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Under The Shelter of Voices

A Collection of Short Stories and Conversations

By

Melissa Jean Seitz

A MASTER'S THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
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1996

ABSTRACT

UNDER THE SHELTER OF VOICES
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND CONVERSATIONS

BY

MELISSA JEAN SEITZ

My grandmother and my mother always told stories. These stories were told to make sense of the world. As I grew older, I began creating stories of my own to live by, and they seemed to become remarkable once filtered through the net of narrative.

Other voices soon became entangled in this net of narratives as other story tellers, such as Toni Morrison, Virginia Woolf, and Grace Paley led me into the use of other techniques to weave fantasy lives into narrative. How to tell stories, how to lure the reader into a world of promised possibilities, and how to unfold a sentence which might create an interesting question to explore became the framework for *Under The Shelter of Voices.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This collection of stories and conversations were guided by Dr. William S. Penn. He challenged me to find the "real" story which sometimes proved to be the hardest story to write. Thank you for the inspiration.

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WAITING FOR VERTIGO

Annie watched them carefully. The ladies of the St. John's Lutheran Church were taking over her kitchen. She had not invited them, and as she watched them in their cheerful dresses, looking like a bouquet of flowers, she felt sick to her stomach.

They brought in steaming casserole dishes, plates of brownies, jello salad, and loaves of bread. The women worked quietly. They did not know Annie, so it was difficult for them to make small talk. She was not one of them.

Hank was Lutheran. He and Annie had been married in a Lutheran church some ten years ago. Annie was supposed to have taken classes to become a Lutheran, but she hadn't gotten around to it. She had even promised the minister, "Yes, I will take the classes." Even as she had said it, she knew that she would find a way to avoid it.

Annie had been surrounded by religion growing up. Strict Presbyterians. But she never saw church as anything more than an excuse for the women to dress up on Sunday. She had always been indifferent. Cold. But now, she was beyond that. Her daughter was dead, and Annie watched the ladies of the church with distaste.

A light tap on the door, and another church lady entered wearing purple and smiling. This was something the woman was happy doing; Annie could see it in her face. She knew she should leave the kitchen and go into the living room with the rest of the family, but she felt compelled to sit and watch these strangers take over her kitchen. Annie sat on a chair, cross-legged, in a long black dress and flat black shoes. She could have passed for a dancer or an artist.

She still had the excess weight she had gained while she was pregnant. The soft rolls of fat around her stomach felt good to her. She loved being pregnant. Her body was built for it. When she was pregnant with Joe, she had grown huge and with her short stature, she had always looked as if she would tip over at any moment. When she was pregnant with Estee, she had been more careful with her weight and had only gained thirty pounds instead of fifty.

Annie sat up in her chair. A church lady had spoken to her. Annie tried to smile, to give some sort of intelligent response. Her hollow eyes followed the woman's movement. She stopped in front of Annie and patted her hand.

"I prayed for all three of my children to be healthy. You need to pray, dear."

Annie smiled at her, a very dark smile, and said, "Get the hell out of my house."

The woman jumped back as if she'd been bitten. She hurried over to the other women and said it was time for them to leave. Each one of them stared at Annie on the way out. She could feel their disapproval. She hoped that she never saw any of them again. She ran back to her bedroom and threw herself on her bed. The room began to spin around her, and she welcomed it. She invited it. She did not want to think or feel.

Hank bent down over Annie and grabbed her hand lightly. "What happened?"

"Too much. Too much." She wanted to tell him that she was being blamed already because she hadn't prayed. They had both been searching for answers, but it was always there, blame insinuating itself into the unanswerable questions. Their doctors didn't know. "One of those things we can't explain yet." Or "It may be related to taking vitamins early in the pregnancy." They said that to them with dead calm. A seriousness she wanted to erase from their faces. "No-you-can't-mean-me," she said to herself.

Hank led Annie to the car. Joe had chosen not to go to the funeral and had gone to a neighbor's house. Annie had felt it was only fair that Joe be allowed to choose. Their lives had been beyond nightmarish for over a month. Ever since the ultrasound and the hushed voices of doctors and technicians. The words of her doctor: "Your baby has a

genetic birth defect." Then, loosely hearing him say, "Incompatible with life." She felt herself leave her body and go somewhere far above his desk and his artifacts from Africa. She felt her stomach with her hands. It was round and perfect. The baby was covered by her flesh. She wondered why the doctor was being so cruel.

"Are you positive?" she had asked.

"I'm sorry," he said.

So, Annie, Hank, and Joe had walked around in some kind of painless fog for a month. The doctors felt that she should complete her pregnancy and not force anything. Annie felt dead. She wanted it to be over. She was pregnant, and the baby was hers.

In the hospital, Estee lived for four days. Annie could not hold her. She knew if she held her she would never be able to give her up. Annie watched as the nurses held her baby, rocked her, sang to her. Annie always stood silently in the corner.

When her milk came in, she stood in the shower, feeling the life-blood in her breasts, screaming at the pain of the milk leaving her body, dripping from her nipples into the shower drain.

Now, as her father drove them to the cemetery, Annie shut everything off again. She looked at Hank. He seemed numb. No one spoke. The cars holding her relatives

followed close behind. They had only wanted a small service. Annie's best friend and her husband came, but other than relatives, no one else came.

The graveside services went quickly. Annie could not hear a single word the minister said. She was somewhere above it all again, floating as she stared down at the tiny white coffin. When the minister finished, Annie buried her head into her father's chest.

One of the men from the funeral home walked Annie toward the car. He spoke quietly to her, and Annie felt safe in the fact that she could have a conversation with this man.

When they returned to the house, she asked her father to please get Joe. She wanted to see him, to hold him, to look at him. She didn't remember praying when she was pregnant with Joe, and he was perfect.

Annie waited in the kitchen for Joe to return. She watched her mother, mother-in-law, and her husband's Aunt Barbara pace around the small kitchen, trying not to bump into each other, but needing to be close to one another. Annie wanted to tell a joke to make these women smile. They were not like the church ladies. They loved her whether she had prayed or not.

Her father walked in with Joe, and she ran to give him a hug. She wished that she could change things for him too. He was only six. Too young for pain.

His kindergarten teacher had been wonderful. Annie had to call her at home to break the news, and Mrs. Kruger had talked to Joe's class afterwards, and they had drawn pictures for him and brought him plants. For a month, they waited while the baby grew inside of Annie. Waited, knowing that they were waiting for death. Annie had tried not to count the days.

Annie and Joe went into the living room while everyone else ate. Hank came out and joined them on the couch. Sesame Street was on television so they sat and watched silently as Bert and Ernie sang a song about a rubber duck. Annie thought that if the three of them could sit there forever, that they might be able to find some peace. Some force of reentry into the world.

Lately, when she was alone, she had sought solace in the hallway. Feeling the cool drywall beneath the palms of her hands made her sane. The hallway was fairly small, and Annie kept it dark. She had never hung pictures of her family on the wall like so many other people did.

She would sit in the hall and count the hours while Joe was at school and Hank was at work. She called Hank every

hour just to hear the sound of his voice. Friends called to check up on her with a frequency that began to frighten her.

"I'm fine. I'm fine," she always said. What did they expect her to say? She was breathing. And waiting for vertigo.

Conversation

"She's crazy."

"Her daughter died. How do you expect her to act?"

"It's been a month. She won't even leave her house."

"You're so critical."

"How do you figure?"

"I was back to normal a week after my father died."

"They say it's different with children."

"I still say she's crazy."

"You always hated her, didn't you?"

Flamingos

As I shove the flamingos into the spongy dirt, my black high heels sink deeper into the lawn, eventually throwing me off balance. Sprawled in the muddy grass, surrounded by forty pink flamingos, I curse myself for behaving badly during my interview with Mrs. Starch-Butt. My son Joe, playing basketball in the driveway, eyes me nervously.

"Mom," he asks, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing." I survey the lawn. The flamingos offer their usual stare.

"Why are you wearing that dress?" he asks. Lately, he's been critiquing everything I wear. Dresses make him edgy.

"I had an interview today."

"Oh," he says, and returns to bouncing his basketball. He pauses, then shoots. "Any luck?"

"No." Standing up, I check out the damage to my dress and curse myself. Another trip to the cleaners. Why can't I keep anything clean?

I try to move forward, but my shoes are stuck in the mud. Carefully, I slip my feet out and march between the flamingos towards the house.

My husband Hank pulls into the driveway causing Joe to temporarily suspend his game. He gives his father the "I'm

annoyed" stare which he has been perfecting for the past fourteen years. As I step into the house, the phone rings.

"Shit," I say to the dog as I step over him. He growls at me to let me know that I've disturbed his nap. My muddy pantyhose-covered feet stain the white linoleum.

"Hello," I say, answering the phone while pulling off my pantyhose.

"Honey," my mother says quietly. I freeze. I've heard this tone before. "Your father had a heart attack. Meet me at the hospital."

"What?" I hear her, but I cannot understand. She repeats what she's said and mentions something about yard work. Hank walks in, realizes I'm upset, and stands next to me.

"We'll be there as soon as we can." Hanging up the phone, I explain to Hank what has happened. "He was doing chores. Outside." Leaning against the wall, I start sliding to the floor. Hank pulls me up.

"Get ready. I'll tell Joe." Hank squeezes my hand and goes outside. Unable to move, I watch the two of them talk. Joe is as tall as Hank now, their features similar, their stance symmetrical. As they start walking towards the house, I run to the bedroom, yanking my interview dress up and over my head. Throwing on sweatpants and a sweatshirt,

I grab my tennis shoes and socks while running towards the living room.

"You'd better take an overnight bag," Hank suggests.

"Right." Running back into the bedroom, I pack a few things while feeling as if I am in slow motion and high gear at the same time.

We climb into the truck, and Hank peels out of the driveway. It is a forty-five minute drive to the hospital. Since I feel like I should show Hank and Joe how strong I am, I start babbling which doesn't fool them for a minute. Joe is in the backseat, and he leans forward and starts rubbing my shoulder.

"It will be okay, Mom," he says.

I wonder if I should tell Joe that my grandfather died when I was fourteen, and I'm scared. My grandfather made wooden toys for me when I was young. My favorite was a rocking horse painted green and silver. After he died, I would sneak into his workshop and run my hands over the tools he once used. My grandmother refused to sell his tools despite the pleas of my uncles.

My father doesn't make things for Joe. He takes him places and teaches him the names of ships traveling on the Great Lakes. I can picture the two of them standing on the shore of Lake Superior, pointing to a passing freighter in the distance.

"I just can't believe it. He was fine when I talked to him earlier."

"It's okay, Mom." Joe continues to hold onto my shoulder.

Hank drives wildly, twenty miles over the speed limit, passing cars with inches to spare. I wonder if we will arrive in one piece.

We pull into the Gratiot County Hospital parking lot, and I hop out before Hank can stop the truck.

Running into the emergency room, I shout, "Where is my father?"

"His name?" The nurse is calm.

Name? I run through a list of his nicknames, wondering which one he's used. It's possible that he's using his given name. "Will Story?" I ask.

