

Our Layers Like Dirt, A Memoir

Holly Wilde

----Advisory for Mature Content----



Last night J.B. asked me what I wanted from him.

“I want you to kill your dragon and save me!” I cried.

He backed away from me as I pressed down my skirt.

“I’m sorry,” He said.

“I don’t think I can ever do that.”

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Chapter 1

Awakening

I was married to a nice man named Mike for sixteen years before I met Dozer and J.B.

Back then, my day to day frequency could be compared to a bumble bee buzzing lazily around flowers, or the sound of someone humming a happy tune. I was like one those housewives from the 1950's pressing down her apron to open the door with a lipstick smile. I don't remember having any problems other than what to make for dinner.

It was shortly after the arrival of the Brazilian student that my frequency was turned way up, more like a thousand swarming wasps. I began to pay attention to the way light landed on things. I began to feel like there was something more.

Neighborhood cats came over to wrap around my legs and birds landed a little closer. When I went for my evening run, men in trucks slowed way down.

Then there was the Schwan's man who came every Thursday afternoon. He'd take my order for frozen food and stand in my doorway grinning at me while his big yellow truck idled in my driveway.

"Well, thanks for stopping by," I'd finally say leading him back towards the door.

I could feel a sexual goddess rising up from some ancient place.

That's also when my husband, Mike, started to notice me and started coming home more often. At first, he teased me during sex,

"You can pretend I'm him." He whispered.

"I'll make it pitch dark in here so it seems more real to you."

One night he even dared me to go up to the Brazilian student's room.

"Just go up and fuck him...you know you want to...no one has to know."

He whispered into my neck.

I was alarmed. We'd role played before, but never with real, live flesh involved. Besides, I'd decided weeks ago that it wasn't worth my kids, my marriage, or being locked up as a pedophile for molesting an underage exchange student -- that's why I'd taken up running, as an outlet for my temptation.

My best friend, Essi, was the coordinator for the exchange student program in our city, and even though I'd made it perfectly clear to her that I'd never host another foreign exchange student, she was in a bind.

"Please Holly, you won't even know he's around. He's very polite and just needs a place to stay for a few, short weeks," She pleaded.

And so, a few hours later, Murillo Dos Santo was sitting in my kitchen with a pile of luggage. I'd always heard Brazilians were symmetrical, but he didn't even look real to me. He kept thanking me for taking him in on such short notice.

“I just wanted out of that place,” he said in perfect English, “they had too many rules there.”

He was speaking of his last host family, so I told him we had rules at our house too, but since I’d never raised a teenage boy, I wasn’t exactly sure what they were.

Essi was right, Murray was polite. He was also funny. He made me laugh until I cried, which no one had ever done before.

I led Murray up the narrow stairs to a long forgotten guest room that Mike called “Chuck's Room” because that's where we chucked everything: tangled Christmas lights, out-grown baby clothes, boxes of arts and crafts, books, and love letters. The attic didn’t warrant a horror story, but there was something unsettling about it. Embarrassed, I quickly pulled the sheets off the bed and the curtains off the rods. Years of dust and glitter from the linens and the kindergarten box floated up to the sunbeam coming in from the south window.

“Sorry, I know it’s not the greatest,” I apologized. I remember feeling strangely self conscious about being alone with him.

“Thank you for letting me stay here,” he said opening closets and scoping out electrical outlets.

I was stacking boxes to make a walkway for him. For some reason his gratitude made me blush and I wanted to be back downstairs in the worst way.

Later that evening, I introduced Murray to Mike.

“A little eye candy for you this time?” Mike leaned in and whispered it to me.

I just scoffed because that wasn’t my intention.

Our last exchange student was a pretty girl from Holland that Mike nicknamed “Bursting” because she looked like she would burst out of her top any minute. I had to sneak a peek at her passport one day to make sure she was really only seventeen. I sent “Bursting” back to Holland after a couple of months because the high school kept calling me about her and I didn’t like the way she looked at Mike.

That weekend, we took Murray to my parent’s house, who still lived on the family’s fifth generation cattle ranch in Dove Valley. To this day, Dove Valley is the only thing Mike and I have in common. Not too many people can say they were the happily married high school football captain and homecoming queen runner-up.

“We’re going to show you the Boondocks,” Mike said looking back over his shoulder at Murray, who was sitting in between our two little daughters in the back seat.

“The Boondocks?” Murray asked.

“The Boondocks is what we call a place that is the middle of nowhere.” I answered.

Murray was still confused.

“The middle of nowhere?”

“The countryside.” Mike said reaching over to put his hand on my knee.

When we arrived, Mike handed Murillo a rifle, went over the basics of driving an ATV, and led him down a dirt road.

“He’s a damn good shot!” Mike beamed when they returned three hours later.

Murray grinned. He was covered head to toe in red dust (which made his teeth look even whiter). He put a beer can full of bullet holes on the counter and Mike put a handful empty shells down next to it.

“You should take these bullets back to Brazil as a souvenir from ‘Merica”” Mike said in his best red-neck voice.

“There is so much freedom in this place!” Murray beamed. “I like that I can shoot guns here in any direction and no one really gives a shit.”

My mother gave Mike and Murray a scolding look and swept the dusty bullets and shot-up cans off her counter top.

“Go put those somewhere else, Mike.” She said.

Mike walked over and kissed her cheek.

“Come on Murray, we’re cramping Grandma Goofy’s style,” he said leading Murray back out the door.

It’s true, nobody cares which direction you shoot a gun in Dove Valley—it’s at least forty miles from the long arm of the law. I know I’d never seen a patrol car the entire time I’d lived there. I used to drive my dad’s Chevrolet all over when I was seven or eight years old. Mom would say,

“Holly run to the store and get some milk.”

So I would jump in the truck and pull the seat up as far as it would go so I could see over the dashboard. What’s more, the old truck had a manual transmission so I had to let go of the wheel and push the shift stick into the best gear with both hands.

Essi warned me that exchange students were not allowed to drive under any circumstance, but the circumstance in Dove Valley was sheriff-less dirt roads that went on forever and ever. I sat in the passenger seat, while Murray messed with the stereo and sped too fast down the loose gravel roads with clouds of red dust rising up behind us. My hair was blowing out the window. He said it was more fun than surfing and I was happy as hell.

Chapter 2

The Brazilian Student

Murillo was only seventeen when he came to stay with Mike and me. I told him that he spent too much time on his computer and I convinced him to come downstairs more often. I also convinced him to play Texas Hold-em with me, with cards and quarters, for hours during the day while Mike traveled around the country for work and my kids did God-only-knows-what.

I don't remember exactly when the matronly feelings towards Murray turned into something else, but three weeks before he was supposed to return to Brazil, I started running. I was never a runner, but I didn't know how else to manage my urges towards him.

For one thing, there was no shower in the attic so Murray always showered in the downstairs bathroom. Instead of bringing his clothes downstairs with him, he'd just wrap a towel precariously around his waist and walk from the steamy bathroom, through the kitchen, and up the stairs. Since I was generally in the kitchen cleaning up after my kids, I never missed his steamy body parade. I didn't ask why he was in such good shape, but one day, while we were playing cards, he offered up the explanation,

"I play soccer and fight with my friends," he said.

Then he lifted his t-shirt and rubbed his bronze stomach. I gulped and shuffled the cards.

One day he brushed up against me in the kitchen when I was bent over unloading the dishwasher. I'll never know if it was intentional, but the only thing I could think to do was go to my room, slip on my running shoes and run a 5K without stopping.

That was the first time in my entire life I understood what sexual energy really was. The month before Murray went back to Brazil, I ran a half marathon, tore down my kitchen, uploaded the cookbook I'd been writing on and off for ten years, and took a part time job at the gym teaching step aerobics.

Next time I need to accomplish something, in a short amount of time, I'll have Essi get me another Latin exchange student to host. I thought.

I felt like I was on crack.

Even the trips to Home Depot, or to the landfill with my torn up cabinets were a huge thrill with Murray in tow. I refused to let him drive in the city, though, no matter how much he begged me. In the background, a voice kept telling me I was a pervert, and I agreed, but I figured it was okay if I kept it to myself.

One afternoon Mike called me from the East Coast to see if I'd join him for a conference. I'd forgotten all about Mike and I was startled to see his name come up on the phone.

“Please can I bring Murray?” I begged.

“It will be a lot of extra money to bring him.” Mike countered.

(Whenever I wanted Mike to change his mind about something, I sat silently until he talked himself into exactly what I wanted.)

“Well, I don’t know, Holly...I guess it wouldn’t hurt for him to see the East Cost...Okay sure...bring him along.” He finally said.

I got online right away and bought two airline tickets. Then I rounded up a babysitter for my kids, someone I normally wouldn’t have left them with even for a date night, but somehow figured it would be fine for a few days. During that time, my motherly instincts could only whisper to me hoarsely from their death bed.

Within hours of arriving in the state of New York, Mike couldn’t believe I wanted to take Murray to Manhattan by myself.

“We can’t be so close to the Statue of Liberty and not see it,” I insisted and then sat quietly.

Mike went back and forth with himself and finally cancelled his meetings in order to come with us. I overheard him tell a colleague over the phone that it would be stupid to let his “country bumpkin wife and her exchange student go to Manhattan alone.”

Feeling giddy, I put on my best “Sex and the City” outfit: tight white pants, a sheer, sequenced blouse and some over-the-top heels.

We parked at a bus station and went over the bus route one more time. I'm not sure why we took the bus—it was a hassle. A few stops in, Mike, Murray, and I were sitting on a bus bench in New Jersey when I noticed a long, green car idling at a red light with a flat tire. I knew that if I didn't warn the driver about his tire there would be a fiery crash down the road for sure, so I got up off the bench and walked up to the passenger side window and tapped on the glass. The black man sitting in the passenger seat tentatively rolled down his window,

“Sir, you have a flat tire,” I told him when the window was finally halfway down.

