see a dime last night and your boys loaded him this morning while I was asleep."

“Now that ain’t my problem, is it?” Ed says and pulls a pillow over his head. Loretta reaches across the blonde and rips the pillow off of his face. The blonde hits Loretta in the chest, finally disturbed from her sleep. Loretta knees her in the side and rolls her off the bed, kicking her as she hits the floor.

“Get out of here,” Loretta says, and threatens her with the tequila bottle, “get out.” The barrel racer is quick, scrambling for her jeans and shirt, and hightails it out of the small trailer.

“What did you do that for?” Ed says, throwing the pillow at Loretta. Loretta turns on him, “Where’s my money? Your boss lady gave you plenty.”

“Now I’m having a hard time recollecting where that money went Loretta, maybe you should show me something nice and I’ll remember.”

“Don’t fool around,” Loretta says.

“Show me your tits, just this once,” he says, and flashes his gap-tooth grin.

“Shut up,” Loretta says and clenches a fist, moving towards Ed.

“Please?” he says, and Loretta smashes her fist into his face, knocking his head into the wall of the trailer. He grunts, holds his hand to his eye. “Jesus christ,” he says. Loretta raises her bottle.

“Your brother,” Ed says, holding out his hand to stop her.

“What?”

“Your brother has the money. He cleaned up pretty good in poker last night.”

Loretta downs the last shot and throws her bottle onto the floor. She slams the door of the trailer, and makes her way to her truck, leaning up against it to pull her boots on. The window of the driver’s side is half down and she snakes her arm through it, opening the door from the

inside. She needs to get that door handle fixed. Clambering into the truck, she foregoes the seatbelt and slams it into gear, speeding out of the fairgrounds. Her empty stock trailer rattles behind, the ancient truck groans at her persistence. The needle of the fuel gauge jiggles on empty. The tank could be empty or full, no real way to tell since it broke last month. The tequila catches up with her as she pulls out onto the Wyoming highway, so she grabs her aviators from the passenger floorboard and forges on. That gelding was worth a lot, from Big Daddy's finest bucking horse line. She presses her boot to the accelerator.

When she pulls up to the house, his truck is parked crooked in the driveway. At least she won't have to track him down. He doesn't answer the door, so she pulls out her cell phone and dials. It rings and goes to voicemail.

"Damn," she says. Loretta walks around the house. The window to the spare bedroom is partially open, so she slides it the rest of the way and pushes out the screen. Music plays in the living room, that hardcore stuff her brother got into while he was overseas. The military took her brother and returned a shell—a hollow, haunted person. Sometimes she imagines them, performing surgery on his brain, extracting his soul, so that he could kill all those people through a scope. The brother who rode horseback with her on Big Daddy's ranch, counting cows and bucking stock, the brother who caught horny toads, who she played cowboys and indians with, he is gone. Gone. She goes to look for the shell; the shell of him will be around this dark house somewhere.

He's laid out on the couch in the living room, amidst dying plants, empty pizza boxes, and a speaker blaring his soul-ruining music. The coffee table tells his latest story—an orange pill bottle and a flask, both empty. Loretta goes to the window, flings the curtains open. The sunlight

shines through the dust in the living room. When she was young, she thought the dust particles were fairies. She'd paw at them and dance, and Big Daddy would chuckle and swing her up into his arms.

"Your momma sent those fairies for you from heaven," he used to say before flinging her into the air, catching her on the free fall. Big Daddy always knew what to do with Al, but Big Daddy never met the shell. His heart gave out the month before Al got back from Iraq. No, this Al was reserved for her.

"Wake up," she says, and shakes Al's shoulder. He's still wearing his jeans, his flannel is buttoned. His boots hang over the arm of the couch. She laughs, even though it's not funny. Not really, and he rolls onto his side, facing away from her. She searches for the money instead of rousing him. His leather wallet holds only credit cards; the coffee can on top of the fridge is empty. A few coins are scattered on the kitchen counter, but there's no sign of her \$8,000. Ed lied, or her brother hid the cash. Loretta grabs Al's shoulders and turns him over. She slaps him on one cheek.

"Alan." She slaps him again, harder this time, "wake up."

His arm collides with her head, sending her to the floor, and he's up off the couch, tripping over her, landing on his hands and knees. He looks back at her through red rimmed eyes. He looks scared, but she gets up and stands over him anyway. He sits back on his haunches and looks at her, laughing now.

"God Loretta. You wiry little bitch." He stands, facing her.

"Where's my money?" she says.

"What?" he asks.

