

River God

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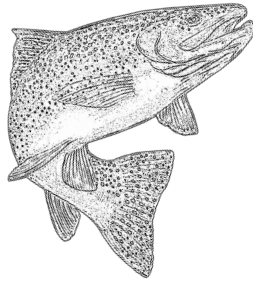


TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE WHITE DEER	1
GHOSTS	22
THE MUD MAN	47
CYPSY	63
RIVER GOD	83
THE END OF THE WORLD	105
THE THINGS WE LEAVE, THE THINGS WE KEEP.....	121

T H E W H I T E D E E R

1968

THE WHITE DEER first appeared on the bank of the Sorrow, out by the old well and scattered pines at the Iverson place. It was hours past nightfall, cold touch of autumn, a half-gone moon. The deer stood hoof-deep in the shallows, as white as if caught in lightning-flash. Moonlight pooled in its eyes.

Later, Wag Iverson would lean over the bar at Pet's and tell the crowd how the deer hadn't run when it spotted him. How, instead, it raised its slender neck and watched him, unmoving. From its nose to tail, nothing but white. Then a low cloud blocked the moon, and it was gone.

The next day, word came down that Wag's father had died. Abner Iverson was a mean drunk, and he'd been drunk for thirty years. He'd spent the last five living in a rancid single-wide upriver, ringed with bear traps he hid in the weeds. He left behind no will, and a sum of money that was a small fortune to the Iversons. He'd told no one about the money while living, had trusted no bank, hiding it instead in a gun case hidden beneath the mattress of his army-issue cot.

The Iversons bought a brand-new Chevy pickup with a custom camper shell. They painted their ranch house blue.

Three nights after Abner died, Henry Cargill saw the white deer while he was driving home from his shift at the mine. It was a doe, he said, afterward, or a buck so young it hadn't yet sprouted the first mossy knobs of antlers. The deer watched him from between the branches of a crooked pine. It flicked its tail at the wind. The next morning, Henry's son Wyatt came home for the first time in two years, skinny but alive. He said he was sorry. He said he'd started praying again.

The white deer was always alone, and it always came at night. Hours after Ginny Lewis saw the deer in the schoolyard while walking home from the A&B, she found her drowned brother's long-lost baseball glove, the leather still supple, sitting on a table in the garage. Through her kitchen window, Annabelle Tomlin spotted the white deer pulling up her chrysanthemums. That night on the bathroom floor she lost a baby at three months in, what would've been her sixth.

It was autumn in the valley. On the hills around Threemile, the aspens turned their leaves in concert—green to pale yellow, soon to brown. Susana Miller had driven the three hours down from Lewiston, two suitcases in the backseat. It always surprised her how much the land changed on that drive—the cattle pastures buckling into mountains, the Snake branching back into its smaller, wilder tributaries, the Sorrow among them—the making of the world in reverse.

She met Marin in the gas station parking lot. The sky shone fiercely yellow, the last bright light of afternoon. The station was a two-pump nameless place west of town, a last-call,

positioned right before the state highway spat the rod-straight stretch of Threemile down the mouth of the valley.

Marin waited by the pumps. She was thirty pounds heavier, dressed in loose jeans cuffed at the bottom, her dark hair short as a man's. Though the parking lot was empty, she waved at Susana with both arms, like she might not see her. There was something small and yellow in her hand. "I gotcha something," she said, and threw.

The package arced over Susana's head, hitting the car window and falling to the ground. She bent to retrieve it. "Sugar Babies?" she said.

Marin grinned. "Memory lane, right?"

Susana turned the candy over. "Huh. I thought they changed the packaging."

"They did." Marin thumbed back at the gas station. "But they got a back stock in there. I thought you'd get a kick out of that, you know, since you were always saying how things around here never change."

Seven years had passed since Susana had left Threemile. It was a place no one visited, wedged as it was in this narrow river valley, miles from the rest of the world. The town took its name from the length of its main road, which arrowed along the north bank of the Sorrow, gathering elevation, until it reached the place's wellspring: Little Sevens, the silver mine, which descended half a mile beneath the earth.

Behind them, the car's engine ticked down into silence. "They put in a new soda machine at Tom's," Marin said. "So, that's new."

Marin was hesitating, Susana saw, had not closed the distance between them though she clearly wanted to, her body tensed like a dog awaiting the command to come. “It’s good to see you, Marin,” Susana said.

Their embrace was quick, awkward. Susana stood a head taller than her little sister and had forgotten the easy way their bodies once fit together.

When they pulled away, Marin brushed a hand over her hair, backwards, so it stood on end. “Before we go,” she said. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. About Joe, and everything. You know you can stay here as long as you want, right?”

Susana nodded.

“He knows you’re here?”

She nodded again. “I made a meatloaf,” she said. “Before I left. Left it wrapped in the fridge, if you can believe it.”

“Man,” Marin said, and laughed. “He doesn’t know what he has. Had, I mean.”

“It’s fine,” Susana said. “Really.”

Already the sun had begun to slip behind the wall of the mountains. The gas station door opened, and a teenaged boy with hair as long as a girl’s stuck his head out. “You want to fill it up?” he called. “Cause we don’t pump it for you here. Just so you know.”

~

Susana followed her sister’s truck to the yellow cottage where she’d been living. The cottage was set back from the road, with a flat porch shaded by a copse of young cottonwood trees. They

parked parallel on the lawn. By then, the sky was the color of a three-day bruise. Marin insisted on carrying both suitcases.

At the door, Marin set the suitcases down and rifled through a keyring wide as a wrist bangle, the kind a jailer might use.

“Are you still working for the forest service?” Susana asked. She could hear the stiffness in her voice, hated that she’d let this space breed between them, but Marin didn’t notice, or pretended not to.

“Nah,” she said. “I was doing some trail work two summers back but I twisted my ankle pretty good up in the crags around Lost Dog. Had to hike three miles back on in, and by then—” she whistled. “I’ve been working down at Pet’s for a while, but the pay’s awful. And I always get out of there smelling like booze.”

Since they were teenagers, Marin had done the sort of work that Susana had always thought of as belonging to men. A stint at the car wash, then summers out in the woods, clearing trails, burning the remains of old cabins from public land. Susana imagined she would’ve even followed their father and brother down into the mine, if Little Sevens had allowed it.

The front door opened into the kitchen. Marin flicked on the light, revealing a trio of spotted bananas, a crusty skillet on the stove. “I’m gonna put you in the back, if that’s okay,” she said. “I got a fold-out sofa from the Salvation Army a couple of years ago. The Christmas sale. You know, even back then, I was thinking to myself that maybe you’d want to visit.” She kicked open the door at the end of the narrow hall. “Anyway, this is it.”

Fairy lights strung along the upper molding cast a strange yellow glow over the room. Susana stopped in the doorway. Along with a plaid pull-out couch and a scattering of mismatched furniture, the back room was filled with angels. There were dozens of them. Angels carved from cedar, and angels made from scrap metal and chicken wire. Tiny angels and angels tall as children, some even taller. They hung from hooks and chains and ribbons, and crowded a fold-up table in the corner.

Marin smiled, like she'd been caught doing something that was against the rules. "I thought about warning you. I guess I probably should've said something."

"Did you make these?"

Marin nodded. "Started up a couple years ago. With this little one. See? My first." The angel was palm-sized, made from fabric, a halo of mesh and bent wire. "I was thinking how Dad always said you've got to make your own luck. You can't just ask for things, you know? So I made it to bring God or something a little bit closer. Then I kept going."

Susana touched the halo of a strange angel made of salvaged car parts. It turned in a slow, wobbly circle. "You talk to him much?"

"God?"

Susana laughed. "No. Dad."

"Oh. Yeah. I try to get over there once a week or so. Retirement's made him crazy. Mom keeps getting after him to find a hobby, but all he does is fish and putter. And it's too late in the year for fish, so you can imagine. He'd never say he misses the mine but you can tell he does."

Frank and Birdie Gallagher still lived on the spit of land upriver where they had raised their three children. Now Susana and Marin's older brother Jimmy had his own family in town, a wife from Clearwater County and a daughter—Lilah—who Susana hadn't seen since she was a little girl. She would be twelve years old by now. How strange it was to be back in a place that appeared unchanged, only to recognize at every turn that it had moved on without her, would keep moving.

Susana bent over the card table and picked up an angel made from woven straw. It was bulb-headed and ugly, but there was something arresting about the contours of its blank face. "These are good," she said. "Really."

"I've been going out to the junkyard, most mornings, to look for supplies," Marin said. "It's crazy what some people around here will just throw away."

"You selling them?"

She shrugged. "Who to? People in Threemile don't have money for junk like this."

At once, Susana felt a swell of affection so strong it left her dizzy. She touched her sister's arm. Remembered Marin's face as a child—ugly and round and angry, it seemed, always angry. She'd been a biter. She bit everyone, even their father, always with a desperate look on her face, like she was daring them to ask her why. But at night, Marin crawled into Susana's bed and burrowed into her chest, fingers wrapped in her hair, and stayed that way until morning. "These are good," Susana said again. "If this town doesn't get them, then to hell with this town."

By midnight they were drunk. They sat around a dug-out fire in Marin's backyard, empty cans of Bud scattered in the weeds. Around the edge of the flames, the dark moved like something living. The cold had not yet killed off the insects, and twin craneflies danced in the fire's afterimage, before vanishing into the smoke. "So, this deer," Susana said.

"The *white* deer."

"The white deer. It... grants wishes?"

The fire cast deep shadows beneath Marin's eyes. She was twenty-nine, Susana's little sister, and still that childlike earnestness that pulled her forward, like she was drawn on a string. "Not like a genie. Not even like God. But once you see it, something happens you didn't even realize you wanted."

"Okay. Sure."

"You don't believe me."

Susana flipped a beer tab into the flames. "It's not that," she said. "I just don't know. I don't know what I'm supposed to say to something like that."

The light from the fire reflected in Marin's eyes. "Haven't you ever felt like there's a thing you're missing?" she said. "And you could fix everything, you could figure it all out, if you just knew what it was?"

A barn owl called from the shadow of a crooked pine. Susana didn't respond.

"I think about it," Marin said. "I think about it all the time."

The fire popped, spitting sparks. Marin hunched forward, resting her chin in her hands. Susana watched her, her stomach tightening as if around some missing thing.

“I’ve spent three weeks looking for that white deer,” Marin said. “Every single day. I’ve been everywhere from the mine to the woods up around Laughing Creek. I dunno what’ll happen when I find it. But I’ve got to. You know? I’ve got to.”

~

Tom’s Diner was a Threemile institution, a squat brick building with a scalloped awning and its name painted in green letters on the side. Everything in it was as Susana remembered: the floor alternating carpet and pale tile, the partition wall made from blocks of mottled glass. If there was any news about the white deer, they would find it here.

She and Marin took the corner booth and ordered griddle-top breakfasts of ham and potatoes and eggs, bottomless coffee served in bleached white mugs. Outside, the sun curled tendrils of fog from the pavement.

Their teenaged waitress refilled their coffee without asking. She had stringy dark hair and deep-set brown eyes—the look of half the girls in Threemile, like it was some kind of uniform. “Get you anything else?” she said.

“I was wondering,” Marin said. “You hear anything about that white deer?”

The girl appeared to catch herself mid eye-roll. “What d’you think? People around here can’t quit talking about it. You’d think it was the second coming.”

“You seen it anywhere around?” Marin said. “Or hear about somebody who did?”

She shrugged.

“It’s just that I’ve been looking,” Marin said, resting her elbows now on the speckled tabletop, and leaning forward in that way she had, like she didn’t even realize she was doing it.

“But every time I go to where somebody’s seen it, it’s gone.”

“I don’t know,” the girl said. But she lingered there, empty coffee pot dangling from her hand.

“Please,” said Marin.

The girl shifted. “Maybe,” she said. “Maybe I saw it a couple nights ago. I don’t know. There was an albino doe in the woods on the far side of the river, though.”

“That’s it,” Marin said. “It’s gotta be.”

“Not a drop of mud on it, either,” the girl said. “Even with the rain.”

“Where was it? Up around Laughing Creek? I’ve been out there a few times but I haven’t seen it.”

“Not that far,” the girl said. “I guess it was somewhere closer to the old railroad bridge.”

Marin nodded. “You mean around the Moon place?”

The girl studied the floor. “I guess.”

Three generations of the Moon clan lived together in a rambling river house on the far side of the Sorrow, all of them white-haired and strange. When Susana was growing up, there was always the sound of piano music coming from it—all sorts of music, nocturnes and etudes and waltzes, but hard-hitting ragtime most of all. The wind in the valley must’ve liked the sound, because it would carry it across the river and through the streets of town, so that you could hear it

as far out as the schoolhouse, if the air was right. If there really was a white deer, Susana wondered if the Moon family hadn't somehow made it themselves.

"I gotta get back to work," their waitress said. But before she could leave, Marin reached out and grabbed her by the wrist. The girl flinched. Marin released her immediately, like she'd been shocked. "I'm sorry," Marin said. "It's just— afterward—did anything happen? Did anything change for you?"

A stiffness came over the girl. She didn't turn around. She tucked her arm close to her body and stepped out of reach. "No," she said. "Nothing at all."

Once she'd disappeared into the kitchen, Susana turned to Marin. "Who is that? She looks familiar."

"One of the Tomlin kids," Marin said. "Clara Jane, I think. You remember Annabelle? Used to cashier down at the A&B when we were little. Anyway, now she's got too many of them to count."

~

There was only one way to get to the southern bank of the Sorrow, and the bridge was ricketier than Susana remembered. It had been a railroad bridge in the first part of the century, converted some decades ago when they shut the old line down. Single lane, more rust than metal, hovering ten feet above the churn of rough water that everyone called the Soap. Marin drove, keeping her pickup steady on the center line.

"Couldn't we have called?" Susana said, but Marin shook her head.

"They don't have a phone."

On the far side of the river, nature still ruled. Thick stands of pines studded the land, and behind them the mountain reared up, rocky and tall. It was early afternoon by then, the sun balanced in its perfect spot between the mountains. There were parts of the valley so low and hidden that the light only found them at this hour. In the steeper parts of the valley upriver, some places never saw the sun at all—only shadow, the cold edges of distant light.

The Moon house was close to the river, and with its green shutters and log walls it looked part of the woods, like it had sprung from it. Marin parked on the grass.

From the house came the off-kilter warble of an old piano, strange and familiar as a repeated dream. That was Isaac Moon, who played all day and did little else, and who Susana had seen only twice and had never heard speak. Some people said he couldn't.

When Marin knocked on the door, the music stopped, leaving only the sound of the river. A dog barked from somewhere deep in the house. But it was a child who opened the door, maybe ten or eleven years old, with her white hair done in messy braids. "If you're selling something," she said, suspicion etched into her freckled face, "we don't have any money."

"Fenella, right?" Marin said, smiling. "You're Freddie's little girl?"

The girl crossed her arms. "Who's asking?"

"It's Marin." Her smile wavered. "Marin Gallagher?"

The girl's flat face betrayed nothing.

"And this is my sister, Susy. Your daddy works with our brother at the mine. You know Jimmy? Jimmy Gallagher? Or Lilah—his little girl, she's your age. You've probably seen her at school."

Susana nudged her sister's arm. "Why don't you pull out your birth certificate while you're at it?"

Marin blushed.

Susana crouched down, but Fenella Moon gave her such a stern look that she immediately straightened up again. "Is your daddy home?" she said.

Fenella shook her head, knocking the weave of her left braid loose. Her eyes were unnervingly pale, the green-grey color of river water. "At the mine. Grandpa, too. And Mom's at work and Cleo is off who-knows-where and I already told you we don't have any money. It's only Uncle Isaac and me." She smirked. "You wanna try talking to him?"

"That's okay," Marin said, too quickly.

A brown terrier came up behind Fenella, poking its wet nose around the frame of the door. "Cleo's got a *girlfriend* now," she said, and made a face.

"We're not selling anything," Marin said. "We just want to know about the white deer."

"That thing, huh?" Fenella said. She kicked at a loose bit of rubber on the doorstep. "I never saw it."

"But it was here?"

"Said Cleo. He said it went right by him through the trees. He still woke up ugly the next day though, so I don't think it worked."

In the background, the piano music had started again, but the song was slower this time, switched to a minor key.

“Maybe it got all spent up,” Fenella said. “Whatever magic it had. Maybe it got it drinking from the river and it ran out. But it don’t matter much I guess, cause it’s gone. Hasn’t been around here since two nights ago.”

“You’re sure?” Marin said. “You’re sure it hasn’t come back?”

Fenella tugged on the tip of her remaining braid. “Why d’you wanna know so bad, anyway? You looking to kill it or something?”

“No,” Marin said, raising her hands and stepping backward, like the little girl had pulled a pistol. “No way.”

“Some people would.”

“We just want to see it. That’s all.”

Fenella Moon studied them, looking first at Susana, then settling her strange gaze on Marin. “Well,” she said, “I’d say you’d have better luck at the river.”

“The river?” Marin said.

She nodded. “That’s where it comes from, right? I been going down there, mornings. I’ve been asking for wings.” She rolled her skinny shoulder blades for effect. “So far, not so good. I think you probably gotta time it right. Gotta go when the god’s home.” She wriggled her left hand through the air, like a fish.

Just then, the terrier broke for freedom, darting past their legs and toward the trees.

“Hey, Butch!” Fenella called, but the dog was gone. “Great,” she said. “Now look. I gotta go get him back. He thinks he’s a snake-killer, you know? It’s down to God he’s still alive.”

“Sorry,” Susana said. “We’re sorry.”

“If you want to see that deer, you better hurry,” Fenella said, shutting the door behind her. “My dad says it’s gone upriver. Up there around Ephraim Whitehead’s place. And you know what that means.” She drew a finger across her pale neck, then ran off, following the dog into the trees.

Together they watched her go. “Did she mean Crazy Ephraim?” Susana said. “With the bone fence?”

“The fence is just a rumor,” Marin said, but she looked uneasy.

They returned to the pickup.

“Nobody would really shoot it, would they?” Susana said.

“Ephraim would,” Marin said. “Prize of the century.”

The strange sound of piano music from the Moon house followed them to the bridge.

~

It was thirty minutes of unpaved county roads to get as close as they could to the Whitehead place, which was nested in the thick woods east of town. Ephraim had winterized the cabin years ago, and for two decades he’d been living there year round. He’d been a miner before, had worked with their father, until he quit the company and town life altogether. He wanted to be up as high as he could, Frank had told them. He’d gone crazy in the deep wet dark of Little Sevens, and swore he’d never go underground again.

Marin’s truck could only go so far before the road became impassable, so they left it on the side of an access road and hiked the rest of the way. Their path cut through a thick growth of pines close to the river, tall blue firs interspersed with shorter, denser hemlock. Autumn had

drained the color from the woods—the bluebells and yellow balsam Susana remembered from long-ago summers were gone.

Beside them, the Sorrow ducked in and out of sight. Up here the river was narrow, chased back to its humble beginning, before it met up with Laughing Creek near town and gathered strength. The water whispered with a cold urgency.

Susana's breathing was labored from the incline. She struggled to match her sister's pace. "What if," she said, "we don't find it? What if it isn't there?"

"It will be," Marin said. "I can feel it."

"And if you *do* see it? What then? What if you see it and nothing happens?"

Marin laughed, but there was no humor in it. "Then I guess my life's perfect," she said. "Guess that would be what it meant, huh?"

They stopped at the crest of the trail. Ahead of them was a clearing, where the Whitehead cabin was. Susana looked at her sister, searching for the right words—the right way to ask if she was okay, if she liked living alone. If there was anyone in her life she'd shown her strange, lovely angels to, someone who spoke soft and kindly to her. But she was afraid it would come out sounding like an accusation; afraid, too, that she already knew the answer.

"You don't have to get it," Marin said, facing ahead. "That's fine. You never did. You never had to want something this way."

Susana remembered the hard and desperate way Marin had grabbed the waitress's wrist in the diner. The same look on her face that had been there since she was a child—as she watched

Susana and her friends in the schoolyard, or later Susana and Joe, after they'd started dating—like she was outside a window in the rain.

For the first time, Susana wondered if when Marin had said she didn't know what would happen when she saw the white deer, she had been lying.

~

They reached the cabin as the swollen sun balanced on the tip of the mountain. The air was different this high, cold and clear. Everywhere, the sharp scent of pine.

No smoke rose from the stone chimney. As they drew closer, Susana took in a sharp breath: a gutted six-point buck hung from a lodgepole pine, its still-hot blood pooling on the ground. Its eyes were milk-white, like they'd been replaced with jewels.