He thanked me politely and conveyed the message to the driver who nodded and drove off. I was sure I'd saved their lives so I felt very proud of myself. As I walked back to the bus bench, Mike, Murillo, and a black lady in a nurse's uniform were laughing hysterically. Tears were streaming down Murrays's face, and the nurse was rutting around in her purse for a tissue. I pressed them to tell me what was so funny, but they were all too choked up to talk.

Mike kept slapping his knee and Murillo was doubled over on the bench.

“What's so funny? Please, tell meeeee.” I begged.

The nurse turned away from me but I could see her shoulders shaking. Wiping away a tear, Mike finally managed to tell me what was so hilarious.

“When you walked up to that car,” he choked, “Murray thought you said ‘I’m for hire’!”

“Yeah, you’re way over dressed for this place.” Murillo added wiping a tear off his cheek.

Humph. I sat with my arms crossed all the way into the city ignoring their remnants of laughter. I thought it was strange that I was "over-dressed" in Time Square too. It was nothing like *Sex in the City*. There were a million normal looking people walking around, but there were no flawless women walking arm in arm in groups of four anywhere.

“You’re the best woman here.” Mike told me.

Easterners think the world revolves around them. The further west you go the less you matter (unless you live in California). Every other book, magazine, movie, or television show is staged in Manhattan—apparently, there is not much going on anywhere else. Anyone who has ever traveled the world, got a book published, cooked on television, or had a free make over lives in New York City.

The first time I ever voted in a presidential election, the winner was announced long before my mom, a Dove Valley election official, reached the county seat with the town’s ballots—she might as well have left them in the trunk of her car.

“If you want your vote to count, move to Ohio or further out East.” Dad said.

So I never bothered voting in an election again after that.

I can’t deny that Time Square felt like the center of the universe, though. It was hard to walk and look up at the same time, especially in those heels I wore. Mike who was more worldly, and less distracted, was on the lookout for taxis.

“How can a place like Dove Valley and New York City be in the same country, or even on the same planet?” Murray wanted to know.

Looking down from the top of the Empire State Building, we all agreed that is was no less surreal than looking down into the Grand Canyon.

Chapter 3

When All Hell Breaks Loose

We arrived at our hotel in Orange County after a strange drive through some thick trees. It was a massive hotel built and then preserved in 1980's ether. The carpets were a stale pastel pink and there was a shiny, plastic vase in every corner with dusty, faded mint green plants. Then, hanging on every wall, there were those pastel landscapes that didn't, even remotely, look like anything from nature.

"This is kind of a creepy place." Murray observed.

Odd—such a big hotel so far out in the woods, is what everyone was thinking. The pool had long since dried out and they were oddly under staffed. Mike was consumed with his work, and he seemed agitated that Murray and I were hanging around, so I took Murray down to the game room. When he got tired of the Pac Man game, we decided to go exploring in the rental car.

As we set out, Murray wanted to drive.

"You can't drive here." I told him sternly.

He didn't argue, instead he used the same tactic I used with Mike to get my way earlier.

“This isn’t Dove Valley...there’s traffic and police here,” I argued with myself.

Finally, I agreed and pulled over. I tried to focus on the consequences of getting caught, but good feelings of being in a foreign place with such foreign feelings about another person were clouding my thoughts—in fact I don’t remember thinking much at all. I felt like the curtain between two universes lifted up and I was allowed into the more enchanted one. I felt like we were in a time zone that wasn’t subject to rules or time at all.

Murray got in the driver’s seat.

“If I let you drive, you can NOT tell Essi, and you must wear a seatbelt.”

He smiled at me and buckled up. *This is the lesser of the two evils*, I thought. *I could just as easily take him back up to the hotel room and molest him.*

Murray drove us to the Hudson River. He finally pulled into a parking lot when he saw a Mexican restaurant.

“Holly, let me buy you a burrrrrrito.” He said rolling his r’s.

I refused to let him order a margarita when he asked for one on ice.

“Do you want to keep driving or don’t you?” I asked him.

Then I told him to stop feeding the ducks tortilla chips.

“It’s not good for them.” I said.

On the way back to the hotel, he pulled into every cemetery I asked him to. I had a thing for cemeteries. I told him about the seven headstones standing side by side in the Dove Valley cemetery. All six of them had the same date of death carved on them. In the 1970's an old rancher in Dove Valley died and his rich son chartered a plane from Dallas for the funeral. The plane crashed on its way into to Dove, so the grave digger just dug six more holes.

Over the years, my mom saw the way graves in the Dove Valley cemetery were dug haphazardly.

“I will not be buried next to Mrs. McCarty!” She said—she was sure of it.

My mother wanted our entire family to be laid to rest together, just like the family from Dallas, so she bought an entire quarter acre of plots for us. I never went to the cemetery in Dove Valley after that because I didn't like to see where I was going to be buried.

“I'll fly back from Brazil for your funeral when you die. I like Dove Valley...and I like you too.” Murray said giving me a quick, side hug.

I changed the subject. I told him the East Coast cemeteries were at least a hundred years older than anything out West.

“We could see a Civil War soldier's headstone here.” I said.

Then there was a short lesson about the Civil War.

“I've never heard of that war. Who won?” He wanted to know.

We walked arm and arm like an old married couple reading from the headstones. One cemetery we stopped at was so overgrown with trees and vines we had to move the foliage away from the headstones in order to read them. It had just rained, so the gravestones were soaked and more vivid. There was a thick mist at our feet and a damp smell that made us breathe in deeper.

When we emerged from the place we were fully embraced.

By then, though, the feelings I had for Murray were beyond sexual. It was more like the feeling I had when I played with my cousins when I was a kid. Like the feeling I had parking with Mike in high school, like the feeling I had holding my babies for the first time—all of those feeling—but all at once. To this day, I've never felt such pure bliss in the presence of another human being.

Sometimes I wonder if Murray was a person at all. Maybe he was an angel that came down to visit me before all hell broke loose.

Or, he could have been the devil that caused it all.

Mike was furious when he found out that I let Murray drive the rental car.

“What in the hell were you thinking?” He yelled.

I told him I wasn’t.

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It was during that trip to New York, that Mike began to feel the sexual tension between Murillo and me, but it didn’t make him jealous, it turned him on. And then Mike, bathing in my new sexual aura, began to feel more than comfortable with his own sexuality

—and that’s when he told me about the girl in Montana.

Later, it occurred to me the reason he told me about his fling was because he was trying to persuade me up into Murray’s room. Since he had crossed the line, I could too.

He actually wants to watch me with Murray?! I couldn’t believe it.

It was like Mike stepped into the same universe with no time or rules that I visited when I let Murray drive the rental car in New York. For some reason, Mike thought it would turn me on to hear he had slept with a twenty something girl in Missoula, but it didn’t. I sat straight up in bed, shocked and hurt, and told him to get the hell out!!! It was like two decades of devotion to him were sucked up into my vacuum cleaner.

He looked shocked and confused at my reaction to his confession.

“Well I guess I’ll just take the camper to the lake for a while,” he said getting out of bed.

Three or four days after Mike left, I had to take Murray to the airport. The United Airlines staff was waiting for us at the door. It was a small airport, so it wasn’t far to run, but we were commanded to. The flight attendant was running beside us.

“You need to be at least an hour and a half early for international flights!” she screamed.

She’d been yelling at us since we’d arrived. We were late because Murray wanted to play one more game of Texas Hold-em’ with me before he left. He was up \$28.

To make things worse, Murray had three or four bullets from the trip to Dove Valley still in his coat pocket. The flight attendant was beside herself waiting for security to clear him through, and she went insane when he walked back to me and gave me one last hug.

“I’ll miss you,” he said,

I told him I would miss him too.

That night, I cried myself to sleep for the first time in my life.

Chapter 4

Sea Otters

A month later, I agreed to meet Mike in Monterey, California. We were ready to meet face to face. I wanted details about his affair, and he said he would give them to me. He had more to tell me, but he was waiting for the right time. I decided that if he would be 100% honest we could start patching things up in our marriage. I knew for sure I'd been monogamous for sixteen years, so I felt like I held all the good cards. Sure, I had been tempted before: Mike's best friend Dean with the adorable space between his teeth; the cute Marine at the country bar who nearly got me out to his truck; my daughter's first grade teacher; Murray.

I had suffered through sexual tension aplenty, but had fought hard to keep my goodness intact for my husband. Sixteen years ago, I had spoken my vows in front of God and about 250 people (it was standing room only at our wedding).

I knew the secret to keeping a husband: sex and home cooked meals. It was my own mother who once told me,

“Always give it up to your husband.”

Mike and I celebrated Valentine's Day, but we also celebrated “Steak and Blow Job Day”. I thought I was a spectacular wife...the best a man could do. I wondered why on earth he would want anyone else.

My best friend, Essi was going through a separation too. It wasn't because her husband cheated on her though. It was because he wanted to move their family to a cabin in the woods—not just for the summer, but forever. She told me it was a one room cabin with a wood stove and no running water.

“Holly, he actually thinks we can haul all of our water up from the creek,” she said.

In a past life, Essi's husband had been some sort of mountain man. He was always bringing her smelly trout and venison to fry up for him. So Essi finally chose modern comforts over her husband. I told her she should contact *Ladies Home Journal* and tell them all about her divorce. I know I'd never heard a divorce scenario quite like hers before.

My favorite thing about *Ladies Home Journal* is their long running advice column called “[Can this Marriage be Saved?](#)”

It was a column that I always read for fun, like a horoscope. *So what's the problem in your marriage? Is it the dog? The mother-in-law? Too little sex? Too much television? His new secretary? He loves sports more than me! She loves the kids more than me!*

On the plane to California, I imagined my own “[Can This Marriage Be Saved?](#)” column:

Holly's turn: A month ago Mike told he slept with a girl in Montana, but as much as he travels, I am beginning to think he has a girlfriend in every state. I always just sat at home and trusted him. I never thought it would come to this.