"Room five."

Mr. Story. Dad. Grandfather. Curly. (Bald since he was nineteen). Willie. Tall Story. Stogie Story. (Because of the thick cigars he used to smoke). Pushing open the door to room five, expecting the worst, I smile as my father waves at me. My mother looks as if she is ready to pass out.

"What's going on?" I move towards my father, carefully avoiding the machines he is hooked up to.

"My heart went crazy." He launches into a full report about the wires and monitors. When did he have time to learn all of this? He looks fine. Not like he did last year when he had cancer surgery and was in the hospital for ten days.

"What are we waiting for?"

"They're watching me. The doctor is supposed to show up sometime. I've been here long enough."

"Now, Will," my mother says as she squeezes his hand.

A child screams in the room next to us which causes my mother to cringe. I bite my tongue. Screamers have always made us nervous and thankfully, Joe never developed this habit. He liked banging things to get my attention, but now he swears to get his point across. I keep threatening to wash his mouth out with soap, but haven't figured out how I'm going to hold down someone so much bigger than I am.

"Is it okay if Hank and Joe come in?" I ask my father.

"Sure. I'm fine. Send them in." I believe him.

I leave the room to find them and walk by an elderly man on a bed in the hall. He is bleeding from his forehead, and no one is around him. The child screams again, and I race to the bathroom.

***

Hank and Joe visit with my father for awhile and come out of his room smiling.

"Grandpa's fine," Joe says.

"I think so," I answer, and head back into the room. I notice that we are all wearing sweatpants which I find terribly funny. My father laughs when I point out my discovery, and my mother shakes her head.

The doctor comes in, and he barely speaks English. Since my father is extremely hard of hearing, I become an interpreter for the Mexican doctor's flavored English and my father's faulty ears. My mother still sits in the same chair, shaking her head.

The doctor informs us that my father will have to spend the night, perhaps two, while they run tests on him. Dr. Torrez suggests that my father has had a heart arrhythmia instead of a heart attack. Beating too fast. Crazy.

I decide that I will stay all night with my mother while Hank and Joe head back home. Someone gave her a ride to the hospital, so Hank and Joe will have to drop us off. My mother and father have seldom been apart at night in forty-five years of marriage. During his hospital stay last year, my mother stayed with us. She didn't like it one bit.

We wait as my father is checked into a room in the main part of the hospital. He is already telling stories to the

nurses, and they surround his bed, laughing as they poke him, and prepare him for the night.

Mother and I kiss him goodnight and leave the hospital with Hank and Joe. At my parents' house, my father's car looks eerie under the streetlight, as if someone were hiding inside.

My mother and I are exhausted, but sleep will not come easily. I settle in on the couch in the upstairs TV room, and stare at the streetlight outside. I wonder if my father can sleep with all of the wires attached to his chest. I hope he has socks on his feet to keep them warm. My mother sighs in her bedroom. I wonder if Hank and Joe will have trouble sleeping.

Hank says he can't sleep when I'm not in bed with him. When we sleep, we wrap our legs and arms together like some awkward octopus. I snuggle deeper under the quilt my mother has given me and smell the cool sweetness of her perfume. I fall asleep counting flamingos.

Morning comes early at my parents' house. They live in town where everything jumps to life. Where I live, there is dead quiet until the school bus roars by at seven a.m. Not here where everything clangs and screeches.

Mother and I shower and dress quickly. I call Joe before he leaves for school, and I tell him that I'll drive

back to town to pick him up. I need to pick up a few things from my house, but mostly I just want to see Joe.

At the hospital, mother and I find my father in his room, surrounded by nurses. They are all under his spell. I can't believe that this is the same man who scared me to death last night.

He's already complaining that they should let him go home. "I'm fine," he shouts, and all of the nurses agree, but tell him that he has to wait.

Another doctor arrives to examine my father, and I am relieved that they understand each other perfectly. The doctor makes us leave the room while he speaks to my father.

Mother and I go downstairs to the coffee shop and find a quiet table. I buy us both a cup of tea, and we sit by a window overlooking a grassy area dotted with flowers.

"Honey, I am worried about you," she says.

"Worried about me?"

"You look so tired."

"I didn't sleep well last night," I say, as I stir my tea with a straw. "Let me change that. I couldn't sleep last night."

"I had trouble sleeping too," she says. She smiles at me. "How did your job interview go?"

"Oh, not very well. Do you think they'll let Dad go home today?" I spill some tea on the table.

"I doubt it. He'll probably drive them crazy until they do let him go home."

"I'm going to run home around one and pick Joe up at school after two. I'll bring him back with me so he can see Dad."

"He doesn't have to come." She folds a napkin into a perfect square.

"He'll want to."

"He's such a good kid."

"I know. How did I luck out?"

We laugh as we head back to my father's room. The doctor is gone, but three nurses are doing various things for him, and he has a big grin on his face. My mother shakes her head, and laughs.

"I have to go home later to pick up Joe," I tell my father.

"Say, bring me the papers will you?"

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, my clothes so I can leave," he says. This brings a laugh out of the nurses, and they all make a fuss over him again.

Heading home in my parents' car, I decide to listen to my father's radio station, so I won't mess up anything. It's some news channel that I have never listened to before. I'll have to remember to move the seat back again. Was it

just yesterday that I was worried about my failed job interview? I feel so confused. My father is in the hospital again. I'm trying to find a job. Joe is fourteen. He'll be driving soon. How can it be? At least Joe still looks the same. Just bigger. Much bigger.

He was born with great cheeks. People used to pinch them until I learned how to be hostile. If I saw a cheek-pincher eyeing him, I'd say things like, "Joe, don't spit up your peas again" or "Joe, you smell like dogshit," and usually the cheek-pincher would look for another victim. I never mention Joe's cheeks to him now because he hates them. Too round. Like marshmallows. He's right. They're exactly like mine. My father says that Joe and I act alike since we're both so stubborn.

Motherhood. I have learned to be flexible. One minute, I'm changing a diaper, and the next minute, cleaning pee off of the ceiling. There were several years when Joe was young that I swear I never got out of the bathroom. Now, I'm learning to be flexible in other ways. Like keeping my mouth shut when he's having a bad day. Or when my parents need me at a moment's notice.

I quit my job after Joe was born and let him take over the house. He began by destroying the furniture. At first, he used blocks. Bang-bang-bang. Then, he moved on to Matchbox cars. Bang-bang-bang. Eventually, he moved on to

riding his big wheel on the wooden floors in our hallway and living room, and learned to do peelies on the kitchen tile. The bangs turned into thuds, crashes, and squeals. My parents said that Joe inherited his hammering obsession from me.

When Joe started school, I worked a few part-time jobs, nothing secretarial though. I'd had my fill of answering phones and being polite to total strangers. I worked at the library at Joe's school where one of my main jobs was to wipe snot and brown spots off of the books returned. I had the flu fifteen times that year. It got to the point that when I saw some cute little girl waltzing into the library with her arms full of books and a nose dripping like a rainspout that I'd excuse myself and run to the bathroom and wash my hands.

I decided to go to college around my thirteenth bout with the flu. Thought maybe I was more suited to grownup germs. I started out slow, history and math, and did pretty well. My history teacher had a habit of smacking his nose when he made a point, and he reminded me of my psychology teacher in high school. Mr. Munch had a handlebar mustache he couldn't keep his hands off of. Joe said that his teacher that year, Mrs. Smothers, had spiders in her hair, but I think it was just a bad dye job. We fell into the habit of comparing our teachers from then on.

***

Turning east onto M-20, I head for Joe's school. Nothing's changed, but somehow things feel different. He walks out of school, carefully ignoring a girl who is determined to get his attention. She gives up, and he smiles.

"Hi," he says as he climbs in the car. "How's Grandpa?"

"Better. We'll go see him after we stop by the house. How was your day?"

"Boring. My history teacher speaks in a monotone," he says. "He puts me to sleep."

"Sorry. Anything good happen?"

"I found out he's retiring next year."

"Oh. Too late for you. Anything else?"

"My gym teacher gave me a copy of our article," he says in an amazed voice. His hockey team won the state championship, and the paper had a large write-up.

"Your gym teacher? That was nice of her."

"She's okay."

"How does it feel to be a state champ anyway?"

"Fine. Good." Joe smiles at me. I swear he's been grinning since the day he was born.

After the twelve minute ride to our house, I pull into the driveway. My flamingoes are head-to-butt, just as I

left them. They look angry. Like Mrs. Starch-butt looked. My father wouldn't be happy if he saw my birds like this. He thinks they should be scattered around the yard. Not bunched up or in a circle. The tops of my high heels are barely visible.

I get out of the car, pulling the flamingos out of the lawn, one by one, and think about taking some to my father's house. I throw a couple into the trunk and line the rest of them up and down the driveway, several feet apart. They look decorative this way. Joe watches in amazement, but doesn't say a word.

Inside the house, I pack clothes into a bag and grab some paperwork I need to take care of. Joe manages to eat two yogurts, three rolls, and drink a glass of milk while standing up at the counter. He's probably having another growth spurt. Hearing a car in the driveway, I look outside, and watch Hank pull in.

"What's Dad doing home?" Joe asks, always suspicious.

"Beats me."

"What's wrong?" I ask when he walks in.

"Nothing. Just thought I'd go back with you to see your dad."

"Great."

"How is he doing?"

"Better. The nurses are taking very good care of him."

"As usual." We laugh.

"I'm going to change," Hank says.

"I'm going to shoot hoops," Joe yells on his way out the door.

I follow Hank into the bedroom and watch him change. Silently, I admire the back of his legs as his pants fall to the floor. He has runner's legs. Firm. Hairy except for around the knees.

"By the way, how did the interview go?" Hank is standing in front of me now in his underwear, so I pull him onto the bed. We fit together easily.

"Terrible. Mrs. Starch in personnel actually looked down her nose at me."

"Mrs. Starch?"

"Starch, Stark. What's the difference?" Hank and I start wrestling until we fall off the bed onto the floor. I know that he's trying to get me in a good mood, and I'm willing to let him.

"What went wrong?" he asks as he pins me to the floor. He still has the wrestling moves he had in high school, so I know that I'm stuck until I tell him what went wrong.

"I think I wore the wrong dress," I say.

"The wrong dress? What's that got to do with it?" He looks puzzled.

"I'm kidding. Something about me sure rubbed old Starch-breath the wrong way."

"What did she say?" Hank asks as he starts kissing me lightly on my forehead.

"She wanted to know why I had such a large block of down time on my resume."

"Down time?"

"Yes, that's what she called it. 1982-1989."

"You were at home with Joe."

"Down time. Mother time is down time according to Starch-butt. Do we have to talk about this now?" My skin feels a bit sweaty, and I have this urge to rip off my clothes. Rip them to shreds. Take the scissors to them.

"No, we can talk later. Is Joe still outside?" Hank smoothes my hair over the carpet. I wonder when I vacuumed last. He starts tracing the outline of my breasts with his finger.

"I think so."

"Maybe we should shut the door."

"Maybe."