There was no bone fence, but the place had the haunted look of a fairytale: moss creeping across the stone path, the hard orange light of evening filtering through the pines.

Together they climbed onto the porch. Marin knocked on the door. The sound had a hollowness to it, like she was knocking underwater. There was no sound from within, the whole place still as the grave.

“This feels wrong,” Susana said. “Doesn't it? We should go.”

Behind them, the gutted buck swayed on the pole. The peak of the mountain had pierced the sun, and it bled orange light across the sky. It would be dark soon.

Then a rustling came from the thicket, and Ephraim Whitehead emerged from the trees. He was bare-headed, with a grey-and-black beard that overwhelmed him. Eyes hidden in his gaunt face. In his right hand was a knife, the tip of it gleaming red in the half-light.

Susana grabbed Marin's arm and dragged her from the porch. "We thought you were home," she said. "We were just knocking."

"That white deer," Marin said, shaking off Susana's hand and stepping toward Ephraim. "You seen it around?"

The beard unbalanced him, making him look like he might topple over. "Don't know," he said.

"Are you sure?" Marin said. "Cause I just want to know. Really. That's all."

"Don't know," he said again, sheathing the knife. "Don't know, don't know."

Marin lunged forward, grabbing him by the collar. She was nearly a foot shorter but outweighed him, had twice his strength, and he careened forward, boneless. "Tell me," she said. "Tell me what you did with it."

"Marin," Susana said, rushing forward. She grabbed at her sister's wrists, trying to pull her away. "Marin, stop!"

But Marin's grip didn't loosen. Instead, she shook Ephraim by his collar, so that his head lolled back, like it might fall off. Susana could see the whites of his eyes.

"Did you kill it?" Marin said. She was not shouting, but her voice sounded too loud in the clearing, like it was coming from someone much bigger than her. "Did you string it up from that lodgepole and slice its skin off? Did you?"

"Marin!" Susana yelled.

At once, the reality of what she was doing seemed to hit Marin, and she let him go, stumbling backward. She dropped her arms to her sides.

“That deer,” Ephraim said, speaking to them as if nothing had happened. “Ain’t enough meat on it for it to be worth anything.”

Marin stared at him.

“Let’s go,” Susana said. “Come on. We need to go.”

They walked for ten minutes in silence, until the path broke through the tree line and hugged the bank of the river. Most of the shoreline showed the slow work of centuries, sheer rock plummeting into the water. But here, the sand swelled at the edge of the river, like a child’s messy coloring spilled from the lines.

Susana walked to the bank and sat in the sand. “Come on,” she said.

“But it’s almost dark.”

“We’ll wait for the moon.”

The lip of the Sorrow was inches from the tips of her shoes. After a moment, Marin joined her. In the haze of evening, the bats had emerged from their hidden caves, and flew fast and low over the water, stealing the final insects before the frost.

“We can come back tomorrow,” Susana said. “We can keep looking.”

Marin kicked at the sand. “It’s okay,” she said. “You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

Susana found a flat stone in the sand and tried to skip it on the dark river, but it sank after a single splash. After a moment, an echoing splash came from the water. Susana looked at Marin, but she was still, unmoving. It sounded, she thought, like a big fish surfacing—though it was too

late in the year for fish, all of them having run by now to the sea. She searched the dark water, but she could see only the shadow-movement of the water, hurrying past.

“I don’t want to go back,” Marin said.

“We can stay awhile.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She hugged her knees to her chest, resting her chin there. “I mean to my life. To any of it. I don’t want to go back to that stupid bar or that stupid little house. I know you think this whole thing is a joke, and I get it. But if I knew how to fix it on my own, I would.”

Another splash came from the dark river, but from farther away.

“If it makes you feel better,” Susana said, “I don’t want to go back, either.”

“Joe loves you, though.”

Susana tilted her head back. Above blazed the first stars of the Milky Way— the Nez Perce called it *ghost’s path*. “Yeah. Maybe that makes it worse. I’ve been trying. I just— it’s just that sometimes you keep trying and it just doesn’t work.”

“I used to imagine you, you know,” Marin said, softly. “When you first left. Like you were a character I made up in my head. I’d imagine you out there in the city. Some corner block by a stoplight. I’d imagine what you might be doing. Who you’d meet.”

Somewhere a high wind moved the pines, drawing a keening sound down into the canyon. The way the trees around here talked to each other—Susana had forgotten that.

“Those angels,” Susana said. “You really should sell them. I mean it. Take them to Grangeville if you have to. Hell, take them to Lewiston. You’d put Owl Drug right out of business.”

Marin was still digging her shoes into the sand. “They’re stupid,” she said.

“They’re not.”

The last blue light had drained away, and the crickets were out now, singing from the brush. Marin stood. “Let’s go home,” she said.

The clouds broke above them, revealing the slivered moon. Across the river, there was movement in the dark smear of the trees.

“Look,” Marin whispered, gripping her sister’s shoulder. “Susy, look.”

The deer stepped through the trees and walked to the water’s edge. It was bone-white, iridescent, made of the moon. It raised its nose, testing the air, then bent its slender neck and drank. After a long and silent minute, the deer looked up again. Beads of water dripped from its mouth. Susana looked at Marin, but Marin was watching the deer. Their eyes met across the water.

*

G H O S T S

1972

THE FIRE took Little Sevens on the first of June. It was a Tuesday, a school day. Grasshopper season. They swarmed the cheatgrass and the backyard gardens, filling the valley with the sound of clicking wings. Clicking like clocks winding down. They hailed against windowpanes, threw themselves at passing cars. East of town, smoke escaped the mine and stained the afternoon sky.

In minutes, the horizon was black. All through Threemile, people ran for the mine. They ran for cars if they had them, and if they didn't, they ran down Main Street, slick from the yellow blood of the grasshoppers. They left posts at the gas station and the grocery store, left their shopping half-done. They abandoned steaming irons and kettles boiling on the stove. They forgot to shut their doors. For weeks afterward, there would be grasshoppers in all the houses in town.

The mine yard was hazy, its wooden buildings hidden in the smoke. A rope line held the town back from Gem Shaft, the mine's mouth, from which the smoke spewed, dark and poisonous and living. It was a thing that could not be happening. Little Sevens was a hard-rock

mine—none of the explosive danger of coal. It was all heat and damp and stone. There was nothing in it to burn.

But it burned, and as the hours turned, it kept burning.

When evening came, the rescue crew arrived from Lewiston. They wore masks that looked as though they had been plucked from the future— masks none of the miners at Little Sevens had ever worn. By then, the smoke had slowed to a trickle. The rescue crew disappeared into the mine. Behind the steel headframe that loomed above the shaft, the last of the light leaked from the sky.

It was past nightfall, a perfect half-moon poised above the shaft, when they pulled the first body out.

They carried the corpse from the cage like a heavy sack—one rescuer at each end, the dead man sagging between them. It was the hoist operator. Freddie Moon. He had two children, Cleo and Fenella, the younger still in school. Freddie Moon's eyes bulged from his skull. Beneath the ash, his face was the color of a plum.

The news passed like a shockwave through the crowd. If the smoke had reached the hoist room, then it had gone everywhere. If it had reached the hoist room, then there'd been no one to bring up the men from the deep parts of the mine. They were trapped down there— if they were still living at all.

The rescue crew worked deep into the night. The town waited: clustered, silent. The cage brought up only bodies. By the time red dawn silhouetted the mountain, there were fourteen of them, shoulder-to-shoulder on the ground. More than twice that, still missing.

As the days turned, the town kept vigil in shifts. They shared sandwiches, thermoses of coffee. They brought fold-up chairs and held signs with the names of their missing. Behind the crowd, the youngest children played in the dirt, and no one told them to stop.

On the second day the rain began—the first hard rain of summer, running rivulets into the hard-packed earth. Grasshoppers drowned in the swollen river. Twenty-six men dead by then, the rain washing their faces clean.

On the third day, the rescue crew found Charlie Tomlin's ruined body against an exploded bulkhead that had sealed a long-vacant drift, char marks licking the stone walls. The fire, they said, had probably been festering there for years.

On the fourth day, the number of confirmed dead swelled to forty-one. Forty-one dead in a town of eight hundred. There was nowhere to put them. The survivors turned Threemile's churches into morgues. They lined the corpses on potluck tables. The crowd still waited behind the rope line, wearing ponchos to shield themselves from the rain, but nearly all of them had put their signs away.

On the fifth day, the rain finally stopped. On the fifth day, the rescue crew found the last two men in a half-mined stope in the deepest part of Little Sevens. The men were Jimmy Gallagher and Wyatt Cargill, and they were alive. They'd found sanctuary three thousand feet beneath the earth, a hot wet place where the smoke couldn't find them. They'd survived by eating dead men's lunches, by drinking the water that pooled on the hard ground. But when the rescue crew pulled them from the mine, the air above ground was too thin, the sun brighter than they'd left it. It was not the world they'd prayed for.

Forty-four men dead, in the end. The youngest only seventeen, the oldest fifty-nine, a new grandfather. The mine shut down—of course it did. For a while there was talk about reopening it, once the broken bulkhead was resealed, the damage assessed. The miners who had not been underground that day would go back. Their fathers had been miners, and their grandfathers before them. It was a risk you took, going underground. A deal you made the moment the cage first dropped you into the earth.

Months passed. Winter came, cold and dark. Threemile collected the pieces of itself. The subterranean miles of Little Sevens remained empty. It would never open again.

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It was the high heat of late summer, a year since the fire. Lilah Gallagher walked along Main Street's weedy shoulder, kicking dust, an ice cube clenched in either fist. The concrete shimmered wetly in the heat. Water trickled from her hands.

Lilah worked summers at Tom's Diner, where the waitresses all wore colored eye shadow and smoked by the dumpsters with their shirts undone. Lilah wasn't a waitress. She was a bus girl, invisible, wiping ketchup from the salt shakers.

By the time she arrived, sweat suctioned her shirt to the small of her back. The sun shone bright on the diner's front window, obscuring the painted lettering of its name. Inside, the fry cook, Sal Iverson, leaned like a grinning Jack-in-the-Box from the order window. His long hair was tied back in a red bandana. "Hey, kid," he said. "Hot enough for ya?"

Sal had an easy way of talking, like he learned it from TV. He was always leaning: against the wall, the prep counter, into the space Lilah held around herself. He pulled at the collar of his shirt, still grinning. “Boiling,” he said.

Lilah managed a grimace. She’d felt sick since dawn, and the heat had made it worse. Bile singed the base of her throat. She slipped past him without looking up.

He found her in the walk-in refrigerator. She was wedged in the corner between the wire shelves, sitting on a box of sliced ham. “Well, well,” he said. “Look what I found. Tonight’s special.”

Lilah hunched forward. “I think I have the flu.”

Sal folded his arms behind his head. His wrist bones were pointed and small, like the joints of a bird. “Hey, I’m not trying to call you out,” he said. “I mean, this is the life.” He grabbed a bag of iceberg lettuce and used it as a pillow, leaning against the walk-in’s steel wall. “See? Perfect.”

Lilah stood. Blood rushed to her head, and even in the cool of the walk-in she was flushed. “I gotta go. My shift is starting.”

Sal’s gaze was long and sharp. “Where’s the fire?”

Often Lilah practiced imagining herself into smallness. She would think of her body, the bulk of it—her thighs and soft stomach, the way she was taller than most boys at school—and see it shrinking, like a magic trick. Like Alice— just drink from the bottle and down, down. Into someone so small she could turn sideways and disappear.

But when Sal looked at her, she felt every inch of herself. Body turned heavy as lead. Lilah flinched inward as she squeezed past him, but her shoulder brushed his chest. “Careful, there,” he said.

Sal was not the first boy Lilah had kissed, but he was the only one she’d had sex with. It was his best friend Silas Tomlin she’d really liked—Silas with his strong jawline and Hollywood good-looks. Sal and Silas had used to hang around the old railroad bridge, always talking about how they were going to sign up, go off to Vietnam to fight for their country like real men. But Silas was the one who’d actually done it. He’d been in Vietnam for six months, and Sal was still here, flipping burgers at Tom’s, a smirk on his face like he’d won something. He was like that. Would try to convince you his copper was better than your gold.

That night, dinner service was slow. Slower than most Tuesdays, but it left Lilah dizzy anyway, the diner fuzzing into blocks of color and light. She dropped a coca-cola glass, the remains of two dinner salads. Sweat matted her hair. By the time the sun began to set, only the long-haul men remained, sitting at the counter with their caps pulled down.

Lilah ran the carpet sweeper over the floors, picking up the scattered french fries, the bits of crust. She stopped at the front window, which looked out onto Main Street, and the void beyond it, where the ruined mine was. As the sky darkened, her reflection appeared like a ghost. She was all pieces that didn’t fit: wide shoulders and small hands; heavy thighs; a thin, upturned nose. She had a lot of her father in her. Everyone said.

For a while, after the fire, the other kids in Threemile had talked to her like she was special. Like maybe some part of the miracle of Jimmy Gallagher’s survival had rubbed off onto

her. Blessed by association. But it wasn't really kindness, the way they spoke to her, just something camouflaged like it. The same masked way girls at school sometimes spoke to the beautiful ones—like they'd been given something they didn't deserve.

He was gone now, though, her father. No one said anything anymore.

Suddenly Sal was behind her, his reflected face looming above her own. "Hey there, stargazer," he said, resting his hands on her shoulders. "Whatcha looking at?"

Lilah stiffened at his touch, twisting away. It was then that it appeared—there in the distance, so faint she first thought it imagined. There was a light on at Little Sevens.

"Look," she said.

Sal squinted, shading his eyes. "Neat," he said. "The grocery store."

"No. Farther out. There's a light at the mine."

At first he was quiet. Then, "I'll be damned," he said. "You're right."

Her breath fogged the glass. "What d'you think it is?"

"Some explorer? A nut with a camera, maybe."

She shifted. "Maybe."

Sal pulled away from the window and grinned ghoulishly at her. "That, or we've got ourselves a ghost."

"I hope so," she said, more eager than she meant to, earnest as a child. "I hope it is."

Her father was a big man, all knotted muscle, shoulders wide as a doorframe. But after Little Sevens, there was something missing in him. Every day he looked more and more like he was still in the mine— gaunt, blue-skinned, the shadows throwing lines like soot across his face.

He sat all day at the kitchen table drinking warm cans of Coors. At night, he walked from the front of the house to the back of it, again and again. He never went outside.

When autumn chilled to winter, he drove up into the woods above Threemile and never came back down. They hadn't found his body until spring. Since then, she'd been haunted not by a spirit but by the absence of one.

Now, Lilah looked out at the light at the mine. "I hope it is," she said again.

Sal's grin slid away. He ran a hand through his lank hair, looking at the space above her ear. "You say some weird stuff, you know that?"

A new wave of nausea churned her stomach, and she pulled away from the window. "I have to go to the bathroom."

A minute later she was sick in the toilet. Afterward, she stood in front of the mirror and unbuttoned her polyester shirt. A flush began at her breastbone, creeping upward. Below it, her stomach swelled, the skin tight and red as if marked by fever. It told her nothing she did not already know.

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Lilah's mother Jolene worked days as a courthouse clerk and nights at the gas station, so most often, Lilah came home to an empty house. Only five rooms, but still it seemed too big. Her bedroom was at the top of the stairs: twin bed, slanted ceiling, small window leading out onto the tin roof. The same bed she'd had since she was a child. Walls still painted pink.

That night she lay awake. The house settled below her, making slow sense of all its empty spaces. Lilah listened to the familiar sounds: the groan of the beams shifting, the horned owl that

lived in the skinny white pine. The box fan thrummed in the window, joined at times by the rumble of a passing coal train—quiet, then loud, and quiet again, the heartbeat of a giant.

She spread her hands on her stomach. How long? It had been late April when she slept with Sal, down on the bank of the Sorrow. Before, she'd thought sex would make her into a new sort of person, a better one. The kind who smiled knowingly at strangers, who always knew what to say. Instead, it was quick and painful and she bled afterward—blood all over the insides of her thighs, her underwear ruined, and why had no one told her about that, that she would bleed? Cold truck bed, Rita Coolidge singing on the radio. There was supposed to be a meteor shower, but all they saw were the clouds.

Already it was August. Four months. She shut her eyes, squeezed them until stars bloomed. Maybe, she thought, it was kitten-sized by now. Some close-eyed mewling thing, curled in on itself, nothing there but the dark.

At midnight, she climbed onto the roof. It was a clear night, deep and moonless. The air smelled of dust and pine. The Milky Way was sugar spilled down the center of the sky.

In the distance was the wreck of Little Sevens. From here it was invisible: two hundred acres of void and shadow. Lilah pulled her knees to her chest.

Then, far away— a flicker. Her breath caught. It was there again, like a miracle. A light at the mine.

She climbed back through the window, slipped into dirty tennis shoes, took the flashlight from the kitchen drawer. She walked the dusty miles toward the mine.

Main Street was silent as a long-buried place. Her flashlight beam made ghouls of cars and fenceposts. The only other light came from the neon sign at Pet's, the bar, where her aunt Marin had worked since Lilah could remember. No matter what time she passed it, Pet's was never empty.

As she neared the end of town, the houses fell away. The road climbed in elevation, veering northward until she could no longer hear the Sorrow. The trees grew thin, and the sky widened, and Little Sevens sprawled like a gutted monster: jagged-toothed, gaping at the sky. Trash blown over from the town stuck in the fence: a chips bag, an empty cigarette carton. All the wood-frame buildings were still there—the compressor shop, the squat hoist house nearest the mouth—veterans of a lost war.

No one had tended the fence since the fire. In one place it was cut clean through, the act of a more brazen trespasser. Lilah slipped through the gap and swept her flashlight beam back and forth. But there were no ghosts—only owls and loose gravel. The shadows were her own.

She stopped at the porch of the dry house, where the miners had gone to change. Ahead was the Gem Shaft—the mouth of the mine. The headframe that supported the hoist motor loomed above it, skeletal, rising thirty feet into the air.

Lilah set the flashlight down. After a minute she turned it off. When the mine burned, she had stood with her mother only feet from this place. Had run from the school with the others when they saw the smoke, taking nothing with them. And the classroom, just like that—scattered, chaotic, haunted in its own way—when after two weeks they finally returned.

Her mother had kept vigil all five days, returning home only to sleep. For five days she had stood rooted, unwavering, her hair neat, each button on her shirt carefully done. She'd refused to show relief when the dead were named and her husband was not among them.

After he died, Lilah sometimes imagined her father had gotten his hero's ending after all. He was still strong, at the end, and laughing. He pushed a stroller from the path of a freight train. He dove into the wild heart of the Sorrow, high water, to rescue a drowning dog.

She'd wanted, only, to be allowed to miss him.

A low breeze turned the dirt at Little Sevens, and the dry house railing groaned. In the dark, a faint light appeared, growing brighter. Close—less than ten yards away. It was rising from the shaft collar. Lilah stood, stumbled, leaned against the dry house railing as the light grew brighter.

From out of the broken earth crawled Fenella Moon. Tiny Fenella, barely five feet tall and skinny as a child. She was wearing a hard hat and denim coveralls, and once she heaved herself over the ladder she lay on the ground with her limbs spread wide, laughing like an escaped spirit.

When Lilah could speak, her voice was a whisper. "I thought you were a ghost."

Fenella sat up and squinted, pushing her helmet back. If she was surprised to find Lilah there, she didn't show it. "Not a bad guess," she said. "Considering."

Fenella was in the same year as Lilah in school. Though Fenella had never said so, Lilah had heard about the things she'd done since her father died: jumped a coal train and rode it all the way to Lewiston, swum the Soap at high water, straight around the concrete of the railroad

bridge. In school, she sat in the back of the room and scribbled drawings in a plastic notebook with a cartoon on the front. Sometimes she laughed at nothing at all.

Lilah walked to the shaft collar, feeling as light as though she was dreaming. “What’s it like?” she said. “Down there.”

“Dark, mostly,” said Fenella. She was still sitting, her skinny knees pointed skyward. “Quiet. You’d expect that. There’s miles and miles of tunnels, and rooms big as palaces, with nobody there at all.”

“But,” Lilah said. “Isn’t it dangerous?”

She shrugged. “Sure. But there’s stuff down there that got lost before the fire. Nobody ever went and got it out. So I thought I ought to.” She tilted her helmet light toward Lilah’s face. “You wanna see?”

Wordless, Lilah nodded.

Fenella grinned. “Okay, then,” she said. “But watch your step, all right? And follow me.”

Like that, the mine became theirs.

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They began meeting on the porch of the dry house. Fenella brought an extra helmet, a carbide lamp, a transistor radio heavy as a brick. She brought deer jerky and flat soda, and a wool blanket to chase off the damp that leaked from the walls. The nights grew cold, whispering of the coming frost.