Mike's turn: Holly's lost her sparkle. She's just not the fun, exciting girl she was in high school. All she does is unload the dishwasher and take care of the kids. She's let herself go.

Holly's turn: He gets plenty of sex, trust me. I go down on him every time he's in town.

Mike's turn: I work 80 hours a week while she sits at home and watches Sex and the City and bakes pies.

Holly's turn: If I didn't stay home and take care of the kids, Mike wouldn't be free to travel like he does. Plus, he loves my cooking.

Mike's turn: True, Holly's a damn fine cook. Ok, maybe I'm just a bad guy.

I had to take my daughters to California with me because I couldn't find a babysitter. Besides, they had never seen the ocean before.

I felt sick to my stomach when Mike walked towards us at the airport. The girls ran up to him and he gave them each a father-daughter-twirl-around. Tears flooded my eyes thinking about the girl from Montana. *How could he do that to us?*

Since the girls were in tow, Mike and I decided not to have any big emotional talks while we were there. We agreed to play it cool and just wait for a better time. I could count on one hand the number of fights Mike and I had our entire marriage, we just always got along. We were always on the same team.

Sixteen years ago, he tried to break up with me before he left for college, but it didn't go according to his plan. He told me he was going to do it with flowers—he thought it would be easier for me that way. According to Mike, he asked the florist to write “Forever Young” on the card. *Forever Young* was a Rod Stewart song that was popular in the early nineties. The song was about people two people parting ways forever. If the card had said “Forever Young”, I would have caught the meaning of it, and the high school break-up would've been final.

The break up came sixteen years later because the florist misunderstood Mike and wrote “Forever Yours” on the card instead. When Mike came home from his first semester of college, I went over to his house with my best panties on thinking that we were still together, and he'd thought, “Oh what the hell.”

What was really sad about the trip to Monterey was that it was our first ever family vacation. Our entire marriage we had been working and saving. When he was in college we had no money. When he graduated, he started making money hand over fist, so we bought a house. When we started saving beyond our mortgage, I got pregnant and quit my job. Now that Mike was making enough

money to do whatever the hell we wanted, we had a sex scandal to deal with.

Nothing was going according to plan.

Still, I decided to make the most of what was to be our first, and last, family trip. We went to the aquarium, chartered a boat to watch whales, toured San Francisco, and played on the beach. We had strangers take pictures of the four of us smiling and hugging. Mike wanted a lot of pictures of just the two of us as well. Our oldest daughter, Jessica, photographed us in front of every good back drop.

“We can keep what we have.” He whispered in my ear.

“It would never be the same.” I scoffed.

“Say cheese!” Jessica said.

Sometimes we held hands for the girl’s sake, but when they weren’t watching, I pulled away.

One evening, at the beach, I told my daughters it was as far west as we could possibly get to see the sun set in the United States.

“Unless we go to Hawaii next year,” Mike said pulling me next to him. I squirmed out of his arms—he was making me queasy.

The beach was bathed in soft yellow and the ocean was a transparent green. We all walked up to the top of a rocky bluff and Mike and I sat on a bench

watching the waves crash against the beach while the girls hopped from rock to rock on the shore.

“I live and die for you and the girls you know,” Mike said squeezing my knee. I looked up at our daughters. The sun was shining in their chocolate colored hair and their little shadows were chasing them all around.

“I’m sure you would do anything for the girls, you just couldn’t manage to keep your pants zipped up on my behalf,” I said pulling my hand away for the hundredth time.

Stop touching me! Tears were starting to come, but I didn’t let them fall...I caught them with my sleeve.

Whenever I went anywhere to meet up with Mike, he’d already been there for a week or two, so he always knew the best places to eat and the nicest places to sit outdoors. He said he’d been to the beach where we were sitting a couple of times already and had seen sea otters and seals. He also said he had brought the Steinbeck book to read, but just couldn’t get into it.

When I heard he was going to Monterey, I put my copy of Canary Row by John Steinbeck in his suitcase. We’d both had the same English teacher, Mrs. Nickenbacker, and she had shoved John Steinbeck down our throats all four years of high school. As an adult, I figured out why, but Mike never did. I was the

bookworm and Mike was the math man, he'd never read a book just for the fun of it.

"We'll go to counseling when I get back," he said sitting back against the bench and crossing his arms.

"Don't you mean when you get *home*?" I asked.

"You've never really thought of it as your home, have you?!" I half whispered and half shouted as if realizing something for the first time.

He sat up straight and blinked at me.

"We'll go to counseling when I get *home*," he corrected.

Just then Annie came running up to us out of breath,

"Look mom and dad! Sea otters!"

We both got up and followed her to the cliff's edge, and sure enough, floating side by side on their backs over the current, were two little otters. It looked like they were holding hands.

"They hold hands so they don't float away from each other," Mike said reaching for my hand again.

Stop fucking touching me, ugh! I pulled it away.

Then the four of us sat down on the rocks and witnessed the most amazing thing: One otter dove down to the bottom and came back up holding two little rocks on his belly. After a while, he pushed one of the little rocks to his friend and

she grabbed it with both paws (or whatever it is that otters have). Next, she dove down and came up with a shell of some kind and began banging it open with the rock he'd given her. Then he did the same thing. They'd dive, grab a shell, pound it open with their little rocks, dispose of the shell, and then dive for more.

I was mesmerized, it was the first time in a long time that I didn't have the naked girl from Missoula on my mind.

When I looked around, I saw that nobody else in my family was breathing either. I said something to snap everyone out of it, but it was too late, we had all stepped into the enchanted universe. I looked at my beautiful children as the setting sun was crowning their heads like halos. It was like the Pacific Ocean was saying to all of us,

“Look at me gently bob these little otters!”

Mike's skin was glowing, and other than his graying goat tee, he looked exactly like he did in high school. His blue-green eyes were reflecting the golden hour as the last part of the sun disappeared behind the ocean. He was smiling at the girls, who were smiling at the otters.

For an instant we reestablished perfect sanity, perfect peace, and perfect love for each other.

And as he reached over for my hand again, I took it and did not pull away.

Chapter 5

Jaguar

The only three people in the world who know about Dozer are Mike, Essi, and me. And since I never told either of them how I met Dozer, nobody knows. Everyone has a chapter they would never read out loud. I've since vowed never to meet a stranger online like that again. One day I was on Craigslist looking for a dresser for Annie's room, but instead of clicking on the furniture link, I clicked on a link called 'Rants and Raves'.

The most recent post was a rant about a book called [The Rules](#). It's not a book I had ever read because I was a married woman, and I wasn't looking for dating advice. I knew about it though, because I'd heard about it on Oprah, or something.

Anyway, the book offered concrete advice on dating do's and don'ts for single women—basically, it taught women how to weed out the 'scrubs' before walking down the aisle. The Craigslist post regarding the book rubbed me the wrong way, and I thought the author of it needed to be set straight:

The Rules Redux

So, if you talk to any woman for any amount of time, you eventually hear about *The Rules*. It's a book written by two women with absolutely no qualifications whatsoever and has turned into something of a lifestyle cult.

Like *Fight Club* for women. Basically, the premise is to train men and, quite frankly, use them as an economic resource.

So I made my own goddamn rules. There are twenty of them, just like the lame lists of rules women have been posting on different venues around the web. Or, in one case *168* qualifiers to date her.

The rules for women:

1. I am a grown man. I look, smell, talk, eat, drink, dress, and walk like a grown man. I don't even pretend to be capable of anything else. I won't pretend for a minute to understand you, and I would appreciate the same courtesy.
2. You must have a real job or be a full time student. This is not negotiable. If you are not working for something, we have no common ground. And you're probably just whoring out for free meals and a baby shaped paycheck someday (unless you already have a couple).
3. Be nice. To everybody. When I saw you Friday at the Ale House dressing down the very nice, but very busy bartender outside, you became the ugliest individual

on the planet. That is why I quit you. It is a shame you spent so much time making yourself look good and forgot to leave the ugly at home.

4. Thanks for putting out so fast. No really, it was great. Probably just what we both needed. See ya later.

5. Thanks for NOT putting out so fast. It shows me you think we may have a chance to be something more.

6. You must be educated. This is non-negotiable. Educated does not mean you skated your way to a degree on Daddy's dime. Educated means you have a pervasive consuming desire to learn, and have acted on it. Education generally comes with opinions. You better have some.

7. You must love Colorado country accents in men. Maybe not love. Maybe just tolerate. Whatever.

8. Do not lose your shit on me. If you want to fight, go elsewhere. I won't put up with your bullshit.

9. The mancave is not to be violated. Should you hear guitar playing or wrench turning/cussing or weight lifting coming from that strange concrete floored room where some people park cars, you know it has transmogrified into the mancave. If you absolutely must enter, bring sacrifices of iced tea and possibly fried chicken to appease the mangods. Being mostly naked helps.

10. For me, my family, my school, my job, and my personal goals all have priority, even over you (for now). My machines, my toys, my sex drive do not.

11. You have to care about yourself. Don't paint yourself up like a hooker or surgically alter your body, but try to stay healthy, and in doing so, you look healthy. Healthy is sexy. Fake is irritating. If you don't care about yourself, it shows. It isn't that hard to go for a hike or take a bike ride once in a while.

12. Be an individual. Have a tattoo or quirky hobby or a goofy sense of humor. Stand out.

13. If you suspect I would sometimes rather spend time with a motor on an engine stand than you, you are right. Sometimes.

14. Want to talk for hours? Great! I'm probably not listening anyway, at that point. My ability to care and the number of words you use share a market/vendor relationship. Keep the supply low if you don't want to saturate the market. But if you just need to talk, do it.