"Jeez. What are you doing?" We both jump at the sound of Joe's voice. He is standing by the end of the bed with a disgusted look on his face. There's that look again. His cheeks are bright red. Hank and I untangle ourselves and

hop up. I try not to look guilty, but Joe won't look at me anyway.

"Talking. Talking," Hank tells Joe as he steers him out of the room. "What are you doing?"

Joe seems embarrassed now, as if he could read my mind.

"Are we leaving soon?" he asks.

"Sure. We'll be right out," I say. Joe walks out shaking his head.

"Tell me what Stark said," Hank says after Joe is out of the room.

"No experience. According to Mrs. Starch of the Roverland Public School system, I am a body without a brain. Simple. I said that I was interested in freelance work, and she wrinkled up her nose, and informed me that they have a communications director who also happens to have a degree in education."

"What's that got to do with you?" Hank asks as he rubs my feet. I swear he is always trying to distract me.

"I have no idea. I told her that I had no interest in being a communications director. I write. I want to write about Roverland. Kids. School. Do publications."

"What did she say?"

"She pointed at my resume and asked me if the information was correct. Then she said, 'So, you've been going to college for the past six years, and prior to that

you stayed home with the child?' She called Joe 'the child.' She was so dramatic about it that I almost cracked up."

"What's she got against kids?" Hank asks.

"I don't know. Her son's a field goal kicker for some college football team out west."

"Is he any good?"

"I guess so. Anyway, she said I didn't fulfill the criteria."

"Forget her. You'll find something else."

"I suppose we had better go. I'd better stay with Mom again tonight. Do you mind if Joe rides with me?"

"No. I'll follow you."

As we begin the long drive back to see my father, Joe by my side, Hank following right behind us, I wonder if I should plant a few flamingos in my father's yard. Six would do it. Ten would be too many.

Conversation

"Are you happy?"

"Occasionally."

"I know what you mean. Some days I feel like I'm on top of the world. Other days I feel like shit."

"I wanted to smash into the back of a truck the other day."

"God, are you depressed?"

"No, just pissed off."

"About what?"

"Well, that's the scary part. I'm just pissed off."

"I know what you mean."

Conversation

"How does it feel to be forty years old?"

"Like I wish I was twenty."

"You look like you're about thirty."

"What do you want?"

Driving Through New Mexico

LIMBO

Most of the time, I am not breathing. Air surrounds me here, but I cannot breathe. Below me, the Arkansas River flows eastward, always fluid, always changing. Cottonwood trees and tumbleweeds border the riverbed. The river, like a cowboy's idle bullwhip, stumbles through the monotonous wheat fields. Away from the riverbed, the land barely rises, and instead slips quietly into a treeless land where the ghosts of buffaloes dine nightly upon the bones of the dead. When I was a child, this bit of land where the earthen dike dovetails with the dam was enough for me. I will miss this place.

Breathing has never come easy for me. Before I came to the river, I lived in a state of namelessness. I was not alone, but no one taught me how to breathe. For two months, the women at the home guarded me and whispered near my face, but they would not teach me how to breathe. They could not call me by my name because I did not have one.

Mother's Voice

I loved telling the story of my daughter's adoption when she was young. Having her in my life was like suddenly turning a light on in a darkened room. A single bulb burning bright in the center of four walls. Her room appeared too small before we brought her home, but once I placed her into her crib, the walls seemed to disappear, and the window screen became transparent. I could see the possibilities for this child stretched out across the open fields.

Her adoption story began with the agency which examined my husband and me. They searched for anything which might interfere with the proper raising of a child. We were grilled and inspected about our religious beliefs, our economic assets, and our morality. Eventually we passed all of their tests, paid a fee, and were declared acceptable adoptive parents. Finally, we would be bringing a baby home to the small farmhouse at the end of the dirt road.

The car trip from Wichita to Dodge City lasted three hours. My husband drove while I held my daughter on my lap. I didn't have a driver's license back then anyway, but as my daughter grew up, I realized that I would have to learn to drive. My husband taught me how to drive by making me go

back and forth down the mile-long dirt road in our pea green Plymouth station wagon. It was not a pleasant time.

When I thought that she was old enough, I tried to explain what adoption meant to my daughter, but she said it seemed vague, detached from her somehow. We used to pull out photo albums and look through the pictures of her as if that might help identify who she was. It bothered her that there were no pictures of her in the hospital when she was born. Her friends photo albums all had pictures marked *newborn*. She told me that it made her a little crazy to think that no pictures of her existed for the first two months of her life.

"What about those two months?" she would ask.

Yes, I thought, what about those two months. I had no answer. All I knew was that her birth parents lived somewhere around Wichita, and that they had placed her for adoption because they were too young to care for a baby. This was the agency's story about the birth parents: the man had big feet and musical talent, and the woman was short and had wanted to name my daughter Connie. I had other ideas and named her after her Grandmother Starbuck.

She was quite young when she realized that not knowing is almost as difficult as knowing. She told me often that her story seemed like a fairytale to her. She said that she dreamt often, sometimes while sleeping, of herself as a

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young child whisked into a treeless land by something large and circular. The wind would howl and push her towards the edge of a grassy cliff.

"But just before I am about to fall, I realize that I am safe. That I can float to the land below."

She began believing in dreams when she was very young, but it would not be enough for her. In grade school, she discovered the power of words, and I learned that holding on to something you've fought for is not always possible. Her adoption story shifted from a slow and peaceful hum of a story to a contorted piece of news. Like barb wire.

Her classmates in Miss Pike's class taunted her one day: *My mom says you're adopted. You don't have a mom. You're stupid.* But she didn't let them get to her. She called the loudest one, Johnny, a son of a bitch. When she told me about it later, I understood why. She had heard her father use this term when he was angry one day, so she supposed that it was a word that anyone could use. She said it felt good saying it. I really couldn't argue with her on that point.

Miss Pike spanked her with a wooden paddle in front of the class. I imagined the voluptuous Miss Pike, hair the color of rattlesnake skin, eyes shaded with a purple-blue that no other woman in Dodge City would be caught dead in, slamming the thick wooden paddle across the backside of my

daughter. I wondered how Miss Pike would feel with a cattle prod poking her in the ribs.

I was furious when I found out and marched down to the school for an explanation. Miss Pike seemed unconcerned that the other children had provoked my daughter's response. Miss Pike, in her too-tight skirt and low-cut blouse, told me that she simply could not tolerate bad language. I told her if she ever laid a hand on my daughter again that I would make the rest of her teaching life miserable. The rest of the year was uneventful.

I did not believe in harming children when they misbehaved. It was the way my mother taught me. Work was the punishment my brother, sister, and I received when we did things we shouldn't. Plus, my mother warned me constantly that God was always watching. I taught that to my daughter. I swear that sometimes she would look over her shoulder to see if it was true. My house was usually spotless since my daughter had a penchant for locating trouble and sometimes inventing it.

She loved bringing animals into the house. Baby pigs, dogs, chicks. I had one rule: no cats. The cats had to stay in the barn. She loved cattle and horses, but never tried to bring them into the house. Her horse, Willie, was a mean horse, and when she rode him, she always wore this determined look on her face, never a face of fear.

The neighbor boys taught her how to milk their dairy cows. Anything the four neighbor boys did, she tried to do it better. Faster. Longer. They scared me to death, but she followed them around like the baby pigs followed her around.

Our neighbors to the east of us, (we had none to the west), had a house even smaller than ours, and it was packed tight with six children. Sarah and Rex had more children than cattle. Their oldest girl baby-sat for my daughter on the rare occasions when her father and I went out to the Lamplighter for fried chicken and dancing to a live band. The four boys made up the bulk of the family, and a baby girl was born a few years after the last boy.

Sarah was like a sister to me. Her husband, a regular on Sunday mornings at the First Christian Church at the end of the dirt road, beat his children with a strap for just about any infraction. I felt that I was always watching Sarah, waiting to see if she needed me, but she never asked for help. My daughter asked me once if God was watching the neighbors or if he was too busy watching her.

She dressed like the neighbor boys, acted like them, and talked like them. She learned to swear and swagger like a bull rider before she turned ten. When I found out that she jumped off of the neighbor's garage at the urging of the

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She dressed like the neighbor boys, acted like them, and talked like them. She learned to swear and swagger like a bull rider before she turned ten. When I found out that she jumped off of the neighbor's garage at the urging of the

four boys, I begged her to start acting like a young lady. I bought her another dress, but she refused to wear it.

"Can't climb fences in a dress," she'd say as she ran through the house, clutching a pig, dogs following at her heels.

I was forty-seven years old, and my daughter was ten in June of 1965 when the John Martin Dam in Colorado overflowed its banks and spawned a wall of water down the path of the Arkansas River towards the Great Plains of Kansas. The culmination of snow melt and heavy spring rains in the mountains meant disaster for the flatlands of Kansas. The riverbanks could not contain what the John Martin Dam could not control. We had little time to pack our belongings and remove our livestock off of our property.

I loved my house at that minute more than anything in the world. How could I decide what to pack? What could I live without? Would the walls hold back the water? Would the water be deep? If only I had an upstairs where I might carry everything to.

I ran through the house, throwing things in bags, and piling things on top of furniture. My daughter helped me by running things out to our car and bringing me glasses of iced tea. I had an incredible thirst. When I told her that it was time for her to pack her things, she stood in her room, wondering what to choose.

Her room, more like a hallway, a place to pass through on the way to somewhere else, had three doors; one led to our bedroom, one led from the kitchen into her room, and finally, a door to the bathroom. In order to go to the bathroom, it was necessary to pass through her room. Inside the bathroom, another door led to the storage room where her clothes were strung along a pole stretched the length of the room. She once told me about a girl in town who had a closet the length of her room, and that this girl had ribbons to match all of the dresses. "What a waste," my daughter said. I didn't know if she met the dresses or the ribbons.

"We have to hurry, dear," I said.

"I can't decide what to pack." She sounded angry. Suddenly, she ran outside, then called me to come. She stood next to her purple Stingray bicycle and her dog, Stinker. "I've decided."

I said, "That's nice, but how about packing some clothes?" I felt like laughing and crying at the same time.

She ran back into the house and threw a bunch of T-shirts, shorts, and jeans into an old brown suitcase. I packed two of her dresses in my bag.

After we finished packing and prepared to drive to my mother's house, we took turns kissing her father good-bye and pulled away from the house.

"I can't breathe, Mom," she said, and I knew what she meant. I saw my husband fade behind a cloud of dust. A tumbleweed blew past us towards the irrigation ditch, and I started quietly repeating to myself *maybe it won't be too bad.*

The River

The Arkansas River rises in the Colorado Rockies and then unfurls through the lowlands of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. Earthen dikes along the river trick the eye into believing that the land ripples gently, one wheat field after another, one farm house after another, while cascades of pastures fluctuating as the cattle move and sway, break the repetitious colors of brown and gold. Through this lens, I search for the river. I know it is just beyond what I cannot see. I know that it is there, that it breathes, that it strips away while it feeds.