In Little Sevens, the air was hot and wet and strange. Cart tracks slithered between pillars of stone. The drifts and shafts were like a nest of snakes, tangled that way, infinite. They stayed

on the higher levels, where the air was thin but not suffocating. Though she couldn't see it, Lilah thought she could feel the twisted miles of the mine coiled beneath them, the deep dark that lurked there.

“Hello!” Fenella shouted down a narrow drift, and the sound came back pulled apart.

“Hello!” Lilah yelled into the dark yawn of a shaft opening, but the mine swallowed the sound.

Fenella laughed. “There’s water down that one, you know? It’s been gathering since before the fire. If you’re really quiet, you can hear it.”

But they could not be quiet, neither of them, stirred into fits of laughter by the strangeness, the funereal knowledge of where they were, that they were there alone.

They raced through the drifts, jumping over piles of rubble, sliding past the ore carts that still sat on the tracks. They tried climbing the slick stone walls and slid to the ground, laughing.

In the mine they found a 900-volt battery and a coil of metal cable and a bent exit sign. They found a chunk of ore that Fenella swore had real silver in it, and they found a single leather workman’s glove. Once, they discovered a metal lunch pail sitting upright on the ground. They left it where it was.

“Watch out for the open shafts,” Fenella said. “Don’t wanna fall in. Though, *woo-eee*, what a way to go!” She climbed into a cart and lounged in it, like it was an oversized bathtub.

“Push me,” she said.

Lilah grabbed the lip of the cart and put all her weight into it. It had not been long enough for the tracks to rust, but the drift was flat, and the cart squeaked along, protesting. After ten feet she gave up.

“Man,” Fenella said, her voice echoing off the drift’s stone ribs. “I thought it would be like a rollercoaster or something.”

“Bummer,” Lilah said, flexing her hands where the metal had bit into them.

“You get in,” Fenella said. She clambered out of the cart and rolled her skinny shoulders. “Let me try.”

Fenella had a carbide lamp that she lit to test the air, which she had found in the mine. If the flame was yellow, then the oxygen was good. If it turned blue, they would need to retrace their steps, find someplace that opened up to the surface. Sometimes they lit it just to look at one another’s faces, and the strange ways they changed in the flickering light.

Other times, once the strange manic energy the mine created in them had dissipated, they sat in some mined-out stope—the closest thing Little Sevens had to a room—in darkness. A dark so complete Lilah’s mind couldn’t trust it, saw movement where there was none.

They touched the dripping walls, the rocks, the dirt. They touched each other’s faces with cold fingertips. “You feel different than you look,” Fenella said.

“Is that a good thing?” said Lilah.

Fenella laughed. “Just a surprising thing.”

Sometimes Fenella talked about the fire. “The smoke moved up,” she said. “It went up Gem Shaft and into the hoist room. It probably took less than a minute—they said it happened quick. But after my dad died there was nobody to run the hoist. There was no way out.”

Lilah swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

“Imagine it,” Fenella said. “Imagine being trapped down here, knowing you were going to die.”

Lilah placed her hands on her stomach and wondered if the baby felt scared, there alone. Maybe for the baby, the dark was a safe place. Maybe it would be frightened by the light, by the wideness of the world.

Fenella scuffed the ground with the toe of her shoe. “He was a genius, did you know that? He knew stuff about everything. Like, all the animals that live in Madagascar. And all about the different sports teams, and history, and cars. He was gonna be on Jeopardy. He was gonna be on TV and come home rich. It was just a matter of time.” She tossed a stone against the wall, and the clattering sound of it echoed out of the stope and down the drift, until it was lost. “At first, I thought maybe it’d be haunted down here,” she said. “But it’s not.”

In the long and cold winter after the fire, when Lilah’s father was missing, she’d taken to walking alone through town. Up and down Main Street, through the scattered neighborhoods with their clapboard houses and chain-link. Miles and miles. She wore a camel jacket that had been her father’s. Even at night she wore it.

That winter had been so cold it starved the deer down from the mountains. She walked until she could no longer feel her toes inside her boots.

Once, as evening fell, she'd found herself at the old bridge that crossed the Sorrow. She stood at the edge of the water, the cold curling the tips of her hair. Close to the shore, an old red-finned steelhead circled, so big its dorsal fin looked like the spine of a monster. It was the wrong color for a steelhead, white-bellied and red-finned, as though over the years the colors had run through its body and ended up on the opposite ends of it. It was a thing that should not have been there, but was— bigger than any fish she'd seen before, and the only one left in that half-frozen river, all the others gone, months ago, to the sea.

The fish circled the bridge's concrete pile, close to the surface. It looked at her with a clouded eye. Lilah stepped onto the bridge and crossed it.

On the other side was the Moon house. That strange half-haunted place, the sound of piano music coming from it, hidden in the trees.

The air was chilled to stillness. Soft crunch of snow, settling into the pines. In the grass behind the Moon house was a fort made from chicken wire and scrap metal. A fort like a child would make, a tarp where the door should've been. A light shone from inside it, bright in the surrounding dark.

Lilah walked toward the fort. She was steps away when Fenella drew back the tarp. For a moment, neither of them moved. Then, "Hi," Lilah said. Her breath hung heavy in the air.

Fenella swallowed. Every part of her, pale as moon. "Come on, then," she said.

In the center of the fort was an upturned shipping crate. On top of the crate, arranged just so, were a dozen artifacts from the mine. There was a silver sinking bucket, a carbide lamp with its flame lit. Fenella held a metal cylinder shaped like a tuna can. "It's a self-rescuer," she said.

“It’s to help you breathe if the air goes bad.” Its shadow trembled on the wall. “My dad left it on the table by the bed.”

Lilah took off her father’s camel jacket. She folded the sleeves and held it out to Fenella, but Fenella didn’t take it. For a long time they’d stood that way. Finally, Lilah put the coat back on. Guilt churned her stomach, like she’d taken something that didn’t belong to her.

Fenella turned the self-rescuer over in her hands. “He left it,” she said.

Nearly a year had passed since that night—summer fading, making room for new cold—though in the dark heart of Little Sevens it was hot and damp, another country. Lilah and Fenella were both quiet. The light from the yellow flame flickered on the wall.

Lilah thought about all the things they’d left—those men, the ghosts of Little Sevens. They left coats and overalls and muddy hobnailed boots by the door. They left cheap beer in the basement and broken cars on cinderblocks, unpaid bills and tinned tobacco in the junk drawer. They left dirt from the mine. It was in all the houses, afterward, impossible to eradicate. Dirt deep in cupboard corners, or the pockets of coats unworn for years.

In some cases it was all they left.

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Past midnight. Crooked pendant of a moon. Autumn had begun to creep into the valley, leaving its vanishing mark on the leaves. Outside, on the clouded window, rain.

Lilah stood naked in front of her bathroom mirror. She had just come back from the mine. She placed her hands over her belly button and imagined the tiny body concealed there. A body

not yet a body, growing a tiny heartbeat, tiny brain, tiny toes. A reptile creature, all bulbous head and webbed skin. She wondered if it was a boy or a girl. “She,” Lilah whispered. “Her.”

A girl. Her daughter. Hers.

“Lilah?” Her mother was in the hall, slippers shuffling across the vinyl floor. “Go on and get to bed. It’s late.”

Lilah swallowed. “Almost done,” she said, and flushed the toilet for effect. She waited with her ear to the wall until she heard her mother’s bedroom door click shut.

Then, slowly, she traced a circle on her stomach, like a spell. “You’ll be prettier,” she whispered. “You’ll be smart. Grow up tall and skinny and proud. You’ll be on all the TVs—an actress, or one of those game show girls. Something to see.”

For the first time, she imagined she could feel the baby move. She pressed her hand to her stomach and there was the baby’s hand, she thought, right there—strange and tiny and close.

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By October, ice hardened the ground at Little Sevens. Lilah and her mother sealed the windows against the coming cold. They pulled flannel sheets from storage and cleared the gutters for the rain. Sometimes when her mother looked at Lilah, her eyes went strange, like there was something she wanted to say but wouldn’t. They worked together in silence, and Lilah dreamt of the mine.

She’d told no one about the baby but Fenella. She stopped working at Tom’s when school started again, and could avoid the way Sal leered at her from the kitchen, the way the waitresses

watched her like they knew. At school, she wore baggy sweatshirts and slouched in her seat. No one asked questions. It was the sort of place where no one asked.

In the mine they'd been making a hideaway place. Off the main drift was a blasted-out stope the miners had called a ballroom, all the rich ore mined out of it decades ago. There they left blankets, candlesticks, bags of pretzels sealed with bobby pins. They sat cross-legged with their backs against the weeping stone.

"I was thinking," Fenella said on one of those nights, when they could hear the autumn wind calling far above them. "What if the baby was born down here?"

Lilah crossed her arms, felt the baby kick against them. "Don't be stupid."

Fenella leaned forward. "No, really. What if it was born in the mine and then became some sort of mutant cave creature, red eyes and everything, from never seeing the sun?"

"Come on," Lilah said. "How would it live?"

Fenella ignored her. "And it could grow up to be a superhero or something, on account of all the things it would learn down here. You know. Echolocation, that sort of thing. Like bats."

Lilah laughed. "She won't be born in the mine."

"She?" Fenella said. "How do you know it's a girl?"

"I just know."

"Well," said Fenella, "I bet that even without the echolocation, she'll end up amazing."

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That night, Lilah's mother was waiting at the kitchen table when she returned from the mine. Cold rushed through the open door, chilling the air between them. Lilah shut the door without a word.

When she was younger, her mother had been all sharp edges. Knobby elbows, skinny pointed hips. She moved with her muscles taut, like something bad was inevitable and she was just waiting for the blow to come. But time had swollen her: her fingers, the skin around her ankles, the place where her collarbone was hidden. In the blue light with her hair undone, she looked like something that had drowned a long time ago.

"Where've you been?"

Lilah swallowed. "Out walking."

"Don't you lie to me, Lilah Ruth. I didn't raise a liar for a daughter."

Lilah drew herself in. "I'm not lying," she said. "I was walking. Out by the tracks. Then down to the mine. That's all."

"You wearing makeup now?" She grabbed Lilah's chin and pulled it toward her. "Doing yourself up for some boy?"

Lilah's face grew hot. Her swollen stomach pressed into the lip of the table, but Jolene did not look down, was practiced in not looking. "No," Lilah said. "There's no boy. I swear."

Her mother looked at her, mouth drawn thin. Lilah could see her thinking, deciding what to say. "I know what you got isn't a lot, Lord knows I see it, but you don't want to go and mess it up for yourself. Believe me."

"I won't."

For a moment, her mother was quiet. “You had me worried,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Up at an hour like this, waiting for you. Could’ve been dead for all I knew.”

“I’m sorry.”

And suddenly there was pain risen up on her drowned face, and Lilah looked at her mother and felt like she would suffocate.

“I know you’re not a baby anymore,” her mother said. “But you’re still my little girl.” She reached for Lilah’s face again and at the last moment seemed to change her mind, her hand falling away.

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It was in the big ballroom stope that Fenella kissed Lilah for the first time. The lamp was off, and they found each other with fingertips, blind and laughing. Fenella’s lips were rough and cold. At her touch, some electric thing deep in Lilah woke up, ignited her. She imagined pinpricks of light shining from her pores, her hair standing on end. Her whole body turned into something else.

That night, they didn’t turn the lamp on again. They held hands and stumbled blindly through the drift, feeling their way along the dripping walls. They collided, laughed, fell. They dragged each other up again. When at last the stars opened up above them, Fenella cried “Eureka!” and Lilah took the gasping breath of the almost-drowned, as though she’d just been saved.

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There was snow on the mountains. Little by little it snuck into the valley. Lilah felt the baby moving all the time. It pressed tiny hands against the walls of her womb; it thrashed back and forth as she lay awake. She thought that it would come out speaking. It would yell and blame her and run away. It would rip itself from her body, just to be free.

For the first time, Lilah went to the mine alone. The sun was making its slow exit, but hadn't yet set. Already it was cold. Wind shook the metal headframe above Gem Shaft. Lilah looked skyward. She had never gone up before.

It took five minutes to climb to the hoist motor at the top of the headframe. By the time she did, her legs were shaking. When she turned around, the valley was spread out below, like a picture glimpsed from an airplane. She could see it all: the firehouse and the neon lights of the gas station, where her mother would soon begin her graveyard shift. The cemetery on the hill above the winding Sorrow, and the lights from the Moon house on the far side of it, spilling piano music into the night, and all the tin-roofed houses, hers amongst them—though which, she couldn't say; how different the town looked from here—scattered down the narrow valley like toys.

She thought, *I will stay here forever. I will never ever come down.*

The sky was first orange than pink and then the murky violet of dusk. Smoke rose from an unseen fire, the smell of it woody and sweet. There was Herschel Haskett carrying a bucket of scraps to the sty, and Annabelle Tomlin closing up the A&B, and closer by, in the low dip of the Sorrow, Winny Cargill, casting stones like runes at the starlit river. Ghosts, from here, all of them.

After the sun set, Lilah shone her flashlight round and round, like a lighthouse beam. Fenella found her at moonrise. She called up from the ground. Lilah gave a wordless wave.

Quick as a cat Fenella climbed the headframe and twisted herself to sit beside Lilah—skinny pale arms, bright as a star. “I saw your light,” she said. “I could see it all the way from my bedroom. I knew it was you.” She reached into the pocket of her overalls. “I was hoping you were still here. I brought you something.”

It was a little gingham dress, trimmed in lace, that looked as though it’d been made for a doll. She had folded in the sleeves and pressed the wrinkled hemline down. “It’s for her. For the baby.”

Lilah held it in a single hand. She wriggled one of the tiny sleeves with her pinky finger. There was a yellow stain on the lace, a stitched-up tear in the collar.

Fenella’s shoulders were tense, all nervous anticipation. “I dunno,” she said. “I just thought it’d be good for her to have something nice.”

Lilah was still holding it, this tiny thing—a toy, she thought, a game that children played. It overwhelmed her, then, all of it. The child inside of her, the future dark as the tunnels in the mine. Below, the lights of town twisted into one.

From miles away, she felt Fenella’s cold fingers on her arm. “Hey,” she said. “Hey. Don’t worry. It’s okay. Don’t you see? It’s going to be wonderful.”

Lilah lay both hands on her stomach and the baby kicked back against them, like she knew they were there. “What am I going to do?”

Fenella scooted to the edge of the platform and dangled a foot over the edge. “We could raise her,” she said. “Together, just you and me. Don’t say anything yet—just listen. We’d live in the mine. Live in that big ballroom stope off the main drift.”

Lilah tugged on a strand of hair. “Don’t joke.”

“I’m not. Just think about it. It’s a whole city down there, and all of it’s ours. Vaulted ceilings, secret passageways, everything.” She smiled. “Our very own indoor pool.”

For a flame of a moment, Lilah could see it. Tea parties held by lantern-light. Pale fingers and white eyes bright in the darkness. In the mine their laughter echoes, growing bigger, chasing the ghosts away.

But the sky was wide above them, and full of light. “Wouldn’t you miss the stars?” Lilah said.

“We could make our own,” said Fenella. “Cut ‘em from cardboard and hang them from the ceiling. Or—even better, listen—we could raise fireflies. Thousands of them. And they’d fly all through the shafts and the drifts, all over, so that wherever you looked there were new constellations. And it would be that way all the time—a perfect clear night all the time.”

Lilah looked at her. “You’ve got to leave the dark sometime,” she said.

Fenella’s smile faded. “I know,” she said.

The night deepened. Wind passed over the ruins of the mine. Fenella yawned, stretching her arms above her head. “Leave,” she said, “and go where?”

From this high, the world was infinite. In the moonlight, Lilah could see past Little Sevens, past Threemile, past the Sorrow and all down the heart of the mountains. “Anywhere,” she said. “Anywhere we want to go.”

*

T H E M U D M A N

1979

THE MEN had been at the riverbank since morning, trying to free Wag Iverson's sunken pickup from the grip of the Sorrow. Twice already they'd hooked it by the teeth of its grill, had waded chest-deep to anchor the cables to its front tires. Twice they'd started the crane motor and the skeleton of the thing had begun to rise, monstrous, from the water. But the river was greedy that day—maybe it was the lack of rain, too little given to it for too long—and both times it had slipped the truck free of the cables and sucked it down again.

It was a hot day in Threemile, faintly buzzing, the elderberry and red clover thick with honeybees. The bar hadn't opened yet, the courthouse was closed, and the sole television channel—a broadcast meant for the neighboring county that sometimes snuck into the valley—had been replaced by static ever since a recent windstorm. The onlookers began arriving between attempts one and two. First came Silas Tomlin, half-crazy since the war, his too-young girlfriend wrapped around him like a snake. After that it was a pair of old Haskett cousins packing lawn

chairs, and then a band of teenagers, who could say who they belonged to, turned vagabonds since school had let out. By afternoon, the crowd had swelled to twenty-five.

Uphill and away from the crowd, Winny and Eleanor Cargill sat in matching iron chairs. This was their property: the cottonwoods and the uncut grass, the sharply-sloping yard that ended in a low stretch of land at the riverside. Chickens milled in the yard, too many of them, pecking at one another. Behind them, the vine-choked cottage listed toward the garden, more grey than white, closer to falling in on itself every day. Winny and Eleanor had lived here together for the last eleven years.

Eleanor was wearing a sweater in spite of the heat, her skinny frame swallowed by the cable-knit. She braided and unbraided a strand of her bone-white hair. “I wonder,” she said, looking at the river, “if anyone’s started taking bets.”

Winny paused her knitting. Even in the cottonwood shade the sun was too bright, turning everything fuzzy, as if she were looking at it through old glass. “I wonder,” she said mildly.

“Good opportunity for it, don’t you think?” said Eleanor. “It’ll take them another hour at least, that’s a given. But my money’s on even longer. Especially if they keep going like they are.” She paused, squinting. She was half-blind but refused to wear glasses, said they made her head ache. “How like a man, isn’t it?” she said. “To keep trying the same old thing even after it’s failed.”

“I suppose we’ll see.”

Eleanor sighed. “Oh, come on. You could at least *try* to be fun.”

Winnie clicked her knitting needles. She was knitting the same blanket she'd been knitting for eleven years. It was big enough now to cover her bedroom floor twice over, maybe more. She had meant to stop a long time ago, had thought she would know innately the stopping-moment when it arrived, but it never came—at least, not the knowing of it. Now its multicolored folds pooled at her feet like water rising, rising.

“One thing’s for certain,” Eleanor said, tugging her latest braid free. “Wag Iverson is an idiot. I mean, I’ve been saying it for years. I have, haven’t I? For years.” She *tsked*, shaking her head. “His poor children. With a father like that.”

“Hot today,” Winnie said in lieu of a response. It was true, though, that Wag’s oldest son had been trouble since he was a boy. Already he’d begun following in Wag’s footsteps—a prolific drinker, father to an illegitimate child that half the town knew was his, though both Sal and the little girl’s mother refused to acknowledge it.

There was no breeze to warn off the heat today, even down by the water. Winnie pointed a knitting needle toward the men wrestling with the Sorrow. “Do you think we ought to bring them down some lemonade? Or something like that?”

Eleanor laughed. In the harsh sun she looked even older than she was, a witch from a fairytale. “Lemonade?” she said. “When was the last time we had any lemonade in the house?”

“I said *or something like it*. Didn’t I?”

“Lord knows you’d like that,” Eleanor said. “Going out of your way. Everyone needs a hobby, I suppose. But I think I’ll stay here.”

Down at the riverbank, Wag Iverson was sitting with his legs crossed in the mud, like a fifty-year-old child. When he'd lost the pickup last October, he'd sworn it was stolen. It had a custom fiberglass shell fitted over the bed, and he often slept there when he was too drunk to drive home. But that night, he said, he'd walked. Left the truck parked in front of Pet's after last call, a responsible drunk, only to return the next day and find it gone.

But Marin Gallagher, Pet's bartender, said she'd watched him stumble into the cab and drive off in the opposite direction of home. The next morning his wife found him on the front porch, soaking wet, half-dead from hypothermia. He didn't remember the river, he said. He didn't know what had happened.

Now it was nearly July. The pickup had surfaced in the murky deep-water place where the river was joined by Laughing Creek. The creek had been named by an early settler, who'd meant to counteract the melancholy name of its tributary, though he'd neglected to consider the implications: here at the confluence, all its water became Sorrow.