15. You must be passionate about something. The above rule about talking is waived if you are discussing something you are truly passionate about.

16. I like beer. This isn't really a rule. I'm just saying.

17. You must appreciate food. Obese people sitting on their couch killing a Value Size bag of cheetos and watching TV do not appreciate food. I mean you have to

like the idea of diverse food and have appreciation for the methods of its preparation. Bacon is God saying he loves us.

18. Cooking is sexy as hell. It's part of the deep fundamental sexy that some women have. A drawn out, all day sort of cool that makes me want to wait until after dinner. And cook you breakfast the next morning.

19. You must be creative. I don't exactly expect you to be a master of portraiture, but I like to see someone make creative efforts. Painting your face is not creative. Writing is.

20. Be yourself. If you end up not liking me, or the other way around, at least we were honest.

There you go, those are my rules. It is very hard for a women to draw my attention, but the ones that do are usually following these rules.

Oh, and don't be afraid to flirt once in a while.

After reading his post, I was a little turned on and a lot fired up. I told the author of "The Rules Redux" the reason I didn't have an education was because we were still paying for my husband's education at one of the finest engineering schools in the country. Plus, my husband wouldn't have an engineering degree in the first place if I wouldn't have worked two jobs the entire time he was in college.

I wasn't passionate about anything because I had two kids for Christ's sake! How can a mother possibly have time to be passionate about anything and do a

decent job mothering? How selfish is that? How would he have liked it if his mother would've gone off to South America to study insects when he was in grade school?

I was mostly concerned with his rule number two: “whoring for food and a baby shaped paycheck”. I explained to him that although my husband was the one who earned all the money, I earned my share of it staying home with our babies. I was no parasite, nor was I a prostitute.

What the hell did he mean by “whoring for paychecks” anyhow? I told him that if it weren't for me staying home with the kids, and keeping up with the housework, there was no way my husband could do what he did. For sixteen years my husband came home to a splatter free microwave, folded laundry, happy children, and a hot meal.

I told him I was a damn fine cook.

There were several days of messages back and forth before we decided to meet in person. I wanted to prove to him that I could get his attention.

As a woman freshly scorned, I wanted revenge sex, but I was also looking for a different kind of friend.

My Mom's Club friends were all nice, but they hardly deviated from the topic of their children, their husband's job, appropriate snacks, coupons, or some far off vacation:

“When is your family going to Disney Sarah? Next July? How fun!”

Playgroup with the stay-at-home-moms was an excess of moderation. It was like a competition to see who had the most boring life as if a boring life made you an excellent mother. I do remember once at a Spring Banquet when one mom bragged she could contort well enough to lick her own pussy, but I think it was a slip up after one too many glasses of wine and we never saw her again. *Madness.*

Before I got married I had several male friends and I always thought that they were the best kind of friend. Since I had a divorce on my hands, I thought it would be nice to have a guy friend who could help me laugh about, or move, heavy things.

I decided to meet this stranger at Starbucks, which seemed like a reasonably safe place to meet a stranger if one were so inclined to do so. I didn't know if he would be young or old, big or small, clean or dirty. I thought it would be a bonus if he was going through a break up himself so we would have something to talk about.

If he was a dirty creep, I decided I would order a small coffee, drink it very quickly, and politely excuse myself. People are people, and I felt like I could have a quick cup of coffee with just about anyone on the planet.

When he arrived, we picked each other out right away and got in line together. I was relieved and amazed to see that he was exactly what I was hoping

for. He was a little taller and much younger than me. I could tell he'd been outside a lot, he had a three day beard, and he didn't spend too much time thinking about what to wear. He had just clipped his head high and tight like a military man, or the way men do sometimes do when they are going bald.

After we both ordered a plain dark roast, we found a table and sat down.

I kept looking around, not with a dreamy-far-off-look in my eyes, but anxiously and terrified. I was afraid someone I knew would see me having coffee with a man who was obviously not my husband. I went over explanations in my head of who he could be in case someone wanted to know who he was. I finally decided, if someone I knew came up and wanted to be introduced, I would tell them that this Dozer was the youth pastor from my church, and that we were working on the Sunday school curriculum.

He was handsome enough to make me very nervous. When I did manage to look him in the eyes, I decided they were very bluish grey. I also scanned his pupils quickly, because I heard that if someone was attracted to you, their pupils would dilate in order to let more of you in...but I couldn't really tell.

He explained that the Craig's list post was just a rant about a high maintenance girl he knew and that he didn't mean to hurt my feelings about the whole "paycheck for babies thing".

I told him I'd never heard the name "Dozer" before and told me it was a childhood nickname that just stuck—something about being the youngest brother in a household of four boys.

After an uncomfortable silence, I told him about my recent kitchen remodel and about some books I had read. When I told him I had read Canary Row at Canary Row, he told me John Steinbeck was his favorite author of all time.

That's when I felt a strange destiny raining down on me, then I noticed myself looking over his head at the barista who wasn't as interesting, but seemed much safer than his heartbreak smile.

I just couldn't pretend that meeting a total stranger in Starbucks wasn't the strangest thing I had ever done in my life. Later, he told me that he thought I was on drugs the first time we met....

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A few days later, Dozer and I were sitting on the edge of his bed kissing feverishly. I had parked my truck, Noble Steve, a few blocks away and walked down a back alley to his house. As he tried to lay me back on the pillow, I sat straight up and told him I was too nervous to go through with it.

"Do you like beer?" he asked.

I told him I did, so he got up, went to his kitchen and returned with a foggy glass and a beer growler from the local brewery. He poured a little into the glass for me while he drank directly from the growler.

His bed was pushed up against the corner in a very impractical way.

You can't walk around a bed 180 degrees to make it up properly when it is pushed up against a wall like that. I thought.

There was no top sheet, just a fitted sheet that hadn't been washed since he borrowed it from his mother's linen closet. There was nothing in the room except a couple of guitars leaned up against the wall and a closed laptop sitting on a desk that was covered with coffee rings and an impressive collection of rocks, minerals, and fossils.

Had he known that he was the only man I had ever been with besides my husband, and that it would be the greatest sin I had ever committed, I'm sure he would've let me go. But, that September afternoon, he didn't know anything about me except that my body was as young and healthy as his.

In fact, our age difference never really mattered to either of us.

Jaguar.

Like a roll on a loosened snare drum and a fuzzed out bass line, she slides down one of my hands. I can feel the smooth drift and moan of her keel under my

fingers. I warned her, I am tactile in nature. The bouts and gulleys of her intrigue my fingers while I rearrange myself to better hold her. She is mostly passive, but easily woken.

The plumbliness of her spine twists and compresses with movement Stanislaw Szukalski could never muster in sculpture. The dust, illuminated by the square beam of evening sun coming in my window, eddies and pools in the lee of my moving hands. She is lean. The long, tall Stratocaster looking on is not an analog for her. The Strat is a large guitar, asymmetrical and maximal. The carved edges of this woman are not rounded and bulging lines. They are tight, sinewy, minimal. She moves like a Blue Period Picasso. Subtle and laconic, but full of autumn languid avarice, malice. Her breathing is a steady harmonic thing. She breathes like leaves fall. To hear her scream would be to witness some minor apocalypse. Her minor key body never heaves against me in an overpowering display of desire or need. She is an introvert. The energy of the room, the energy of me, is channeled down through my hands into her lithe body.

She and I have never met, not here. Not in this bed. I woke up to thunder in the night. I am alone, with a paper analyzing the kinetics and dynamics of Unaweep Canyon half done up on my computer. My computer speakers tell me the vagaries of being a Crawlin' Kingsnake. The ceiling I stare at, my old friend, flashes blue and green with the pulsing of a wireless router on my desk.

I haven't been sleeping alone. Laying there, compact, the sort of minimal that made the 1970 Mercury Cougar a legend, is the one sharing my sleep. Muscular and toned into a straight American flawless beautiful destruction machine. Maybe sharing my dream. An electric wet black that sucks away the reason and intellectual accountability of my mind, she reflects the lightning outside like a mirror in the sweaty and close September air.

Such is life sharing your bed with a Jaguar.

Chapter 6

Later Love

Even though I thought I had settled the infidelity score with Mike, I was ashamed and completely overwhelmed with guilt. More than hating myself, I emailed Dozer the next day and told him it was just a one-time thing.

He replied that he figured as much and that it was nice to meet me.

After that, every morning with my coffee, I read Dozer's blog along with the Bible. I don't like the word blog, I prefer the word journal. But I'm sure if Dominguez and Escalante were alive today, they would have a blog also. I felt like a stalker reading it, but I figured that's the chance bloggers take. Even Edward Abbey would have been inspired by Dozer's descriptions of the Uncompahgre and the high desert life in Western Colorado.

In the book The Power of Myth, Moyer asks Campbell,

"Where are our shamans?" and Campbell tells Moyer that it is the artist that communicates myths now days.

Then Moyer wants to know,

"What about those others who are ordinary, those who are not poets or artist, or who have not had a transcendent ecstasy? How do we know of these things?"

Campbell tells Moyer when that happens to,

“Sit in a room and read—and read and read. And read the books of the right people. Your mind is brought onto that level, and you have a nice, mild, slow-burning rapture all the time...when you find an author who really grabs you, read everything he has done...”

Well, Dozer became my shaman and I read everything he wrote, usually breathless with slow burning rapture and my palm pressed hard against my chest.

You know the attraction I’m talking about if you’ve ever fallen in love with a fictional person like Jaime Fraser from “Outlander”

Dozer’s geology blog was my ticket to transcend my kitchen, anytime I wanted to. I was sure life wouldn’t so sterile, and society wouldn’t be such a wasteland, if every man would pay attention to the layers of the earth, and to the layers of women, like Dozer did. Mike knew everything about his favorite football team, but he would’ve been hard pressed to describe me naked.

