

NEW YORKER NOVELLA

IN HINDSIGHT

By Callan Wink November 20, 2015

1.

Lauren followed the drag mark for a mile down the gravel road and then another half mile down her dusty driveway and then parked her truck and cried. The bastard had shot one of her steers—one of six, red Texas longhorns—and dragged it down the road by its neck and deposited it here for her to find, practically on her front step.

She'd got her taxes done that day at the free tax-preparation kiosk in the County Market. Lauren hadn't filed a tax return since Manuel died, two years before. She wouldn't have this year, either, but she was in the store and had just gotten her mail and had the W-2 forms in her pocket, and she thought, What the hell? It was free. As it turned out, she had almost a thousand dollars coming to her as a refund. Manuel's death had put her in some sort of different tax bracket.

She'd left with her groceries and was feeling pretty good all the way home. And then the drag marks. None of the cattle were to be seen except for the dead one. Its tongue hung from its mouth. Its eyes were open and skimmed with white. Its neck was twisted and one of its horn points was buried in the dirt. That was what had made the groove all the way down her road. The poor animal's beautiful, ivory-colored horn scraping through the dirt as he dragged it to her doorstep.

Lauren wiped at her eyes with her shirtsleeve and got out of her truck and sat on the animal's massive flank and cried some more. And then she opened the back door to let her dogs out, and went to track down the rest of her cattle.

A section of fence was down, and she followed the tracks leading through the gap and there they were, just over the first rise, on the vacant lot next to hers, where there was a small creek and the grass was tall and green. They watched her approach, and she talked to them as she always did. She didn't have names for them. She called them all Red.

"Hey there, Red. You goddamn Reds. Let's go now." She was behind them, waving her arms and hazing them back toward the fence. With some reluctance they left the creek bottom and trudged single file to their own rocky pasture. The fence had already broken once and her mend had failed, so she pulled the wire a little tighter to overlap the ends and then twisted. Fixing the fix. The definition of insanity was continuing to fix the fix.

Her dogs sat and watched her work, two small brown mutts of indeterminate breed. They'd shown up together a couple of years back and decided they would stay. They were neutered males, and they seemed to be good friends, old travelling companions. She'd named them as a unit, not separately, because they were never apart. Elton John. That was their name.

With the cattle back in the pasture, she stood and looked some more at the dead steer. She pulled on one side of its horns to get its head straightened so its neck wasn't in such a gruesome position. She thought about driving down to Jason's house. He had a big German shepherd that he let roam, and it was pure black and didn't ever bark, just growled, a wet rumbling deep in its chest. She didn't like that dog and she didn't like Jason and Jason didn't like her and she knew damn well it was him who'd shot and dragged her steer. She didn't want to go down there because it was getting close to dark. She didn't want to go down there at all, really. But she was going to make herself go, because a dead steer was not something a person could just turn a blind eye

to. She wasn't going to go now, though. She'd wait until morning and then she would do it.

She called Elton John in and fed them and put out two bowls for the cats. She heated up soup for herself and dumped half a bag of broken saltines into it and ate standing over the kitchen sink looking out the window into the dark thinking alternately about her dead steer and her thousand-dollar tax refund. Her life was one of those electronic poker machines, rigged for the house. Feed you enough sugar to keep your hopes alive and then crush-crush-crush, a little more sugar, and then crush some more.

She and Manuel had been married for only two years. They hadn't been particularly good years. But during that time her life had been occupied by another person. There was something to be said for that, even if that other person was just Manny, wheelchair-bound toward the end, and mean, even at the beginning. Since Manny's passing she'd filled her life with the animals. She had the cattle, three hogs, three Nubian goats, Elton John, several cats that existed, as cats tend to do, on the periphery, and an ever-changing number of chickens.

She cared greatly for the animals, but sometimes she missed having a weight on the mattress next to her at night. There were times when the sound of her cattle muttering in the yard and the snoring of Elton John weren't enough to make her fall asleep.

She did her chores in the early-morning gray. It was the weekend and she didn't have to go to work. She was a custodian at the high school in town, a job she neither liked nor hated. It was just what she did for a set number of hours a week to feed her animals.

She tried to avoid the red mound of the steer on her front lawn but she had to scatter feed for the chickens, and as she walked by the dead animal she saw that something, a magpie, probably, had pecked out an eye. The hole yawned at her. She went back inside and climbed into her bed and pulled the covers over her head.

Lauren had ten acres of land upon which grew not a single tree. At some distant time, there had been a riverbed and her pasture was cobbled river rock sparsely covered with grass. When the wind blew, great swirling clouds of dust rose and sifted into her house, forming deltas of grit under the doorways. There wasn't enough forage for the cattle, so even in the summer she had to buy hay.

The land and the small house that sat upon it had been left to her by Manuel. It was half of a twenty-acre plot. The other ten acres belonged to Jason, Manuel's son from his first marriage. Jason worked at the Stillwater mine and was gone for long periods of time. He had a trailer house on his section. When Lauren hadn't seen any sign of his presence for a while, her hopes would rise slightly and she would think fondly about explosions, tunnel collapses, equipment failures, and then when she saw his truck parked again, and that evil-looking shepherd dog stalking around in the burdock, she'd feel vaguely ill, as if he were the returning symptom of some chronic disease.

Jason begrudged her the land Manny had left to her. He and Manny, the way it often is with fathers and sons, had hated each other every day of their adult lives and at the time of Manny's death hadn't spoken in months. That degree of hate takes almost as much work as love, and in the end the two may be nearly indistinguishable. With that in mind, she tried not to hate Jason. She just wished he didn't exist.

She lay in bed until nearly noon, when Elton John's whining at the door forced her to move. She let the dogs out and watched them sniff around the dead steer. After a while, still in her flannel pajamas, she put on her boots and went to the shed. She rummaged around and found a length of chain and a flat nylon tow strap. There was a large greasy rag on the workbench, and she grabbed that as well. She pulled on her gloves, and with the rag covering the steer's head—its gaping, vacant eye socket—she looped the chain around its neck, snugging it up behind the horns. After hooking the tow strap to the chain, she secured the other end around the hitch on her truck. She opened the door for Elton John and they jumped in and sat next to her on the bench seat.

She drove slowly, looking behind her once to make sure the steer was hooked up tight, but not looking again because she hated the way the steer's neck stretched under the

chain and the way its legs crossed all akimbo and its tongue lolled in the dirt like a huge pink mollusk pulled from its shell. Half a mile down the road she turned off and drove to the edge of a coulee that ran through a section of fallow pasture. She'd heard that the land had been subdivided, but, as far as she knew, not a single plot had sold. She drove parallel to the coulee, as close as she dared, until the steer swung in behind. She'd brought a piece of two-by-four, and, with a rock as a fulcrum, set to work levering the huge animal off the lip of the coulee. The wind was up, as usual, and she had grit in her teeth. The animal was as obstinate in death as it had been in life. She was grudgingly appreciative of this quality. When it went, it went as slowly as a sinking ship, hindquarters first. It landed in the sand, some six feet below, with a wet thud she could feel through the soles of her boots.

It was early evening now. Spring, according to the calendar, but the wind still carried with it an edge of snow and she was headed down to have it out with Jason right then and there. Still in her damn pajamas with her barn coat over them.