It had taken half the summer for the sun to burn off enough water to reveal the tip of the pickup's frame. It was a wonder they were bothering to get it out at all: the river had clearly taken a liking to it—it could get selfish that way—and the truck was long past ruined anyway, no use anymore.

“I wonder what'll be inside,” Eleanor said. “When they finally pull it out.”

“Probably nothing,” Winny said. She set her knitting down, suddenly exhausted.

“Nothing that was there before, anyway.”

At the riverside, the men had left the river and gathered next to the crane. They were a mix of old and young, very few in the middle—it had been like that since the mine burned, the whole town only seared edges, a gathering around some impossible hole.

“Do you think they’re giving up?” Eleanor said.

“It’d be for the best,” Winny said. “Don’t you think?”

But the men must have just been reassessing their tactics, or else gathering their strength, because moments later they’d returned to the water. On the shoreline, someone raised a beer and shouted in premature triumph.

“You can cheer,” said Eleanor, looking at the river, “but my money’s still on the home team.” She tucked her skeletal hands into her sweater. “I’m thirsty,” she said. “Bring me a glass of something, would you?” Her mouth twisted into a smile. “Lemonade, if you have it.”

Winny rose from her chair, wincing at the bone-deep ache in her legs. She gathered up her blanket and piled it on the chair. “I’ve got to get dinner started anyway,” she said. “Don’t get up.”

“A roast, right?” Eleanor

“Whole chickens were on sale.”

“With red potatoes?”

“They only had yellow.”

Eleanor nodded, slowly, like she was thinking it over. “At least you got potatoes this time. You know how Wyatt likes potatoes.”

Winny stiffened.

“And a good brown sauce,” Eleanor said. “To dip them in. I’d hate for Wyatt to come all this way and not have a brown sauce for his potatoes.”

Winnie swallowed. “And a brown sauce,” she said.

Eleanor smiled, like she knew she’d won. “Good. And no lumps in it this time, if you can. You’ve got to whisk it, you know.”

The mid-afternoon sun was at its brightest, scattering white light over the surface of the Sorrow. It was a playful river. Cruel, too. Always changing its face, tricking you like that, but remaining undeniably the same river, something eternal woven into it no matter the currents cut into its surface and erased again, no matter the way the waterline rose or fell. Sometimes the river took things—eyeglasses and wedding rings and beer cans and loose change. Sometimes it even took people— Johnny Lewis, just a boy— years ago now, his body never found.

But Winnie knew that the river also gave.

Eleven years ago she had returned here, to her childhood home, after her brother Henry’s death left Eleanor a widow who had no idea how to be on her own. Such a haunted summer it had been, the two of them little more than strangers, together in that falling-down house, everything familiar so far away. Bluejays and white-throated sparrows stunned themselves flying into the windowpanes. It was like that, a dizzy summer like that.

Eleven years ago, on the bank of the Sorrow, the river had brought the mud man to them.

Even now, the feeling of it: electric, something swimming through her. The touch of his cold skin on hers. It was hot and they had swum in the river without any swim clothes, because Eleanor had always done it that way, because Winnie was pliable, had wanted to please her.

They'd dug him from the shore together. Bare hands, and naked, all three of them. Until he was there between them—a man from river mud. When he opened his eyes, they were the color of the river.

On the shore, one of the men was shouting. He waved his hands above his head, warning another off.

“If they keep going like this,” Winny said, “you don't think maybe — I mean there isn't any chance—”

Eleanor didn't meet her eyes. She only laughed, quick and short. “Don't be silly. What would there be to find?”

~

How to explain that summer? Both of them still stunned by the loss of Henry, mired in the grey haze of afterward. Eleven years ago, before the mine burned, before life started leaking out of the valley, turning it into some half-dead thing. That summer, bright flowers bloomed in places where none had grown before. Even the insects went mad, heat-drunk, spinning into one another. In their little garden plot, every carrot they grew came up in twos, wrapped and fused together.

And that cool deep river, the only place to go to escape the heat. The green pool beneath the rocky cliff face that gradiented down into blackness. Bright spots of steelhead prowling the shallows. And the giant one among them, monstrously long, that had sometimes circled them as they swam, light trapped in its moon-white eye.

Winnie and Eleanor swam across the river and back again, until exhaustion reached all the way down to their bones. Afterward, they lay on the shore, silent, their bare bodies heaving, both of them staring at the sky—which was small, up here, funneled by the mountains and high-reaching pines into something knowable, another river, above them.

They'd found him at twilight. A man buried in the river mud.

How to explain it? How bit by bit he took shape beneath their fingers. The silence between them, so loud it buzzed. How the underground water moved to fill the spaces he left in the earth. How it was not until the sun had moved off and blue evening haunted the valley that he opened his eyes, and raised his hands to grasp their own.

When she touched him, Winnie had felt, inside her, the sudden pull of an undercurrent. She looked at the mud man, and something in her awakened.

Afterward, Eleanor swore she'd been the one to find him. Because after all she was a mother, wasn't she, that instinct strong in her in spite of how Wyatt had turned out. Wyatt, who'd left home for the first time at fifteen, who vanished for days, who picked fights with boys twice his size. The wayward son Eleanor thought she didn't deserve. Eleanor had seen the mud man and known, she said, that he was her second chance. Her thing to save.

Winnie never argued. She didn't have to. She knew the truth. She had felt the blood—or was it water, she didn't know—moving beneath his skin. Had felt herself open when she looked at him. Winnie knew, then and now, that the mud man had been for her.

~

It was too hot for a roast, but it didn't matter. Eleanor insisted on tradition. Winny scrubbed the potatoes under the faucet and dried them on the rough fabric of her apron. Outside, Eleanor was still sitting beneath the cottonwood tree, watching the men at the river. Through the warped glass of the window she looked small as a child.

Winny sliced the potatoes slowly, the fingers of her left hand curled safely into her palm. In the last few years she'd become unable to trust her own body. The fits came on suddenly, there and gone, her control yielded to some clumsy puppeteer. Just last week she'd shattered a drinking glass, fingers loosening when she'd told them to hold.

Day by day they accumulated, her body's betrayals. The sudden weakness in her legs; only static where a memory should've been. One day, she feared, her control would slip and she wouldn't get it back. Trapped in a body that was no longer her own.

The ceramic sink was the same one her parents had put in when she and Henry were children. So much of it the same in spite of the years, though failing now: lines webbed like cottonwood branches across the ceiling of her childhood bedroom, bricks crumbling from the fireplace, the shattered window in the living room covered up with cloth. It had been so strange, the returning, after a half a lifetime lived away. Henry was two months dead, his absence like a living thing.

They'd buried him on Easter Sunday, eleven years ago. Winny wore black, and Eleanor wore blue. It had been her husband's favorite color, Eleanor said. She wore her white hair loose around her shoulders like a shawl.

Eleanor had never been on her own, and Winny had never been without someone to help. At Henry's graveside, him still fresh in the ground, Winny had looked at her brother's widow and known, as she had always known, just what she needed to do. Wyatt had left school by then, was living in some upriver trailer and working in the mine. He could not be counted on. Eleanor had no one else. Winny looked at her and felt something inside swelling up, a feeling both regretful and euphoric, same as it had all the times she had set aside the things she wanted for the things that needed her.

She'd said goodbye to her little duplex in the middle of town. She gave the little dog she'd been looking after to Alice Moon, who had two young children. She came back to this low-ground place, to the high weeds and the overgrown garden and the Sorrow. To the little bedroom with the porthole window where she'd slept as a girl.

The oven radiated heat. Winny had opened the window but could coax no breeze through it. Into the hollow body of the chicken she slid a spring of rosemary from the garden, a quartered carrot, half a withered lemon. She placed the potatoes cut-side-down in the oil.

Wyatt, of course, would not come to dinner. It didn't matter that he'd promised. Still Eleanor would insist on waiting for him, she knew, postponing dinner until the sky darkened, until the meal grew cold. He was her only child. It didn't matter to her that he'd turned out rotten.

Even as a boy he'd been angry, working himself into red-faced fits that left him exhausted. He'd spent more time in jail over the past decade than he had out of it. He'd shown up to Henry's funeral—his own father—half an hour late, wearing ripped blue jeans, his left eye swollen shut.

Since the mine burned, Wyatt had only gotten worse. He'd spent five days trapped beneath the earth while all around him better men died. If there'd been any moral piece left in him, Winny thought, he'd lost it down there. Now he never came home, spent all his time running around with one of the Tomlin girls, Clara Jane, and there were rumors now that she was pregnant, was planning on keeping the baby even though she hadn't stopped drinking, rumors Eleanor refused to hear.

Eleanor kept his photo centered on the mantle. Sometimes she took it down and sat in the green armchair, holding it against her chest like he was dead. She stroked the frame and cried—she'd done everything right, hadn't she? Hadn't she been a good mother?

Once, Winny had felt sorry for her, but now it just made her angry.

Winny slid the roast into the oven and returned to the yard.

"Any progress?" she asked Eleanor.

Eleanor shook her head. "Only from the nosebleeds. One of them's brought out a cooler. Probably bought out all the beer at the A&B, by the looks of it. You hear them? They're getting rowdy."

"No wonder," Winny said. "It's the event of the year."

"If you think about it," said Eleanor, "it's just like fishing. Trying to reel in the big one. If they pull it off they'll be bragging about it for years."

For now, the river was still winning.

"Dinner's on," Winny said. "It'll be done by seven."

Eleanor nodded. "You made enough for three?"

~

They had taken the mud man back to the cottage. What else could they do? One of his cold hands in each of theirs. He did not speak. They did not know if he could. Though he seemed to understand them, tracking them with his wet green eyes. They sat with him at the table. They spoke to him, teaching him the words for *river* and *window* and *pine*. He was listening to them, they could tell—but he was silent.

They cooked for him. Eleanor fried trout from the Sorrow, and they picked bitter greens from their little garden plot. He ate slowly, with his hands, like food was a thing he had never seen before. And he left trails of himself in the house, which dried to hard cakes of mineral-rich earth—which they had kept finding traces of, years later, after he was gone. Beneath his skin was blue, blue.

Winnie's room was closest to the river. The mud man slept there. Though if he slept at all, or just stared through the porthole window at the water, Winnie didn't know. She wanted to check on him, to stand in the doorway as the moonlight came in through the glass, but she didn't. At night, she and Eleanor lay together in what had been Eleanor and Henry's marriage bed. Winnie looked up at the ceiling, and imagined him. His fluid movement, the strange and constant dampness of his skin.

He was sent here, Eleanor whispered in the dark. Sent to me. I know it. A second chance.

As if Winnie were nothing, were someone incapable of want. As if in Eleanor's world, everything was hers and hers alone.

The pillows on the bed were dense and heavy. And Eleanor, selfish, needy Eleanor, slept as if the world had vanished. She was older than Winny, and weak. How easy, Winny thought. How easy it would be.

Winny could've had her own children. Good children who never let rage take possession of their bodies, who never disappointed their mother. She could've married and let her husband care for her, could've kept a photograph of herself in a long white wedding dress on the mantle. She could have kept the duplex in town, with the vegetable garden, the little dog who slept at the foot of her bed at night.

Couldn't Eleanor see? Couldn't she see the things Winny had sacrificed?

~

A cloud front had moved in from behind the mountain, hiding the sun. Eleanor was shivering. "It's cold," she said, though it wasn't, the heat still trapped in the valley. Lately it had been this way: some piece of her waning with the day, evening leaving her a husk, a shedded skin of who she'd been in the day.

"Do you need a blanket?" said Winny.

Eleanor shook her head. Once she had swum in water chilled from snowmelt and hadn't felt it at all. Now it was like she was sinking, slowly, beneath the surface of a river that neither of them could see.

Winny gathered her blanket from the chair where she'd piled it, her knitting needles still attached. She threw it across Eleanor's lap. "Here," she said. "You've got to keep warm."

Across the yard, the Sorrow was still fighting to hold onto the sunken truck. Eleanor did not look away from the river. She was still shivering. “Did you call Wyatt?” she said. “He’s coming, you know. I can feel it.”

“I tried,” Winny said. “No answer.”

“Oh,” Eleanor said. “Oh, he must already be on the way.”

Winny swallowed. “He’s not,” she said. “Don’t you see? Don’t you get it? He’s not going to come.”

“You’re horrible,” Eleanor said. “I wish you’d just go away. What’ve you done? What have you ever done but take away the things I love?”

Winny looked at the river. It had been silly of her to think that they might’ve found something more than the pickup in its depths. Silly to think that they might have been any trace of the mud man still there, any part of him left.

~

It was Autumn, low water, the night Winny had led the mud man back to the river. Midnight, the two of them alone. The heat of summer had finally broken, leaving the valley dazed, unsure of itself.

Winny had left the bedroom she shared with Eleanor, had left Eleanor sleeping with her white hair spread across the pillow. Alone, she had gone to him. He sat on the edge of her single bed, watching the river through the porthole window. It was the same window through which she had watched the Sorrow as a girl. *Come*, she said. *Come with me*. She took him by his hand. Red-

tinged river mud streaked the sheets when he stood. Afterward, she had stripped the bedding, tucked it deep in the closet where Eleanor would never look.

The water shone green in the moonlight. His hand, in hers, was cold. They knelt by the fast-moving water, glinting in the light from the moon.

You are my thing, mine only, she said to him. She took his face in her hands. *Say it back to me. Mine. Say it.* His skin was cold, but beneath it, that warmth, the hot proof of his living. She slipped her shirt from her body and dropped it onto the shore. She pulled his body against her own. His heartbeat quick as an animal's beneath his skin.

When dawn came, she took hold of his hand. Together they walked into the river. It was easy like that. Eleanor still asleep in the greying cottage behind them, the sun red and violent above the trees. They walked into the river and he was gone.

~

On the bank, the men were shouting. They had done it. The covered pickup hung from the hook like a gutted monster. The crane swung the truck from the river to the bank, where it swayed, ghastly, just above the shore. The crowd, which until now had been subdued by the beer and the low light of late afternoon, rose from their seats and cheered.

Winnie stood beneath the cottonwood tree. Next to her, Eleanor had taken Winnie's blanket in her hands. She was unweaving it, or trying to, her swollen knuckles failing her, picking hopelessly at the threads.

"He was mine," Eleanor said, still pulling, blue and green threads bubbling up between her fingers. "My chance. To do it over. To do it right this time. Don't you get it? Don't you see?"

Gently, Winny took the blanket from her. “Come on,” she said. “Dinner’s ready. Let’s get you inside.”

A shout came from the riverbank. Winny turned. The rear window of the pickup’s camper shell had come loose. It swung out in a wide arc, then fell to the ground. From the cave of the pickup’s covered body fell dozens and dozens of fish, their scales catching the last of the light. They twisted through the air and smacked, gasping, into the mud.

*

G Y P S Y

1989

THE NEIGHBORS' skinny hound barking in the yard. The sputter-growl of an unmuffled motor, passing on the street below. Outside, the last hard rain of springtime, filling the copper dish on the windowsill.

Gypsy sat on top of the desk, bare toes curled around the edge. Caro, stomach-down on the bed, her legs crossed in the air. They'd cracked the window to let in the smell of rain. All afternoon they'd talked about the carnival, which would come to town in three days. Caro wanted her fortune told. Gypsy wanted to ride the ferris wheel, to see the town from up there—its hazy edges, the river and the peaked tin roofs and the burned-out mine. There had never been a carnival in Threemile and they didn't know if there ever would be again.

Gypsy was rolling a cigarette over her grammar workbook. Her mom waitressed the closing shift at Tom's, would not be home until late. And anyway she didn't care, had given up sometime in the last two years, hands-up surrender, like Gypsy was some runaway train going

wherever it would go. Gypsy licked the cigarette and sealed it, dusting the loose tobacco onto the floor.

Caro fiddled with the radio knob, surfing different waves of static. Crest and crash.

“Quit it,” Gypsy said. “I’m getting a headache.”

Caro dropped the radio. She looked out at the copper dish, chewing the end of a painted nail. “Your cup runneth over,” she said.

All of this: happening in the slant-ceilinged room at the top of the grey house, sun giving up and sinking, the Sorrow glutted and loud, a preacher’s river— all of this as a mile and a half away, Silas Tomlin rammed his ’77 Harley into the concrete pile of the railroad bridge and sent the crows screaming into the sky.

~

That winter had been warm and nearly snowless, tricking life into the valley too soon. The Sorrow running high by April, cottonwoods in full uneasy greenery. Now the whole place had a tilt to it, a not-rightness. Last week a young bull moose had wandered down Main Street, confronting the lamp posts, before charging its own reflection through the window of the closed-down drugstore.

It had been seventeen years since the mine burned. Everywhere were the signs of decay—the abandoned storefronts on Main Street, *for rent* signs faded from the sun. The years had leeched the color from everything—once-red houses faded salmon pink, whitewashed cinderblocks going grey—whole town like a shirt wrung too many times through the wash.

Caro, the two of them hunched over the soda counter at Tom's: "I'm out of here the second I turn eighteen. Alaska. They say there's twenty men to every woman."

Gypsy's mother, at the dinner table: "This was a good place to raise a family, once." Like she was convincing herself.

Gypsy, lying starfish-flat on her bedroom floor, looking at the ceiling. Imagining climbing onto a train, one of the trains whose whistles she heard calling through the woods at night. Climbing into a boxcar and just riding. But she could never push the daydream far enough—could never imagine what the world would look like when she got off.

~

Silas Tomlin had served for two years in Vietnam. He had come back to Threemile and married, had fathered a little girl. Since the war, he'd never so much as touched a drink. He had a surprisingly clear tenor voice and was a good flat-picker, had an ear for music. He swore he could see the future, but afterward, he couldn't remember what it had been. All of this was true. But all anyone in Threemile could talk about was the way the corrugated metal of the railroad bridge had gutted him like a buck when the motorcycle flung his body into it, how his intestines had hung loose from the white spill of his belly. How from the smoothness of the road, it looked as though he had not even braked.

~

Moths in the valley. Thousands of them. Translucent wings, dust-soft bodies not made for this world. They came the night Silas Tomlin died. Filling the valley, white-winged, milk in the bowl of the mountains.

Moths gathering on the shore of the river by the railroad bridge. Resting on its iron struts. Ghosting above the water. Maybe something in his spirit that had led them there. The spectacular violence of his death. They were scavengers that way—mouthless, all their earthly eating done as larvae. Theirs, a different kind of hunger.

Threemile lay in uneasy sleep. Moths tapping windows, sneaking in through cracks beneath the doors. Moths on the streets and the fenceposts and truck beds.

And a mile away, in the slant-ceiling room: Gypsy, sleeping. Gypsy with her window open, though the nights were still cold. She liked to pile the blankets from the cedar chest on top of her, liked that weight. Gypsy, waking at some high-moon hour, blue light on the blankets, to find that the moths had gotten inside, and rested now, lightly fluttering, in the crests and hills made from her body.

Her first thought was: *snow*.

~

Silas had been a future-seer. It had started when he came back from Vietnam. He'd left at eighteen. Had talked of killing for his country, of dying for it. But he saw combat only twice. Took no lives, watched no one die. When he returned, the town was not the one he remembered. The mine burned, and the town reeling, his father and older brother dead. Devastation in the place he hadn't expected it, hadn't signed up for. Like his two lives had switched places when he wasn't looking.

The future, when he saw it, played in front of him like a movie. When the movie started playing a trance would come over him, and he would carve the truth into the dirt, scrawl it onto

the counters and carpets, everywhere, with whatever he could find. If you heard him during one of those visions—heard him yelling, the words garbled, like he was speaking in tongues—you would hear the ecstasy in his voice, and the terror. The knot of the future had untangled itself into a moment of searing clarity.

Afterwards, though, it was always the same. His own hands turned out to have betrayed him. His fevered writings transformed into nonsense, loose scribbles on the wall.

How strange it must have been: to be always learning the future only to forget it, again and again. Nothing solid anymore.

~

Moths inside cereal boxes and washing machines. Moths in the grasses and gardens and drowned in the river. The air thick with them. The streets smeared with the slick contents of their bodies.

Moths in the cemetery on the morning they buried Silas Tomlin. The cemetery was on a hill, the hill a stepping-stone to the mountain behind it. Below it the valley: arrow stretch of Threemile along the Sorrow, the town like a line of debris left from a dustpan, straight and gathered and grey. The cemetery was too high up to grow cottonwoods, so there were only pine trees here, scattered, windblown. More people beneath the ground than would ever be above it again.

Gypsy stood next to her mother. They were both in black dresses, though they had not known that branch of the Tomlins, not really—had known them only in the way everyone knew everyone else Threemile—that heaviness, that weight between them.

Gypsy picking at her cuticles. Gypsy tapping at the dirt with a too-small shoe.