Dozer was always on the fence between self destruction and training for the Olympics. He was seeing a therapist at the VA because he’d served in Iraq and needed consoled about something. He wrote about his sessions in his blog. The VA counselor didn’t think he was crazy, but she did think he was incorrigible.

Generally, though, other than geology, he wrote about a girl with tourmaline eyes that he was madly in love with. This girl was so consumed with herself that she never once noticed him bleeding for her. I wished I’d known who she was so I

could've shaken her...but mostly I wished I was her. I thought it was strange that she could possibly love anyone other than him.

I read once that the one you love, and the one who loves you, are never ever the same person.

Later. Love.

A couple of beers are going flat and she has tears in her eyes. The leaves outside have long since surrendered to the tides and currents of the seasons, fallen, withered, and begun to clog storm drains and contribute to the loam of a riparian valley. She isn't letting them fall. Because she never does. They hang there in her eyes, tempting gravity to surround us again with all that it has to offer. Time.

Death. Down.

You know, I tell her, I hope you know that you are the only woman I know who has absolutely nothing to work on. Her lips tighten into that smile and her eyes squeeze a little at the sides. One drop breaks free, fighting cohesion and adhesion, to trail down her cheek from behind her sensible librarian glasses. I tell her: you are already the best a man can do. You're a beautiful woman, you're strong, you're an amazing mother...

The words are maybe getting to her. But I know they're just taking their place there, in a head full of words, in a memory full of men saying things. The particles flowing from my mouth to her thoughts are there only to annihilate the words of

another. One who had no idea what he had. Who had no idea what a universe of everything right with femininity he had the privilege to draw near. Her dark hair, sensibly bobbed and her eyes, all tourmaline, green, and shot through with gold, frame her face. And I see it there. We two proud souls share more in common than possibly two separate people can. Another tear falls farther down and she prosecutes the target with extreme prejudice, attacking it with a napkin. Not before the one on the other side can make the trip all the way down her face and off her chin. It impacts the table and spreads out to the limits of its volume, but never past its cohesiveness. She is indeed beautiful.

I grab up my beer, a little cooler than dead warm, and smile at her while I drink some of it down. She would say thank you, but she can't talk just now. I know.

We two proud souls have lived and fought and sometimes died bravely on the gilded plains of the Illium of love and promises. We are warriors, true, but battered. We both know, more than most, that we are forever damned to be nothing more than what we always are. We know we will never escape ourselves.

I hope one day, after enough words and thoughts have annihilated those bullshit petulant words spoken to her by a spineless fraction of a man, the ones she carries with her, we can both face each other as some sort of victor. I love her, that is true.

That we are not destined by the springing and neeping tides that push us through our lives to be together is no less obvious.

Her hand falls in mine. She's not one to be shaken. She's forever poised and controlled, a sort of classy cool, even when she's crying in a bar. Some part of me will always be hers. A large part, maybe the best part. And I know I carry some of her with me. We two proud souls are forever shackled to each other.

She has seen me, all the parts of me I normally hide. She has seen me break down and rage about injustice and murder. She has seen me cling and need. She has seen me falter and fail. She has seen me mourn. I tell her: believe me. No man will ever do better than you. No man can do better than you.

She believes me, but those other words, the ones that make me want to destroy him, still float around in her head. I love her. It kills me. I know with every word I tell her, I am also telling her to go on past me. To find some other person. I won't lie and say it doesn't hurt to think about that. But she needs to.

What we have is not romance. It is not any sort of sexual relationship, though it has been there a few times. We are undefined. When one of us makes a venture out into another shot at loving or whatever may pass for it, we root for each other and are happy for each other. I'm not sure what that makes us, more than simply saying friends. Not many women challenge me. She does. And she will one day have no more of that fucker's words in her head, in her heart.

Out at her car, she's turned to me and we hug a little longer than most friends would. She kisses my cheek and pulls me into her. We both breathe each other in

and remember. Remember days and nights and the time we thought we were ended and given a death sentence. We remember other things. Things which are none of your business and positively immoral. And then we pull apart and she kisses me again on the cheek and says she loves me. She tells me: you be nice to the girls.

I always am, you know that.

I know, she says, and then gets in the car and I wave. And walk away.

That's the best I can do for her. That woman is always the ocean to me.

Chapter 7

Abundance

The Song of Songs was written by King Solomon, his lover, and their friends. It was like someone secretly slipped the erotic book into the Bible hoping that no one would notice. King Solomon's friends were a chorus of well wishers to his love affair with some exotic beauty. It was always my favorite verse in the Bible, even when I was a kid. I stumbled upon the book when I was around eleven years old and I wondered why I had never heard about it in church—it certainly wasn't in my Picture Bible.

Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon, your mouth is lovely.

I liked to pretend that Dozer was writing with me on his mind, sometimes he did, but mostly he didn't. Even worse than stalking, I started cutting his posts and pasting them in my journal. *I would like to remember this when I'm old*, I thought. *Maybe, looking back on my life won't seem so dull then.*

One morning while reading his post about college, it occurred to me that I had never been, so I decided to enroll. I decided to go when my kids were in school and study literature and the humanities, which was my original intention after high school before I got married. In grade school, someone told me I was a good writer, so that's what I always thought I'd be when I grew up. After I got

married, I wrote a cookbook, but I stopped writing poems and silly fiction because it didn't feel like a very grown up thing to do.

With an imminent divorce on my hands, I started to realize that I should've have been preparing for some sort of career all along...just in case. My resume had a nine year gap. I could imagine someone interviewing me about team building and me saying something about how I keep my kids from fighting over toys:

"The number one rule for a mommy with two daughters, I have discovered, is to get things in pairs and exactly alike. I mean exactly alike. If you get two sippy cups, but one is pink and one is yellow, forget it! They must be EXACTLY alike."

From the pull down menu on the college website, I chose English 101, Two Dimensional Design, Western Civilization, and Colorado Geology. Looking back now, I wonder what stars were aligned that morning for me to enroll in college, at age 35, without even blinking an eye.

It was like I woke up that morning and just snapped out of something.

For sixteen years, I'd been in some sort of a domestic coma—loading the dishwasher and then unloading it again—like Sisyphus, compelled to roll the boulder up the hill only to watch it fall back down.

I was raised up a [Proverbs 31:10 woman](#), and if there were trophies for such a thing, I'd have them all.

I imagined the awards ceremony with Martha Stewart opening the envelope,

“...and the winner of wife and mother of the year goes to Holly Moyer!”

The camera would pan out into the crowd and catch my very surprised face (because the other nominees were so much better than me). But, *after all*, I thought walking towards Martha on the stage: *I was always the one with the neighborhood kids in my yard. I was always the one with a homemade casserole and the recipe cards already printed out. I owned a candy thermometer and made Christmas candy from scratch with butter, sugar and extracts. When we bought our house, I negotiated with the city and won approval to turn the horse pasture into an equipment yard for my husband's construction company. I had mastered meringue!*

The only time I got off the straight and narrow was to watch “Sex and the City”, but only if I was doing something productive such as folding towels. I was a thread of devotion that never unraveled, and my purpose for the last sixteen years was very clear to me: The reason I was born was to take of my husband and our children.

Since Mike was a very successful, I always felt like I was contributing to society in a very big way, albeit indirectly. If it weren't for me, Mike wouldn't

have been able to travel all over the country stabilizing hillsides and preventing rocks from crashing down on cars on interstate. I always felt like he must have been very proud of me—so when he told me about the twenty something girl from Montana, I became mightily lost.

When my mother heard about my marriage, and the way I was behaving, she mailed me books written by Christian women who tapped their faith to save their marriages. *Hide your crazy and act like a lady*, I could hear her saying as I opened up the box of books. I read all of them, but none of the authors were dealing with quite the same scenario as I was.

As I suspected, it hadn't just been just the girl in Montana...it had been two handfuls of women. Mike told me of them one by one, watching me carefully, and slowly backing away. I thought his confessions were kind of like whisky—the first shot burns your throat and feels like hell going down, but after a few it just tastes like water.

Affair number one, Mike said, was for an entire summer with a coal miner.

That's right, a fucking coal miner.

He'd even introduced me to "Tammy" one day because she'd walked into his work trailer with a box of donuts. Looking back, I remember she was a petite, raven haired beauty, that looked like Snow White except for the coal dust all over her face. Now I know that Tammy had been very surprised to see me sitting there

eight months pregnant and all. She put the donuts down, murmured that it was nice to meet me, and nearly fell down the stairs leaving the trailer in such a rush.

“She’s one of the miners.” Mike told me after she left.

“You mean the coal mine?” I asked, blinking.

“Yeah can you believe that shit?” he laughed, reaching for a donut she had left.

That summer, Mike was the big supervisor at the coal mine in New Mexico—a coal mine so big you could see it from the moon.

Affair number two was the lesser of his two secretaries. I was totally blown away by that one. I had always worried about his beautiful secretary from Georgia. The one who always spoke his telephone greetings for him in her velvety southern drawl:

“Hellooo, you have reached the voice mail of Mike Moyer, he is available to take your call right now.”

Affair numbers three and four—And. I. Am. Not. Making. This. Shit. Up.—two bridesmaids at a friend’s wedding. There were eleven bridesmaids in the wedding, including me, so I couldn’t narrow it down to just two, I just know I wasn’t one of them. At least I was having fun during affairs three and four. I was out on the dance floor doing the hokey pokey when he snuck both of them up to our hotel room.

During the other affairs, though, I figured I was probably at home unloading the dishwasher, baking a casserole, or folding laundry while he had their legs up in the air—except for the coal miner, I also had my legs up in the air giving birth to Annie.

There were a couple others, including the girl in Montana, but by then it tasted like nothing at all and I was completely numb.

It took a long, long time to feel any pain at all.

Back when Mike and I were happily married, I always had prophetic dreams about him cheating on me, but I never believed any of those dreams until that day. I remember one dream in particular I had while sleeping next to him in a swanky hotel.