“The eight grand you won last night? That was mine, Ed owed it to me,” she says. Al sits down on the couch, shading his eyes from the sun.

“Gone,” he says.

“Gone where?” she asks. He gestures towards the pill bottle.

“Some of it went to my dealer, some of it got lost.”

“How do you lose eight grand, Al? Please, enlighten me.”

“Couple bad hands of poker, and some debts I needed to pay,” he says and shrugs. Loretta runs a hand through her greasy hair. She hasn’t showered in a few days.

“Are you ever going to get your life together?” she asks, “It’s been six months.”

“What for?” he asks, and turns on the TV.

“I could use some help at the ranch,” she says, staring him down.

“You have Flynn, and you’re selling everything off anyway.”

“We are not selling everything off. See this is what I mean, you don’t know what’s going on,” she raises her voice, “Do you even care?”

“No, I don’t.”

“I don’t believe you. Big Daddy meant more to you than that. The ranch means more than that, more than this,” she waves her hand at his mess.

“Not anymore,” he says, “That doesn’t matter. There’s a war going on. If I’m needed anywhere, it’s there.”

“Don’t you dare,” Loretta says and clenches a fist, “Don’t you dare pick that place over home.”

“Sometimes home changes, Loretta,” Al says, shifting his eyes from the TV screen to his hands.

“Fine,” she says, and opens the front door, “thanks for nothing.”

“Wait,” Al calls from the couch. Loretta stops in the doorway.

“What are you going to do, about the money?”

“I’m going to get it back from the people who owe it to me,” she says. And the door slams.

It’s afternoon by the time she slides into the truck and turns up the radio, letting George Strait sing about his exes in Texas. She barrels down the dirt road and turns down the long driveway to the ranch house. As she pulls up, Flynn is sending some of the bucking horses into the holding pen. He hollers at them until the lead mare has tricked them all into following her into the enclosure. Flynn jumps from the rail he’s perched on and swings the gate shut. Loretta smiles. It’s the simple things that make it home. He waves to her, and she walks over to the pen, hitches her boot on the bottom rail. The horses mull around, pushing past one another, brushing shoulders and rumps. Flynn comes up beside her and rests his well-worked hands on a rail.

“These are the ones going to Colorado next week,” he says.

“I figured,” she says, “I’m going to Cheyenne tonight. I’m going to need you to hold down the fort until late tonight.”

“All right,” Flynn says and spits some tobacco, “what are you going there for?”

“Didn’t get the money for Astronaut, Ed and Al gambled it.”

“Shit,” Flynn says and looks down at the dirt. He’s always been so kind, not much of a fighter. “Did you see Al?” Flynn asks. Loretta knows he wants to know about his best friend, but doesn’t want to let on.

“Yeah,” Loretta says, “He didn’t have any of the money left. That’s why I’m going to see Rose about my money, she owes me.”

“Damn straight,” Flynn says, “It isn’t your fault her boys can’t do what they’re told.” Loretta reaches an arm around Flynn’s tall shoulders.

“Thanks,” Loretta says and heads for the trailer hitch. She’d come home to drop off the trailer. She looks over at Flynn, leaning up against the rail of the pen. He’s watching the horses, relaxing for a moment before tackling the rest of the workload. She thinks better of hitching up the trailer. She might need it.

“Loretta,” Flynn calls to her as she climbs into the truck cab. She shuts the door and leans out the window.

“Yeah?”

Flynn strides up to the truck window, hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Do you remember that night you, Al, and I got caught drinking with those Indians?” Flynn asks. Loretta nods, remembering the way Big Daddy picked them up as they were stumbling up the road. He didn’t say a word to them, letting his silence punish them.

“Do you remember what he used to say to us, like before we left that night?”

“Endeavor to persevere,” Loretta says, uttering words she hasn’t heard in months.

“Yeah,” Flynn says, “I didn’t understand it then, but I think you should remember it today.” He taps the truck door and turns back to the horses, tipping his hat at her as he goes. Loretta smiles for a moment, before it falters.

Earlier that morning, she woke up in her truck, the bottle of tequila cradled between her thighs. Her belt was undone and an bull rider slumbered in the passenger seat, reeking of whiskey. She remembered him calling to her from across the grandstands the night before, asking her to come celebrate how well her bulls had bucked. Too bad she had sold them, he’d said. The celebration involved a cheap bottle of tequila for her, and whiskey for the bull riders. Barrel racers and ropers had come and gone throughout the night, and Loretta remembered sneaking off with the lanky bull rider to get chewing tobacco at the gas station. She guesses that’s when they fucked in her truck and passed out. Around that time, Ed lost to her brother in poker, lost her eight grand. She pounds a fist on the dashboard and the truck shudders. Big Daddy would not be proud.