As she drove by her place and saw the drifts of wind-driven dust rising from the pasture, she had an idea. She pulled her truck around and sat visualizing the way it would look. Trees. Her tax return. A whole line of them planted close together, some kind of hardy pine. A shelter belt. Their branches intermingled into a net that would catch the wind and bring it to the ground, the branches fringed with soft needles opening like welcoming arms, smothering, softening, subduing so she could stand on the leeward side, her hair barely tousled. She grew excited and went inside and spent an hour making drawings on yellow legal pads. She drew her house, and then a series of different tree-placement configurations. She found a number for a nursery. By that time it was dark and she had to do her evening chores.

She stood on her porch just after dawn and watched six turkey vultures spiral through a thermal, their wings motionless. The crows and the ravens had shown up as well. She could hear them, a dark flock rising and settling in the coulee, black as dumped coffee grounds against the backdrop of dried grass. She thought maybe she should have shovelled some dirt over the carcass, but, then again, maybe this was better. A Buddhist funeral. She'd heard this was how the Tibetans did it.

Yesterday the sight of the birds feeding on her steer would have debilitated her, but today things seemed better. A project was all a person really needed to keep her going. A task, a goal, a pursuit, an objective—these had always been truer husbands to her than Manny or even her animals. And who was to say—maybe Manny and her menagerie were just variations on the same theme. Do a job and lose yourself in the doing of it. Animals were guarantors of certain tasks. A man like Manny, even more so.

She did her morning chores and thought about trees. Elton John followed her around as they always did, respectfully sniffing the chickens, steering clear of the cattle, engaging in mock standoffs with the cats. She wanted the trees now. She wanted them ten years ago. She needed trees that grew fast.

The cattle got out again. Lauren was making herself and Elton John lunch when she saw a red rump walk by the kitchen window. She put down her sandwich and went out to scream and plead the cattle back into their enclosure. They'd broken through the fence, at a different spot this time. One of her mismatched poles had been pushed over. Probably the animal had been scratching itself and unwittingly knocked it down. Still, she was worried. Two escapes in one week. The fence was flimsy, that was true, but it wasn't the physical fence that kept the cattle in anyway—it was the idea of the fence. She had to wonder if maybe the cattle had come to believe less in the magic of the wire. She reseated the toppled post and stacked rocks around its base. The cattle watched her balefully. She tried to read their blank eyes for signs of insurgence.

She didn't go speak to Jason. She was in a good mood and figured that this was hard enough to come by so she shouldn't ruin it. That night she heard coyotes howling down in the coulee.

In the morning Elton John whined to go out, early; it was still dark. She rose and opened the door for them. They filed out as they normally did and set to their routine sniffing of the yard. She went back to bed. When she woke later to start her chores, Elton John weren't at the door. They weren't in the yard, either. She never saw them again.

She blamed herself. She never should have let them out with coyotes that close to the house. She blamed Jason, for shooting the steer that brought the damn coyotes in the first place. She blamed Manny for dying and leaving her alone. She called in sick for work and spent a morning driving the back roads, calling their name.

It was a full moon. It rose up, fat as a blood-engorged tick stuck to midnight's flank. The coyotes worshipped it faithfully. They made their home in the coulee for a week, and she could hear the snapping and popping of their teeth. If she had owned a gun she would have left the coulee littered with their corpses. If she had owned a gun she would have gone down and shot Jason and his black dog. If she had owned a gun maybe she would have sat down on her couch and never gotten up from it again.

She ordered her trees, two dozen blue spruces, and spent a weekend with a pick and shovel digging holes. Two dozen pits, neatly spaced, with the piles of dirt and rock next to them, like little graves awaiting occupants. At night she had long one-sided conversations with Jason during which she showed him the error of his ways in a multitude of devastatingly articulated reproaches. She didn't go down there and actually face him, though, and each day that passed it seemed less likely that she would.

The trees came. Much of her excitement was gone, but she planted them carefully, tamping the loose dirt around the roots, sinking them deep so the wind wouldn't blow them over. She spent a whole afternoon watering each one of them in turn, standing with the hose, looking out over the backs of her cattle to the mountains that hunched white and silent above the valley. The trees were small. She'd had no idea they would be so expensive. To get the number she wanted, she'd had to settle on spruces that were only slightly larger than seedlings. When planted, her shelter belt, her brilliant idea, came to just above her knees. The trees themselves seemed fragile. She wondered if she should have used her money in some other, more responsible way. That thousand would have bought a lot of feed. She watched the trees pitch and blow with the wind, the strong gusts nearly laying them flat.

It was early summer now. Lauren watered the trees every morning before she left for work. She watered them again in the evening. They seemed to have taken root just

fine. Sometimes she plucked a green needle from a tree and chewed it as she did her chores. She liked the taste of pine. It was astringent and clean. It seemed as if she'd had a bad taste in her mouth for as long as she could remember.

It was just past dark when Lauren drove home from work. Summer meant shorter hours. Fewer students meant fewer trash cans to empty, fewer toilet-paper spools to refill. The night was warm, and she had the windows down so she could smell the river and the cut hay in the fields. She was nearing her driveway when a huge red-brown form filled her headlights. She braked and cursed, and the steer stood with its massive horns lowered, eyes like rolling white marbles in the glare.

She honked her horn and the animal turned and ambled slowly down the road toward home. Lauren followed and saw other shadowed forms moving in the ditches. She could hear the cattle's hoofs striking rocks and their occasional groans.

In her driveway she turned her high beams on, the twin shafts of light stabbing out at the cattle milling around in the yard. When Lauren got out of the truck to assess the damage to the fence, she saw what had happened. Her trees. They lay in trampled wreckage, limbs splintered, thin trunks snapped off near ground level, the whole line of them violently trodden to pieces under the churning hoofs of the escaped cattle. Lauren sat down, right there in the dust and manure of the cattle enclosure. She sat with her legs out in front of her, and then even this was too much. The earth wanted her flat. She lay back with her arms spread, the headlights running parallel above her, white moths and dust motes swirling through them. She tried, very earnestly, with only a hint of self-pity, to remember the last time she'd heard the words "I love you."

2.

At age twenty, Lauren was fairly certain she would never be considered pretty. However, she had been told that she was shapely, and she thought this was better than nothing.

She liked to walk. Once she set out from the small apartment she rented in town and hiked along the frontage road and then up the trailhead to Livingston Peak and then up to the peak itself, scrambling the last hundred yards over loose sliding scree as the sun set behind her. It was a one-way journey of some twenty miles. She'd brought a sleeping bag and a few granola bars. She found a declivity in the rocks, out of the wind, and looked out across the range stretching down and away to the south, dark and silent under the wash of stars. She hiked back home the next day after watching the sunrise.

She had boyfriends. She liked to dance. She could two-step and jitterbug and waltz a little. On Friday nights she'd go to the Longbranch and sit at the bar and drink soda water and twirl on the floor with anyone who would ask her until her feet hurt in her boots and the small of her back was damp from the hands of her partners.

She'd gone to school. For three semesters she'd been a college girl. She'd worried about finals. She'd worked part time at the Western Café, serving breakfast. She'd lived in the dorms. Once she'd had sex with a boy she'd met only that night and never saw much again afterward. She still marveled at this sometimes, not the act itself, just her ability to perform it. It seemed like something someone else had done.