In my dream, I walked out to the hotel pool in my robe and I froze because Mike was in the hot tub straddled by a young woman with her hair pulled up into a loose bun. When they saw me, just standing there, the young women got off the top of him and got out of the hot tub. She was wearing a bikini top only, but didn't bother covering with a towel.

Then in my dream, Mike stood up to his waist in the churning water and motioned me to get in with him. When I told him I most certainly would not, his eyes turned very dark and he called me a “whore” and much worse. Then he hissed

like a snake and told me he would walk in blood up to his waist before he would ever let me go.

When I woke up from that dream, I was shaking. Mike asked me what was wrong. When I told him, he sleepily said dreams were just random brain activity that had nothing to do with real life. He said it probably had more to do with some movie I watched or some book I read. Then he told me that he loved me very much and would never do anything stupid to mess up everything we had. I believed what he said and fell back to sleep. Since Mike was so confident the dream was null and void so was I.

I tried to be reasonable: If it had just been one woman, it wouldn't have been a huge deal. Two women? Yes, I could dig deep for the resolve to stick around. But a half dozen women? I started packing up boxes.

I went down to the court house and got the county divorce package. The lady behind the counter gave me the divorce papers like she was handing me a greasy bag from a drive through window.

"Here you go, have a nice day!" She said cheerfully.

I took the papers and walked back to Noble Steve. Nothing was new or different about the day. The sun was still shining, cars were still passing by. What I thought would be the most solemn and harrowing thing in my life took about five minutes. When I got home, I hid the papers deep in my underwear drawer.

I did not want to disappoint my mother with a divorce. Stand by your man, your life is no longer your own when you became a wife and a mother. These were not her exact words but she was a fourth generation Southern Baptist woman and I was a fifth.

When I graduated high school, my mother said that if I was going to go to college in the same city as Mike we should be married. Then, when we got married, she said maybe I should just wait and go to college when he was finished. Then when he was finished, she said the best thing in the world was to be a stay at home mom.

I'm sure if she would've known about Mike's tendencies, she would have given me different advice. She was just telling me what had worked for her. She was relying what she knew best.

But, it was one of life's great trade-offs: She had a horrible father, and a good husband, and it was visa versa for me. I tried to fake it for my mom and for my kids, but living with a man that made my skin crawl quickly became an intolerable situation. I began to act out and take chances that, even with my colorful imagination, seemed impossible.

One night when Mike was out of town, I invited a complete stranger over after midnight. He was a boy I'd seen mowing a lawn next door. Long after my daughters were fast asleep, I snuck the very nervous, but legal 19 year old boy into

Mike's brand new 19 foot camper. I guess I just wanted to get the process moving more quickly. *Hide your crazy and act like a lady*, I kept thinking—but St.

Paul once said “For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may show his mercy to all.”

Abundance.

I dreamed a dream the other night. I was crossing Glade Park, the northern edge of the Uncompahgre, the leading edge of an ancient island arc thrust onto Laurentia, where once the raging main, the Iapetus and Rheic Oceans, washed and swashed into Wyoming when the first four legged land animals were living and dying in the sweltering coal swamps of Antarctica. They were memorialized in the coals of Pennsylvania, but 99% would die off in the Permian. As I tore across the rolling cedar plains of the Park, I was answering a question about math. One of those simple juvenile questions about the efficacy of learning the higher functions numbers have to offer.

I have always loved mathematics, but I love them like I love women. I appreciate the beauty and I love to see the intricacy, but I have no real desire to ever truly understand them. It may rob me of the wonder. But some days I see the secant pull off something magic or a black dress flowing in the autumnal breeze and I know my heart is taken, forever dead and lovely, into the ground.

The answer had something to do with understanding the world as it is, rather than as a series of approximations. I looked over into the passenger seat and into a set of blue eyes under a shock of white hair and knew somehow I was responsible for the little person barely able to see out the window of my Scout. And it was my Scout, not an approximation. Hank was playing on AM 580. The kid wore thick glasses, like I used to. There was an awkward intelligence and some deep welling of understanding there, floating behind those eyes I look into everyday. He was smarter than I was at that age. A terrifying prospect for me, the father of this blackhole of curiosity.

$1^2 + \sqrt{3}^2 = 2^2$ does not, can not, exist in this real world. It is an approximation of what we see. But it is amazing in that the numbers are both imaginary and imagined real and they work out in so faddish a display of logic. There are many times for powerful and beautiful functions found here and there, but that's the one I thought of first. When one plate is thrust onto another, it generally makes something $\approx 30^\circ$. When islands collide with cratons, you get something like that. It is obviously enormously more complicated.

The boy, my son, was satiated for a time, but I knew he had more to ask.

I woke up to traffic sounds and a Norah Jones song playing. I went outside and began working on the details of my Scout long neglected. Someday I may need it to be around.

Chapter 8

How it Went

I felt like I needed to be in a witness protection program—I knew too much. Mike regretted telling me about his affairs and now he was making horrible threats. The next morning as I was walking towards the coffee pot, he grabbed me by the arm, tight, and held me there.

“None of this leaves the house. Do you hear me?!” He hissed. His eyes were blood shot because he’d been up all night. When I didn’t respond, he shook me a little.

“Yes, ok.” I said pulling my arm away.

I didn’t plan to tell anyone about his roving penis, except for Essi and maybe my sister.

I rubbed my arm and started to worry. He was going crazy with guilt, lack of food, and sleep. His moods were getting more and more unpredictable every day. He would threaten me and then turn right around and try and smooth it over.

“We’re all going to be just fine Holly...we’re all going to be just fine. This is just a big hump we need to get over...through thick and thin...remember?”
He’d say.

I'd decided to forget about Mike and focus all my attention on the kids. *I don't have to be Mike's wife to be a good caregiver to my daughters*, I thought. I figured things could stay normal for them if we planned it right. I'd heard about couples who had highly amicable divorces. There was a couple on the morning show who claimed they were still the "best of friends" after their divorce. Their kids stayed in the house, and the parents took turns coming and going. The dad came one week to stay with kids and then the mom came over the next week.

"Why make the kids go back and forth? The dad reasoned.

It's a new trend called "co-parenting". It's just something people have finally evolved to now that more than fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Now days a mother and a father can be divorced and still be good parents and even friends. Apparently, co-parenting can be just like a corporation where the kids are the shareholders.

I decided amicable co-parenting was just the thing for Mike and me.

I didn't want to have anything to do with our master bedroom anymore though. I moved all of my stuff up to the attic.

But after the first night, I was afraid to sleep up there by myself, so I started sleeping in Annie's room, spooning her on her little twin size bed. Each night, at some point, I'd wake up and see Mike standing in the doorway.

"Come to bed!" he'd hiss at me trying not to wake her up.

I hissed back at him and told him I would never, ever sleep in his bed again! Then he just stood there and glared at me, so I hid my face in Annie's hair until he left. For some reason I felt safe there. I was pretty sure Mike wouldn't do anything crazy that would wake Annie up on a school night.

I was so relieved when he had to go out of town for business.

With Mike, it was always a last minute thing, he'd look up from his laptop and say,

"Holly, I need a ride to the airport, I need to be in Alberta for a few days."

He was expecting me to jump up and pack his suitcase for him like I usually did, but he'd have to start packing it himself from now on. I wished him good luck finding clean and ironed clothes.

On the way to the airport I was silently planning my escape. With Mike out of the house, I could start looking around for places to rent. It would have been easiest to go to Dove Valley and stay with my parents, but the girls were in school and so was I. I decided I could at least start moving things out of the house without Mike noticing. Certainly he wouldn't notice things like the garlic press or a few photos going missing.

"What are you thinking about?" Mike wanted to know as I pulled up to the United Airlines gate.

I focused hard on parking because I didn't want to talk to him. I was thinking about the best way to get the hell out of the house, and as far away from him as I possibly could without disrupting our daughter's lives.

"You're thinking about that fucking writer again aren't you!?" he screamed.

I knew he could hack into my computer and phone whenever he damn well pleased. He knew all about the revenge sex I'd been having. I turned the radio up so I wouldn't have to talk to him. Someone behind us honked and I just wanted him to get out of the truck and get on his plane, so I could go home and get some sleep.

I waited for him to get out.

"Have a safe trip." I said looking straight ahead, but he just sat there staring at me.

"You'd probably be happy if my plane crashed!" He finally yelled.

Hell yes I would, I thought, but I didn't answer him.

"Wouldn't you!?" He screamed. After some uncomfortable silence, he reached up and ripped Noble Steve's window visor clean off. Then he got out and slammed the passenger door as hard as possible. I shuttered with the lingering vibration of it. My head was aching.

I knew that I needed to be long gone by the time he got back from Canada. I was married to a madman.

When my daughters got home from school I calmly told them that their dad and I would probably get divorced. Jessica went into her room and slammed the door and Annie put her head on my lap and started crying. But it wasn't a real cry, it was just something she thought she was supposed to do if she ever heard that word.

Through the wall, though, I could hear Jessica crying real tears from the depths of her soul.

The next day, Mike called from Canada and told me he scheduled a session with the best marriage counselor in the city.

"Holly, I'm sorry about the way I've been acting." He said. "I'm just tired and afraid. I can't imagine my life without you and the girls."

I thought it would buy me a little time, so I agreed to go counseling with him. I couldn't believe how my life was changing direction so drastically and in such a short amount of time.

It was during this time, that my husband split into three different personalities: There was Mike, the demon from Hell, Mike the child, and regular Mike.

Mike the demon was pure raging evil—fire and brimstone. His green-blue eyes would glass over with a shadowy darkness and he would try to stare me down. *Snake eyes*, I thought, just like in my dream. He was seething in a quagmire of hatred and jealousy.