The dike prevented me from watching the river from my bedroom window, but even though I could not see the river with my eyes, I knew it was there, like the thunder that rolls across the fields just before a storm. The river pulled me towards it like the moon shifts the tides, tempting me, teasing me, while I waited for it to reveal itself to me.

Father's Voice

We raised our daughter in the last house on a dead-end road. People called it the dirt road because it was never officially named. The road was a mile-long and straighter than the dull edge of a knife. It began at the First Christian Church down by a small bridge over the irrigation ditch and ended at our house. Eight houses were in-between.

Behind these houses were fields which rose at their northern-most point into dikes. To the naked eye, it looked as if fields and a slight strand of cottonwood trees stood between the spectator and Fort Dodge. The river was not visible from our house.

The river flowed slightly north and west of our land, a mere two minutes by foot down a dirt path, but then gradually veered further north and east. Down by the church, it was a distant mile away. The builders of the church did not rely on distance to save them from the river though. They built the small white building on top of a six feet high concrete block foundation in the event that God couldn't protect it from any overflow.

South of the dirt road were an irrigation ditch and acres and acres of corn fields. The irrigation ditch, the baby of Harry Riley's dam, sliced through the countryside for several miles feeding wheat fields and corn fields along

the way. Farmers depended upon this water, and Harry never let them down.

Down by the church, where the dirt road connected with the paved road, was the grade school my daughter attended through eighth grade. It was a long brick building with a football field out back. There never seemed to be enough boys for a football team, but they kept the field prepared in the event that enough strong farm boys were allowed to do anything after school besides chores.

We passed the church and the school on our way to town every single day. There were no alternative routes, no back alleys. Seeing that church every day sort of kept me in check even though I avoided going to it unless somebody was getting married or buried. My daughter sang there one Sunday when she was about twelve, so I went for that. Wore my brown suit. She was trying to be a singer then, so she'd sing wherever they'd have her.

My daughter learned to read the road the way farmers figure out clouds when they are looking for rain. Instead of looking upward, and either praying for rain or cursing the cloudless blue-white sky, she watched the road for cars. She could predict who was driving down the road long before she could make out the car or truck. She could tell by their dust. Cheaters, as she called those people who fished illegally, always drove real slow down the road as if they

could sneak up on our driveway. Regulars hit the corner by the church and accelerated until they reached their own driveway. Dust clouds were common on our road. You learned to breathe it, smell it, and taste it.

The mailman's truck was the easiest vehicle to figure out. Stop and go. Stop and go. Nick Jackson told my daughter she was the best customer he had after she got into the pen-pal business. She had almost thirty of them, including a young man from Nigeria. Every summer after church camp, she always had a new batch of boys writing to her. Not long letters. I could tell by the thin envelopes. The girls she wrote to sent back bulging letters.

One boy she met at camp when she was fourteen, wrote her a few letters, and then showed up in our driveway one day in an old white hearse. He was sixteen and drove all the way from Pratt. I remember watching her walk barefoot down the sidewalk towards this boy who had a grin like a snake, hair hanging over one eye, and wondering if I should warn her about him. He moved towards her like he was going to inhale her when he got close enough. I thought I saw her disappear for a minute. My wife warned me to get my face off of the door.

On summer nights when my daughter got a bit older, she liked to sit on the fence rail at the corner of the field and peer down the dirt road with her hands cupped over her

eyes like they were binoculars. She began waiting for him. Dean. A boy in a dark red Chevy with an oversized engine. He had the same walk as the boy from Pratt, but not the same smile. Dean didn't smile. His face was expressionless, but his hands moved over her as if he were tracing lines on a road map. I'd watch her walk down the sidewalk, arm-in-arm with Dean. He would lead her to the driver's side and help her climb in. Once inside, she would carefully straddle the stick shift so that she could be next to him. I hated the car. I hated him. He made me nervous.

Sundays were good days. Family days. Everyone on our road had company for Sunday dinner. My wife's mother and father came out every Sunday after services at the First Presbyterian Church in town. My daughter never tried to sing there. Said the minister's son was always trying to get her into some alcove or trick her into going to the janitor's room in the basement. She said he had fish hands, and she was tired of slapping them away.

After her grandfather died, her grandmother continued coming out on Sundays until she died at the age of ninety-two. But by then, my daughter had moved on, so it was just the three of us sitting at a table with too much food and too many ghosts.

Sunday was the only day I could be home all day. My wife and I owned a restaurant at McKinley-Winters Livestock

Incorporated. On sale days, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, we worked from early morning until late at night. Loren, who lived next door to the church, helped around the farm on days the rest of us were tied up at the restaurant.

My daughter could go anywhere in the sale barn. The offices were across the hall from the restaurant, and a western clothing store and a party room were upstairs. The sale arena made up the bulk of the building.

The Branding Iron, the western clothing store, chose her as their model when she was three years old, and her picture was on the front page of the *Globe*. She wore an outfit that had *Tomboy* embroidered on the jeans. The black and white picture of her sitting at the horseshoe-shaped counter in my restaurant, with that crooked smile on her face as she posed for the camera, seems a bit faded now, but the memory is sharp and full.

I made her stay away from the cattle pens on sale days because of all of the semi-trucks unloading cattle. She would go upstairs to the party room across from the Branding Iron, stand in front of a window, and watch the cattle run out of the trucks into the long chutes which led to the holding pens. "Mean men, mean trucks," she told me once, insisting that the wheels of the semis were filled with blood.

Her favorite spot in the building was in the auctioneer's booth where she had a perfect view of the cattle coming through the arena and of all the cattlemen waiting to bid. She loved the cadence of the auctioneer's voice as he sang out the prices. She liked to go into the booth when no one was around and pretend that she was the auctioneer, but she could never speak fast enough. But this too began to bore her, and after the flood in June of 1965, she never set foot in the auctioneer's booth again. Not after she heard that dead cows had floated right past our house. Just wasn't the same.

Fugue

There was a path from my driveway to the dam. As a child, I walked it barefoot, careful to avoid sticker patches and rattlesnakes. Tumbleweeds strolled aimlessly past me gathering at the irrigation ditch until a strong westerly wind would force them out and whip them towards defenseless corn and wheat fields.

My dog Stinker, a Cocker Spaniel who climbed the wooden gates and fences on our farm, always followed me expectantly, hoping for an adventure worthy of a dog who preferred going over fences rather than under.

And we would follow the path until we reached the spot on the highest part of the dam which stood level with the tops of the irrigation ditch gates. Two steps to the east of the gates was the iron ladder which had been built into the concrete dam so that the dam keeper could climb down to the river. Once reaching the bottom of the ladder, the dam keeper could walk across the cement slab spanning the width of the river and raise or lower the small wooden gates to coincide with the demand for water in the irrigation ditch. The slab and the four foot drop below it created a poor man's waterfall. It was a perfect spot for watching.

There were days when the Kansas wind subsided long enough for me to hear the sound of my own breathing. It was during these moments that I began to understand the pitfalls

of motionlessness.

Harry Riley's Voice

I was paid to watch the river. Every morning and every night. Opening gates. Closing gates. Making sure that all of the farmers had water for their fields. If I needed a lot of water running through the irrigation ditch, I had to open up the twenty-foot high irrigation gates, and then climb down the iron ladder into the river. Then, by pulling up all of the gates running along the concrete slab, one by one, the river would slowly begin its surge to the south.

I hated it when I had to block off the entire river, because that's when the kids would show up and run across the slab into the trails leading to Fort Dodge. It's not that they ever touched my gates; it's just that I was afraid that if one of those kids ever dropped into the river or fell down and cracked their head open, I'd have a dead body on my conscience. And it was always girls down there wanting to cross over into Fort Dodge. My daughter was one of them.

It was a hell of a river until the flood of 1965 came through and wrecked my life. I still felt the need for it. Like blood running through my veins, I guess. Even after the flood ripped my house off of its foundation and left it broken in a flood-made riverbed a half-a-mile downstream, I still needed to work the river. The irony of the thing was

that my house ended up like some old bone in a graveyard while the family's house closest to the dam and the river just stood there. Didn't budge.

Well, it was easy to see why. When the dam broke, the main current went to the south. Turned just like it was filling up the irrigation ditch. I guess I trained the water well.

We tried to hold off the river. Tried to keep it in its banks. About twenty men, farmers, ranchers, all of the men with houses on the dirt road, tried to make the dam hold the river off. And we would have too, if we hadn't been scared off the dam the night the flood rolled into town. We worked for about ten hours straight trying to shore up the dam and the dike. Some city men had driven to Garden City, about fifty miles west of town, to get a first hand look at what was coming our way. They put a call through to us right away and ordered us to get the men to higher ground immediately because the wall of water was like nothing they had ever seen before. "Too dangerous," they said.

We had set up a camp over on a hill about a mile from the dam, and so we headed there to listen for the river to roll in. As we sat outside of our tents and campers that night, sipping a little black jack, and filling ourselves with fried chicken from the Lamplighter, everyone grew silent as we began to notice the sound of a river exploding.

We couldn't see it, but we could hear it, and it scared us all to death. No one slept that night for fear the river would continue to climb, maddeningly, searching for us, as we clung to the safety of a small grass covered hill south of the Arkansas River.

Finding Harry's House

It stood in the riverbed about three miles east of our house. The flood had wedged Harry Riley's house in the riverbed north of his land. It wasn't the natural riverbed either, but one carved out by an overgrown river. This stretch of sand rippled and smelled. Dying cottonwood trees were scattered around like pick-up-sticks. Tires and wads of barbed wire sat among clumps of tumbleweeds and clods of dirt. A small pink shirt hung from a downed tree branch. It looked like Harry's daughter's shirt.

Toby and I had been forbidden to go to Harry's house, but since both of our mothers and fathers worked all day and usually into the night, we had no one to report to on most summer days. Sometimes, Toby's oldest sister Sally was supposed to keep an eye on us, but her idea of watching us consisted of staying away from her and her boyfriend. They spent most of their time in her bedroom listening to records. Sally ended up pregnant when she was seventeen, and Toby and I weren't surprised.

The day that we found Harry's house was beautiful. At ten o'clock in the morning, the temperature climbing past eighty degrees, not a cloud in the unforgiving sky, we crawled into Harry's house. It was slanted at a forty-five degree angle, and reminded me of a fun house I had gone

through at the Kansas State Fair the year before. The only difference was that this house was silent. The floorboards creaked as we made our way through the kitchen. We could hear ourselves breathing.

We made our way into the living room where toys covered with mud clung to the corners. A fat brown chair lay on its side against a wall. I thought it must have been Harry's chair. It was exactly like my father's chair except that Harry's was covered with mud.

"Let's get out of here," I said. Toby agreed. We went outside and crawled on top of a downed tree after checking it for snakes.

"Must have been scary," Toby said.

"What if he'd been in it?" I asked.

"Dead. He'd be dead."

"Wish I hadn't had to go to my grandmother's house," I said. Toby nodded in agreement. She'd been stuck at her grandmother's house, too.

My father had sent my mother and I to my grandparents' house north of town by the Country Club. We had to stay there for two weeks. I got to swim in a neighbor's pool and had it all to myself. I rode my bike all over that part of town on paved roads with no holes in them. But those were the only good things about staying there.