She'd had the idea that she might want to be a nurse. It wasn't something she'd put a lot of thought into, but she had a vague idea that nurses were generally optimistic and competent and rarely lacked employment opportunities. That was what she told people when they asked her what she was studying. "I'm pursuing my nursing degree," she'd say, liking the way it sounded, as if the degree were something she had to chase down. She pictured the diploma—the piece of paper itself, the little embossed seal and the looping signature of the dean—windborne, fluttering out across the empty field behind her house. Her in pursuit.

Three days a week she opened the café at 6 A.M. The early crowd was mostly old men who wore jeans and pearl-snap shirts and Stetsons that they would put beside them on the bar top when they ate. These were men whose wives had finally gone on to rest after a lifetime of ranch work and whose children hadn't yet got up the courage to suggest a retirement home.

She liked the job well enough. She poured endless cups of coffee and laughed and rolled her eyes when one of the old buzzards made a feeble pass at her.

And then a regular she knew by first name only, Karl, had a stroke in the bathroom and she simultaneously learned two things. First, that she wouldn't be able to continue working at the Western and, second, that she might not have what it took to be a nurse. When a line four deep had formed at the closed restroom door, she was forced to do something. Still holding her coffeepot, she rapped sharply on the door and there was silence. Everyone in the restaurant was watching now, and she didn't know what to do. She cleared her throat. "I'm going to come in, Karl," she said. It was her do-you-want-another-refill voice. She handed the coffeepot to the nearest man and put her shoulder to the thin door. It splintered at the lock, too easily, and she stumbled in under her own force and almost landed in Karl's lap. He was slumped on the toilet, pants around his ankles, his legs spread, with a long line of spittle trailing out from his crooked lips. She remembered clearly that his eyes were open and that they watched her, dully. He was still alive, but he had cow eyes.

She tried to stick it out for a while longer, but no matter what was cooking on the hot line the Western smelled like the bathroom had smelled that day—the rankness of Karl's loosened bowels, spiked with the chemical odor of the air freshener. It nauseated her. What troubled her more, though, was what this incident seemed to reveal about her own lack of backbone. A nurse would have taken control, would have felt an innate sense of compassion and made the best of a horrible situation. Lauren had backed out of the room with her hands over her mouth, Karl's bovine glare following her every move. The old men had had to do everything. She'd even been unable to make her fingers work to dial for the ambulance.

At school she felt like an impostor. She knew that it wouldn't get better. She would have to attend to people in pain. Wipe excrement from people's bodies. Go home and wash blood and worse from her scrubs. It all seemed too much. She looked for weakness among her classmates. Did anyone else have this inner recoiling when confronted with the sight and smells of humanity at its most basic? If they did, she saw no sign. These women seemed staunch and solid. The type that could look unblinking

into fevered faces, smooth the brows of children with incurable ailments, not panic when faced with the unnatural sight of a car accident's mangled limbs. She had been tested and found wanting. Simple as that.

She stopped attending classes. She moved out of the dorms and back in with her mother until she could find her own place. She got a job.

3.

By age thirty-two, Lauren had been her mother's sole caretaker for three years. Her mother had given birth to her when she was forty-one years old. An accident, with a man she'd had no intention of marrying. She'd been divorced once already, and said that she wanted no part of that song and dance. "I met him at the rodeo on Fourth of July and we watched the fireworks," she said. "I think he was maybe twenty-two years old. I mean, come on. We had fun for the weekend, and he left when the rodeo pulled out. Don't think of him as your daddy. Think of him as a sperm donor working pro bono. He was good-looking and smart, for a cowboy."

Lauren always had the vague idea that she would track down her father. She didn't want a relationship with the guy, but it did seem that she almost owed him the knowledge of her existence. In college Lauren had taken a biology course where the professor had tried to show them that the one constant for life in the universe, the purpose of life, if you will, was procreation. This had always stuck with her, and she didn't like the idea that the sperm-supplying half of her biological makeup might be a broken-down old cowboy who didn't know that he had a daughter to show for his years on earth.

When Lauren was young, her mother had always maintained that she didn't know how to get in touch with him. But Lauren was pretty sure she could have if she'd wanted to. She was just protecting her from disappointment. Lauren figured that at some point she and her mother would get a little drunk on wine and the whole thing would come out and she'd get his name and last known address and she'd find him for that awkward

conversation over coffee. As it turned out, her mother, entering her late sixties, began to experience periods of slippage. She'd stop in mid-conversation and hold her finger to her nose the way she always did when she was thinking hard. "Now," she'd say. "What? What were we talking about just then? Jesus, I must be tired." Lauren had been worried about her ability to care for others. She'd thought herself prone to wilt under the smelly reality of human corporality. It was almost laughable now. Lauren had washed food stains and worse from her mother's clothing, struggled to get her spongy body into the shower, kept the knives in a locked drawer, engaged in horrible looping conversations that weren't so much conversations as they were brutal endurance events. Demonic anger followed by tearful bouts of recognition and apology. Her mother had cataracts coming on, and when Lauren looked into her eyes it was like watching a star die back there, in some far-distant galaxy behind the white veil of the Milky Way.

4.

At thirty-nine, Lauren fell in love for the first time. She was working as an assistant at the veterinary clinic in town. She'd clean cages, fill food bowls, calm skittish cats, and help lift large dogs onto the table for surgery. She was living alone now that her mother had passed. Renting the house she'd grown up in.

She'd had her mother cremated and had hiked up to Livingston Peak with the tin urn of ashes in her pack. She'd waited for the wind to gust and tossed the ashes up so that they were borne away, a small matriarchal cloud scudding across the sun. There was a U.S.G.S. plaque bolted to the rock and a small cairn of stones. At the top of other mountains Lauren had climbed, there was often a container with a logbook or just loose notes scribbled by hikers on whatever paper they had handy. She liked to read these little glimpses into the lives of other walkers. Most were simple, some were flippant, some were beautiful. She'd brought a small spiral-bound notebook and a pen, and she sat on the rock cairn and tried to think of what to write. She wrote the date. She sat and thought and then wrote, "My mom and I made the hike this morning. It was nice and sunny. My mom is staying for a while. I'm heading down now." She signed her name and put the notebook and pen in a plastic bag and pushed the bag into the empty urn, pressing the lid down tightly. She wedged the tin between some rocks,

hoping the mountain goats would leave it alone so others could leave their own messages.

Lauren put the knives back in the drawers, threw away the packages of moist wipes and the weekly pill dividers and adult diapers. She had long, silent meals with a magazine open on the table and a glass of wine in her hand. She'd felt mostly relief at her mother's passing and was fairly certain that this made her a bad person. She worked at the clinic as much as possible, picking up extra shifts whenever she could. She occasionally thought about returning to school, but it had been so long. She couldn't imagine sitting in a classroom. Coming home from work to memorize anatomy terms.

She got up early. Made coffee and drank it as she walked the two miles to the clinic. Work was work, but with the arrival of the new veterinarian, Dr. Genther, it had become something more. Sandra Genther, D.V.M., was short and compact. Wide hips, strong legs, thick black hair that she kept in a braid twisted up in a severe bun. She'd surprised Lauren by asking her name and remembering it, using it, even, in conjunction with a smile, every morning when she walked through the door. The previous in-house vet had retired. Leif Gustafson was a taciturn old Swede who'd ignored the assistants as much as possible outside of the occasional barked order. In the three years that Lauren had worked with him she couldn't recall Gustafson once using her name. They had worked well together. But Dr. Genther, Dr. Sandra, Dr. Just-call-me-Sandy-honey—she was something altogether different. She came from some deep Southern state—Louisiana, or Alabama, one of those places. Dr. Sandy could calm a high-strung bird dog with a touch and a few murmured words. She worked with a smile and was a hearty clutcher of arms and rubber of backs and giver of enthusiastic high fives.