Silas Tomlin's widow stood at the graveside in a black dress that had been made for a larger woman. Her name was June. An Iverson before she'd married Silas, one of the Iversons from the trailers up in the woods around the mine. The dress gapped at the shoulders, revealing her freckled skin, the strap of her white cotton bra. Her whole body heaved as she cried.

June was the one who had found him. She had walked toward the river that night like something in her knew which way her husband had gone. The new baby strapped to her, the one whose head lolled all the time, like it hadn't figured out how to support it. And the howls the two of them had sent up, like nothing human, howls that had caused Winny Cargill half a mile away to call the sheriff about coyotes circling.

June Tomlin, silent now, kneeling in the dirt by the grave. A fat-necked woman behind her, hand on the small of her back.

Gypsy, chewing her finger, watching. Wondering—what would happen to her now? After the burial, after the casseroles stopped coming?

Moths on the casket, dozens of them. In the end they couldn't clear them off—they must've liked the looks of their reflections in the polished wood—so Silas Tomlin was buried with them.

~

Gypsy lying on the bed, still in her funeral dress. Gypsy, watching the sun move across the ceiling. Caro could not come over, it being one of the rare occasions when her father was home. "Rules," she had said, rolling her eyes.

Next door, the neighbors, shouting again. There had been three brothers living in that house when Gypsy was young, all of them fat and tobacco-chewing and mean. Now it was only the youngest left, and a girlfriend from Grangeville or somewhere, somewhere outside of Culver County, who had a hyena laugh and complained about everything, everything was *shit*. Those complaints must've been some sort of foreplay, though, because afterwards Gypsy could see them fucking—they did it in the living room with the blinds open, like they wanted people to see.

Gypsy, closing her eyes. *Tick, tick* of the old house settling. Soft piano music coming from somewhere river-side: the radio, maybe, a station she could never find. She practiced arching her back. She balled the comforter in her fists. She held her legs in the air for as long as she could stand, then let them drop. She wondered what her ceiling would look like if she painted it blue. Glued some of those glow-in-the-dark stars up there, the ones she'd wanted as a little girl. "Deliver me, O Lord," she said.

The Grangeville woman was screaming. "There are *moths*," she said, "in the *cereal*." Like the moths were his fault. Like everything bad in the world had a reason for it, someone to blame.

~

There was no mystery about Gypsy's father, though her mother would not name him. He was any one of those slack-faced boys turned men, those easy-leaning boys, who worshipped their fathers until they grew up and that worship warped into love of themselves. The sort of boys who looked at you with eyes cast down or from the side but never straight-on, never like you were a person worth directly considering.

She knew better than to wonder who he was. Knew knowing would only bring disappointment.

But once, in her mother's cedar hope chest, inside a wooden box with a broken latch, Gypsy had found three letters. The letters were from a woman named Fenella Moon.

Gypsy knew about the Moons. Everyone in Threemile did. That strange family living on the other side of the river. Once the house had been full of them but now only two were left. Cleo, who preached hellfire at the Assembly of God. Isaac, who spent all day playing the piano and who never crossed the bridge into town. Gypsy had never even seen him. Not even when she'd been dared to sneak across the old railroad bridge and look through the kitchen window. She'd done it, of course she had, but the place was empty. Nobody there.

The first letter was postmarked from Portland. Fenella was living in a converted garage. She'd found work at a florist's, early before-dawn work cutting stems with metal shears, pruning dead leaves and wilted blossoms, then placing the cut flowers in big metal urns of water. Before she left she would sweep all the dirt and fallen leaves from the tile floor, but the dirt always stayed behind in the grout, and on Sundays she cleaned the grout with a hard-bristled brush, with bleach that burned the inside of her nose. The flowers weren't even that great, she said. They didn't come close to the colors of the wildflowers in Threemile.

Fenella was doing fine. Fenella was happy. For a while she'd had dreams about the mine, but she didn't anymore.

She said, is the baby talking yet?

She said, I bet she's got eyes like yours.

She said, did you teach her to say my name?

~

Gypsy at the riverside. Walking the stretch of shoreline near the house where the Tomlins lived. The water was quick here, lined with white. The steelhead jumping, hungry, returned from the sea.

Before Silas died, June Tomlin had done puppet shows for the children at Sunday school. The Assembly of God, the only church that had survived the lean, leaving years after the fire. Where Cleo Moon preached three nights a week about the sins of fornication and alcohol, looking, with his crazy white hair, like he'd been struck by lightning.

Once, Gypsy and Caro had gone to watch June's morality play. Because they were bored with smoking and walking to the A&B for five cent candy. Because sometimes, together, they brought out in each other a heart-thumping delight in being cruel.

The stage was made from cardboard. A hand-stitched red curtain. Caro and Gypsy sat in the back, pushing each other, laughing. The way the light hit the puppets' button eyes. The way June Tomlin pitched her voice from behind the stage. The earnestness. Like she believed in it, didn't realize how silly it was, some little girl playing a game. "Encore," Caro and Gypsy shouted, halfway through. "Encore, encore." Until June's voice faltered, until the puppets stopped moving. Until quietly she stopped and put everything away.

"Goddamn terrifying," Caro said, as they were leaving.

"That voice," said Gypsy. Both of them trying on levity, neither laughing anymore.

Gypsy, alone, remembering. Kneeling at the river, skirt pulled over her knees. Her cheeks hot with shame.

~

The slant-ceiling bedroom had once belonged to Gypsy's mother. For years the two of them had shared it, until Gypsy's grandmother, forty-seven and drowned-looking as long as Gypsy had known her, died grey-skinned of a disease known for taking old women, in the armchair by the window where she'd spent a decade spinning silence like a shroud, like she was waiting to make a gift of it to someone who, one night in the winter of Gypsy's eleventh year, finally came.

Now her mother slept downstairs, when she slept at all. The old wood floors telegraphed even phantom movements, and most nights Gypsy heard her track the same path to the kitchen window and back again, heard her turn the kettle on and off, low whistle like a coming train. She rustled through drawers, opened cabinets and shut them, and sometimes there would even be the sound of chopping vegetables, though by the next morning all trace of her nighttime movements would be gone.

~

Gypsy across the street from the Tomlin house. Late afternoon, bright fleeting sun. Moths resting on her shoulders and in the waves of her hair. Moths turning in the air like locust leaves.

How had she gotten here? Standing in a thicket of tangled cottonwood and old car junk and creeping vine outside the Haskett place, so that nobody would see. The Tomlin house was green. Brighter than the others on the street. The blinds were open. And in the window was June, sitting at the table. And at the table, the dark-eyed baby. June with her hands pressed together,

like she was holding something between her palms. June, moving her hands forward. Gypsy waited, squinting, gripping a branch of the cottonwood tree. But when June opened them, there was nothing there.

~

Gypsy and Caro at the carnival. Wearing short buttoned dresses and cowboy boots, their hair curled. Caro holding cotton candy, spun thin as cloud. Dragging Gypsy by the arm into the line for funnel cake.

The carnival was set up in the empty lot across the street from the old fire station. Night had fallen. Their faces strange in the multicolored lights. The carnival would be here for two days, then it would be gone. Gypsy standing beneath the ferris wheel, looking up. Missing it, even then, as if it were already gone.

Caro and Gypsy rode the merry-go-round, their dresses hiked up around their thighs. They drank soda as fast as they could and threw their heads back, laughing. At a booth made from painted wood they shot tiny rifles at figures in the trees. Gypsy knocked down zero. Caro knocked down three. “Runs in the family,” she said, blowing imaginary smoke from the plastic rifle tip.

Caro’s brother Benny was in the navy. He’d been gone six months. His job was protecting Kuwaiti tankers as they crossed the Persian gulf. “He says it’s not so bad,” said Caro. “He calls it guard duty.”

Benny had always been the smart one. The kind of person with a future you could see. When he came back he would go to college, and the navy would pay for it. “He’s going to study architecture,” Caro said. “He’s going to design skyscrapers in New York.”

Gypsy remembered Benny as a skinny boy with round glasses. He had been building a house in the backyard before he left. A little luxury house for chickens, where they would be safe from the coyotes, other predators. She remembered him agonizing over what color to pick for the inside. He wanted something the chickens would find calming. It was hard to imagine him in a place as far away as that, even though it was just guard duty, and not a war.

Gypsy and Caro playing the ring-toss. Throwing baseballs at milk jugs. Gypsy won a little stuffed lion, with limp limbs and hair like wire. Gypsy and Caro linking arms. Running through the crowd, kicking up dust and straw.

They rode the Ferris wheel, each pretending the other were a lover, arms around each other’s waists. It was the wrong angle to see the whole town. Not the airplane view Gypsy had dreamed of. And the lights of the carnival blurred the rest, though the close part of the river sparkled in multicolor. They tried to spot each other’s houses, but it was too dark, and from this high they all looked the same.

“Come on,” Caro said. “Let’s go learn our futures.”

Outside the fortune-teller’s booth was June Tomlin. She had the baby strapped to her front. Red curtain of the fortune-teller’s booth moving in the breeze.

Gypsy and Caro, gone quiet. Arms falling from each other’s waists.

“Oh,” June said. “Please. Go ahead.”

“Are you sure?” said Gypsy.

June nodded. “I’m just waiting.”

Waiting for what? She never said. The baby watching them with mirror eyes, filled with lights.

In the tent it was dark and quiet. Soft walls, pillows on the floor. Caro went first, sitting in the fold-up chair across the table from the fortune-teller. Gypsy on the floor, her skirt tucked around her knees.

“A long life line,” the fortune-teller said, long purple nail tracing Caro’s palm. “That’s good.”

“What about places,” Caro said. “Can you see the sort of places I’ll go to?”

“I see marriage,” the fortune teller said. “Many children. You’ll be very blessed.”

Caro on the floor, retracing the lines the fortune-teller had drawn on her palm.

When it was Gypsy’s turn, the fortune-teller took her hand in her own. Costume rings wider than her knuckles. “Oh, but you are a pretty one, aren’t you?” she said. Said it like wisdom.

Caro in the corner with her arms crossed. Chewing her lip. “She gonna get married? Some straw-headed idiot from town, or what? Come on. We paid fifty cents.”

When they finished, June Tomlin was still waiting outside the tent. The baby sleeping. June, silent, staring at the red curtains.

“Maybe she misses it,” Caro said. “You know. The raving. The visions of the future.”

~

In the second letter, Fenella was in Boulder. This was the new address, she said, in case Gypsy's mother wanted to reply. But Boulder would not be for too long because Fenella had been thinking about heading down south, somewhere where the winters weren't so cold.

She said, the baby must be talking by now. Is she as pretty as I imagine her?

She said, you could send a photo, if you wanted to.

She said, I miss you, I miss you, I miss you.

~

Gypsy and Caro standing on the street corner in skinny-ankle pants and black shirts cropped at the waist. The carnival had moved on, leaving the field trampled in its wake, still smelling of smoke and sugar.

School had let out, and before them stretched the long unstructured days of summer, long nights with nothing to do. Some of the other kids had talked about going to the junkyard, smashing everything there that still had something in it to break.

"What do you want to do?" Caro said.

But already they had exhausted the easy options: milkshakes at Tom's, smoking in Gypsy's bedroom. The Sorrow was still too cold for swimming, and it was always at this time of year that somebody got stupid and drowned.

Gypsy kicked the toe of her shoe against the sidewalk. "Don't know," she said. "Don't care."

Sometimes Gypsy liked to walk through town alone, just waiting for the great love of her life to find her. It would happen if she stood in the right way, caught her face in the right sort of

light. Maybe they would see her drinking a soda in the window at Tom's, or sitting ankles-crossed on a wooden fence, hair loose in the wind. She might be reading poetry on a blanket spread out in a field. Who would it be? It didn't matter. But they would see her first. It would happen that way.

~

Gypsy at the A&B, buying jelly and wonder bread. She had watched June Tomlin take the baby and strap it into the car. And Gypsy had not meant to follow them, not really, had climbed on her bike to head home.

Gypsy on the road toward town.

Gypsy riding down Main Street, until she saw the station wagon parked crookedly outside the A&B.

Now June Tomlin was holding a package of wrapped chicken thighs like she didn't know what to do with it. Dead-looking in the supermarket light. Purple under her eyes. The baby on her front with its head thrown back, pulling her down, like a metal ball through water.

The chicken dropped to the floor. The baby wailing now, its face swollen and red. June, staring at the fallen package like she could no longer comprehend what it was.

~

Gypsy at the railroad bridge, where Silas Tomlin had died. Standing in the latticed shadow. Wanting to feel it. Her eyes closed. Her hands against the metal.

~

Caro on the porch of her parents' house, pulling the slats from the railing and smashing them into the ground. Making the gap wider and wider. Caro, hands running red with blood.

And Gypsy, standing in the yard.

Gypsy with her blue-painted bike, feeling too young, too small.

And the chickens behind the house, the sound of them like laughter. They could trick you, that way. Make it sound like somebody was waiting for you, just out of sight.

At the carnival there had been a little side show, behind a green curtain. A man put a girl in a box. They watched her climb inside. Then, *presto*, a flick of his hand, and when he opened the box she was gone.

It was like that, Caro said. There were no bombs, no rifle fire. Benny was standing on the deck at his post, until *presto*, and he wasn't.

Only days ago, Gypsy and Caro had gone to the cemetery on the hill to drink half a bottle of old Christmas wine that Gypsy had found in the cleaning cupboard. Backs flat on the cold stone roof of the Fairchild mausoleum. They had sung all the songs they knew and argued over the words, each of them knowing they were right. And the dead below them, Silas Tomlin's grave still fresh, that morning's rain stirring the smell of soil into the air, moths on the branches, moths like lint on the stones—the cemetery where Benny would never be, and Gypsy was a fool to have thought so, a fool to have asked.

~

Gypsy in the kitchen, spreading jelly onto bread. Her mother home late, though what was late anymore, blue smock smelling of smoke. Standing in the doorway, a plastic bag in her hand.

In the harsh kitchen light she looked both old and young, her hair still holding the shape of her ponytail, a blemish on the ridge of her cheekbone. The plastic bag smelled of grease—sausage, maybe, or leftover hamburger. Tomorrow’s breakfast.

“PB&J,” Gypsy said, holding the knife in the air. “You want one?”

The quick curve of her mother’s smile. The strange way the kitchen light threw things, so that their shadows stretched long and thin. And there, where the linoleum gave way to wood: the overlap. Their shadows, just touching.

~

The last letter came from Phoenix. It was postmarked three years after the one before it. If any more had followed, Gypsy’s mother hadn’t kept them.

Fenella had married. He was a good man, she said. Kind. He didn’t ask things of her that he knew she couldn’t give him. He had a daughter from a previous marriage, seven years old. She was so smart, Fenella said. She had a talent for drawing, a real talent.

But Phoenix was not what she had expected. It was so colorless there, the city grey and flat, the heat of the summers so intense it made the buildings shimmer. She missed the trees in the valley, those skinny pines, the way the aspens’ leaves danced in the sun. Her uncle playing the piano, the sound of it mixing with the voice of the river. And the river itself, the green-watered Sorrow. Was the old fish, that strange-colored steelhead, still living there? That giant river god, who she’d greeted by the shore outside her house when she was young. Who had looked at her like it knew her future, knew that she would leave.

She said, you don’t have to write back if you don’t want to.

She said, I don't mean to bother you, I promise.

She said, I just want her to know about me. I just want someone to remember.

~

Gypsy and Caro listening to the siren, the night Silas Tomlin died. Before the moths. Together on the bed by then, laughing at Teen Magazine. Looking at each other's faces upside down.

And the siren like a wail.

And the rain, quieted by then to a slow drip from the gutter.

Outside the street still held onto that wetness, so that it reflected the streetlight, a drowned moon.

"What d'you think?" Caro said.

"Fire?" Gypsy tossed a wadded piece of notebook paper into the air, caught it as it fell.

"Or maybe— the end of the world."

Caro laughed. "Imagine it."

Gypsy closed her eyes. And maybe it was just the same heavy thing that always haunted the air in Threemile, she had felt something, then, pressing down. "It's gone," she said.

"Everywhere but here. And we're the last to know."

"We look outside," Caro said, "and the whole place is up in flames."

Gypsy opened her eyes. She shook her head. "Not flames," she said. "Not anything. We look outside and it's just gone."

~

Gypsy at the bank of the Sorrow. Sitting back from the waterline, beneath a ponderosa pine. The stretch of shore behind the Tomlin house, her bare feet in the mud. In the afternoon light, through the branches of the trees, the river was a shade of green deep as a forest. Hot sun, the moths a memory. Gypsy folded her hands beneath her knees.

From far-off, the sound of movement through the trees. At the other end of the stretch of sand, where a path wound through the thicket, was June Tomlin. The black-haired baby wrapped to her chest.

Gypsy, shrinking back into the brush. Drawing her knees up to her chest, silent, so they wouldn't see.

And June: her long curls loose, blue sundress, no shoes. Walking with the baby to the water's edge. She unwound the baby from its wrappings, so that it squirmed, naked, in the green-filtered light. The baby silent, big head hanging heavy, hands balled into fists. And June, lowering it toward the water. Slowly, slowly. Beneath them the quick-moving Sorrow, waiting.

Gypsy, holding her breath. Afraid to speak. Gypsy digging her fingernails into the flesh of her thighs.

The baby's head met the water. It was silent, didn't cry. For a moment they were frozen like that: June with the baby between her hands, and the crown of the baby's head resting, floating, on the surface of the Sorrow, its face pointed toward the sky. When June raised the baby again, beads of water fell from the fuzz of its hair.

The June herself, standing knee-deep in the shallows. The current parting around her. June, bending backwards, her body a perfect arch, long hair meeting the water. The river liked her better, streamed from her curls.

Afterward, the two of them, laughing. Sitting together on the shore. The sun on their faces, water like jewels on their skin.

*

R I V E R G O D

1993

IN THE PLACE where Laughing Creek joined the Sorrow, Tig and Lucky Cargill were sitting on a plank-board roost in the big pine tree. For three days it had rained. The rain had melted the last of the mountain snow, glutting the creeks in the high country. Everywhere the hard earth turned to mud. Now all that water had fed into the Sorrow, changing it into something not quite itself, muddy and angry and wild.

Tig sat cross-legged, watching the water. Twice now she'd thought she'd seen something circling in it, something red-colored and alive. But the water was moving too fast to make it out. Anyway, she thought, if there'd been something there, even something living, by now the current had carried it away.

Her little brother Lucky was dangling his bare legs over the platform edge. He was skinny as a stunted fir, his hair so matted that the rain stuck to it like water in oil. He held a pinecone in either hand. After a brief deliberation, he drew back his left arm and threw. There was so much white water that they couldn't even see where it hit. "Bullseye," he said.

Tig yawned. “Bullshit.”

He threw the remaining pinecone at her chest. “Like you could beat me,” he said. “You throw like a wuss.”

Tig uncrossed her legs, then made a show of choosing a pinecone from the arsenal between them. But when she threw, the wind must’ve taken it, because it didn’t even reach the waterline.

“Christ alive,” Lucky said. “I told you.”

“Shut up,” she said. “Yours was just heavier.”

Behind them, the rain hammered against the tin roof of the double-wide trailer they shared with their great aunt Winny. The trailer sat close to the water, placed in a wide bowl of land at the bottom of a hillside. Behind it, the rain had turned everything grey: the yard and the old garden and the ruined cottage behind it, halfway up the hill. The pine trees’ branches drooped like birds with their feathers wet.

Tig and Lucky had come to live with Winny after their father Wyatt went to prison. They never visited him. It was hours to Kuna and they didn’t have a car, and Winny was half-blind anyway, did her knitting staring skyward like she was in a trance. Their father had been gone so long that Tig barely remembered him, but she missed him anyway, sometimes—his smell, of stale smoke and copper; copper from the coins that he carried, dozens of them, so that you could always hear him coming, coins that he spun for her and Lucky on the tabletop and pulled from behind their ears. He wouldn’t get out of prison until after she and Lucky were grown.

Above them, thick ropes of rain dripped from the pine's branches, like honey from a hot spoon. "It's too wet," Tig said. "Let's go inside."

Lucky shrugged. "Fine. You think Winny got pop tarts yesterday?"

"Blueberry," said Tig. "I checked."

She swung herself from the roost onto the wet ground, landing feet from the Sorrow. Just then, something rose up out of the water. A long and red-finned thing, its dorsal sharp as the spine of a monster. It sank again as fast as she'd seen it. "Lucky!" she yelled. "Did you see that?"

But Lucky was already headed for the trailer. "See what?"

Whatever it was had gone. "Never mind," she said, and followed him. "You weren't paying attention."