When my mother and I were finally allowed to return home, we were relieved to find that our house had survived the onslaught of water, but everything that had been stored in our garage and storage were gone. In our haste to pack, we had left a trunk filled with pictures of my father's family, and Willie's saddle and bridle behind. The river had claimed them.

When the river had burst through the dam and the dike, the water which bled off of the main current had gone south of our house. Since our house had been built up high on concrete blocks, and my father had sandbagged around the perimeter of the house, we did not get any water in our house. Our neighbors, one-hundred yards to the east, received three feet of water in their house.

Our fields were brown and flat and full of sand and quicksand. I was not allowed to play outside until my father felt that the rattlesnakes were mostly gone, and a spot of quicksand in our front yard had been cleaned up. But what I remember most about being outside after the flood was the quietness and the lack of color. It was like looking at the black and white photographs in our picture book, everything colorless, everything frozen in time. I cannot remember hearing birds for many months.

"Dead," I said to Toby as we stared at the odd pile of wood which used to be Harry's house. "He would have been dead."

Learning to Drive

My father didn't care much about farming after the flood, so he left the pens empty and decided to teach me how to drive. The pickup, a red and white ford, three-speed on the column, had an AM radio and an oversized ashtray. I liked to drive the truck down the road between our fields and our livestock pens, pretending that I was in charge, tipping my cowboy hat at no one and nothing. After some time passed, my father bought a few head of cattle and plunked them down in the middle of what used to be a small wheat field. I liked it better when the pens were empty. Then, it was just empty against empty. A handful of cattle set against a wall of barren pens looked strange. He never let Willie come back home either. So, I kept on driving, barely able to see through the steering wheel.

I liked riding home from the restaurant with my father because sometimes he stopped at the Trail Street Tavern and drank a few beers. The music from the jukebox mixed smoothly with the laughter of the working men and the giggles of women who Toby said were witches. She'd seen one of them sneaking up the stairs in back of the building one night pulling Dee Potter's dad along by his Champion Bull Rider belt buckle. Toby said that these women cast spells on men. I always kept an eye on the door to make sure my

father was safe from any magic that might be happening inside.

One night, while waiting in the truck, keeping my eyes focused on the door, I accidentally knocked the truck out of gear. It rolled several feet backwards due to a slight incline in the dirt parking lot. I was glad that my father had not parked on a hill, but Dodge City has few hills, so any slight variation in elevation is usually missed.

But one hill in town was famous to outsiders. Boot Hill was where men were buried with their boots on. This variation in the overall rise and fall of the town mattered mostly to tourists who were eager to amuse themselves with bones and dirt. Once, my friends and I ventured upon the grounds of the re-built historical part of the town and watched a re-enactment of a gunfight, but it didn't mean much to us. We'd seen glimpses of it all of our lives as we passed by on Wyatt Earp Boulevard.

Fourteenth Street intersects with Wyatt Earp Boulevard not far from Boot Hill. This street starts out north of town and slopes downward towards South Dodge. It does not rely on the dead in order to achieve its place in the history of the city. Just south of Wyatt Earp Boulevard are railroad tracks and beyond that lies the Fourteenth Street Bridge which was built for a much wider river than the

Arkansas. During the flood of 1965, the bridge looked as if it were spanning water worthy of its concrete and steel.

It is at this point that the town begins to shrink upon itself, spreading like arthritic hands outward into pockets of houses and businesses, leaving the substantial part of town behind. When the flood came, it swallowed up the south end of town, filled houses with mud, severed farmers crops from the fields, drained families life savings, and prompted the people on the north side of town to drop a few extra dollars into the overflowing baskets at the First Presbyterian Church. The Catholics and the Baptists came in a close second and third. The First Christian Church down at the end of the dirt road was closed two months for repair.

The summer I turned fourteen and was old enough to obtain my restricted license, my father said that it was time for me to attend Mr. Black's Driving School. Bud Black was a smooth-looking man, cigarettes hadn't ruined his face yet, and his crew-cut gave him the appearance of a military man. Mr. Black taught ninth grade economics during the school year, and through pure, bad luck, I ended up in his economics class in the fall. He gave me an A-plus in driver's education, and a C-minus in economics. While I could parallel park flawlessly and make perfect three-point

turns, I failed to understand the intricacies of supply and demand.

At the age of fourteen, restricted license in hand, I graduated from the fields by my house to streets and bridges of the town. There were three bridges connecting the north side of town to the south. By using alternate routes and randomly choosing which bridge to cross to move between home and school, or home and work, or home and my grandmother's, I was not hindered by the smallness of my place on the river behind my house. From these bridges, I could watch the river before it flowed past my house and catch a glimpse of it after it had safely passed.

The Fourteenth Street bridge was farthest from my home on the west side of town. A bit nearer to my home, and the main route we used to go anywhere, was the Second Street bridge. Our connection to the lifeblood of the city. The Coronado Bridge, a few miles east of my house, was the closest but yet the most dangerous to my eyes because of the men who spent their days fishing and drinking beer there. My father told me that it was a place where men spent their time dreaming, but I never saw them with their eyes closed. As I lumbered across the bridge in my mother's Pontiac, I would glance their way, but I didn't dare stop. Instead, the lights from the radio, the hum of the car's engine, the air seemingly chasing me through open windows, made me drive

on. I wondered if they knew why a dirty stream of water was capable of splitting a city and stealing a man's house.

Tennis Shoes and Blood

I became a thief in 1968 when I stole Sandy Pierson's new tennis shoes. Lifted them right out of the girls' locker room, still in the box. Still white. Still virginal. This girl who wore candy-striped dresses and curled ribbons in her hair had decided that I acted more like a boy than a girl. Along with this declaration, made before a group of girls who had been my friends through the first thirteen years of my life, she claimed that I shouldn't be allowed to watch *The MOVIE.* But I was way ahead of her because I had never intended to watch *The MOVIE.*

The movie, "A Young Girl's Guide to Becoming a Woman," was required viewing for all seventh and eighth grade girls at the Wilroads Gardens Grade School. For one hour, around twenty girls, the combined total of seventh and eighth graders, were shuttled into a classroom, blinds pulled, and voices silenced. When Toby's sister forewarned us that it would be the worst hour of our lives, I came up with a plan to get out of watching it. Toby refused to try it even though it worked for me for both years. I figured that I didn't need to watch a movie about menstruation because I had already learned everything I needed to know from Toby's

sister and her endless stash of *True Romance* magazines. I was not afraid of sex because I couldn't care less about it.

In 1967, prior to the theft of Sandy's shoes, my mother gave me a book about sex. These facts of life as they were called seemed to me like something a person ought to know naturally without having to watch a black and white film or reading a book. Inborn. Unlike rules (like making us watch a movie) which were man-made and were likely to be challenged and broken.

To placate my mother, I read the book secretly, careful not to read it when my father was home, fearing that if he found me reading it that some connection between it and sex would be made. Toby's sister's magazines spelled out all too plainly what happened to young girls when they were confronted with sex: disaster. I wanted to avoid that at all costs.

In a way, I was jealous of Sandy in her brightly-colored dresses and her Mary Janes. When go-go boots became popular, she got a white pair of those. For gym class, she wore perfectly white tennis shoes. Sandy was rich, and new tennis shoes meant nothing to her. To me, it seemed as if she got a new pair as soon as the old ones became dirty, and believe me, there was a lot of dirt flying around the school.

Even though they were rich, Sandy's parents preferred country living because they loved horses. They owned ten of them and kept them in specially built pens. But Sandy didn't care about horses because she wanted to live in town where her true friends lived. She knew she had been born to live in town. Belonged at the regular junior high. Not at some country school where first graders and eighth graders shared the same bathrooms. So, bored, Sandy tried to run the seventh and eighth grade social circle by promising free rides on her horses for those girls and boys who allowed her to call the shots.

For some reason, probably because I never went to her house to ride her horses, and because I didn't join the phone group who called each other up every night to decide what dress to wear to school the next day (I was into a pair of pink pedal-pushers at the time), Sandy decided that I should be cut off from the other girls. When she suggested that I shouldn't be allowed to watch the movie, I decided that she was right even though I didn't tell her that.

I couldn't think of a single reason to sit in a classroom crowded with girls when I could be in a classroom filled with seventh and eighth grade boys watching a movie about the invention of the automobile. After all, boys didn't need to learn about sex; they needed to learn about

cars. Girls needed to learn about sex, take home economics in ninth grade (as I would later find out), survive high school without becoming pregnant, and then, get married and have babies. It was really a movie about timing. Timing was everything.

So, that first year, I forgot to take the note home to my mother and failed to obtain written permission to watch the movie. No note; no movie. I lied to the school secretary and told her that my mother didn't want me to see it, so in with the boys I went.

The first year Sandy Pierson thought it was hilarious and that justice had prevailed. The second year, after I once again lost the note, she came up to me after the movie as I walked out of Mr. Stevens room laughing with several boys and said, "You planned this all along didn't you?" I smiled and kept on walking. That's why I stole her shoes and dumped them in the river. For taking two years to figure out something so simple.

The Blues

They came out of nowhere. Like a roll of thunder rumbling in ominous crescendos, I could feel the blues wash over me like a cool spring rain. But I could not see them. I searched the sky, hungry for their source, but nothing was revealed to me until that clear April day when I saw lightning out of the corner of my eyes. Like heat lightning. Suddenly, I could see what could not be seen. Bolts of silver. Streaks of white heat. Driving became more complicated.

The lightning became more frequent as the blues hid just below the surface, slightly out of reach, dark and oxygen-rich. I met Dean and began driving with my eyes closed. The summer passed by slowly as the heat of Kansas robbed the sky of rain.

Dean's Voice

I threw her against the lockers at high school one afternoon after seeing her talking to some six-foot-four football goon. Rumor had it that he wanted to ask her out. A rich boy after my girl. He was destined to be a doctor or something, and I didn't see how she figured in his plans. So, I pinned her against the locker until she promised me that she would never speak to him again. I used to be a wrestler, so I could play tough. Walk that walk. When she walked away from me that day, after I promised her that I would never hurt her again, she acted like it didn't mean anything at all.

I watched her forever it seemed before we finally exchanged words. I had heard of her and how she liked to write poetry, and I wanted her to write for me. She was sixteen, and I was seventeen.

One night at a party down on Sunflower Street, she walked up to me slowly, her eyes half closed, her body swaying to the music. She danced in front of me, expectantly, waiting for me to speak, but I had never been good with words. I could not think of anything to say to make her stay close to me, but it didn't matter.

"Can't you talk?" she asked.

"When I want to," I answered.

"I think you want to."

She was right. I wanted to. She asked me to take her home after her friend Toby left.

"Isn't Toby coming back?"

"No. I told her that I thought I had a ride home."

"What if you didn't?" I asked, amazed at her nerve.

"I can walk."

"Don't you live way out in the country?" I asked, stupidly realizing that I had just revealed that I knew something about her.

"It's only about five miles from here."

"It's dark out."