She was a few years older than Lauren and had small parenthesis-like creases that formed at the corners of her mouth when she smiled or was concentrating, but otherwise her face was smooth and un wrinkled. Sometimes the nature of their work would put the two of them in close physical proximity and from these instances Lauren learned that Dr. Sandy smelled like Gojo citrus soap and she had a few strands of gray hair interspersed within the black.

Dr. Sandy started giving Lauren hugs in the parking lot before they went their separate ways. Nothing much. Just a quick tight squeeze and a good-job-today-see-you-tomorrow. Lauren would wave as she set off by foot and Dr. Sandy drove off in her Subaru wagon. And then, on one rather blustery cold evening in late fall, when it was already nearly dark at 5:30, Sandy slowed and pulled up next to Lauren. She reached over and opened the passenger door.

“Get yourself in this car, honey.”

“I don’t mind walking. I prefer it, actually.”

“Oh, come on, it’s colder than a well digger’s ass out there.”

Lauren laughed. Her nose was running, and she sniffed and wiped it with her glove. Dr. Sandy patted the passenger seat and smiled. Lauren got in.

“That was always my dad’s line, by the way. About the well digger and his ass. I use it whenever I can and I think of him. He’s been gone for a good while now.”

“My mom always said it’s hotter than the hinges of hell.”

“Don’t get me started on hot, girl. I’m from Lafayette. I know a few things about hot. It’s hotter than a tick on a dog’s balls, hotter than two rats humping in a wool sock, hotter than a half-bred fox in a forest fire, hotter than a two-dollar pistol on the Fourth of July. It’s so hot I want to take off my skin and sit in my bones.”

They were both laughing now, and Dr. Sandy was slapping her own thigh and Lauren’s alternately. She drove Lauren home, and they sat in her car talking for a long time. They picked up the next night right where they’d left off. And the night after that. And before long they were taking turns cooking each other dinner and sometimes, at work, Lauren would be standing at the sink washing her hands and Dr. Sandy would come up behind her and rest her hand right on her hip. She’d reach around Lauren with her

other arm and pull paper towels from the dispenser and give them to her with a smile, close, their faces almost touching.

Years removed, Lauren would realize that if this had happened to her—if Dr. Sandra Genter, D.V.M., had happened to her—when she was younger or older her life might have taken a surprising and beautiful turn. It was strange to think about, but the young and the old seem to be uniquely positioned to take advantage of the opportunities that life affords. It's that middle time that's a bitch. That time when you first realize without a doubt that you can't do everything you wanted to do, or be everything you wanted to be, but you still cling to the hope that if you just make the right choices it will all work out in the end. Of course, as a result you are paralyzed by indecision. For Lauren—age thirty-nine, unmarried, not a homeowner, underemployed, her mother a drifting cloud of ash—every choice she made had carried such weight. How ridiculous. Never in her life had she been so unencumbered. If only she'd known it at the time.

One night Dr. Sandy put down her wineglass mid-conversation, leaned over the dinner table, and kissed Lauren full on the lips, one hand wandering and getting tangled in Lauren's hair.

Kisses have a way of gathering mass unto themselves. First there is a snowflake, then a snowball, then an avalanche. Dinners became sleepovers, and Lauren walked around feeling as though overnight she had somehow sprouted a strange new appendage, or woken up to find that an unexplored room had appeared in her old house. It was disconcerting but not unpleasant. Definitely not unpleasant.

The Montana winters were hard on Sandy, sweet blooming flower of the South. She had arthritis in her knee from a riding accident she'd suffered as a girl, and when cold fronts blew down from the Canadian Rockies she'd hobble and swear. They made frequent trips down the valley to Chico hot springs, to soak in the mineral water. Sandy said it helped her knee, and Lauren loved the way the thick white steam hung in the cold air, blanketing the pool, and how they could sit there, arms around each other, and no one could see a thing.

In the early spring Sandy's mother fell and broke her pelvis, and Sandy took two weeks to be with her in Lafayette. During this separation, Lauren spent a good deal of time trying to figure out just what in the hell she was doing. She could still have kids, or a kid at least, if she wanted to. She could get married and all the rest. She didn't have to resign herself to anything. But she missed Sandy. It was an almost visceral truth.

Sandy came back, and things continued as they had for a while. It was summer, maybe the best summer of Lauren's life. They hiked up to the lake above Pine Creek and had a picnic. They stripped and jumped in, shouting and cursing at the shock of the frigid water, then they dried, lying side by side, shivering on the sun-warmed rock. Then fall came, days when you could taste the snow coming, the copper tang of it on the wind. People in town burning leaves under gray skies, great flocks of geese making their way south, the ragged lines of them like stitched wounds in the bellies of the clouds.

Sandy's mother was not doing well. She was going to need full-time care soon. Lauren could see what was coming. She wasn't surprised when Sandy, after dinner one night, grasped her hand and said, "I've got an idea." She had a smile on her face, hopeful, but scared, too. She was putting her heart in her hands and offering it to Lauren. "What if you came with me down to Lafayette? You'd like my mother. She's an old Southern belle but smart and tough, and I can see you two sitting on her porch, drinking sweet tea and talking, and that thought makes me happier than anything else I can think of. It's warm there. There are pecan trees, and the people are so nice."

Lauren thought about it. She really did. She got up and ran water in the sink and put the dinner dishes in to soak. She came back and sat at the table.

"What would I do?" she said. "In Lafayette, what could I possibly do, other than drink tea with your mother?"

Sandy was holding her hand again. She had both of hers around one of Lauren's. Lauren was briefly aware of how alike the two of them were, their hands almost indistinguishable: blunt nails, dry, cracked skin on the knuckles from frequent vigorous washing.

“You’d just help with my mother. I’d work—my old practice would be glad to have me back—and you’d make sure Mom was O.K. It wouldn’t be too demanding, and mostly you could do whatever you wanted. It would be perfect.” Sandy kept talking, her words speeding up and colliding with one another. Lauren had stopped listening. She leaned back in her chair, pulling her hand from between Sandy’s.

Sometimes an action you think is born of conviction, staunchness, taking a stand, is actually a simple product of fear of the unknown. At the time, she was indignant. How dare Sandy even ask that of her, after everything Lauren had told her about her own mother? Did Sandy really think that she would be content to be some combination of housewife and caretaker? How would it look, their happy little family? Lauren stuck in the house with a querulous old woman in the Louisiana heat while Sandy went out and made a living for them both? Absolutely not.

Lauren’s self-righteous anger carried her through that fall. Work was now awkward, and she slowly became aware of a growing suspicion that she’d been wrong, and cruel, and an idiot on top of that. But she’d lived her entire life in one place. It was too late for her to reimagine herself as someone who could just pick up and leave. Louisiana wasn’t real to her. It was a swamp.

Dr. Sandy was gone before the snow hit. On her last day at the clinic there was a going-away party. They hugged, and Lauren said something, choked on tears. “We’ll stay in touch. I’ll call you. Maybe I can visit?” They were in the middle of a crowded room, and Dr. Sandy kissed her full on the lips and shook her head. “That’s not how it works with me,” she said. “I don’t do halfways.”