His demon tried to terrorize me with fear and threats. He said that if I left him, he would hunt me down and kill me, and then he would kill himself. He would call me horrible names and try to convince me if I did make it out alive, my life would be pure hell without him. He told me I was making a horrible mistake—the worst mistake of my life. He told me he would devote his whole life to making me regret walking out his door. *He's wade in blood up to his waste before he ever let me go*. I couldn't believe the man that vowed to protect me was now the person I needed protected from the most.

“It must be so exhausting to try to control everything!” I sobbed one day trying to escape him. He had me pushed up against the bedroom door and wouldn't let me leave.

Mike the child clung to my legs and cried. “Please, Holly, please.” He would cry from his knees grasping for me. For some reason, I wanted to comfort him and tell him that everything was going to be okay. I soothed his hair as he buried his nose in my hips and cried. His big shoulders heaved up and down, sobbing with pain and despair. But I've learned from being a mother that you can't

say “don’t cry” to someone who already is—and you can’t tell someone to stop hurting once they already are. He clutched me so tight I couldn’t move. He said he was scared and didn’t know what to do.

“Holly, I’m so afraid to keep the girls when you are not here, I don’t know how to cook for them or anything.” He cried.

Then there was regular Mike. Mike the way he was born. Mike, the man I married. Unfortunately, regular Mike didn’t show up much.

People sometimes say their ex-spouse is crazy, but I am certain that Mike actually was. My mother told me that it was probably just his blood sugar.

“Mike has always been a little moody.” She said “Maybe you shouldn’t try to talk with him unless he has had something to eat first.”

I scoffed at the ridiculous idea that Mike just needed a sandwich in order to act like a reasonable human being.

Mike and I were ordered to take parenting classes. It seemed logical to me that Jessica and Annie should not be burdened with our problems, so whenever they were around, I put on my happy face and showed only appreciation and admiration for their father.

“Yes, Annie your daddy fixes hills so rocks don’t roll down on cars, etc. etc.”

Meanwhile Mike must have slept through the part of parenting class when they talked about not burdening children with adult problems, because whenever he needed someone to talk to about our looming divorce he always went to little Annie. He told Annie that I was a whore and that I was the reason their family was being torn apart. He told her that she would never turn out to be a normal woman because of me.

“She’d rather sleep around with every guy in town than be a good mother to you.” He told her.

In just a few short months, my little daughters were locked in the sinful, dark closet of adult problems that I never wanted them to see. I swore I would protect them from it, but in the end, I just couldn’t.

So, I decided to get them a puppy.

They say when you reach rock bottom you will find your true self.

Also, when push comes to shove, you do what you have to do.

I found unusual ways of coping. And one way to cope was to have sex with whoever was up for it. Then I'd wrap myself up in a calm fuzzy fantasy blanket and soothed myself with daydreams. Nothing made sense, so why bother trying to make sense of it? Now that there was no longer a rhyme or reason to my life, it seemed so much easier.

A new sense of freedom washed over me once there was nothing left for me to control.

I daydreamed about building a cabin in the woods. I daydreamed about sitting under a shade tree with my daughters and reading them book after book after book, and I daydreamed about being with Dozer.

There was no real reason to keep up with laundry, dishes and appearances anymore because cleanliness was never the real answer anyway.

When I got back from my classes at the college, I wasted away hours playing with the new puppy. My entire life I was never a dog person and now I was letting the puppy lick my entire face and pee wherever it wanted.

The house fell into complete disarray.

Chapter 9

Shiloh

Since Dozer and I both attended the same university, I wore lip gloss to class every day hoping to run into him, but I never did. One day, I was looking out the third story window of the Fine Arts Building, and I saw his light blue Scout parked on the side of the road with the top down. The passenger side tire was halfway up on the sidewalk and there was a bright orange parking ticket tucked under the windshield wiper. I figured he must have been late to a class.

That day in art, I made my two dimensional road a desert scene with cactus clumped on either side of it. In my favorite daydream, Dozer and I are driving down a county road in Dove Valley in his Scout. Since I know all the county roads like the back of my hand, I am always the one driving.

There is the crackling 580 AM station playing on the stereo, a dog panting in between us, and a blanket on the back seat...just in case. I'm proficient with a stick shift because I grew up on a ranch in Western Colorado. *Clutch it and shift like butter*. Conceived in the same decade, the Scout and I were built to last and we both got more out of three speeds than most: grinding slow, faster, harder.

The rusty red mud from the road splashes up onto the rims and up the sides of the doors, and when he drives back into the city it will be there for months—proof that he was with me the entire weekend. The rusty red dirt from Dove

Valley will only come off after two or three trips through the car wash, he could try to get it clean the first time, but it wouldn't be easy.

I know now, that day dreaming about Dozer was a crazy thing to do when there were so many more important issues that needed dealt with. But at the time, other than the new puppy, I didn't really have anything better to distract me from my pain.

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Jessica and Annie named the puppy Shiloh. She had one light blue eye and one dark brown eye. Her favorite maneuver was to paw at your leg and whimper until you bent down to pet her, and then she would quickly roll to her back to expose her little round belly...her favorite part to have scratched. She had just a stump for a tail, so when she wagged her tail, her entire back side wagged with it. At approximately 3:15 p.m. (as if she could tell time) she went to the front door and started whimpering and moving around like a million bugs were crawling all over her. When the bus door hissed, I opened the door and she would burst out towards the girls,

"Mom Shiloh wags her whole butt!" Annie giggled with delight watching her one day.

The only time Shiloh stopped wagging was when Mike and I had our long, sad talks. Then Shiloh placed her chin on the leg of whoever was talking and

looked up with sad eyes. When I cried, she pawed my leg and whimpered...but not for the purpose of being petted...it was to comfort me. If Mike was the one crying, she did the same for him. Then after awhile, she'd look out the glass sliding door and forget the whole thing.

One morning I went out to the porch to see Shiloh laying listlessly and breathing very heavily. The towel she was on was covered in her own diarrhea. I knew something was very wrong so I wrapped her up and drove her to the vet right away. The vet said she had parvo and that she would probably die within hours without an emergency blood transfusion. Since I grew up on a ranch, I knew that no matter how sweet she was, and no matter how attached we were, there was no way in hell we would pay over \$2,000 for a blood transfusion for a dog. I ruefully told the vet to put her to sleep. I was wiping a tear away walking out the door, when out of habit, I called Mike to give him the news.

I was surprised when "regular Mike" answered the phone, and even more surprised when he told me to go back in and pay the vet for the blood transfusion.

"Mike, you're crazy to pay \$2,000 on an operation for a dog that may or may not even work." I told him.

I was thinking about our mortgage and all of the other bills we had. I was sad about Shiloh, but I wasn't unrealistic about things. After going back and fourth with me, Mike hung up on me and called the vet himself.

I hated to admit it, but two weeks later, I was grateful to Mike for what he had done. Shiloh was back running around between our legs and chewing up my leather sandals. Her little bones were still brittle and frail due to the blood transfusion, so Mike shelled over another \$1,000 to fix her broken hind leg three months later. From October to Christmas she hobbled around dragging a fuchsia cast that we all signed with a black sharpie

One day, around Christmas, when Mike was feeling fine, he looked down at Shiloh, who was growling at her cast, and laughed,

“I think we need her as much as she needs us.” He said.

Chapter 10

Love Letters

Other than being the oldest person in class, college wasn't that difficult for me. What I noticed right away, though, was that I hated college aged girls—always tugging on a skirt they never should have worn in the first place and overusing the word “like”.

In freshman speech class I chose ‘Love Letters’ as my topic. I spoke directly to the twenty-something girls in the room and asked them if they'd ever received a handwritten love letter. I told them I had a shoe box full of them from my husband, Mike, from when we were in high school. I spoke about the World War II soldiers who wrote to their girls back home about trenches and rain, about Napoleon's letters to Josephine, and about John Adams' letters to Abigail.

“Any man who has ever conquered the world, or thought he could, had a woman on his mind,” I told them.

“Has anyone ever put a pen to paper for you? Has anyone ever sung the blues on your behalf?” I asked.

Then, I stood and watched them from the podium as they squirmed in their seats and stared sadly down at their manicures because they'd never received anything other than a booty call via text message.

The girl who spoke after me wasn't prepared. She was scrolling through her email trying to find her slides.

"Hmm. I emailed my slides to myself last night,..." she explained in between blowing big pink bubbles, "...but I don't see them now."

"Huh hum," the speech professor had to remind her.

She walked over to the trash can and spit out the gum.

"Sorry." she said.

Her email name was something like hottiehotness92@hotmail.com.

Typical. I thought.

She sighed and fiddled around with something on the podium. She was quite pretty to look at, so the long wait for her to get organized wasn't horrible.

"So...my name is Chelsea, and my speech is about staying fit in college." She finally began.

She was thin, but not fit.

Surprisingly, her speech was somewhat helpful and she only used "like" once or twice. She provided information about the health and wellness classes offered at the college: yoga, golf, hiking, mountain biking, and weights.

"...and if you must have pizza delivery, always go for the thin crust," she advised.

Mike was confused the next time I ordered pizza.

“What the hell?” he said when he opened the box

I never ordered anything but thin crust pizza after that.

Her

I love you dearly and fiercely and without regret. You are the one who shines through all of the time passed beneath us. My whole life up until now, I hoped to meet one like you. I know it would never work with you (damn the hope) and I know you have left me thoroughly for another, as I left you thoroughly for a life of living and dying on the raging main.

The night I told you I loved you, you hit me. Not with the coy punch in the shoulder of a buddy or the giggling acceptance of a girl manipulated by the most used and trifling and powerful of words in our tongue. You hit me and with tears raining from your tourmaline and serpentine eyes like the Southwind storms, you slapped me with all the force of one who had delved into the depths of humanity and emerged as something better and deeper than the normal. You slapped me because I was leaving for a year, maybe forever. At least you were honest. Had I met you long ago, I would have changed everything, I hope. He had no right to ruin you for me. As I had no right to ruin bitter single motherhood for you. That's why I worry some days. I worry that you are living with someone less than you because I reminded you of the bond possible between an honest man and his woman. And an honest woman and her man.