Lucky turned around. "See *what?*" he said.

Tig saw it happen that way: through her little brother's face. His eyes widened, so big she could see white surrounding the dark of his irises; the slow falling-open of his mouth. "Tig," he said. "Look."

The river had breached the bank. Now it raced to fill the deep bowl of land where the trailer was, surging toward them in a fast muddy swell.

"Run," she said, but Lucky was already running.

~

From the hill above the yard, Tig watched the river drown their home. She and Lucky had gotten Winny out of the trailer just in time, hauling her between them up the steep grassy hill, slick with rain. Already the water was halfway up the trailer door. Winny sat on a flat stone, too weak to

stand. When they'd reached the top of the hill and turned around, she'd made a yelping sound, like an animal, a sound Tig had only ever heard her make when she was sleeping, trapped in a dream.

Lucky was gone. Once they were safe he'd taken off running, up the wooded road that led to the ruined mine. He got that way, sometimes. Sometimes he just ran.

Tig put a hand on her great aunt's shoulder. The water had worked its way into the trailer by now. It had taken the hemlock sapling. It had taken the plank-board roost. She watched the hungry water race by in a froth of white and waited to feel what she was supposed to—panic or anger or sadness, something to fill the cavern of her body—but nothing came.

It had always seemed like everyone around her could slip right inside a feeling without even trying to, just let it swallow them up. Even Lucky had cried when last month they'd found the dead coonhound by the old shed, two stillborn puppies next to her. And though Tig had felt something turn in her when she saw the mother dog's white eyes, it never pushed its way out. Afterward, lying awake on the side of the bed she shared with Winny, she'd pinched her arm so hard that in the morning, the welts looked like hornet stings.

The river was roaring like a waterfall. It frothed at the hillside, like it wanted to climb even higher.

"Everything," Winny said, trembling. "It's taking everything."

Tig reached for her hand. "When the water goes down," she said, "we'll go back. It'll be okay. We'll go back and get what's left."

It was only then—when she said it out loud, said *what's left*—that Tig remembered the metal box. She looked at the trailer, thinking of everything inside, how drowned it would be, and her insides twisted.

Before he was moved to the state prison in Kuna, Tig had visited her father in the county jail. She was six years old. And he had told her where to go, into his bedroom in the house in town where they'd been living, had told her to scoot the mattress to the side and feel at the bottom until she found the metal box he'd hidden there. It was locked, and he didn't mention a key. He said, *Tig, I want you to keep that box safe until I get back.* She never asked how long that would be. He said, *Can you do that for me?* and she said that she could. She never asked what was inside.

It was a stupid thing, that box, but she had kept it. When the roof of the cottage fell in, she moved it into the trailer. Kept it pushed into the corner of the closet, with the broom and the broken mop and cords for things they didn't own anymore, where it looked like any other piece of junk.

And now, Tig looked down at the trailer and knew that her dad's box, the one thing she had sworn to keep, was still there, drowned by the angry river.

~

They slept that night in a one-room camper in the hills north of Threemile, loaned out by Merle Lonsdale, who raised sheep. Tig and Lucky slept on the floor. Even though the rain had stopped, the air was so hot and wet that it was suffocating. Winny snored on the single bed, which she'd

accepted only after Tig and Lucky had threatened to sleep in the field if she didn't. Winny was so old that she walked with a stoop. When she stood up too fast, her bones made a sound like two stones cracked together. Sometimes, late at night, Tig wondered what would happen to her and Lucky when she died.

Tig couldn't sleep. She tracked the moon, sliding past the high window. In the six years her father had been gone, she'd barely thought about it. There were things he'd left that mattered more—his brown leather jacket, stained black at the elbows, which she'd been waiting to grow into before the river took it; the coins she still found scattered in the low yard and all through Threemile, buffalo nickels and quarters and fifty cent pieces, which she liked to think he had dropped there, years ago, just for her to find. Intangible things, too—the sadness she had seen in her Grandma Eleanor's face, after the sentencing, only months before she had died.

Now, though, she couldn't get it out of her head. What if the river snuck in through the keyhole and ruined what was inside? What if the current got ahold of it and snuck it through the window and out to sea? And what if her dad came back, one day, found her grown, and asked for it back? It was a little thing to ask of someone. To hold onto a thing so small.

Tig looked like her father. Everybody said. Same dark wild hair, same freckled skin. People always said it like it was meant to be a comfort—like this was the only good thing, only safe thing that they shared. But what about the person he was? Did she have any of that? The deep boiling anger that had come out of him sometimes, like something set loose from a cage. If he had been there when the river flooded, Tig knew, he would've acted just the same way as her. She pressed her stomach, feeling for some balled-up lurking thing. Nothing.

Six years ago, her father had hit a man on the street outside Pet's. The man bled out on the pavement, dead before the ambulance came. She'd asked him, afterward, why he'd done it. There in the little harsh-light concrete room at the county jail. *I wish I knew*, he said.

Was it an accident? said Tig. He didn't answer.

~

The next afternoon, they were eating burned eggs covered in ketchup at the camper table, when Merle Lonsdale came to the screen door to tell them that a local boy had gone missing. Zachary Iverson. He was sixteen, three years above Tig in school. Early that morning, Zachary had gone upriver with a group of local boys. The rain had stopped overnight and it was the first sunny day in a week. They'd packed their tubes and a cooler of beer and put in up north, around Lost Dog. But the flood had changed the river they knew. The currents were strange and sneaky and strong. He'd flipped in a hole near town, and when the river spat his tube out he wasn't on it anymore.

Zachary Iverson, with his oval face like a cartoon character's, with three flyaway wisps of hair he'd tried passing off for a mustache on his upper lip. He talked tough at school, but Tig had seen him crying on the bus after he flunked a math test. His uncle Sal was organizing the search because his mother was too distraught to help. Some of them were out there already, Merle said, in boats, or walking the still-dry parts of the shore.

Won't do any good, of course," Merle said. "They'll keep on looking until the river makes up its mind on what it wants to do."

Tig shifted in her seat, running the tines of her plastic fork through the ketchup that had congealed on the styrofoam. Zachary Iverson was the only boy who'd ever touched her breasts

without a shirt in between. Up until then, she hadn't thought a boy's hands could be so cold, or that a touch in one place could make the different, untouched parts of her shiver. He said, "You got nice tits for a kid," and then he put his hot mouth on top of hers, like he was trying to swallow it. Afterward, she told him "thank you," and when she got home she had looked in the mirror for five minutes, wondering if anything about her had changed.

Winnie leaned over the table, her face pale. "God save him," she said. "God save that boy."

Tig thought about what Merle had said, about the river making up its mind. What happened when the river got ahold of something that it wanted to keep? A thing it knew it wasn't meant to have. Could you do anything? Could you ever get it back?

~

Late that night, when Lucky and Winnie were sleeping, Tig rolled off the camping pad and tiptoed to the screen door. She inched it open just wide enough to slip through, then walked quickly through the grass to the gravel road that led to the hill above the Sorrow. The crickets were loud, quieting when she passed and then starting up again behind her. Something small and dark darted across the road in front of her—a raccoon, she thought—then disappeared into the trees.

She reached the hilltop when the moon hung above the peak of the mountain. The river had grown calm, its fight gone once it had moved to fill its new space. Now it looked lazy as a summer lake, stretched out over the low hollowed-out part of the yard.

Tig took off her shoes and braced herself as she descended. The hillside was steep, still slick with rain. She passed the ruined cottage, which sat on a plateau, high up enough that the water hadn't touched it. Feet past its door, the grade grew even steeper, dropping down to the low place where the trailer was. At the drop-off point, the water lapped at the grass. At the side of the yard, an old railroad tie that had once been a garden trestle rose from the water. It seemed, in the half light, to be moving—its surface churning, come alive. When Tig drew closer, she saw that it was covered with swarming beetles and fat worms, all crawling over one another, fearing being drowned.

She breathed in, slowly, then out again. The sky had finally cleared. The moon gave off enough light for her to see, glinting off the trailer's metal roof. The water rose halfway up the plastic siding. Though the river was calm where it had spilled its banks, if she went too far she knew the current would be strong. If she was careful and quick, she could make it.

She took off her shorts and folded them on the ground. She had raised the hem of her tank top when a voice spoke from behind her. "Ew," it said. She whirled around fast enough to make her dizzy. And there was Lucky, standing in the moonlight, his hands covering his eyes.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she said.

"Followed you," he said. "Jeez. You move like a rhino."

She crossed her arms. "Did Winny see you?"

He shook his head. "She's still snoring. You can hear it from here. Listen."

Tig rolled her eyes. "Those are frogs."

Lucky had taken his hands from his eyes. Now, Tig watched as he looked out at the drowned yard. They were both quiet for a while. “What are you even doing here?” he said at last.

Tig hesitated. She’d never told Lucky about the box. He’d been only three when their father left, too young to hold onto secrets, to even know what they were. And though she’d never tried to pry it open, didn’t even know what was in there so worth holding onto in the first place, it was still Tig he had entrusted it to, her thing of his to hold. “I left something in the trailer,” she said. “I gotta get it back.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Lucky said. “Do you want to get yourself drowned, too? It’s gotta be filled up halfway with water in there. Maybe more.”

“I’m not stupid,” she said. “And it’s not like I’ll get anywhere close to where the current is.”

“But Zachary—”

“I know about Zachary,” she said, cutting him off. “Look at the water. It’s barely even moving.”

“I just meant,” Lucky said, then stopped, swallowing. “I meant his *body*. You know. They haven’t found it yet.”

That was something Tig had been trying not to think about. “Doesn’t matter,” she said, looking ahead, to the open trailer window that would be her entrance. “Anyway, it’ll only take a minute. I know where I left it.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Lucky joined her at the water’s edge. “I’m a better swimmer than you,” he said.

Tig knew Lucky. He had a wilderness in him. He slept most clear nights beneath the big fir tree without even a sleeping bag. Sometimes he spent the whole day gone, coming back looking like a castaway, his feet black with dirt. Once he got something in his head, it was no use trying to get it out again. She smiled in spite of herself. “Like hell you are,” she said.

Together they waded into the flood. Tig went first, her brother behind her, until they weren’t wading but swimming, a faint but persistent current tugging at their legs like it had something it wanted them to see.

The moon was crooked and low in the sky. The rippling water distorted its reflection, turning it into an accordion stretch of yellow light that led right to the trailer’s open window. Together they followed the moon path, until they’d both banked against the side of the trailer, arms spread wide.

For a second, Tig thought she felt something else swimming beside them, something big and powerful and strange. But it was too dark to see into the water, and as quickly as the thing had been there, shadowing them, it was gone.

Tig struggled with the window screen. The bottom half of it was submerged in the dark water. She felt along the base for the grooves buried in the water, then pushed. When she’d opened it wide enough, she swam inside on her back, using the upper frame for leverage. Lucky followed.

Inside the watery trailer, the sounds of the night—the crickets and frogs and the night birds—faded to near silence.

“Shit,” Tig said. “It’s *dark*.”

“Told you so,” Lucky said, treading water in the middle of what had been their living room. “What are you looking for, anyway? It better not be something dumb.”

She swam toward the far wall where the kitchen closet was, her knees bent. She skimmed over the counter top until it ended, then smacked her foot into what felt like the stove, wincing. “It’s no big deal,” she said. “Just something I left.”

“Is it, like, *girl stuff* or something?”

She hesitated. “Something like that.”

He splashed away from her. “Gross.”

After a while, her eyes adjusted enough to make out the different shapes in the darkness. Through the water floated things they’d left behind. She could tell what some were easier than others, like the plastic dust pan, and a vase that had been on the table holding dried flowers. She found a plastic grocery bag full of other grocery bags, and a baseball cap, and an empty margarine tub. Lucky kicked up a wet sodden thing that after some debate, they finally decided must’ve been the stuffed bear Tig had slept with as a baby, which Winny had insisted on keeping—for Tig’s own children, she said—among the pile of pillows on the pull-out couch.

When she reached the closet door, she found that it was already open. The thing inside her twisted.

“You find it yet?” said Lucky. He was smacking the surface of the water like a drum, like he’d been let loose at a public pool.

“No,” she said. “Hold on. I’m gonna go under and look. If I don’t come back up in thirty seconds, I might’ve got stuck and you’ll have to pull me out.”

“Fat chance of *that*,” he said. She didn’t respond.

Tig closed her eyes and dove. She could still hear her brother kicking around underwater but now it was an alien sound, some deep sea noise. The water pressed heavily on her ears. She found the door jam and worked her way down. But the shapes on the closet floor were unknowable, strange. A winter coat, maybe, the vacuum, one of Winny’s orthopedic shoes. She came up for air and went down again.

Rich, thick mud had settled over the trailer floor, like it was the riverbed. She found a tennis shoe. She found a broken pot. She found Winny’s Bible, its pages turned back to pulp. She kept diving. Her head filled. She surfaced, dizzy, then dove again.

“It’s not there,” Lucky said. “Whatever you lost. Is it?”

“The current must’ve moved it,” Tig said. “But it’s still in here somewhere. It has to be.”

She kept diving, sweeping her hands over the floor. She dove until her lungs ached.

Finally they lost the moonlight, and the dark was deep in a way that chilled both of them, made the place even more stranger. Dawn could’ve been minutes away, or hours.

Finally, they left the trailer and swam for shore. They were halfway between the trailer and the hillside when a monstrous shadow passed in front of them, like ink dropped into water.

Lucky splashed to a halt. “What the hell was that?” he said, panic pitching his voice high as a girl’s.

The thing passed again, feet in front of them, coming close enough to the surface now for them to see the shape of it. It was a fish, but it was bigger than any fish she’d ever seen. Ancient,

too, its colors bleached and strange. Giant patches of milky white marked its scales. White moon, palm-sized, for its eye.

They treaded water. "It's just a fish," Tig said.

Lucky swallowed. "Hell of a fish."

"They get big," she said. "Those old steelhead. They get as long as your arm."

"That one," Lucky said, "was longer."

She watched a shiver pass through him. Then Lucky swam like a drowner for the shore, flailing, as though the thing were on his tail.

Tig followed after him, but slowly. She searched the water for the big fish but it had vanished again. She thought of the red fin like a spine she had seen yesterday, right before the flood.

They lay next to one another in the damp grass, spread like starfish. Lucky was heaving. "Lord," he kept saying. "Lord."

The clouds drifted, revealing a patch of moon. It was earlier, then, than she'd thought.

"Look," Lucky said. "If I'm gonna be risking my life out here, you could at least tell me what it is you're looking for."

So, as they climbed up the hill to the roadside, she did.

~

In the trailer, they found a tin of tobacco and a pair of ladies' panties and a swollen can of peaches, heavy as a stone. They found a gasoline can and a broken side mirror. Stuck up against

the door, they found the round rotting body of a cat, which they pushed out through the window with a spatula. But they didn't find their father's metal box.

"Are you sure it was ever even here?" Lucky said. They were sitting on the trailer's metal roof, where they went when the dark walls of the double-wide turned strangling. "Maybe you just made it up. A fragment of your imagination."

"Figment," she said. "And I didn't. I left it in the closet. Right in the corner underneath the shoe rack."

"You couldn't've picked a better place?"

She only shrugged.

"What do you think's inside, anyway?" said Lucky. A breeze had picked up, raising goosebumps on their skin.

"Dunno," Tig said. "A couple of things, at least. It rattles around when you shake it. Metal or something."

"You think it's a gun?" Lucky was always talking about guns. He crawled through the brush at the riverside, playing Vietnam.

"He left the hunting rifles," Tig said. "Why would he need one that small?"

"Maybe it's money," Lucky said. "Or treasure or something. Maybe it's just more coins."

Tig laughed. "Treasure? Where would he have got something like that?"

Lucky shrugged. "Stole it, maybe. Or won it off somebody in a poker game."

"He never stole anything. He's not a thief."

"What, then?" Lucky said.

Tig breathed out, long and slow. Up here, with the water around them, she felt like a castaway, like the two of them the sole survivors of a ruined world. “Maybe it’s something from the mine,” she said.

The mine was a thing their father had never talked about. It had burned eight years before Tig was born, and she’d grown up hearing the stories—about the fire that should not have happened in such a wet and woodless place, about the men who had died there. Her friends’ grandfathers and uncles, men whose faces she had seen in photographs on the walls at Tom’s Diner, and every year in the paper on the anniversary, so they were distantly familiar to her, like celebrities. Whose graves she had seen at the cemetery on the hill, where she and Lucky had gone to visit their mother. The miners’ graves were marked with tiny birdhouses on sticks, stuck into the dirt. She’d always wondered who made them, but no one she asked ever knew.

Their father had been in the mine that day. He and forty-five other men. But unlike the others, he hadn’t died. He found a low-down hollowed-out place where the toxic smoke didn’t reach and sheltered there for five days. Five whole days stuck underground, before they pulled him back to the light. It should have been a hero story, the sort of thing that happened in the action movies Tig had seen at the theater in Grangeville with her friends. But it wasn’t.

She’d tried, for a long time, to tell herself that the anger that had boiled up in her father wasn’t his fault. That it had been the mine that did it, those dark days underground. Before the fire he’d been tough and lean like a prizefighter, with a halfway smile like he knew something the rest of the world didn’t. She had seen photos of him back then, in a secret album her Grandma Eleanor kept hidden and showed to her, sometimes, at night. He was handsome. Curly dark hair

just the right side of messy, while Tig's always crossed that line. Eyes so deep they looked black. If his photo had been up on the wall at Tom's with all the other dead men, she thought, he would have stood out by a mile. He would have been the first one that you saw.

Lucky was quiet. "Do you think he's ever coming back?"

"He won't get out 'till years from now," Tig said. "We'll be grown up by then."

"What if he gets out earlier?" Lucky said. "My friend Buddy told me it could happen. He said it happened with his dad. He was good, so they let him out. What if he's good and they let him come home?"

Tig pulled her knees up to her chest. Could he be good? Could you turn around and come back after doing something like that? When she was little, he'd called her Skipper, gave her her own tool box, taught her how to aim a bb gun. He'd tossed her so high in the air that she'd been sure he wouldn't be able to catch her, until he did. Maybe, she thought. Maybe he could.

Lucky threw a stone into the water. The splash echoed in the quiet. "We could go somewhere, if he got out," he said. "He could take us away. Somewhere that isn't here."

Tig looked around them: the crooked trees, the floating garbage. The ruined cottage like a ghost behind it all. "Either way," she said, "we're gonna have to go somewhere that isn't here."

Where Lucky's stone had hit, the big fish surfaced, close enough to show the serrated length of its fin. The moonlight gleamed on its scales. Lucky was looking away, off toward the swollen moon. Tig watched the fish, silently, until it was gone.

~

Zachary Iverson was still missing, though by then most of the town had given him up for dead. Still they searched the river. Tig and Lucky went out looking in a fishing boat helmed by Bill Evans, who was eighty-nine years old and deaf as a stone. The whole landscape of the river had changed. Crooked pines poked up from the water. Broken bits of wood floated on the surface, far away from the places they'd been stripped from. Bill kept close to the shore, so they could spot Zachary's body if it had surfaced.

Today they searched the far side of the river, away from town. The water was calmer today, the sun beginning to burn it off. Tig scanned it for movement, her arms stiff at her sides.

They passed the Moon house, which was high up enough that it had escaped the flood. Piano music floated through the open window. It was the kind of fast-beat bass-thumping song you'd hear in an old movie, the cheer of it at odds with the grimness of their mission. Once, there'd been a whole family living there, three generations, but now there were only two left.

Lucky shivered. "Creepy," he said. Bill steered the boat, oblivious.

They moved downriver, past the A&B and the feed store, past the neat row of grey company houses that had been built there a century ago for the men who worked in the mine. In the distance, Tig could hear people shouting Zachary's name. As though he'd climbed out of the river and was hiding behind some raspberry bush, just waiting to be found.

She watched the green water move beneath the boat. It had been stupid for him to test the Sorrow that way. It was narrower upriver, but the currents were strong. It was dangerous even when it was familiar, and the flood had made it strange. He should've known better. It should have been so easy for him to know.

“Do you think that thing got him?” Lucky said, quiet enough that Bill would’t hear.

“The fish? Don’t be stupid.”

“You saw it.”

“It’s a fish. What’s it gonna do?”

But she knew, though she wouldn’t say it, that a part of her had been looking for it since they’d set out. Hoping for it. For the red spine of its fin to cut the water.

“It’s no good,” Bill said, as the sun started going down. “Poor kid’s probably reached the Snake by now. I’m turning us around.”

“What’ll happen?” Lucky said, though it wasn’t clear who he was talking to. “What’ll they do? What happens if they never find him?”