Then someone came and wished Dr. Sandy well and they were separated. Lauren watched her for a while. She was talking, laughing, even, holding a paper plate with a piece of cake on it. Dr. Sandy would be fine. It was written all over her. Lauren had the peculiar feeling that it was she who’d had her affections spurned, not the other way around.

5.

If you live long enough, eventually there is a doubling back. In old age there is a regression to childhood, of course. But before that, even, late middle age can become more like young adulthood than would seem possible. At the age of forty-eight, Lauren was again in the habit of going to the Longbranch on Friday nights.

She drank whiskey and ginger ale and sat with her back to the bar, watching the dance floor. Occasionally drunks would ask her to dance, and she'd shake them off silently. Sometimes, more rarely, non-drunks would ask her to dance, and she'd turn them down as well. She met Manny there one night. The bar was full and he came stumbling through the crowd, cane in one hand, sloshing drink in the other. As he was making his way past, the stool next to her became vacant, and, simple as that, he lurched himself onto it and into her life. Something was obviously wrong with his legs, and he had a hard time getting up on the stool. His cane whacked her shins, he nearly spilled his drink on her, and he was cursing. When he got settled, he turned to her, hanging his cane by the crook from the bar top.

"No," he said. "Don't even ask. I will not dance with you." Then he turned away from her and began drinking. She had to laugh, despite herself.

Many drinks later, they did dance, slowly. She had to hold him upright, although she was none too steady at that point herself.

That night he'd told her that he had nerve damage from taking shrapnel in Vietnam. A few months later, after they'd gone to the courthouse and signed the papers, he admitted that he hadn't even been to Vietnam. His number never got picked. What he had was multiple sclerosis. He could look forward to the continued degeneration of his body on a timeline and severity scale known only to the disease itself. He might remain more or less as he was for years or, in the course of a few months, devolve into a complete invalid.

Lauren quit the veterinary clinic and took a custodian position at the high school, mainly working nights. The pay was similar, but the health benefits were much better. She missed the animals and the normal hours. Getting to work as the sun was going down was disorienting, but it did mean that she could sleep most of the day when Manny was awake, which turned out to be a good thing. She'd moved in with him, into his modular home on the windswept bench on the west side of the river. He'd bought the cattle a few months before his M.S. diagnosis.

Manny clung to the cane for as long as possible before succumbing to the wheelchair, and when this transition finally came it was not pleasant. Lauren laid a sheet of plywood on the front steps to make a ramp so that he could go in and out on his own. During the week, things between them were bearable—they saw each other for one or two hours at most. On weekends, though, it was different. He'd yell for her to bring him more ice for his drink or change the radio station or adjust the volume of the TV. In nice weather he'd be outside rolling around, drinking Lauder's Scotch from a travel mug, shouting out things that needed her attention.

"Come out and look at the steer with the white on its face. Is there something wrong with his hoof?" "Come here and look at the corner of the foundation here. Is that a crack?" "The mailbox post is tipping a little to the left. The next big wind, and the thing is going to fall right over. You need to get out here and shore it up, or our mail is going to get scattered all over the damn countryside." "God damn it, Lauren, I need you to keep this place from crumbling into the dust. I'm counting on you here."

Occasionally, when Manny was especially far gone and she was helping him into the bath or onto the couch or bed, he'd become enraged and lash out at her. Once, he'd connected, a hard closed fist to her eye, and she'd seen an explosion of white sparks and then she'd dropped him, and left him, on the floor of the bathroom. She sat in the kitchen with a bag of frozen peas on her swelling eye, trying to ignore him as his angry screams turned to sobs, the first of their kind she'd ever heard.

In the summer months, Lauren began taking small road trips on the weekends. She'd load up the truck with a cooler and an inflatable mattress and a tarp and head out.

She went to the Bighorn Canyon and then over to the Little Bighorn Battlefield monument. She went to the Lewis and Clark Caverns and took a candlelit tour, the hanging mineral formations breaking and sending the glow of the flickering candles in a million different directions. Manny didn't like her to be gone, but there was nothing he could do to stop her, and even he realized that after one of these trips she was generally in good spirits for the rest of the week.

On one of the last nice weekends in October, Lauren packed up and headed to Butte. She wanted to see the Berkeley Pit and walk around the crumbling copper-king mansions in the old downtown. It was a beautiful weekend. She camped one night and then, on the second night, sprang for a room at the Finlen Hotel with its ornate, high-ceilinged lobby, its chandeliers and wall accents made of pure polished copper. The room was pretty and had a claw-foot tub, and she soaked until the water began to cool and then she drained and refilled the tub and soaked some more. She had a steak at the Cavalier Lounge and drank a dirty Martini.

Sunday morning she woke up late and took her time getting back. She stopped more than she needed to—for coffee, for water, for the bathroom, for gum. Despite all this, she made it home before dark, pulling into the driveway as the sun was getting ready to set. Usually when she returned she found the kitchen a disaster area of dirty dishes and empty soup cans and beer bottles. Manny would begin shouting about something that needed her attention and she would set her bag down, square her shoulders, and get started cleaning things up. Today, however, the house was quiet, the TV off. There was only one can in the sink, and Manny was nowhere to be seen. She went to the back porch to see if he was outside smoking, but he wasn't there, either.

Eventually she spotted him, and she knew immediately. He'd wheeled himself out to the far corner of the pasture and his back was to the house. There was a turkey vulture resting on his shoulder like some hideous overgrown parrot. From a distance it looked as if the bird were whispering a secret into his ear. When she came closer she saw that a blast from the shotgun in his lap had removed the part of his head where his ear would have been.

With Manny gone, once again her life resumed its simple course—dinner with wine, magazines on the table. She stopped the weekend trips.

She decided to sell the steers. She'd made a call and set up a time for a livestock truck to come and take them away. The day before it was due to show up, she came home from a long night shift to find that they'd broken out. It was early morning and she was tired. She saw that the fence was down and the cattle were gone, and she decided to go inside and sleep for a few hours until it was light enough to see, and then she would go out and round them up.

She was awakened a short time later by a pounding. It was just past dawn, the mountains still black, the pasture streaked with gray light. Manny's son, Jason, was at the door, his long hair tangled, sclera shot with red, looking like he hadn't slept in a long time. His black shepherd dog sat on the steps. She hadn't seen Jason since Manny's funeral. He'd spent the whole service eying her murderously.

He was holding a long section of vinyl house siding in his hand. When she opened the door, he waved it in her face.

"See? Look at this. You see this? I'm watching TV and I come out to see your goddam loose animals tearing up my lawn, rubbing themselves against my house. This is Tektrex siding. The best they make. It's made to look like wood. You see that? That's simulated wood grain right there. You don't get that unless you pay extra. I paid extra for the wood grain, and now you're going to pay to get everything put back just the way it was."

He kept ranting. She was having a hard time following. Something about court-appointed attorneys and the invalidation of wills composed while incompetent. He had one hand raised in the air, his index finger up and pointing at the sky.

"Get your house in order!" he screamed. "Or so help me God, one more of those shitting animals steps on my property and I'll shoot it dead and drag it to your

doorstep.” He turned and stomped off the porch, the shepherd dog at his heels.