"So? It isn't that hard to find." She started to walk off, and I realized right then, that I'd better start thinking straight. Start talking right. I took her home that night down a dark road to nowhere it seemed. Past the Sandpit, dimly lit houses, a youth home for boys lit up carefully as if the lights could contain them somehow, the desiccating plant where the smell of dead animals made us hold our noses until we passed, then more houses.

"How can you stand this drive every day?" I asked.

"Well now, I don't have much choice, do I?"

I didn't say much after that for fear of saying the wrong thing. When I dropped her off at her house at the end of a long, dirt road, I realized as I watched her walk up

the sidewalk to her house that I never wanted her to walk anywhere without me again.

It was hot that summer, and we drove around in my 1966 Chevy exploring country roads, finding all of the hiding spots out at the lake, and she began writing poetry for me. When school started, I convinced her to do my English homework, and for the first time in my life, I got an A in something involving words. When she typed my papers on her mother's big, black typewriter, I used to sit across the table from her and watch. She was fast.

I'm not sure when the trouble started between us. She said I was getting too involved with drugs. Marijuana. Hash. Acid. Speed. One high after another. I felt myself slipping a bit. Started looking at the down side of things while she wanted to see the good things. She didn't understand that my addiction to her was much worse than anything I was feeding my body.

One night when I was at Richard's trailer and not expecting to see her, she walked in right when I had the needle poised against my arm. She pushed Toby back outside and slammed the trailer door without saying anything. A few hours later, she and Toby showed up with a half-empty bottle of Boonesfarm wine and never mentioned what had went on earlier.

One night soon after that, she snuck out of her grandmother's house, walked two miles in the dark using streetlights to guide her and shadows to hide her from the cops, and lightly knocked on my window until I woke up. She had been staying with her grandmother she said so that she could get a feel for living in town again. Like she had for awhile when she was ten. Something about a flood.

"I've got a poem for you," she whispered. I could see her fairly well because of the streetlight at the corner of my street.

"You are crazy," I answered as I opened up the screen and grabbed the small piece of paper.

"See you tomorrow," she said as she ran from my house. I read the poem in the dark. I didn't sleep the rest of the night. She was that good with words.

Things went smooth again for awhile. Bought her a few eight tracks; James Taylor, Carole King. Stuffed animals. Had her sit with me while I worked at my dad's Kwik Shop. Then one day, on the way to the Dairy Queen, she said something that angered me, I can't remember what it was now, and I pulled over, parked along the curb next to Doc Gleason's house, and forced her against the passenger door. Held her there. Yelling at her. Something just came over me, and I wanted to hurt her. Make her feel what I felt. Whatever the hell it was.

Night Moves

"If I had a gun, I would kill you," he said as he choked me, hands locked in a stranglehold around my neck. Holding me against the side of his car, the weight of his body crushed me, warmed me. The same body he had used for the purpose of loving me seemed larger now, the arms stronger. His legs pressed into mine. Blue jeans rubbing against blue jeans. I could not breathe. Could not negotiate this passion.

Tailspin

Toby and I, bored with what the city had to offer, began roaming the perimeter of the town for the purpose of watching the skies. Dark purple clouds, threaded with dark blues and grays, brought the possibility of danger with them. Excitement. Passion. The monotonous cover of blue which usually blanketed the sky on hot Kansas days seemed to be lulling us into a kind of walking numbness. At nineteen, chasing tornadoes was the only way of confronting the emptiness, the colorlessness, and the unforgiving miles and miles of treeless plains. Each of us were looking for that one thing that would allow us to breathe again.

My father had warned us to stay near the river when we chased tornadoes since he believed that they would not cross a river. I understood his concern with our safety, but I could not make him understand the feeling of intoxication, of floating, that I felt while watching a wall cloud breathe life into the sky. I knew that with the slightest rotation of a funnel cloud, that the breath could be sucked out of me and the Kansas dirt the last thing I saw.

Toby and I refused to be confined to the curves of the Arkansas River. We believed that we were like the river, and that we were safe from a tornado's path. We talked of how we wanted to be close enough to one to feel the wind, to

watch it as it sucked up the Kansas dirt, but nothing more. Night after night, we watched the sky, tempting the clouds to spin.

On cloudless nights, we divided our time between Fred's Tavern and the Horseshoe Bar. We played foosball and loosely flirted with men who spent their time farming by day and drinking by night. Cloudless skies constrained us to a game of skill instead of a game of chance. We did not like losing because we believed that it was dangerous.

So, Toby and I began to coast through the nights. It was as if we were wounded somehow, walking around with masks on, laughing too much, drinking too much. I never asked her how she made it through her nights, but my nights were filled with dread. I felt as if I were being squeezed by imagined hands made of sorrow and pain. Hands welcoming the dead. I missed Dean, but I could not understand why.

I began writing poetry, but it was not filled with rage or anger. Not filled with politics or the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Not filled with stories of girls who once had brothers. Not of headbands and burning bras. Not of Roe versus Wade or Nixon's bullshit. I could not look past the land at the end of the long dirt path so I wrote of a river that flowed past my house willing to take a man's house, but unable to take me to a place where I could find passion. I could not rest. I could not sleep.

One night at the Horseshoe Bar, Toby and I played endless games of foosball against two men we had known for some time. They were killing time, too. Toby and Randy began playing distractedly, their eyes becoming more intent on each other than the game. When they decided to leave, Randy's friend and I decided to ride around for awhile. I considered going home, but thought that if I spent a few hours with Jared that I could avoid going home to the stillness of my room.

We stepped outside into the night air, and the coolness of the bar was replaced by instant sweat. I could feel the change in the weather without looking towards the sky. We climbed into Jared's MG, and he drove south, and then east. I asked no questions because I preferred silence.

At eighty miles an hour on Highway 56, Jared drove directly into a wall cloud. This was not the way Toby and I played the game. We were not foolish enough or brave enough to look for the tail of a wall cloud. The car seemed to rise above the ground with every gust of wind. As the lightning highlighted the sky, we watched the wall cloud as it bloomed and faded into view. Purple and blue clouds filled the sky punctured by fissures of blinding light.

"Don't worry, we'll make it," he yelled above the wind as he laughed and sipped from his Budweiser, casually, as if he were sitting on his front porch. The lightning was no

longer in the corner of my eye, but instead had come alive in front of me. I felt as if it were striking me in the face, punishing me. The pulse of the evening air hammered at the small white car.

I could not speak, but strangely felt my breathing become regular, normal. I wondered if I would ever see my room again, so I made a quick deal with God, hoping that he might be listening. In one split second, the life span of a lightning bolt, I realized the dangerousness of being a passenger in a car where the driver did not care if the last thing he saw before dying was Kansas dirt exploding in his lungs. He had gone beyond the thrill of the chase.

A few years later, Jared committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Breathing had become difficult for him somewhere along the line, and he could no longer find the passion to live. His friends said that he was depressed because a girl named Nancy had walked out on him. I thought about that night in his car, and I realized that his passion had taken him to far. He had gone over the edge alone.

After his funeral, I sought shelter under the voices of the cottonwood trees which filtered the Kansas wind above the Arkansas River. I wondered why breathing was so close to dying.

Toby and I were losing interest in chasing tornadoes, but we decided to give it one more try. We headed north of

town, far from the river, about a mile west of the feed yards. The skies became violent as they shifted into an dangerous shade of purple. Sirens blended with the onslaught of wind and rain, but we could not see the funnel cloud from where we sat like two spiders waiting for their prey. We had failed again, so Toby drove me to my parents' house. They were slightly drunk and laughing over the way the tornado had tricked them. It had bounced through the fields behind our house, cutting a path parallel to the river, but it had not crossed the river. My mother said, "I couldn't close the bedroom window," as if that were all that mattered.

Toby's Voice

"Remember Harry Riley?" I said as we sat on her parents front porch. She looked at me carefully, and I felt guilty for what I was about to say.

"What about him?"

"Well, remember that day we went into his house after the flood?" She nodded. "We decided that Harry would have been dead if he had stayed in his house during the flood." She sipped noisily on her beer.

"What's your point?" she asked.

"I'm moving to California. In two weeks."

Dead silence.

"Did you hear me?" For as long as I had known her, she had pretended not to hear things she did not want to hear.

"I heard you. Wow. California. So? Should I be impressed?"

"No. You should come with me. Before you drown in your own house."

"I'm perfectly fine."

"Since when? You haven't been anything for quite a while. Just like me."

"I like it like that. Floating. It's easier that way."

"Dead. You'll be dead before you know it."

Paper Ghosts

Toby took off down the road much like Harry Riley would have in years past. They both had a flair for stirring up dust. I went in the house and grabbed two beers before heading back to the porch. The night sky turned pink, then purple, and eventually slipped into a shade somewhere between blue and black. The wind picked up and a cluster of tumbleweeds inched across the road towards the ditch.

My father came out on the porch and sat down beside me. I offered him a beer, but he said he wasn't thirsty.

"Remember when we had the fence around the yard?" I asked him.

"Sure," he answered.

"You used to tell me that there were paper ghosts in the fence when I used to get scared."

"Right."

"How did you come up with that?" I asked.

He cleared his throat and grabbed the beer after all. "When you were about eight or nine, I can't remember, your horse got loose during a thunderstorm. He ran off. For hours after the storm had passed, you kept staring at the fence, pointing at some spot, telling me that Willie was out there waiting to get back into his pen. I never saw him,

but I still went outside to look for him. There was never any sign of him."

"Where was he?" I asked.

"I don't know. Down by the river. Over at Norton's. Who knows? Since I didn't have an explanation, I told you that you must be seeing paper ghosts. I thought that maybe you had seen paper blowing around in the storm and were imagining Willie when it was paper or trash caught in the fence."

"Did it work?"

"Well, you fell asleep calling Willie's name, and your mother and I decided to give up looking for him for the rest of the night. In the morning, Willie was standing by the fence in the very spot you had pointed at. I guess you knew somehow."

"How?"

"I could never figure that out."

Neither one of us could think of anything to say for a while. We watched as the moon filtered through the fields and lawn, and the night sky shifted everything visible into shadows. My mother softly called to us, so I went inside and assured her that everything was fine.

"We're just talking," I said as I grabbed two more beers from the refrigerator.

I shut the screen door quietly on the way out, handed my father a beer, and reminded him of when we used to sleep out on the front porch.

"I don't think my back could handle it now. Why? Are you thinking of sleeping outside?"

"No, but I'm glad we used to do that." He patted me on the hand, and once again, we both fell silent.

When I was younger, on clear, hot summer nights, my father and I would take the cushions from our divan to make a bed for him, the pad from the bench in the back room to make a bed for me, and the two of us would sleep on the front porch. Most nights, the sky, free from city lights, would loom above us like a sequined mass of marrow. Occasionally, a small airplane stalked the nighttime sky allowing us to dream that we were on the plane heading somewhere south of Albuquerque.