The Wyoming mountains and prairie blend together on all sides of her. It’s an hour long drive from Laramie to Cheyenne, and she spends the miles brooding over her mistake. She doesn’t register pulling off the highway until the back road turns to gravel. Big Daddy used to bring her out here for horse trades. When the road turned to gravel he’d pull out a tape cassette and play her favorite song, “Pony Man” so that they didn’t have to listen to the rocks crunching under the tires. She turns down the music now, listens to the gravel bite the underside of the trailer. The ranch arch of Stampede Ranch crooks over the road, and she pulls under it onto the dirt driveway. The ranch house looms in front of her. White austere porch, red paint. It’s perfect, like the woman she’ll find inside. She parks in the spot next to Rose’s Ford and checks herself in

the mirror, swipes a hand through her thin hair, fluffing it won't do any good. She's never been a rodeo queen. The wooden steps of the porch creak, she knocks on the door three times. There's no sound from inside, so she double checks that both of Rose's vehicles are there. The Benz is under its carport. She knocks again.

"I'm coming," Rose calls from inside. The door opens and she's wearing a satin robe over her jeans and t-shirt. Her hair looks perfect. Loretta sometimes wonders if it's a wig. The lines are beginning to show on her face, though, around the mouth and eyes. She's no longer the young beauty she was.

"Loretta, well dear, what are you doing here?" Rose says, and turns, waving her hand for Loretta to follow her. "Come in," she says, and sashays back to her office. Loretta follows her, glancing at the mahogany bookcases and desk. She remembers when Rose's father, a thin, wispy man compared to Big Daddy, sat in the chair where Rose sits now, crossing her long legs.

"Sit down," Rose says, and gestures to the chair on the other side of the desk.

"I'll stand, thanks, I've been driving," Loretta answers, and folds her arms, standing behind the chair.

"All right," Rose says, showing her veneers. "What can I do for you today, Loretta?"

"Your boys didn't come up with the cash for Astronaut," Loretta says.

"I gave Ed the money, there was more than enough, and the horse is here now," Rose furrows her brow, looking confused. Loretta can't tell if she's acting.

"I know he's here, that's why I came." Loretta unfolds her arms and grabs the back of the chair. "I need that eight grand, Rose, and I didn't get it." Rose holds up a long finger.

“One second,” she says and picks up her cell phone. “Ed, I need you up at the office please.” She hangs up, and looks at Loretta, “let’s see what my guy has to say about this.”

Loretta sinks into the chair, puts her hands on her knees as they wait for Ed. The silence warps around them. Ed scuffs in after a few minutes, his boots bring the smell of manure. Rose stands up, “Loretta says you didn’t pay her for that bucking horse.”

Ed takes off his hat, works a toothpick between his teeth, “Miss Rose, I paid Loretta for that horse. I paid her the eight grand and the boys loaded him this morning. He’s out in the round pen.” Loretta almost believes him herself. She looks out the window, the sun is setting, casting shades of orange over the dark mountains. Rose sits back down in the chair.

“He’s lying. He never gave me the money, he gambled it,” Loretta says.

“Now, Loretta, I have to take him at his word. I hired him, after all. What’s it worth if I don’t trust my own judgement?” She smiles again at Loretta, and Loretta can see the twinkle in her blue eyes, she knows.

“I guess your judgement isn’t worth much, anyway,” Loretta says, staring her down.

“Loretta, I think you had better leave now,” Rose says, narrowing her eyes. Loretta sees the snake behind them, knows that it’s best to play this a different way.

“I think you’re right,” Loretta says.

Rose swivels around in her chair to look out the window.

“Good to see you, Loretta,” Rose says.

Loretta hurries past Ed, pushes open the front door. She hears him stomp out onto the porch. He catches up to her at the truck, tries to open the door for her. The handle catches and he stumbles backwards, Loretta stretches her arm to open it from the inside.

“Get away from my truck,” she says to him, and slams the door. He waves to her, one hand on his belt buckle. His smile says he got the better of her. But Ed never met Big Daddy. She barrels down the driveway, under the wooden archway, aiming towards the grove of trees on the gravel road. She parks the truck behind the wide oaks, hidden from view of the ranch. Darkness will descend in less than an hour. Loretta checks behind her seat, there’s two rope halters and a lead rope. She hasn’t eaten all day, so she forages and finds some stale trail mix in the glove compartment. The nuts crunch between her teeth. When a dark blue replaces the orange in the sky, Loretta hitches a halter over her shoulder and moves to the back of the trailer. She opens the trailer door, leaves it open. She puts her hands in her jean pockets and starts off down the road.