Right then, she decided to cancel the livestock truck. She put on her boots and set out across the pasture to retrieve her cattle. An hour later, she had them back in the enclosure and she mended the break in the fence. Splicing the wire together in the first of what would be many fixes.

6.

Wind and loneliness, interminable fatigue and broken trees. Also, animals that needed to be fed. The same world that wanted to steamroll you also contained goats bleating their hunger, eggs that would go to waste if they weren't gathered, cattle that would run wild if they weren't contained. Lauren watered, she milked, she grained, she gathered. She collected the splintered pieces of her trees and doused them with kerosene in her burn barrel. She tossed in a match and there was a concussive whump as the spruces caught fire, and she didn't stand there even for a second to watch them burn.

Winter came creeping down from the north, frosting the hill pines, taking up residence in her hands. She swallowed four ibuprofen every morning. In the long evenings she sat at the kitchen table, soaking her stiff fingers in a bowl of hot water. Sometimes, before night fell, she could see Jason's shepherd dog padding across the snow-blown field between their houses. A black shape that seemed to birth the coming darkness itself.

The wind picked pieces of her house and sent them spinning out into the drifts. A shingle here, a section of trim there, a blue sliver of siding piercing a backdrop of pure white. There was a storm that lasted for three days. Her road was drifted shut, and all night she lay awake listening to the house shift and creak under the weight of the snow.

When the storm broke she emerged, a brilliant sunny morning, the light frantic with nowhere to settle. The cattle sensed her coming and shifted, sleep-eyed, red coats made

piebald with matted ice and snow. The goats sprang from their shelter, kicking through the fluff, whether in disgust or delight she couldn't tell. A cat appeared from behind a bale of hay. It slunk, weightless, toward her and sat still, allowing her to rub its ears clumsily with her gloved hands. One of her roosters let loose, soft at first, as if clearing its throat, checking its tone, then louder, a raucous crowing that seemed as clear and timeless an affirmation as one might ever expect to hear. The storm was over, a clear dawn. Lauren had to laugh. Roosters, like the males of other species, seemed to have a knack for stating the obvious.

7.

At some point Lauren decided that she wasn't going to cut her hair ever again. It had been white for a long time now. She remembered finding her first white hair somewhere near her thirtieth birthday and how it had sent her on a tailspin for half a day.

It was hard to believe, but somehow, in old age, she'd gotten vain. She loved her hair. She tucked it into the back of her overalls when she was out doing her chores so it didn't get in the way. She brushed it out every night. She washed it only once a week, because she'd read in her magazines that too much shampoo could destroy the natural oils that make hair healthy. A sixty-eight-year-old woman reading *Cosmopolitan*. That was something that would probably give some folks pause.

As it was, she got looks. She'd be pushing her cart through the County Market and kids, shopping with their mothers, would stare. She figured that some of these folks in town, newcomers most of them, thought she was some kind of crazy witch, living way out where she did with all the animals. Her truck pieced together with baling wire, still running forty-some years after it had rolled off an assembly line in Detroit.

She had aches and pains. Sometimes on winter days her hands just didn't want to work, and she went about her chores as if she had flippers on the end of her arms. Her finger joints were gnarled and swollen, and she took fish oil and glucosamine and Vitamin C

daily without much noticeable improvement. She chewed ibuprofen like candy and worked off the rest of the pain by petting her dogs.

Since retiring she'd volunteered at the animal shelter three days a week. She'd adopted dogs, of course, one or two a year, and she currently had nine, mostly mutts, except one purebred Dalmatian, named Rocks, after the contents of his head, who showcased all the magnificent idiocy inherent in his pedigree. He was a car chaser. Any vehicle that came down the road, he'd be after it, eyes rolled back in ecstasy, barking, slobber flying, trying to bite the tires. He was going to get his empty head crushed. She kept him inside with her most of the time and he sat on the back of the couch, looking out the picture window to the road, eying each passing car wistfully.

She still had goats. She had chickens. She had one Red left. It stood alone out in the pasture, and sometimes, while tossing hay, she thought she saw something in its eyes, a mean stubbornness. "You're not going to outlast me," she'd say. "Keep looking at me that way and see where it gets you. I'll take care of you once and for all. I'll have you parcelled up in my freezer, wrapped in butcher paper. And I swear to God I won't go to the grave until I've eaten every last piece of your scrawny ass."

8.

Jason's trailer had been empty now for years—five or six, she couldn't remember. He'd been there with his dog, same as always, and then one night his truck hadn't returned. It had stayed gone. The trailer had a broken window now, and she'd seen pigeons flying in and out. She could only imagine what the inside looked like. She'd had pigeons set up a nest in the rafters of her storage shed once. At first she'd let them be, out of respect for their eggs. But they'd turned her whole workbench white with their shit in a matter of days. Eventually she'd had to knock the nest down with a broom, and she'd felt bad about it. The eggs splattered on the concrete, and one of them broke open and she could see the alien shape of a hatchling in there.

Sometimes she sat on her back porch in the evening and devoted a few moments of her pondering to imagining fates for Jason. Occasionally she was feeling generous and she let him win the lottery and move to California. Most of the time he got killed in a drunk-driving accident or addicted to methamphetamine and shot in a drug deal gone bad.

One Saturday she came down her road and there was a silver minivan in the driveway of Jason's trailer. It had a flat tire and it somehow seemed exhausted, as if it had pushed itself to the limit to get its owner to this point, and now, upon arrival, it was giving up the ghost, a trusty steed used up in service.

Lauren slowed. There was a girl standing on the sagging porch. She had a blond ponytail and wore pink shorts. She waved at Lauren, and then Jason emerged from the trailer. He'd gained weight. Lauren noticed immediately. Even from a distance he looked heavy. He was leaning on crutches, his foot encased in a dirty white bandage. He saw Lauren and made no sign of recognition. He motioned for the girl to get inside, and they both went in and shut the door behind them.

It was a beautiful day in mid-June. The sky a smear of bright blue, sun warming the grass.

She had her binoculars, and she often stood at the kitchen window with them trained on Jason's trailer. She felt slightly bad for spying, but so what? She was an old woman with little to do, and she hadn't done anything worth apologizing for in a long time.

Jason rarely came outside. But the girl was often in the yard, doing what Lauren could not always tell. She walked around the trailer with a stick, hitting the walls randomly until Jason came out, and Lauren could see his mouth open wide as he yelled at her to stop. When Jason went back inside the girl hunkered down in the weeds, her back to Lauren, so she couldn't make out what she was doing, until she saw a thin trickle of smoke rising over her head. Was she smoking? No. She'd started a fire. She squatted

next to it, pink shorts and tank top, holding her hands out as if she were warming them. Lauren's porch thermometer read seventy-three degrees, not a breath of wind or a cloud in the sky. Where in God's name was this child's mother? The van hadn't moved since they'd arrived. The tire still flat all the way down to the rim, resting on the gravel. What were they eating? Were they living in there with pigeon shit and feathers and who knows what all else? Jason had at least taped a piece of cardboard over the broken window. Through the binoculars Lauren had observed the birds returning, flying around the roof in vain, their distress seemingly visible in their erratic passes. Maybe they had eggs in there. Of course, if there had been a nest Jason would have cleared it out first thing, as she had the one in her shed. There was nothing else to do. If one was sentimental enough to see tragedy in the plight of pigeons, even the happiest human life would be unbearably sad.