On other nights, the air hung so thick upon our faces that we could barely breathe. We would watch as heat lightning snaked its way around the sky like a pinball machine without sound. My mother always slept inside, preferring damp sheets over sweaty cushions. She'd say, *goodnight, sleep tight,* and I'd answer, *I won't let the bed bugs bite.*

For several nights after Toby warned me that she was leaving, I watched the sunset from my front porch,

smothering myself in the fading light. Night after night, the sky blew red and purple wisps of dirt clouds above the treetops, and I imagined the sun slipping into the ocean instead of dusting the tops of cottonwood trees. I could hear myself breathing, but I knew that Toby was right. If I didn't leave my house soon, I'd be dead before I knew it.

White Lines

Toby moved to California, and I worked so many hours and parties at the Country Club that my boss, a petite French woman named Lucy, asked me what was wrong. I told her I needed the money and that seemed to satisfy her. I knew that she was nervous about losing more of her staff since the previous female bartender ran off with the head chef. One night, they loaded up their cars with her two kids and his favorite pots and pans and headed to an unknown city in Oklahoma. Everyone at work thought it was terribly romantic and told stories of what we would do if that kind of passion were to come our way.

After work, around midnight or one a.m. depending on the crowd, I would drive around the mostly deserted streets in town to unwind before making the long drive home. I liked the emptiness of the town, the neon lights in windows, and the stoplights blinking red or yellow. It was on one of these nightly trips that I ended up talking to Dean again. I climbed into his car.

"How have you been?" I asked, even though I knew because I had heard all of the stories about him. Who he was dating. How he'd cleaned up his act. I felt like I knew more about him than he did.

"I've been okay."

"So, what do you want?" I asked, since he had been the one to indicate the desire for conversation. This was the first time he had wanted to talk to me in some time, and I was relieved to find that I felt emotionless. I loved him, and I hated him at the same time.

"Did you ever cheat on me when we were together?" he asked. I wasn't sure I had heard him right.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I heard you, but I don't know what you mean."

"You know. Did you ever see other guys when we were together?"

"Jesus Christ," I answered. "How can you ask such an asinine question?"

"I wanted to know," he said.

"What difference does it make now?"

"I just need to know."

I opened the car door and climbed out.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "Don't go."

"Did you ever know me at all?" I said as I slammed the door. I drove home as fast as I could. I realized that loving someone did not mean the same as breathing the same air. Toby was right; I was almost dead.

I drove down the dirt road, raising a cloud of dust high enough to choke the dead. I quickly parked my car and

hurried into the darkened house. My dog Charlie greeted me at the door, happy that his wait was over. I grabbed the photograph albums out of the closet in the laundry room and began looking through them. Flesh and bones. Long hair, short hair, tomboy clothes, Easter dresses, prom dates, riding Willie, pictures of myself with every dog I had ever owned, pictures of me with the family. But even with all of these pictures of my body traveling through time, none of them showed me beyond flesh and bones. I had been certain that there would be blood upon the pictures. I thought that I would find traces of lightning in the corners of my eyes. Dead. I'd be dead before I knew it.

Mother's Voice

I knew she'd be leaving us one day, but I thought that she would be married first. For a few years, I had hoped that she would marry a boy from here. Have some babies. But she never seemed to find a groove like some of her friends did. Quite a few girls married about a minute after high school ended, but she avoided that. I think that her relationship with Dean confused her somehow. I'm not sure she knew what she was looking for. She never told me what happened between them. I didn't ask.

The morning she left was beautiful. Cloudless. Not too hot. She promised her grandmother and I that she would write to us all the time. Her father warned her not to speak to strangers for about the hundredth time. For the first time in her life, she drove away slowly, the dirt road barely shedding dust.

Driving Through New Mexico

Somewhere around Albuquerque, I started breathing again. I had been to New Mexico several times before, but never this far west. My father used to take my mother and I to the horse races in Raton when I was younger, but I never imagined myself beyond that point.

With the windows rolled down and my hair swirling like August dust devils, I drove towards the west. There were many places that I wanted to stop, but I felt that I should get to California before I changed my mind.

Two days after beginning my journey, I finally arrived at Toby's driveway. Too little sleep and too much caffeine had left me feeling strung out, hyper. I stood in front of the duplex, a few blocks off of Highway One, and told myself *welcome to Hermosa Beach.* I knocked on the door.

Toby turned out to be different or maybe it was me. Her sister had married and moved out, so it was convenient that I had arrived to help split the rent. We went our separate ways during the day, but sometimes at night, we found time to play foosball at one of the local bars. But Toby was busy juggling several boyfriends at the time, and she seemed to be edgy. Off of her game a bit.

Around Christmas time, I flew home to visit my parents. When I returned to California, the apartment was empty

because Toby had decided to get married. I wondered how she had moved from dating several men to the decision to get married. How had I missed the sign? I didn't have time to worry about it. I had to find a roommate.

Luckily, Paige and Evie needed a new roommate. Another woman who lived with them was moving out to get married. I wondered if there was some sort of boom going on. Marriages seemed to be popping up all over, and I wasn't even dating.

The three of us fell into a steady routine of work and play, but tension surrounded us constantly, like a never-ending game of tug of war. We gained ground on some days and fell flat on our faces on other days. There were days when we felt as if we could have anything we wanted, but more often than not, on those days when we could barely feel the skin covering our veins and our bones, we'd realize that we had a long way to go before we could say that we were where we wanted to be in our lives.

Our apartment seemed to reflect our lives. The living room furniture consisted of a television set and pillows, and in the kitchen, we had an old round table with matching chairs that Evie's mother had given her. Our stove and refrigerator did not work, so we picked up take-out food every night. My bedroom had a bed and a dresser. Paige and Evie shared the larger bedroom, and they each had a bed and a dresser. The ironing board was kept in their room.

On weekend mornings, we ate breakfast at Joe's in Redondo Beach, a place where cheap food and good-looking guys helped us start our day. If we had a bit of extra cash, we'd pig out on beef stroganoff omelets at the Surfboarder in Hermosa Beach. After breakfast, we'd head to the beach for the day. We wanted an apartment near the beach, but the rent for a one-bedroom apartment was four times what we paid for our place.

Although the ocean was very different from my river, I found that the sea breeze, the voices of strangers hovering nearby, and the constant sound of the waves created a sense of peacefulness in me. I thought of the dirt road and the Arkansas River less and less. Sometimes, when our conversations at the beach faded away after we exhausted ideas and plans, we would slip into a void, a place of false dreaming where we were surrounded by voices while clinging to the sand. My breathing became fluid.

Our routine continued until marred by Paige's old boyfriend. Ted started following her everywhere, calling her at odd hours, and disrupting our lives. She began to be afraid to be alone, and Evie and I learned to watch and wait. He showed up outside our apartment building first thing in the morning, so that he could follow her to work. Paige filed complaints with the police, but they said they could not do anything unless Ted physically harmed her.

Evidently, mental harm was allowed. We began devising ways to get her out of the house without being seen.

Our neighbor Louie, whose dream in life was to be on *The Gong Show*, started sneaking her out of our neighborhood in his frog-green Volkswagen and taking her to a friend's house where she had started keeping her car. Still, nothing deterred Ted from stalking her.

One Saturday morning, the front door of our apartment was open as we prepared to leave for the beach. I stood in the bathroom combing my hair and at hearing a noise, I turned and saw Ted standing ten feet away from me on the other side of the screen door.

I walked toward the door as if I were happy to see him, greeted him, and slammed the wooden door in his face. I quickly slid the bolt on and yelled at Paige to call the police. Ted started yelling, animal-like, while Paige called the police. Evie grabbed a broom, and I armed myself with the mop. Suddenly, Ted smashed through our front window with a metal chair borrowed from the front of Louie's apartment. He started pulling out pieces of glass until he could squeeze his large frame inside. Since we did not have a back door to escape through, we froze as he lunged toward Paige.

He threw her to the floor and punched her in the stomach. Evie and I jumped on top of him and were trying to

pull him off when the police arrived. I watched as Ted was taken away in handcuffs and wondered why the connection between love and anger was so fragile. I promised myself that I would always remember to breathe on my own.

Paul's Voice

She walked into Sam's apartment without knocking.

"Where's Sam?" she asked.

"Out."

"Who are you?"

"Paul."

"That's nice. When will Sam be back?"

"Later, I guess."

"Do you know anything about converters for radios?"

"Know anything?"

"Yeah. Like how to get them out." Her friend hadn't said a word.

"Maybe." I got up slowly and straightened my hat.

I think she was impressed that I was able to remove the converter out of Paige's car so quickly. I'd always been good with my hands, and it paid off. They thanked me, and said they would come back when Sam was home.

Sam came back shortly after they left, and I asked him about her.

"She's cute, I guess. I think she's got a boyfriend somewhere."

"Somewhere?"

"I guess so. She doesn't go out with anyone here. Doesn't talk about anyone."

So, that's how it is I thought. Well, I didn't think it would hurt to try to get to know her. I had a whole week to work on her before I had to return to Michigan. She wasn't easy to get to know. It seemed as if she were pulling me close and pushing me away at the same time. I couldn't figure her out. She was hot and cold. I wondered what I was letting myself in for.

She went to the airport with me to tell me good-bye. I had planned all of these things I wanted to say to her, but a man and a woman began fighting over a baby right next to the boarding ramp, so my words were left unsaid. The woman begged the man not to take her baby away from her, and the man kept pushing the woman away. She ripped his clothes, pulled at the baby, screamed, begged, and the man continued walking away from her. Security showed up, and took the crying woman away. We could only watch, and then it was time for me to go.

I missed her from the moment the plane took off. A few months later, after plenty of phone calls and letters, I asked her to move to Michigan. I couldn't believe what I heard myself say.

"Why should I move there?" she asked.

"To be with me."

"I'll think about it."

A few months later, she quit her job, sold her furniture (a bed, a dresser, and a bookshelf), and drove from California to Michigan with a short stopover in Kansas. A bottle of champagne she brought along with her exploded when she opened it in my hallway.

"And I used to be a bartender," she announced. We cleaned up the mess.

We moved slowly at first. I was going to college, and she got a full-time secretarial job with a construction company. I'm not sure when I came up with the idea of marriage. Wasn't sure if she'd go for it. Sometimes, she built this wall around her, and I couldn't get past it. She decided that I should meet her parents, so shortly before Christmas, we drove from Michigan to Kansas.

The trip was uneventful until we reached the middle of nowhere it seemed. A blizzard struck about ten miles from her house. She said that she'd only seen one other one like it.

"Kansas blizzards are shitty," she said as I tried to find the two-lane road in front of me. I couldn't see anything, so we inched along. I hoped for the best.

She continued talking in a quiet voice. "Once, when I was at a bar on the north side of town, a storm hit, and trapped my friends and me inside. I called my father to tell him that I would be late, and he didn't believe that I

was watching a blizzard outside. Snow was actually blowing in through a hole in the roof."

"What happened?"

"He didn't believe me. Said it was clear at home. No snow. Well, I didn't believe him. But he was right. After the wind died down, there wasn't really much snow, so all of us went home. There wasn't any snow near my house. None. It was beautiful. The stars were out."

"Shit," I yelled as I slammed on the brakes.