Crickets chirr in the fields on either side of her as she walks. She can hear cattle ripping grass from the ground, grinding it between their back teeth. The lights are on in the upper story of the ranch house. Hopefully Rose is distracting Ed with her dulling charm. It’s quiet up by the pens, the horses are eating. Loretta approaches the round pen. It’s empty. They’ve moved him, so she sneaks around the other pens, it’s hard to see the markings on the horses in the dark. Astronaut has a star on his forehead, something to distinguish him from the rest. She begins to check foreheads, no stars in the first two pens. There’s a few younger colts in the pen closest to the house, and then she sees a glowing star, Astro. She doubts these colts he’s with are halter broke. Sliding between the rails, she talks softly to the the horses, letting them know she’s there. The younger colts shy at her presence, they’re not used to being handled, let alone encountering humans in darkness. She lets them shy, and walks towards Astronaut, talking all the way. He stands for her, switching his inside ear toward her. She slides the halter over his nose, ties the knot of the rope halter near his ear. Stroking his neck she leads him to the gate. It squeaks as she

opens it, and she tenses. Astronaut feels her tense and rushes through the gate, brushing her shoulder. He's easy to handle on the ground, but he's nervous about the dark, about her stealth. She's relieved that none of the colts try to slide through the gate, none of them want to come near her. Jogging, she keeps the lead rope slack as Astronaut trots behind her. He scurries from side to side, spooking at things in the darkness. Loretta smiles, he trusts her, follows her even though he's scared. They get to the trailer faster than Loretta expects, adrenaline has pushed them both this far. The trailer is another matter. She knows this horse. He shies at the trailer, pulling back. She extends the lead rope, let's him stop, and produces carrots from the back of the truck. He can't resist, and approaches her at the smell of them. She breaks him off a piece, palms it to him, and rubs his neck.

“That's a good boy, Astro. We're going to get in the trailer now,” she says and breaks off another piece of carrot. He follows her to the back of the trailer, snorting. She gives him the carrot and then backs herself into the trailer, encouraging him to come in with her.

“It's ok,” she says. He wants the rest of the carrot so he inches up to the edge of the trailer. Loretta extends the carrot, leaves the slack in the rope, waits for him to decide. He calms after a moment and lifts a hoof, steps into the back, and loads. Loretta jumps out to close the gate of the trailer and then climbs up the side to tie him from the outside. She exhales, and looks up the driveway to see headlights coming towards her. Running for the cab, she starts the truck and slams down the accelerator. The wheels spin on the gravel, and then take purchase, shooting off down the road. The speedometer needle creeps upward, the headlights get bigger in the rearview. She's thinking she might not outrun them hauling the trailer when the truck jerks forward and sputters, the engine stalls. She forgot to fill up. The truck slows to a halt, and she slams her hands

on the wheel. “Fuck,” she says, and gets out of the truck. They’re not going to take him. It’s still her horse. Ed’s truck comes into view, she can see Rose in the passenger seat. Loretta stands with her hands on her hips as they pull up and get out of the truck. Rose leans up against the side of the pickup, she’s still wearing her robe and her jeans, she takes a swig from the flask she’s holding.

“I believe you have something that belongs to me,” Rose says, and looks toward the trailer. Ed goes to open the back of it.

“You can’t take him,” Loretta says and blocks his way with her small frame, “You never paid me for him, so he’s mine. You stole him.” She grits her teeth and looks to Rose. Rose cocks her head to the side and approaches Loretta herself.

“Get out of his way or I’ll knock your teeth out, you little bitch,” Rose says, rearing back like a cobra and spitting at Loretta’s feet. Loretta bolts forward, colliding with Ed’s shoulder and grabs Rose’s pristine blonde hair. Rose screams and claws at Loretta’s hand, it’s not a wig after all.

“Get her off me,” Rose says kicking Loretta in the stomach. Loretta lets go and turns on Ed, slamming him in the nose with an upturned palm, he stumbles back but then dives for her midsection and knocks her to the ground as she brings her knee to his groin. He falls on top of her and hits her, over and over, slamming his fist into her face, grunting through his pain. Blood fills her mouth, runs from her nose, she turns to the side and he hits again, sending her plummeting into darkness.

It's light out when Loretta feels the hand on her shoulder. "Wake up," he says, and for a moment she thinks it's Big Daddy leaning over her.