She continued to keep her eye out for the mother. There had to be a woman—Jason's wife, or girlfriend, or something. There was no way a girl would be living with him for any other reason. Occasionally Jason would come out on the porch, always on the crutches. He'd smoke a cigarette, looking off at the mountains. Sometimes he would piss simultaneously and Lauren would be able to see the yellow arc of it, glistening in the sun. When he'd finished he would flick the butt of his cigarette into the weeds, zip up, and go back inside, the thin walls of the trailer rattling as the door slammed behind him.

Lauren had never been much of a cook. She'd cooked for her mother, when her brain was probably too scrambled to taste the difference between carrots and chocolate cake. She'd cooked for Manny, and he'd never said much about it either way. He never had an appetite for anything other than Lauder's Scotch whiskey. She'd cooked for Sandy—well, they had often cooked together, and that was a different thing entirely. Less about the actual food and more about the act of preparation, the whole meal like one big flirt.

These days, Lauren scrambled a couple of eggs in the morning and spooned them on buttered toast. She often skipped lunch altogether, sometimes she had just an apple and a wedge of cheese. For dinner she ate a bowl of canned soup with a handful of saltine

crackers crushed up in it. Her doctor had told her that she needed to watch her sodium levels, so she had been getting the Healthy Choice soup lately. It cost twice as much and tasted half as good.

Still, although she rarely did it for herself, cooking held no mystery for Lauren. She went about it the exact same way that she changed the brake pads on her truck. She got out the manual and she followed the directions.

Lauren thawed some chicken breasts she had in the freezer. She dug out one of her good, seldom used Pyrex baking dishes. She put the breasts in there on top of a bed of instant rice and poured over a couple of cans of chicken-mushroom soup. She scattered some croutons on the top and put it in the oven. Rocks watched her move about the kitchen, the expression on his face, if possible, even more quizzical than usual. Usually he got to lick out a soup bowl at some point during kitchen operations, but thus far none had been offered, and he was obviously concerned. He whined.

“Oh, shut up,” Lauren said. “This isn’t for us. You have nothing to complain about. Be happy you’re in here and not outside with all your siblings. Be happy you found the one place where it is to your advantage to be too stupid to remain at large with the general population.”

She worked at the shelter the next day, and on her way past Jason’s trailer she put the chicken and rice on the porch. She’d written “Just heat and serve!” on a blue Post-it note and stuck it to the top of the foil.

She worked a full six-hour shift at the shelter. She walked fifteen dogs, one at a time, in a complete loop around the property. She figured that, over the course of the day she’d done at least five miles, and she felt pretty good. Although her hands were arthritic, her knees and ankles were fine. She was still a damn good walker. Lately she’d been thinking about making one last trip up to Livingston Peak. She hadn’t done it in years. Though she was strong enough to do five mostly flat miles, she wasn’t sure if she was capable of a steep scramble at high altitude. She could fairly easily imagine falling

and breaking her hip. Crawling around in agony, waiting for the magpies to peck her eyes out while she was still breathing. There was too much snow up that high right now anyway. She had all summer to decide if she was up for it. Maybe in the meantime she would pick up the pace. She'd take the dogs for two loops around—they'd love that.

That evening the chicken-and-rice dish was gone from the porch railing. There was no sign of life, and she watched for a long time after dinner, drinking tea with her binoculars by her side, but no one came out.

A few days later, she pulled out another baking dish and put together a tuna casserole. Rocks watched her work, and she talked to him. "That's the way it goes," she said. "You cook for other people, better than what you make for yourself. That's some human foolishness right there. A dog wouldn't understand. Church ladies are always doing stuff like this. Any crisis or sad turn in a person's life and they're right there with a nice casserole. Their husband is at home, eating a microwave dinner, smelling all day what they got cooking in the Crock Pot. Why do they do it, Rocks?"

The dog, recognizing his name, tilted his head and thumped his tail on the floor.

"Are all these casseroles delivered out of pure Christian compassion? Or is it just an excuse for them to weasel themselves into the situation? Rocks, I'm telling you, all the charity in the world, I'm suspicious of it. And yet here I am, a church lady that never got around to going to church."

9.

Early summer days, maybe the finest time of the year. Mountains capped with snow, the river on the rise, the hillsides electric-green with new grass. Lauren walked her dogs at the shelter. She puttered her way through her chores. She had plenty of time left to stand at the kitchen window with her binoculars. The girl came out occasionally, always underdressed in the same pair of shorts and T-shirt. She wandered around the yard hitting things with sticks. Sometimes she set out walking

down the road toward the highway. She never went very far before she turned around and came back. Frequently she'd squat in the yard with a book of matches. Striking them, letting them burn down to her fingers, one at a time, over and over. Obviously the child was bored out of her mind at best, some kind of pyromaniac at worst.

Jason emerged less frequently. Once he came out and hobbled over to the van and made some efforts to change the flat tire. He was still on crutches, and he leaned them against the side of the van as he knelt with the jack. He removed the flat tire and was going around to the back to get the spare. He was hopping along, steadying himself with a hand on the van, when he tripped over something and went down. She kept the binoculars on him for a long time, but he didn't move. He had a hand over his face, so she couldn't see what was there, but eventually he hauled himself up, retrieved the crutches, and went inside. The van was still on the jack. That had been a week ago.

Lauren had made them macaroni and cheese with chunks of ham. Now she was out of baking dishes and she was pissed off. Funny to think that, after everything, what finally drove her to his doorstep was the fact that she wanted her good Pyrex cookware back.

She stood on the dilapidated front porch and knocked. He opened the door, and, up close, he looked even worse—lank hair, bloodshot eyes, a gaping hole where a tooth should have been. If he was surprised to see her, he didn't show it.

“You shouldn't have shot my steer,” Lauren said. It wasn't what she'd planned on saying, but that's what came out. “It was just a dumb animal, and it never did enough harm to you that you had to shoot it.”

Jason shrugged. His face may have been slightly red, but it was hard to tell. He pointed to his foot, encased in a dingy white bandage. “I got diabetes,” he said. “They took off three of my toes.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Lauren said.

“I’ve been on disability for four years. Hardly enough to get by on. And now I got a dependent.” He sighed and grimaced as if in pain. His missing tooth was like a black portal into the cave of his mouth. “Admit it, you married my dad just because you saw an opportunity to get yourself a place, because you knew he wasn’t long for the world and you knew you could take it from him. There was no other reason for a woman like you to marry a man like him.”

Jason was looking at her now, his nostrils flared slightly. Lauren had imagined this conversation many times, but now that it was happening she realized that it was nothing like what she had expected. Jason looked halfhearted, pathetic. She was old. It was a conversation that had no bearing, no cause for taking place. Any emotion attached was a faded shell of what had once been real hatred, fear, anger. They were going through the motions, and both of them knew it.

“Your dad was a miserable asshole, most of the time. You yourself hated him, probably for good reason. I married him because I’d loved someone and made a mess of it and I wanted something to take my mind off it. To punish myself for being stupid. Maybe I needed to be needed. I don’t know. It was a long time ago and things get muddled. I never wanted his shitty land. Is the girl your daughter?”

Jason was going to say something, but a voice piped up from inside the trailer. She had obviously been close and listening. “He’s not my dad,” she said.

“Mind your own business, Jo. I’m talking to this lady.”