Tig crossed her legs on the bench of the boat. She imagined Zachary Iverson’s bloated body caught in some deep-river place. The fish swimming around it, nibbling holes in his skin. She imagined his oval face, his scraggle of a mustache. All around him it was green.

“Do fish ever eat people?” Lucky said. “I mean, like, if they were already dead? Do they even like the taste?”

Tig closed her eyes. “Fish eat bugs,” she said.

~

Her father had been drunk the night he hit the man outside Pet’s. That had made it easier, for a while. It had made it easier that he’d meant only to hit him, not for the man to fall, for the soft part of his skull to smash against the curb in such a way that he never got up again.

Afterward, Tig had sworn to herself that she would never drink, not a drop. She'd sworn she wouldn't even go near the bar, but she'd broken that part before the end of the first year. She'd stood in front of Pet's, searching for a dark stain on the pavement. Waiting to feel different, to feel the truth of what had happened there work its way through her. But there was no stain, only dandelions, and beads of broken glass. When she looked up, the bartender was watching her through the front window. Frozen, a stack of dirty glasses in her hand. She looked at Tig with wide wet eyes, like she was about to cry.

Maybe, Tig thought, the box had held a key. Something that would've let her figure it out. He'd left it to her, after all, like he'd wanted her to look inside of it one day and see what was there. Maybe it would've told her if his anger was something that had come from the mine, or if it were born in him, had always been there. Maybe it would've told her if there really was some dark thing living inside her, too, just waiting for its day.

~

On the fourth day since the flood, a fisherman found Zachary Iverson's beat-up body on the rocks a mile before the Sorrow met the Clearwater. The search ended. Things started moving back to the way they had been. Threemile settling in to the familiar space of mourning, the river knowable again. Already it had begun to regather itself. When it finished, Tig knew, it would leave the land changed, different from what they remembered.

That night, she went to the drowned yard alone. Lucky was gone. He'd run off as soon as Winny turned in, some sort of full-moon fever burning him up. Maybe he'd made it to the

burned-out mine, or the cemetery, with all the best climbing trees. Maybe he was up in the grassy fields, somewhere, just running.

The yard was as bright as she'd seen it since the flood. The moon lit on the tin roof, scattered light over the dark water.

Tig left her shoes and denim shorts on the shore. This time, she let the current pull her through the water, let it decide, but it took her to the trailer anyway, so she listened, slid inside. The moonlight slipped through the high windows, but still the water was dark. She didn't dive. She wouldn't search anymore. She floated on her back among all the waterlogged things, letting her wet hair halo around her. The water filled her ears. It was like listening to another world.

She knew, with a strange iron certainty, that her father's box and whatever had been inside of it were gone. Maybe the box had been lost even before the flood, sometime when she was growing up, too busy with her own life to notice. Maybe whatever was inside had mattered once, but didn't anymore. A lot could happen in six years. A lot could change.

She used to write her father letters, and he would write back. On her eighth birthday, she'd traced an outline of her hand and sent it to him. Underneath, in crayon, she'd written, *Look, Daddy, I'm this big now*. She wondered if he'd kept it. If he still looked at it sometimes, put his hand over the outline of her own, thinking she was still that small, that the thing she'd told him back then was still true.

The sound of underwater movement cut the muted quiet. Something was coming, moving toward her through the water. She raised her head and swam to the window.

The big red-finned fish surfaced in the water outside the trailer, swimming in slow circles through a shaft of moonlight. Blood pulsed in her ears. It was monstrous, its body longer than her own, scales the size of her palm.

The fish turned its head, and it looked at her. It was blind, she thought, from the sheen of its milky moon eye. But it looked at her. String bits of flesh trailed from its battered head. And the strange reversal of its colors: the red spine, white belly, pale mouth. As ancient as the river itself. Like a thing that had always been here and would be here always, would never leave.

Tig squeezed through the window and into the river. She stretched out her hand, and the fish met her. Its scales were like river stones. She moved her hand up and down, feeling the ridge of its spine. And the blood in it, close and strangely hot, moving beneath the skin.

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T H E E N D O F T H E W O R L D

1999

JUNE TOMLIN stirred a lump of brown sugar into her coffee, watching her daughter Katy poke at her peanut butter toast. Outside, the sun had breached the mountains, and the cottonwood tree scattered drops of light on the floor. It was shaping up to be the sort of day June knew well: so perfect it asked you to mistrust it, to wait for the paint to crack.

Katy sighed, dropping toward her plate. She still hadn't taken a bite.

"How about some cinnamon?" June asked. "We could spruce it up, if you want."

Katy pushed the plate away. She was all round edges, her stomach soft under pink pajamas, her full cheeks splotched from sleep. Her short dark hair stuck sideways, like a cat had licked it. "No," she said.

June had used her favorite plate for breakfast. It was plastic, painted blue, washed so many times that the edges had begun to crack into green. The bits of toast were all the same size, too, none of them touching. June didn't know what had put her off.

“You’ve got to eat something,” she said. She was practicing the bright-faced positivity Katy’s therapist had talked about, but it was harder than the woman had made it sound. “Don’t you want to grow up big and strong?”

Katy didn’t respond. She was tall for her age already, over five feet, and growing fast. They’d been marking her progress in pencil on the kitchen doorframe. By the end of the year she would be past the second hinge.

“No,” Katy said again, louder. Tears ringed her eyes. She kicked her slippered feet at the floor. “No.” She pulled at the tablecloth and the shaker toppled over, scattering grains of salt onto the vinyl.

June lay her hands flat on the table, fingers outstretched, and breathed in, long and slow. “Don’t do this, Katy, please. Not today.”

Katy fell still. Her long eyelashes cast fans of shadow beneath her eyes. She wouldn’t look at her mother, dark eyes filmed over, like she was stuck somewhere else, stuck there dreaming.

“Well, I’ve got an idea,” June said. She hadn’t meant to do it but she was moving her voice toward the pitch of a song. “What if we went down to the river today? Huh? Just you and me.”

It was early summer, the water in the Sorrow high and snow-fed. Fat red-bellied trout twisted through the air, flinging arcs of water from their tails. June and Katy lived together in a green bungalow with a falling-in porch close to the Sorrow, just a narrow strip of buildings between them and the shore. That was the view from the picture window: the old sheds and

burnt-out trucks, and right across the road the house where the Hasketts had lived, next to a turned-over shipping container now full of tickseed and climbing ivy.

The stretch of shore closest to their bungalow had once been clear and wide, but in the years nature had begun to take it back, too, the cottonwoods and pines growing thick, the brush rising. Even the river had begun to spread, shifting the world they knew.

“We could bring a snack,” June said. “Oranges, maybe. Or some graham crackers. We could watch for birds. Watch the fish jump.”

At last, the fog started going from Katy’s eyes. She loved the river, had loved it since she was a baby, those hard lean years when the two of them were in the house alone, after Silas died. She loved the white-tipped water, its rushed whisper. “Fish,” she said, and she smiled. Something in June lifted up. Katy smiled with her whole body. First her shoulders started to rise, then her chin tilted up, and finally her arms drifted from her sides, floating, wing-like, as if she were no longer beholden to gravity, or to anything.

“All right.” June was smiling, too—she couldn’t help it, never could with her daughter. “You want to wear the yellow dress? It’s hanging on the door.”

Katy left the table, running. June started on the breakfast dishes, listening to her daughter’s steps echo down the hall. Katy was prettiest in yellow. Whenever she wore it, she couldn’t stop looking at her own reflection. Sometimes, she would bring June dandelions from the yard, and together they would twist the hollow steps into her hair, where they stayed, scattering petals, until they withered shut.

From the bathroom, Katy began to sing.

When June had finished cleaning up, she would make sandwiches to take to the river. Baloney and yellow mustard. They would scatter Katy's uneaten toast to the birds. If they were lucky, there would be a cardinal out today. Katy could spot a cardinal from all the way across the yard. And she had a way with hummingbirds, too, a sweetness to her. They would spread a blanket and have a picnic on the riverbank. Take the shortcut across the old Haskett land, where now Greg Miller from Los Angeles lived with his mouse of a wife. The wildflowers were in bloom, the skunk weed and the prairie flax, so there would be bursts of color on the hillside, and the smell of woodsmoke, and the monarchs on migration, resting bright-winged in the grass.

Then Katy screamed. The jar June was rinsing slipped from her hands.

Katy was sitting on the bathroom floor when June found her, rocking back and forth with her knees pulled up to her chest. Her pants were down around her ankles. On the white cotton crotch of her underwear, blood.

Something in June tightened. She knelt in the doorway. "Katy," she said, softly. "Oh, Katy, sweetheart. It's okay." But Katy was crying, yelling, she wouldn't stop, her soft hands hardened into fists. And June knew that it wouldn't help to say *remember, we talked about this*, wouldn't help to go to the cupboard and show her the sanitary pad, with the wings the therapist had had them practice folding down. June knew her daughter would hit her if she got too close. She would bite and kick and scream.

So instead, June sat across from Katy on the floor. She told stories. She told her about the little ghost who lived in the attic, rattling around whenever there had been too many days without rain. She told her about the big fish who guarded the Sorrow, and the sprites who lived in the

cottonwood tree. “One day,” she said, “this whole world will be nothing but water. The park and the schoolhouse and the place where the mine used to be, all of it covered up in blue. It’ll fill up all the houses, and we’ll have quick white currents for roads. An instead of air we’ll breathe water, like the fish do. We’ll grow colored tails and gills and we’ll swim through the windows below us. We’ll skim right over the tops of the trees. It’ll be just like flying.”

Katy crossed her arms over her stomach and cried. The sharp line of shadow moved across the linoleum floor, like a tidal wave.

~

By afternoon, Katy had calmed down enough for June to clean her up and change her underwear and send her off to bed. She tucked away her plans for their picnic and started on the laundry instead. In the bungalow’s sun-browned front yard, there was a clothesline strung between the rafters and the crown of the cottonwood tree. When she was younger, June had felt shy about using it, about hanging her white cotton bras with clothespins, her worn underwear, things that were not meant for others to see. Even her shirts had seemed so vulnerable there, without someone to fill them. But she had been afraid of so much back then—afraid in her marriage, although Silas had been a better husband than most, afraid even to meet the eyes of the clerk at the A&B. Now she liked the clothesline, the way the shirts and dresses stiffened in the sun, the way they dried smelling of dirt and flowers and sky.

Across the gravel road, in the shade of a monstrous fir tree, Greg Miller was leaning on a spade. He wore a hat meant for fishing. Before he’d bought the place, the yard had been a tangle of brush and discarded objects— the parts of at least four vehicles, like some disassembled

Frankenstein's monster; the claw from a backhoe, a painted clawfoot tub. Then Herschel Haskett had died and his grown children left Threemile, one after another, scattering eastward. Now Greg was living there, fancying himself a survivalist, and all the junk June had spent years silently resenting was gone, leaving the place with an emptiness, a melancholy, that she hadn't expected.

She tried to be quick about getting the sheets up on the line, but he spotted her. "Hey, neighbor!" he called, throwing his free arm in a wide arc of a wave.

There was nowhere for her to go, not with the laundry half-hung. Greg crossed the road to the edge of her yard, taking his spade with him like it was a hiking stick. "How's that daughter of yours?" he said. "Keeping out of trouble?"

"She's taking a nap."

He laughed, like she'd said something funny. "We should all be so lucky."

June didn't answer. She pinned the sheets to the line.

"You'll never believe it," Greg said. "We just ordered a door that'll hold up to rifle fire. Thing's military grade. Virtually indestructible, they said." He was building a bunker, had been since spring thawed the ground, in order to outlast the end of the world.

Greg tilted back the fishing hat. Sweat darkened the pits of his denim shirt. "Cost me eight grand," he said.

June stuck a clothespin in her mouth and pulled the next sheet from the basket.

Just last month the Millers had moved here, to this low river place in the valley. He'd wanted somewhere in the middle of nowhere, he said. Like the place wasn't a town at all, was somewhere no one would ever find. He wore jeans that had never seen a day's labor, never

touched dirt, and that watery-eyed wife of his lurked behind him like a shadow. June had still only heard her speak twice. Sometimes she wondered what the wife would say if she ever got her alone, about the bunker, about the end of the world, about the way Greg's beard grew in patches and he always left the bottom button of his shirt undone.

Greg was still watching her, waiting for her reaction. Her words were doughy around the clothespin. "Seems like there's a lot you could've done with that kind of money," she said.

He straightened the hat again and gave her a look, almost like he felt sorry for her. "After Y2K, that money won't be worth the paper it's printed on. You know that, right?"

June only shrugged.

He leaned on the spade, the tip balanced on the hard earth. "You got much saved up?"

"Enough," she said, though it was a lie. She got some from the government and some from making jams from the wild huckleberries and blackberries that grew at the riverside. There were more berries every year. It were as if the color were leaving Threemile—all the buildings and houses sucked to grey—and blooming somewhere else, reclaimed by the land.

The sun was high and round. Greg squinted at her. "Well, you ought to get it out before the banks go. Not enough money in 'em to pay out a hundredth of what the owe. And once people realize that, well, *boom*." He drove the spade into the earth, startling a cluster of sparrows from a nearby juniper bush.

June scratched her arm, where a mosquito bite was starting to rise. "You got enough food in your clubhouse for the end times?"

He shifted his weight off the spade. "I've got a freeze-drier."

When it was berry season in the valley, June and Katy would go down to the river together. They carried plastic buckets with the handles wrapped in cloth. Sometimes they squeezed the blackberries between their fingers, cool juice running down their palms. Sometimes they painted lines of it on their faces, like they were lost alone in some deep jungle, just the two of them, the rest of the world small and far away.

“It might even be that it’s not the banks that go first,” said Greg. “Might be that the Chinese or somebody sends a missile. Them or the Russians. Set the whole damn country on fire.” He tugged at the collar of his shirt, leaving it crooked. “Either way, I’m not about to get caught unawares.”

Above them, a pair of hawks circled like kites. “They’ll kill you if you’re not ready, you know,” he said. “Doesn’t matter who they were before. They’ll kill you for a bottle of water.”

June pulled Katy’s now-clean pants from the basket and whip-cracked the wrinkles out of them. “These people you’re talking about,” she said. “I’ve known them all my life.” She threw the pants onto the line and tucked the empty basket under her arm. “I gotta get going.”

“You’re saying you wouldn’t kill for your daughter?” he called after her. “Wouldn’t tear out the throat of somebody if it was her or them?”

Across the yard, the bungalow was quiet. June looked at Katy’s bedroom window, propped open to invite in the breeze. *I’d use my teeth*, she thought.

~

June’s husband Silas had been dead for twelve years. He’d died when Katy was still a baby. He’d been able to see the future, or at least he thought he had. The fits came on late at night, the sort

of fits June had only ever seen take hold of her grandfather, a lifelong alcoholic and god-fearing Christian, in the months before he died. But Silas never drank. His were visions, he said. A truth he'd been chosen to see.

Afterward, as he lay with his head in her lap, weeping, he would tell her that he had seen the way the world would end. June wiped his forehead with a wet cloth, cradling him to her like he was a baby. He couldn't remember it, he said. All the details gone, leaving only the ghost of it, the solid dread of knowing.

In the years after his death, when the sharp pain of loss had faded, June had hated him. Katy was young then, wasn't growing the way she was supposed to. All the sweet promises the other mothers had made to her—how wonderful it would be, how worth it—broken one by one. How easy, she thought. How easy it had been for him to die.

Now, it had been long enough that both feelings had faded to form a single scar, which flared only briefly, and never when she was expecting it. More than anything, now, June pitied him. His visions had caused him such anguish—knowing that the end was coming but unable to change it, to even say how or when. Each one had taken another part of him away.

Katy, June knew, would never know that pain. Her world would go on forever, a bright perfect infinity, until one day, without her knowing, it wouldn't.

~

The next day, June woke to find Katy sitting spread-legged on the floor with her pants missing. Dark streaks colored her thighs. "Oh no," she said. "Big mess." Red ringed her dark eyes.

"Sorry, Mom."

In her bedroom, blood had seeped through the periwinkle sheets and into the mattress. Her comforter lay in a pile on the floor. Outside, the sky sagged, heavy with the promise of rain.

June took her by the hand. The bathroom hallway was too narrow for them to walk side-by-side, so Katy trailed behind her, shuffling her feet on the floor. “It’s okay,” June said. She helped Katy undress and led her into the bath. She’d grown so tall she had to bend her knees to fit.

June turned on the faucet and waited for the water to grow warm. “Hurts,” Katy said, pressing her hands into the soft folds of her stomach. “It hurts, Mom.” And even though she was crying, she let June touch her. Let her hold her face in her hands, wiping her tears away with her thumbs.

“I know,” June said. “I know, baby, I know.” But it wasn’t enough. It never was, never would be. Pain for her daughter was never temporary. Every moment was the whole world, time eternal, and there was nothing she could do.

June washed her, then, from head to toe. She was still sitting, so June couldn’t use the shower head. Instead, she filled a plastic tumbler from the kitchen. She lifted Katy’s arms, and her legs. She massaged the soap into her daughter’s scalp and rinsed, gently, until the water ran clear.

June hadn’t bathed her that way since she was still small enough to hold. When they were finished, she wrapped her in her favorite yellow towel and pressed her daughter’s warm body to her own, until Katy pulled away.

~

It was the sort of grey day they'd usually spend inside, baking peanut butter cookies or telling ghost stories. But on Wednesdays, June drove Katy to Grangeville so she could see her therapist. The therapist had both of them call her Shelley. She was red-haired and white-teethed and younger than June. She was supposed to help Katy so that she might be able to get a job one day, but where in Threemile was there to work anymore—the A&B grocery closed now three years, the schoolhouse even longer, and it was only by a thread that the diner was holding on; it would've been closed already if Tom's son had had anyone to sell it to.

Everywhere was evidence of the coup of the land: the saplings sprouting up in cracked parking lots, the way the wind and rain had eaten through the paint of all the buildings, had begun on the wood beneath it. Green covering the pitted land where the mine had been, trees and cheatgrass blocking the crosses that they'd put up to honor the dead. Taking it back in pieces that way. Bit by bit it was ending, their little world.

If Katy were to get a job, find a place in the world, it would be somewhere that wasn't here. The place where all the good things in June's life had come to her, but also the hard ones. The place that held every memory either of them had that mattered.

Katy was making good progress, Shelley said, as though this should please June, should come as some sort of pleasant surprise. But June already knew how good Katy was when she was given a task, how careful she could be. When the weather was nice, they would do laundry. Out in the yard in the scrubby grass, lavender season, the air perfumed with the smell of it. June would pull the clothes down from the line, and Katy would hold the basket. When it was full, they spread out in the cottonwood shade, where in the distance, across the gravel road, they could

hear the Sorrow hurrying by, could hear the calls of the mourning doves, up in the pine trees, and the high soft wind.

They teamed up to fold the sheets and towels, end to end, like a dance. June did pants and Katy did t-shirts. They left the socks for last.

“It’s like this, right?” June would say, holding in one hand a long striped sock like a witch would wear, a little one with daisies in the other.

“Noooo, *Mom*,” Katy said, every time, and how June loved that. The way she said *Mom*, like June was the only one in the world ever to have been called it, like she was born into it and had been it always, nothing else.

“Oops,” June said, and Katy took the socks from her hands, exasperated, led her to sit on the bench by the tool shed where she would be safely out of the way.

And June watched her, from there. Watched as she matched each sock with its partner, lovely in the tree’s shadow, singing to herself.

If they worked hard, Shelley said with her white-teeth smile, one day Katy might even get to live on her own. There was a special house up in Latah County where she’d be around friends, other girls and boys like her. A new house with a roof that never leaked, a town with color in it, where the places she knew weren’t always leaving, going back to nothing. A house with no clothesline or cottonwood tree, where the river was a faraway thing.

Katy was quiet on the drive to Grangeville. When it had become clear she was different, there had been nowhere in Threemile to help her—not even a regular school left by then. For

years they had been driving all the way to Idaho county, down the ruler-straight stretch of Threemile that followed the Sorrow, to the place where Main Street rejoined the state highway. The highway curved through the tree-studded mountains, past lonely houses and sagging barbed-wire fences, horseless pastures, the road rising up, up, until the trees fell away and the valley was there below them: the bright glint of the Sorrow and the grey stretch of Threemile beside it, the flat low place at the end of town that was the burned-out mine. How small it looked, from up there.

The sky was still heavy, hiding the sun. Katy sunk low in her seat.

“How about we try the radio,” June said, which was their joke. Out there it was all static, until they got close enough to Grangeville. Katy huddled up against the car door and pretended June wasn’t there.