"Al?" she says, and sits up. Al keeps a steady hand on her shoulder.

"Hey there, kid. Let's get out of here," he says, helping her to her feet.

"The truck's out of gas," she says, leaning up against it as she waits for her head to clear.

"They took Astronaut."

"I know," he says. He takes her by the arm and leads her to the passenger side, handing her a white handkerchief from his shirt pocket. "Clean yourself up a little." She presses the cotton hanky to her nose as he turns on the truck. "You okay?" he asks.

"Yeah," she says, flipping down the visor to check herself in the mirror.

"I went by the ranch this morning, Flynn told me you were still gone. I was worried, didn't want you dealing with them by yourself," he looks at her wiping the blood off of her face, "with good reason."

"I thought I could get away with him," she says, "I couldn't let them cheat me like that."

"Loretta, you're going up against something bigger than you. Those people, they'll walk all over you now that Big Daddy is gone."

"So, help me," she says.

Al sighs. "If I went there now, all it would be is a fight. A fight between me and Ed, and that wouldn't solve anything."

They pull into Cheyenne, and Al parks the truck on a street. "Let's get a drink," he says.

"It's seven in the morning," Loretta says.

"A cup of coffee?" he asks.

“Sure,” she says. She smiles, which hurts, her face is sore. Al jumps out of the truck and strides for the diner across the street. Loretta follows, wondering what has gotten into the shell of her brother. He’s holding out two fingers to the waitress as Loretta walks in behind him. The waitress looks at Loretta’s face, widens her eyes. Loretta makes a beeline for the bathroom and cleans the rest of her face off before joining Al in a red booth. He looks tired, but he smiles at her.

“You clean up good,” he says. They order coffee and when the waitress leaves, he clears his throat. “Loretta...” he trails off, pressing his lips together as he thinks. “Do you remember that pack trip we went on the summer I shot the buck?”

“You were twelve,” she said, smiling at the thought of Al, licking his lips in concentration as he aimed Big Daddy’s shotgun. Then she thinks about him licking his lips as he aligns crosshairs with a human head. She stops smiling.

“Yeah,” Al says, shaking his head, “it wasn’t the buck that I was so happy about, it was Big Daddy.”

“He was proud of you,” Loretta says, “Remember– he would rub his mustache, like this” she mocks the memory, smoothing an imaginary mustache with two fingers, “he would do it to hide his smile.” Al nods at her, laughing at her impression of their father.

“That look on his face, that smile–he never looked at me like that, Loretta. He looked at you like that,” Al says. Loretta looks out the window, not meeting his eyes.

The waitress brings the coffee. She sets the sugar and cream down on the table and wipes her hands on her apron. “That it?” she asks.

“For now,” Al answers. As the waitress heads back to the kitchen, he takes a folded white envelope out of his shirt pocket and hands it across the table to Loretta.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“Half of your eight grand,” he says. She takes it, counting the bills inside.

“How did you get this?” she asks him.

“It’s part of a reenlistment bonus,” he says, looking down at his hands, “I’ll make sure you get the rest.”

She shoves the envelope back towards him. “I don’t want it,” she says, “not if it means you going back over there.”

“Loretta, don’t,” he says, “I can’t stay here. I have nightmares every night. It’s like I’m trapped,” he presses his hands flat on the table, “We both know I’m not doing any good here.”

“You’ve already decided?”

“I re-signed a month ago, there’s no changing it.”

“I need you,” she says, her voice goes soft.

“You don’t,” he says, “you’re more like him than I am, Loretta.”

“But he’s gone,” she says, fighting tears. She’s so tired and hungry. Al looks out the window as the waitress sets the coffee on the table. Al takes a sip, looks at her.

“Yeah,” he says, “he is.”

“I can’t do it without him—without both of you.”

“You have to.” He pauses. “Do you know what Big Daddy said to me while we were cleaning that buck?”

“What?”

“He said, Al, you watch out for that sister of yours, because next time she’ll be the one shooting the buck, before you even get him in your sights.”

Loretta fiddles with the container of sugar packets, not meeting Al’s eyes.

“Do you hear what I’m trying to tell you?” Al asks.

“Yeah, Al, I hear you. I’ve got to do it.”

“That’s right, you’ve got to do it.”

“You take care of yourself when you’re over there, though. I’ll need you in one piece when you get back. If I keep the place running, you’ll owe me that.”

Al laughed. “I’ll owe you big time.”

“You can start by paying for this coffee and some pancakes,” Loretta says with a tired grin.

Al holds one long finger up to hail the waitress, “Yes, that’d be a good place to start.”

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