“My dad’s in the Army. He’s overseas.”

“Maybe he is, maybe he ain’t. Go watch TV.”

“He’s a sniper.”

“If you say so.”

“First thing he’s going to do when he comes back is shoot you.”

“Hey. That’s about enough from you. Go watch your show.” There was grumbling and then the sound of the TV being turned up loud. Animated shrieks and laughs and car tires screeching.

“I was in Florida,” Jason said. “I was with that girl’s mother and then she left to see her sister in Tampa and never came back. I looked for two weeks, but her sister don’t even exist in Tampa as far as I can tell. I thought about just taking off, but I didn’t. I could have, but I didn’t.” He raised his chin and widened his eyes, as if this were still a surprise—the discovery of a small nobleness existent within him. “And now I’m here. They took three of my toes down there, and I got a half-wild girl child that’s not even my own. All of that and I’m on disability.”

And then Lauren, surprising herself, started laughing. She felt it coming up from deep inside her, a release of something that had been pent up for a long time. She laughed until she coughed. “Those damn red cattle,” she said. “Truth be told, there’s been times over the years when I would have paid someone to come out and do for all of them what you did for that one.”

Jason was looking at her slack-jawed. She started to turn away, and then she remembered. “If you want me to keep making you dinners you’re going to have to give me my damn dishes back,” she said.

“Hey, I didn’t ask you for anything,” he said, raising his hands as if to ward her off. “I got your dishes right here.” He retreated into the trailer and Lauren tried to look in, but he’d partially shut the door behind him. He came back, balancing her dishes on one arm, crutch under the other. They hadn’t been washed. The corner of one pan had something stuck to it, furred with gray mold.

“I’m out of dish soap,” Jason said. “Otherwise I’d have got these clean.”

“That’s O.K.,” Lauren said. Then she thought of something. “What happened to your dog?”

“Huh?”

“That big black shepherd you had.”

“Got dysplasia and I had to put it down. Got so it couldn’t walk, and it turned mean. Understandable, I guess. I was trying to feed it one day and it bit me, and that was that.”

“Well, that’s too bad.”

“Was just a dog.”

“I’ve always liked dogs. That’s why I asked. I remember watching that one walk across the field in the snow. A beautiful animal.”

“The day you get a dog is the day you sign up to bury it. It’s a package deal. No sense getting too attached.”

“You could say that about anything. Everything in your life—either you bury it or it buries you. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get attached.”

Jason scratched his head and nodded, obviously unconvinced. He pointed at the dishes she was holding. “I got a freezer full of burritos,” he said. “But it’s been nice to have some variety.”

The girl’s voice came from inside. “I hate tuna!”

“You’ll eat it and you’ll be happy to have it!” Jason shouted. He looked at Lauren and raised his eyebrows, as if to say, “See what I’m dealing with?” He cleared his throat. “We

appreciate it,” he said.

She'd planned on putting it off until later in the summer, but she knew she'd have to contend with the storms that tended to come up suddenly that time of year, violent, with lightning and strong wind. And she felt good now. Who knew what the coming months held? When she'd worked at the Western Café, one of the regulars—a funny old guy who dressed in a ratty coat and tie every day—used to say, “When you get to my age, dear, you'll think twice about buying green bananas at the grocery store.” Lauren had always laughed then. Now she knew what he meant.

She drove to the trailhead at dawn. She had a small backpack with a few granola bars and water and a light jacket in case of rain. She had a walking stick with a loop of leather that she could put around her wrist. She brought Rocks, too. If she left him alone in the house for too long he had a tendency to upend the garbage or go into the bathroom and shred the toilet-paper roll.

It was a cool morning, and, as she started up the trail, the peak above her was obscured by skeins of fog. Rocks chased the little red pine squirrels, growling and yipping in frustration. As she started to gain elevation, the fog burned away. She stopped frequently to rest.

She reached the top in early afternoon. The valley was splayed out below her, green, with the river winding silver down its middle. She looked down on a pair of ravens coasting along on a thermal. Anytime you were up high enough to see the back of a raven in flight, you knew you'd done a good bit of climbing.

She shared a granola bar with Rocks and then she searched around until she found the tin that she'd left all those years ago. The notebook was still in there, swollen a bit with moisture but otherwise in good shape. It was more than halfway filled with notes now. Hikers of all kinds had written their messages and she spent a long time reading them, all the way back to the first one, the one she'd written on the day she scattered her mother out over the precipice.

She hadn't thought about it much until right that minute, and it came to her now as a slight embarrassment—her mother had never climbed this or any other mountain in her life. She liked working in her garden. She liked walking by the river. Lauren's hiking her ashes up here and tossing them over the edge hadn't been for her mother at all—that had been Lauren all the way. But maybe that was how it should have been. The disposal of ashes and bodies and remnants of all kinds was the duty of the living. The dead have no say, and it was silly to think they'd care either way. That was the rational line of thought. However, it was something to consider. It was true that in her life Lauren had loved mountaintops. But, if she wanted to be comfortable in eternity, work her in with the cow manure, scatter her ashes for the chickens to dust in, dump her in the slop bucket for the pigs.

The sun was just starting to set by the time she made it down. She was dead tired. She'd twisted her knee stumbling over a loose rock and had to hobble to her truck, leaning heavily on her walking stick. On the drive home, Rocks slept on the seat next to her, instead of standing and smudging the window with his nose as he usually did.

She was too exhausted even to heat her soup, though she was ravenous. She opened a can and ate it cold, not bothering to pour it into a bowl. Tomorrow she'd wake up early and do her chores. She'd take a long hot bath, and after that she'd cook them something, maybe a pasta bake. That was easy enough. Some sausage, some pasta, spaghetti sauce, and cheese—she had all the ingredients and wouldn't even have to go to the store. It was a satisfying feeling to have a day figured out like that. One of the few benefits of getting old, an enjoyable economy: short-term planning started to look a lot like long-term planning, too.

She rinsed her soup can and spoon and drank a glass of water standing at the kitchen sink looking out the window. It was all but dark now, and she could see down to Jason's trailer. The lights were on, the blue glow of the TV faintly visible. Maybe it was none of her concern but pretty soon that girl would need to be enrolled in school. She'd tell him that tomorrow. It was obvious that the TV was turning her brain to mush. She needed some decent clothes. Maybe she'd like to come over and feed the goats. At the very

least, it would give her something to do besides setting fires. The wrong gust of wind in a couple of weeks when the grass got dry and things could go south in a hurry. She'd have to talk to Jason about that, too.

She went to the back door and let Rocks out. He did a quick disdainful bout of nose and rear sniffing with the low-caste outside dogs. They came to her, all eight of them, mutts in varying shapes and sizes, all wagging their tails, snuffling at her hands, the more excitable ones among them jumping and trying to stick their snouts in her coat pocket. She made them all sit, a furred mass of anticipatory canine. She tossed them their biscuits one by one, and the air was soon full of the sound of happy crunching. She sat on her porch chair and she rubbed ears and tugged tails and scratched under chins.

Off to the other side of the field she could see her Red. The lone steer standing there, a silhouette, made small by the dark shapes of the mountains rising up behind it. She waited for it to move—dip its head to graze, or lower itself to the ground, for sleep or something else—but it didn't. It remained poised until the light was gone, as if it were conscious of its position, a piece of the landscape, a duty it took too seriously to fail.

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