"Shit," she echoed as she braced herself. We were surrounded by cattle, and they looked mad.

"What do we do now?" I asked. I'd never been in a blizzard with a bunch of cows before. Come to think of it, I hadn't passed a car for a long time. "Where the hell are we?"

"Almost home," she answered. "Norton's cattle must have worked their way through a hole in the fence." She laughed, rolled down her window, and started mooing at the cows. "Keep going straight."

"Which way is that?"

She pointed.

By the time we reached her house, I had decided that I was crazy. Meeting her parents. Thinking of marrying her. We hadn't talked much during our trip since we had decided to drive straight through. We had talked once, about three

in the morning. I think we were in Missouri at the time. She drove, and her face was dimly lit by the car's interior lights.

"You ever feel like you can't breathe?" she asked.

"Breathe? I'm not sure what you mean." Sometimes she did this to me. Asked questions I couldn't quite understand.

"Certain places. I don't know. Places where you don't feel right. Can't breathe."

"No. Not really. Well, once. When I was ten, I think. A thunderstorm hit while my family and I were watching TV in the family room. Lightning hit and blew out the TV. I was the closest to the TV, but I didn't get hurt. I remember being scared. I probably had trouble breathing then."

She shook her head as if agreeing. "Lightning." She looked over at me. "Lightning." She smiled, and I fell asleep after that.

Father's Voice

She married Paul. He seemed like a nice young man. College type. Acted intelligent. Didn't want her to marry him at first because I didn't think they had known each other long enough. I thought they needed to test each other out longer. I told her that sometimes you can't really know a man until he goes through some difficulty. I wanted to make sure he wouldn't jump and run the minute things got tough. Young people always think getting married makes everything better. Can't foresee the rough spots. Don't have to work on the relationship anymore. I warned her that just the opposite is true. Takes more work. I wasn't sure if she was ready.

Marriage

At first, I didn't understand Paul because I couldn't negotiate his passion. He never raised his voice, and he never laid a hand on me. He wanted to love me all of the time. Touch me. I felt like I lived in a closet, and it was just the right size. I could handle us in a small space, but when I stepped outside of this place where we existed as two people, I couldn't breathe. I did not know how.

There were no storms for me to chase. There was nothing catching me off guard. I felt as if I could not stumble no matter what I did. There was no one stealing a part of me. This kind of passion seemed much more dangerous, but I wanted to learn it. Learn how to breathe through it. Breathe with it.

We married in Kansas, and I wore my mother's wedding dress. Toby brought vodka and Seven-up into the dressing room before the ceremony and made drinks for us as we prepared to go into the sanctuary.

"Does this remind you of anything?" I asked her.

"What?"

"Girls in one room. Boys in the other."

"Ha. You'll be sorry you missed that movie now," she laughed.

"What do you think will happen to us?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know. Marriage. Kids. The whole bit."

"Means we survived all the bullshit." She picked at a bit of ribbon on her bridesmaid dress. "You really should have seen the movie." We burst out laughing.

Sailing

After Paul graduated, we moved to a small town in the middle of the state. I loved Michigan, the lakes, and the rivers. All of the trees made me claustrophobic, but as time passed, I learned to walk through the forests without feeling as if walls were closing in on me.

A few years passed, and Joe was born. He had my cheeks, and Paul's eyes, but people still asked if he resembled Paul's side of the family or mine. I had a small genetic pool to consider, so I learned to ignore the question and found that giving people a blank stare worked very well. I wondered if something was wrong with me.

Whose side of the family does he take after? He looks just like his father. He looks just like you. He looks like your father. Do green eyes run in the family? I wondered if these things mattered? Was it really necessary to know the past in order to survive? What stories did Joe need to live by? Wasn't what I could offer him enough? I wanted the unknown to remain unknown. After all, Joe had not begun life nameless.

The three of us began taking weekend trips to Higgins Lake where the water was unlike any water I had ever seen. In Kansas, where the lakes have dirt bottoms, the water was always a cloudy gray. In California, the Pacific Ocean

fluctuated between turbulent green, and smoky blue. At Higgins Lake, I could look into the water and follow my toes with my eyes while I walked along the sandy bottom. The deep parts of the lake, where blue swirls into black, fascinated me. I knew that if I could find a light to guide me, I would be able to see the bottom over one-hundred feet down.

We bought a small cottage and fixed it up with the help of Joe who believed that every job required a hammer. We built up a rock wall along the shoreline to protect our beach and cleaned up the woods around our yard. Soon, we bought a Hobie Cat and learned to sail around the lake. Paul would man the sails while I would ride the trapeze. Joe was happy riding the waves.

On the boat, I found that I breathed fluently, relaxing as the wind moved us forward, soothed as the waves slapped against the body of the boat. This was a different kind of calmness for me, floating as if in limbo, but breathing.

The lake was not always calm, and sometimes the wind blew too hard for us to sail. Storms fired up quickly and fanned out just as fast. Late one afternoon, the three of us stood in our living room looking out across the beach, watching the waves crash into our rock wall, and listening to the wind steadily increase. Suddenly, a stillness took our breath away. A small white tornado formed from the dark

clouds churning above the middle of the lake, snaked its way out of the sky, and slowly touched the water. We stared. Motionless. Speechless. None of us were afraid.

The tornado gradually spun into a dark blue, and continued moving eastward, away from us, before suddenly losing its shape. Its tail receded back into the clouds. We cursed our bad luck for not having a camera.

"I've been waiting all of my life to see one," I said. Paul grabbed Joe, and we headed outside.

Breathing

My parents are older now and have decided to sell the house in Kansas. They want to live near us so that they can watch Joe grow up. My breathing is out of rhythm, out of syncopation. I fear that when they sell the house that it will be the end of something. Something I cannot name.

It is not because I think I will miss the walls of the house, or the fields, or even the river, but rather it is something else. I am not sure if I can explain it, but it is there, hanging over me like a star waiting to fall and burst before my feet. It is as if the wolves are howling down by the river again, and I feel as if needles are sliding up and down my spine. I must return home, grab a handful of Kansas dirt, and run my fingers through the Arkansas River.

I fly home this time since I am no longer obsessed with driving and take Joe with me. He thinks that we were meant to fly on airplanes and hums quietly throughout the entire trip. He no longer feels the need to carry a hammer around or to bang things to see if they break.

We land in Wichita, and a man who sat behind us during the flight compliments me on having such a well-behaved son. I tell him that traveling comes naturally to us, and that it is a family trait.

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I rent a small blue car, not sure if it is a Ford or a Chevy, and Joe and I head for Dodge City on Highway 54, and drive directly into a wall cloud. I remain focused on keeping the car on the road, fighting off the gusts of wind and the torrents of rain. I am somewhat relieved that we are not still on the plane, but I am not pleased to be driving such a small car when I am searching the sky for tornadoes. Is it possible that I used to chase them?

"The lightning is awesome," Joe says as he comfortably watches the sky. That is how I used to be, but now I only want us to be safe.

We pass through the storm unharmed. In Kingman, I stop at the A & W and order french-fried pickles and root beer for both of us. Joe, who loves drawing maps and memorizing geography books, is happy to be traveling. He is living what he loves. After a short break, we continue on the road.

We pass through Pratt where a sign announces *Home of Beautiful Women,* and Joe asks if we can stop and look for one. Joe believes in signs, and I try to remember if Dodge City has signs proclaiming anything that I will have to show him.

"Hey, Joe. Do you want to go to Boot Hill?"

"What's that?" he asks.

"It's where cowboys are buried with their boots on."

"Are they naked?"

"That's funny," I say, "I'm not sure."

"Grandpa wants to take me to the rodeo."

"Do you want to go?"

"I guess so. Will you come?"

"Sure."

Since my parents' house is east of town, we use the back roads by taking Highway 154 through Ford. Everything seems the same. Joe wonders where all of the trees are.

We pull into the driveway, and my parents walk out to greet us. They seem so brave to be starting a new life at their age, and I realize that they are much tougher than I had ever imagined.

After unpacking our clothes and eating some sandwiches, I ask Joe if he wants to walk down to the river.

"Things have changed," my father warns.

"Changed?" I ask. "In two years?"

"It's not the same. Take a look for yourself." My mother smiles carefully.

"I will."

Joe and I take our time walking down the path to the river. We walk past one of our fields, and I can't believe how large an empty field can look.

"That was Willie's favorite corner," I say to Joe.

"Oh. Will we see any rattlesnakes?"

"I hope not."

"I want to."

"You're silly."

We walk in silence to the dam and find that Harry's wheel for turning the big gates has rusted shut. The iron gate stands permanently closed, bolted shut, so we climb over it. No one fishes here anymore, and Harry retired as dam keeper several years ago. We look down towards the river. Barely any water flows between the banks and half of the trees are dead.

"Do you like this place?" Joe asks. He doesn't look very impressed.

"I used to. Let's walk down the dike."

My father had warned me that the Army Corps of Engineers had re-figured the river, had reshaped it. They did this to prevent any more floods from ruining the land like the one did in 1965. They had managed to ruin the land anyway.

Joe and I continue our walk along the dike, occasionally passing discarded appliances, old tires, old cars and tractors, a few animals, and the back side of our neighbors' houses and fields. It seems strange to see everything so exposed.

We come upon the old motorcycle racing course. Years ago, someone had started up a course with the hopes of

making money. To get to the course, people drove down another dirt road which was a mile south of here. We always knew when there was a race because we could see the motorcycles racing up and down the dike towards the dam. The course had been highly popular for awhile, but somewhere along the line, people just quit coming. It seemed strange that something so popular could die out so quickly but still remain a part of the land.

"I'm tired." Joe says.

"Me too. Let's go back."

"Are you sad?"

"No, why?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I might be a little."

"How come?"

"I can't believe that people dump their old stuff back here along the dike."

"It's dumb."

"When I was younger, about your age, I used to live down by the river. It was beautiful then. Clean. No one would ever think of dumping trash here. We respected the river too much."

"What happened?"

"I guess people forgot the reasons why they loved the river."

I thought for a minute. Why did I love this river? I used to call it my river. As if I could own it. I had believed that it was mine. I try to clear my head.

"We'd better head back before your grandmother worries about us," I say. I grab Joe's hand, and we walk back towards the house. I glance towards Willie's corner, and for a moment, I think I see him waiting there for me.

Conversation

"We're so proud of you," my mother said. My father nodded in agreement.

"I'm glad. Have I made up for the trouble I caused when I was younger?"

"You were never any trouble," Mother answered.

"I think you've got me mixed up with someone else's daughter."

"Why do you think you were trouble?" she asked.

"I never came home on time."

"But you're so prompt now."

"How about the time I ran off with that country-rock band?"

"You were just confused," my mother said. My father nodded in agreement.

"I hope that I can be as understanding as you two are some day."

"I still am." Mother smiled and took her pills. Father nodded in agreement.

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Conversation

"Reunion shows scare me."

"Reunion shows?"

"Yes. The ones where someone is reunited with their biological mother or father."

"Why does that scare you?"

"I'm just afraid that someone will try to surprise me someday."

"You don't want that?"

"I like things the way they are."

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