Maybe, June thought, she could turn the car around. Maybe they could give up on today, crawl back into warm beds, close up the windows, dream.

Shelley’s office was downtown, in a whitewashed brick building next to the bar. When they first started coming to see her, they’d all sat together at her wide black desk. Then June sat in the corner next to the plastic palm. Then the waiting room, which had a strange cold blankness to it, no smell at all. Now Shelley had been having her leave. She’d been having her and Katy spend longer and longer apart. June wandered through downtown, usually. She bought a coffee from the gas station, or checked on her jams on the end-cap where they sold them in Asker’s Harvest Foods. If the weather was good, she sat in the park, the same bench every time, watching

people pass by on the sidewalk, imagining the sort of lives they had, the secrets they kept from everybody else.

They pulled up to the curb, and the car's rattling quieted into a hum. Katy was still pressed up against the door. When June reached to unbuckle her seatbelt, she started to yell.

"But you like Shelley," June said. "You have fun together."

Her face had gone red. She made a quiet keening sound, pulling on the drawstring of her pink nylon pants.

"You can practice with the numbers. Maybe you'll even do some cooking today. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Katy's cheek was pressed up against the window, her round shoulders hunched like a shell. On the roof of the car, the first fat drops of rain.

"Please," June said. "Please."

They were five minutes past her appointment time, and then ten. The rain fell and fell. Maybe it would be enough to raise the river up again, high enough that it breached the banks. Maybe this time it would not just take the low places, but the whole valley. White water gone mad, rising past the scrubby bushes and the old railroad ties, past the strange house on the far bank where Isaac Moon still played his fevered ragtime to the empty rooms. Past the neighbors' empty shipping container and Greg Miller's half-built bunker, all the way to their front door. Higher still. Coming in through the peephole, through the cracks in the walls. June and Katy at the kitchen table, their own underwater world. Watching the steelhead swim past the window,

the giant one among them, as old as the land. “How about,” she said, “we get some ice cream instead. Moose tracks. How about we eat it right out of the carton with the giant spoon.”

~

June sprinted into Asker Foods for the ice cream through the rain. In the car, Katy was laughing. They drove back to Threemile through the rain, so much rain it shrank the world down, all the trees and the mountains gone, only inches of road around them, the warm grey interior of the car.

Back home, June parked crooked in the driveway. Across the road, Greg Miller had a yellow tarp set up over the hole where the generator would be, but it was raining sideways by then, turning everything to mud. He was outside, wearing a poncho, yelling at no one, swinging his shovel around. The generator had to be underground, he’d said to her, so the roving bandits and starved raving churchgoers turned murderers couldn’t destroy it or steal it for parts. The generator would survive the new millennium. The generator would last though the end of the world.

It was raining so hard the air had gone white. They ran from the car, splashing through puddles. Katy had the plastic bag from the ice cream over her head, the handles looped around her chin. She spread her arms like wings.

They were wet already, both of them, so they sat on the covered porch in matching lawn chairs, and ate their ice cream with serving spoons. There was a carton for each of them, and an extra, just in case. And June thought that the roof might not be holding up as well as it used to, but it kept the worst of the rain away, and the air was warm and thick.

There was ice cream on their shirts and faces and stuck into their hair. They laughed and laughed.

When the light left the sky, Katy scooted her chair over to June's and leaned against her, as close as she could get. Greg Miller was still pacing his yard with a flashlight, guarding the place where his bunker would be.

And in a second, there on the porch, June could see it: she could see the end of their little world. Every morning, she would wake up to Katy calling to the birds out the window, or pressed up soft and warm beside her, on top of the comforter, saying *Mom, wake up, sun, sun*. And the screech owl in the skinny white pine would make his stuttering bouncing-ball call, and the wind would shake the windowpanes and sing through the trees. And maybe there would be water that snuck in through the holes in the roof, maybe the cedar steps would turn to rot, but down by the river the pine trees would grow straight and tall, and the river would rush on and on, on as it had before and would do after they were gone, and here they would be, right here: on the porch in the rain, or sitting across from one another on the bathroom floor, until the sun faded, until nothing was left, and they were just ghost here together, rattling beams.

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T H E T H I N G S W E L E A V E ,
T H E T H I N G S W E K E E P

2003

IT MADE no sense to take the dishes, though she loved them. No two were alike, each scavenged secondhand, chosen for its colors— the brightly-striped bowl, the drinking glass dotted with daisies. There was a novelty cup with a straw attached, a hand-painted coffee mug. A plastic dinner plate, meant for a child.

It made no sense to take them, but still Marin Gallagher stood for a long time looking at each of them, stacked neatly in her kitchen cabinet, and remembering.

In the living room, the detritus of decades. No to the coat rack, that faithful sentry at the door. No to the wingback chair that had always smelled, strangely, of burned butter. No to the torn fishing jacket, the gingham dress, the pile of fleece vests unworn for years.

She would take her crock pot and the straight-backed wooden chair her grandfather had made. Her steel-stringed guitar, and the scarf her sister Susana had bought for her on her trip, last year, to Ireland. No to the laundry hamper, the floor lamp. No to the wind chime, hanging outside the door.

~

It was winter, snow on the streets, five days until Christmas. Marin scattered rock salt on the sidewalk outside the bar, whistling *Silent Night*. Afternoon, but already the sun had gone, graying the snow-covered streets. Inside, she plugged in the colored lights that framed the front window, then straightened the tinsel hanging from the liquor shelf.

Sal Iverson was first to arrive, sliding into his usual place at the bar. He was years younger than Marin, but had aged poorly: face swollen from the same drinking that had killed his father and his grandfather before him; heavy bags of fat beneath his eyes. He ordered his usual drink—soda water, since his second heart attack—and only after he'd taken the first sip did he look up and say to her that Isaac Moon was dead. He'd been dead for at least two weeks. "Hard to tell," said Sal, "with how cold it's been."

"Christ," Marin said, leaning against the lip of the bar.

"Christ," Sal said.

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "Heart attack, probably. Out there all alone like that, he wouldn't've had no way to get help. And he had to be, what, seventy? Seventy-five? Up there somewhere, anyway."

Once, seventy had seemed so old, an impossible number, but Marin would turn sixty-four in March, the same age her mother had been when she died. "What did they do with him?" she asked.

Sal blinked. "What?"

"With the body?"

He looked at her, strangely, like he hadn't considered it. "Who knows," he said.

It was too quiet in the bar. Marin slid a Bing Crosby tape into the cassette player, then turned the volume up. *O Holy Night* crackled into the room.

"Not this sentimental crap," Sal said.

Even in the half-light, the bar showed its age: the deep scars in the wide-plank pine floors, years of dust still caught in the hard-to-reach places, refusing eviction. Marin had been at Pet's for thirty-five years. She'd owned it for the last nine, after Bill Evans willed it to a son who'd moved to California decades earlier. It had taken all her savings to buy it from him, but she'd done it. Back then she couldn't stand the thought of another death in Threemile, another familiar place gone.

Sal lifted his glass and drank. A flash of disappointment passed over his face, as if he'd forgotten it all for a moment—the soda water, his clogged-up heart, that things were no longer the way they had been. "I swear," he said. "There's nobody left around here anymore."

"Somebody should try to track down Fenella," Marin said. "Don't you think?"

Sal laughed. "Good luck with that."

Last anyone heard, Isaac's niece and last living relative had burned through her second marriage—a metalworker, ten years younger than she was—and moved to Arkansas. That was when she was still writing to her brother Cleo, a fire-and-brimstone sermonizer who'd ascended two years ago, after a stroke everyone said must've been brought on by the vein-popping intensity of his conviction. The Moon men had all died young, except for Isaac.

“I just think somebody should try to do something,” Marin said. “A funeral, or something. Shouldn’t they?”

Sal shrugged. “Not like he’ll care either way.”

“It’s just sad, I mean,” Marin said. “Not having anybody left.”

The swell of Bing Crosby’s yuletide orchestra faded, replaced by crackling silence.

“I’ll say this much,” Sal said, raising his glass. “Thank God for you. At least we can all count on something in this goddamn ghost town.” He tilted the glass in her direction. “Go on. Pour one for yourself. It’s no fun drinking alone.”

She hesitated, then reached for the brandy on the bottom shelf. “Just one,” she said.

Sal laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

Marin sloshed a centimeter of amber liquid into a glass. She thought about the house by the river where she’d lived the last twenty years. The hidden room at the top of it, and the kitchen window that looked out onto the Sorrow. The single iron-frame she’d slept in her whole life, not because it was anything special, not because she hadn’t been able to afford a new one, but because it had always been fine, always good enough.

She thought about the suitcase she had begun packing a week ago, the suitcase she’d had to go into Grangeville to buy because all she’d ever owned was an army rucksack that smelled wet, like mildew. She thought about the way she’d frozen, standing in her bedroom, the first time she’d opened her closet and confronted the process of sorting through her life, deciding what was worth taking, and what she would leave behind.

She thought about the letters from Wyatt Cargill. She kept them in her kitchen drawer, pressed beneath the brown silverware organizer. She hid the letters not because she feared someone would find them, because she liked the way it felt, having a secret. A thing about her that no one knew, would ever even guess.

It was five days until Christmas. By then she would be gone, and none of them knew.

“To you,” Sal said, clinking his glass to hers.

~

Marin and Wyatt had never shared any friends. They hadn't been in school together— he was ten years younger than she was, born, as he often said, on the day General MacArthur pushed the North Koreans back over the border and the US went to war. He'd dropped out at seventeen and gone to work in the mine. And he'd been there, half a mile underground, the day that it burned. He and Jimmy Gallagher, Marin's big brother—the only two men to leave the mine alive.

Wyatt had always been quick to anger, but after the fire that anger was colored differently than before. There was red defiance in it. Like he was daring the world to say something, like he expected it. Like everyone who looked at him was a second away from asking why he'd gotten to live when forty-four other men had died.

In the years after the fire, Wyatt had started coming into Pet's almost every night. Threemile was a strange place back then, trying to figure out what it was. Marin watched him from her place behind the bar. She couldn't help it. He wore a brown Stetson, like some kid in a cowboy movie. In his pockets, he carried around so much change that you could hear him coming from half a block away. Sometimes he left trails of coins behind him, like he was hoping to Hansel

and Gretel his way back to the places he'd been. He never ordered the same thing. "I want to keep you guessing," he said.

His nose was crooked from being broken too many times. He had a scar above his left eye and black hair that grew past his ears. If he noticed her looking, he never let on.

One night, after the rest of the drinkers had gone, Marin had finally asked him what it was like, there in the mine as it burned. She wanted to know. To see what Jimmy had seen, to understand. Her brother, the trickster. Who took up space without apology; who told the best jokes she knew. Jimmy had left something down there that he hadn't been able to find again above ground. He'd died that winter, up in the mountains, alone.

Wyatt had looked at her, long and slow. He drained his glass. "A fucking picnic," he said.

All of that was so long ago, now, that her memories of it had grown faint, like old film. Now Wyatt had been locked up in the prison in Kuna for sixteen years. He'd hit a long-hauler from Wyoming so hard that the man's head broke open when it hit the ground. Marin watched it happen from behind the bar. Wanting, so badly, to move, to do something, but unable to.

Sometimes Marin re-read Wyatt's letters out on her porch, late night, the light above her flickering like a tiny storm. They'd been writing each other for more than a decade, but in all that time his handwriting hadn't changed: still cramped and careful, like it was a thing that didn't come naturally to him. He asked about his kids, who were grown now but had been small the last time he'd seen them. He asked about the town. He asked about the angels she'd been making, angels from junk and scrap metal, which she'd once thought about trying to sell before she gave that idea up. He never talked about his own life.

A few years ago he'd started signing the letters *Love, Wyatt*. And after that, she had done the same.

~

No to the cherry-patterned dishcloth. No to the magazine rack. Yes to the recipe box and to the leather-bound Bible, because it had been her mother's, because her mother's faith had led her more easily into death than she might've gone otherwise. Yes to the photo of her niece holding her baby girl. No to the fishing pole.

No to the giant angel in the front yard, which she'd made, years ago, from chicken wire and scrap metal. No to the dozens of others, the angels from the innards of old dishwashers and ovens and abandoned cars, that she had not managed to give away.

In one of his recent letters, Wyatt had asked her if she was still making the angels. He'd kept the one she'd given him before he left, he said, had stored it in a place safe. She'd given it to him one night at the bar. *No big deal*, she'd said. *I've got so many I don't know what to do with them*. She didn't tell him that it was one of the best she'd ever made. Delicate metal joints, and wings from spun tulle. Small enough to fit in the palm of your hand.

When she wrote back, she'd told him *yes*, because she knew it was what he wanted to hear.

What would she wear on the day she left? All of her clothes were old, simple— *serviceable*, Susana had once said. She'd also said that green brought out Marin's eyes. A green shirt, then,

and her nicest jeans. She knew she was being foolish, but it didn't matter. Knowing it had never helped.

When Wyatt was released from prison on Christmas Eve, she would meet him there. They would go somewhere together. Who knew where they would go.

~

Marin had no employees. When she was there Pet's was open, and when she wasn't, it stayed closed.

Which was why it didn't matter if she took the long way to work, walking along the frozen riverbank, the water so low that rocks jutted from its surface, exposed bones. She would miss the river most of all when she left.

Some people said it was a cruel river, with its quick currents and surprising depths, the way the surface lied to you, hiding the power that was beneath it. But Marin had never thought of the river that way. It was a thing detached from the quiet and simple dramas of their lives. The Sorrow had been there for hundreds of years before any of them. It would keep running long after they were gone. It would run until it unclaimed itself from them, until it no longer had a name.

In the shallows, the giant steelhead circled. It had been there as long as she remembered. Bleached age spots marking its scales, the white sheen of its eye. It swam like it didn't feel the cold. Maybe it didn't. Maybe it wasn't a fish at all, but part of the river, a part of it that could see.

The winter light caught the sheen of its scales. It swam as though there were no currents, as though it could write itself through things that only moved one way. And Marin thought, then,

that if that fish were to work its way upriver, were to push its battered head through town and past the ruined mine and into the mountains, then time itself might start unspooling. Color blooming again in all the faded places, the town reclaiming all it had lost. Her brother and both her parents still living, the A&B and the feed store open again. Music coming from the far side of the river, where Isaac Moon played ragtime to a house that wasn't empty anymore, had never been. And through it all, the shouts and echoes from the mine, which had stolen nothing, had not yet got it in its mind to steal.

~

When Wyatt went to prison, he'd left two kids behind. It was for the best, he'd written. Their correspondence was still in its early days then, neither of them quite sure of the right things to say. He missed his kids, of course he missed them. But they were better off this way, he said. Better off without him for a father.

They were grown now. Lucky, the youngest, was off in Iraq, had signed up the second he turned eighteen. Tig ran rafts down the Salmon in the summertime, made enough money off rich tourists to spend the off-season working part-time in Orofino. She hadn't been back to Threemile in years.

Last spring, after Wyatt had gotten his release date, she'd written a letter asking if he remembered what had happened the night the man from Wyoming died. If he remembered what had led up to it, why he'd done what he did.

She never sent it.

What would it change? He did or he didn't. Maybe he'd been too drunk. That's what he'd told the judge—that he remembered nothing before the fight, only the red blur of afterward.

Maybe all of it was lost in the hollow parts of his memory. All the late nights at Pet's, when everyone else had gone home. The things he'd said to her, those nights, with no one else to hear.

~

Half a strand of the Christmas lights in the window had burnt out, so Marin put a lit candle at the center of each table to salvage the atmosphere. She'd switched out Bing Crosby with Nat King Cole. It was a Friday night, all four stools taken by a line of men each shorter and fatter than the last, like a set of descending stairs. Sal Iverson was the top step, drinking soda water with a drop of whiskey in the straw, just to taste it, he said, just to remember.

They'd sent Isaac Moon's body to the crematorium in Kooskia, he told her. No one was clear on what would happen to him after that.

For hours, the men traded stories, talking over one another, as if there were someone else in the room who was listening to them, someone to impress. At midnight, Sal switched to whiskey. "We all die someday," he said.

Now he was holding court. "Listen," he shouted, a half-filled glass in hand. "I ever tell you about the idiot cat who used to come around my place? Dumbest goddamn cat I ever saw. Walked with its head tilted to the side like it was trying to shake water out of its ear." He leaned to the side, demonstrating. "Couldn't even go in a straight line, just wandered in circles like a goddamn drunk."

“Two of you’ve got something in common,” shouted Merle Lonsdale, who sat on the second stool. The other men laughed.

Sal waved him off. “So, Mary had this statue, okay? This cement statue of a cat she got from the garden center in Grangeville. Not that she ever grew a garden, but that’s nothing to do with it. Well, that dumb cat loved the thing. Curled up next to it every single night. Brought it sparrows, mice, you name it.”

“Look at that,” said Merle. “It’s a love story.”

Sal shook his head. “You’re not hearing me. So, anyway. You know that cold one we had a couple weeks back? Froze the river over past the bridge? Well, morning afterward I found that idiot cat curled up next to the statue’s paws. Frozen solid.” He laughed, then, like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. “Damn thing spent its whole life in love with a statue and it never even knew the difference.”

Marin stepped back from the bar. She twisted a rag in her hands. Just kept twisting it. The men were laughing, laughing like they were being paid to do it, loud enough to shake the windows. Half the Christmas lights were burnt out. In another day, Isaac Moon would be ashes in a cardboard box. Who knew what had happened to the statue, Sal said, but he’d thrown the dead cat into the Sorrow. *Fish food*, Merle said, and the laughter swelled. The big steelhead had a blind eye the size of a baseball but she had seen it, had seen it watching her. She had heard the sound of the piano today though it had stopped when she realized, and there was nobody left to bury Isaac Moon. It was two days until Christmas. Jimmy had never gotten to see his granddaughter. The valley was covered in snow.

The men were subdued now, their laughter lapsing into embarrassed silence. Where would they go from here? Four drinks deep, all their good cheer used up. Marin looked at them. And she knew, then, that this whole place had gone to bones. The burning of the mine and the men it took might have started it, but here they were, her and the rest of them: the real Threemile ghosts. Woke up some morning and they weren't there anymore, just some specter whose feet didn't touch the ground. And maybe it wasn't the hard blows that did it, but the spaces between them. The slip-bys, the never-weres. Until one day here they were—nothing more than a muddy reflection in some skuzzed-over pond, all the things they wanted sunk too deep to find.

Marin twisted the rag, then let it go. She'd spent sixty-four years learning just how much you could love something that gave you nothing in return.

~

In Pet's, Wyatt had spun the coins on the wooden bar. Sometimes they seemed as though they would spin forever, until they caught in the deep grooves of the wood, or fell to the floor. Once, he'd given her a penny flattened on the railroad tracks. The sort of thing you might give to a child. *For you*, he said.

She had always wondered where he got them, all those coins. If he raided gum-ball machines or combed the gutters, the parking lots. If he gathered it because he liked the weight, that dependability. Something to anchor him to the ground.

He'd been spinning coins the night the man from Wyoming came into the bar. Another one of the long-haul men on his way to Seattle or Portland, indistinguishable from all the others like him, some shared thing that must've come from the road. Within an hour the man had drank

himself to staggering, had to use the bar to support himself. She remembered the yellow line of his teeth, the wetness in the whites of his eyes.

She'd cut him off. She should've done it earlier.

And she had seen the meanness in his eyes, then, had steeled herself for what would happen next. She'd been at Pet's long enough to deal with men like that.

Fat fucking dyke, he spat, leveling his eyes with hers. And before she could respond Wyatt had gotten up from his stool, had shouted *what did you say to her*, Marin both hot and cold with shame. Wyatt pushed the man outside. It was a cold night, autumn's first breath. The crowd at the bar followed them, had all seen what had happened next, but Marin stayed behind the bar, frozen, knowing even before it happened, before Wyatt hit the man and he fell backwards, split the back of his skull open on the curb, that she was suspended between two distinct moments, that the color of *after* would look nothing like the color of *before*.

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The night before she left, Marin stayed up touching all of the things she would leave behind. The crooked lintel above the door, the little angel that hung from a hook in her kitchen, the first one she had made, years ago. She had thought about taking it with her but had decided to leave it instead. So that it could bless whoever came afterward.

She sat in her living room chair, that strange old smell of burned butter, unable to sleep. There was a wind chime that hung from the rafters of her front porch. Another one of her angels, this one made from bronze. Sometimes, at night, the moon would catch it just right, so that the

bell shone through the transom. And Marin would look up from whatever she was doing, caught by that bright movement, tricked into thinking that somebody was out on the porch. Waiting there, without knocking, just waiting to come in.

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