When I met you, I knew I had to leave. I didn't want to tell you because I knew the toll of the left behind. I wanted to experience a woman, but mostly just individual beautiful you, without being afraid and lonely and with you hanging under my domestic departure. We shared our bodies, in life and death. In love and the end, we shared all we had and I took you into me.

But these nights, when I sit in the cold, and when I am honest with myself, when I was lonely with anyone else, I missed you. I would drive by your road and think of turning my old Ford up your way. In life and death, pervasive during those terrible times, from bullet or pathogen, you were a lover and friend. And now, forever gone to the wilds of finding yourself. You reside easy on the mind, but so heavy upon me that some days I can't think about anything but you. I want you. I think I need you. But you are not one to be needed or wanted, not by someone like me. You need someone more permanent.

And permanence is a sick joke. We both know that better than most anyone.

That day in marriage counseling, Mike told our counselor he bought us a pair of mountain bike so we could go riding together. I told her that after so many years of doing our own things it was a little too late to start riding bikes together. It was true, for sixteen years, we never really did anything as a couple outside of our bedroom.

“He just bought me over \$1,000 worth of Victoria’s Secret stuff.” I told her. She rolled her eyes and said we should go riding someday soon just for fun, “Maybe it would be good for the two of you.” She said.

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Chapter 11

Tom Waits Wrote the Bible

It took me awhile to decide, but I messaged Dozer and asked him to go mountain biking with me instead. I am sure he wondered why I had contacted him out of the blue after so many months, plus it was entirely too hot to ride. I wasn't a proficient mountain biker yet, neither was he, but a few days later, I was following his tracks down to the Gunnison River in the desert southeast of town. We kept going down and down and I knew there will be hell to pay coming back up.

He looked back at me and laughed, "We need to watch for BLM signs or we could get lost and die out here."

When I was in my early twenties I went to West Texas with my parents to visit my mother's aunts. I remember looking out the window wondering where people went if they ever needed to hide. Everything was so exposed in the flatness of it all—*that's the real reason everyone has a basement in Texas*, I thought.

In Western Colorado, you can go down an old dirt mining road for just a couple of miles and be long gone. From the city, there are landmarks on the horizon in every direction you look, so you think you can leave town without getting lost, but when you get out in the middle of it, it swallows you whole.

One summer, my friend [Paige](#) disappeared. Come to find out, she was a single mother of three by day, and a hooker by night. Whenever I would go to her

5,000 square foot house for our mommy playgroups I always wondered how she could afford to keep it after her husband left. When I asked her how she was surviving, she told me she sold Pampered Chef and taught dance lessons. She always had a baby on one hip and a phone pressed between her shoulder and her ear. Paige's favorite thing to say was "I can sleep when I'm dead."

One summer, Paige's car was found burned near the interstate. My Moms Club friends and I searched for her along with the sheriff's department all summer. Essi and I are the ones who found her personal checks and business cards scattered along side of Highway 50. It was like someone threw them out the passenger window of a fast moving car.

That summer we searched for Paige, I realized how major the desert outside of town really was. In Western Colorado, all you would have to do is pull off the interstate, place a body at the bottom of any dry gulch, climb back up, and slough the edge off over the top of it. That's exactly what Lester Jones did with Paige's body. They found her skull wrapped in duct tape five years later in a Wells Gulch just off the highway.

When I called Essi to tell her where they found Paige, she remembered that summer day we searched Wells Gulch, "Oh God, Holly we walked right over her."

When Dozer and I finally rode up on the Gunnison River, the vermillion bluffs that were spooning it blushed like they had just been caught. There was one puffy cloud in the sky and I prayed that it would float in front of the sun for just a few minutes.

I was surprised there was cell service that far out and even more surprised to see five text messages waiting from Mike.

He'd hacked into my e:mail again, so he knew all about my mountain bike ride with Dozer. In the texts, he told me that if it weren't for him being out of the country he would shoot Dozer, me, and then himself.

I texted him back and told him we would discuss it in counseling.

I kept apologizing to Dozer for answering the texts and he told me to stop, "It drives me crazy when people over apologize," he said, "If you're really sorry, saying so once is good enough for me."

I knew from Dozer's blog that he probably knew the geology of this place, so I asked him about it. He put his water pack under his head, folded his hands on his chest and said it was the classic ugly duckling story, where all of the beautiful, colorful layers we were seeing in the sedimentary bluffs used to be the guck and grime at the bottom of ancient seas, shallow lakes, and alluvial fans. He said that time and erosion, not God, was responsible for any beautiful sedimentary feature in Western Colorado and Eastern Utah.

He convinced that we were sitting on a million year's worth of slow accumulation of dust and dirt, which was easy to do since I'd never taken the Bible literally in regards to creation. Whatever God was, I decided, It was not subject to time and was completely indifferent to a billion years.

The poet Blake once said, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time". That day, sitting on the bluffs above the green river that flowed forever down its canyon, there was a palpable eternity around me and I got the feeling I'd been there with Dozer before.

Next came the lecture about the Unaweep Canyon. The Unaweep is an immense canyon sixty miles north of Dove Valley. I drive through it every time I go back and forth to the city. Dozer said it would be as deep, or deeper, than the Black Canyon of the Gunnison if it weren't for all of the sediment on its valley floor, the problem with Unaweep Canyon is that it has no river at all. He told me that the river that carved the Unaweep Canyon out over a hundred million years had abandoned it millions of years ago. "It was either the Gunnison River or the Colorado River that carved it out," he said. Then he told me that the river slowly changed course, and finally stopped flowing down the canyon altogether. He called it "the great abandoned canyon".

Before we left that place, I wanted to offer up my testimony to him, but I didn't. *Not only is there a God—It is here with us now—and every time you write about geology or the girl with the tourmaline eyes...I come to Jesus.*

After awhile, we decided to walk our bikes up a couple of really steep hills to get back to the road a little more quickly. The further we got from the river, the harder the desert came down on us. The only thing around was an occasional ant hill sparkling with broken shards of glass and crackling sage brush that looked like it would burst into flames any second. Dirt was getting into our brakes. It was pure hell riding back up from the river, just like I predicted it would be.

When he'd get to the top of a particularly steep hill, Dozer put his bike down and walked back down to fetch mine for me. I was raked over, completely exhausted, and running out of water.

After a couple hours of steep, hot climbing, I felt divine relief to see Noble Steve waiting there alone in the parking lot for me.

"This was fun." Dozer said.

He tried to kiss me before I got in the truck, but my mouth was bone dry, so he handed me the spout of his water pack to drink from. The water was as hot as boiled tea, but I was grateful. He leaned in again, but I turned my cheek not wanting him to feel my lips so dry. So he reached up under my sports bra instead.

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I was twenty minutes late for marriage counseling that afternoon and Mike never showed up at all. “He’s late for everything,” I told the counselor.

“He was three hours and twenty minutes late for the birth of Annie because he was screwing that coal miner in New Mexico and forgot I was pregnant.”

She’d heard the story of the coal miner a half dozen times before.

I told her the marriage was beyond repair anyway, not because of the infidelity, but because I was afraid Mike would actually kill me. I told her about the threatening text messages he had been sending me.

“You just don’t threaten to kill the mother of your children.” I said.

She nodded and wrote something down.

Our devoted, and expensive, counselor had tried for several months to get me to decide what I wanted to do about the marriage.

Finally, that afternoon she said, “Holly, you need to pretend your mother is dead when you are making major life decisions.”

I thought that sounded very harsh, but it worked almost instantly.

And that was that.

After a year of sitting on the fence, I decided to leave Mike for good.

With Mike stuck in Canada for another night, I felt safe staying at the house. When I finally got home, I drank a gallon of water, took a cold shower, and cooked a decent dinner for my two little daughters:

Tom Waits Wrote the Bible

She's a wild rose, not settled. She's a cold gun and ice blue metal.

She's got one of those rearends that only seem minimal till you have a handful of it in a corner. That's when you catch the rebound. The stiff posture. Dig into that body once and you know you're gone for good. It takes a couple tries before you got her. Use your weight, load up, sit back, let the brakes off. She doesn't scream, just lets out one long sigh. She won't do it all for you, but takes direction well.

She ain't easy to handle. You feel raked over. Your core muscles scream. Get in the groove, follow that track, she'll go for days.

She's something to see.

She's green clover and jimson weed, red leather skirt way up above her knees.

Oh yeah, my baby's low down.

Then there's the other one. Yeah, she's got an ass like a Dana 60 four link. It's maximal, it's too much, it's obscene, it's beautiful. Flexing and torsion out of fucking control. It's like her body is just some primitive transportation device for that amazing and barely constrained posterior. In another life and time, she'd be a honky tonkin' woman such as the world could not survive. At least my world. It's like all the dangerous sugary volatile beauty on earth is trapped in a dirty glass and cooled with a couple melting cubes. Catch it quick, my friend, entropy is calling.

It's in the way they move and in the way they breathe and in the way they look sideways and catch their breath when they're thrown down on the ground and taken for my purpose.

I don't know why I bother trying to restrain myself. I'm an animal. This isn't about guitars, it isn't about mountain bikes. This is about summer and the sweat and jiggle of the female form wearing little and exposed to the sun. Goddamn.

That's all I got. Goddamn.

Yeah, the first paragraph may have been about my Element. The second about a cheap Mexican Stratocaster.

Maybe.

Maybe they just have the privilege of sitting around all naked when the girls go walking by my open door brown and beautiful and when the girls go breathing through my head, writhing and sinful.

Maybe I'm just worked up from all the running, biking, lifting and fighting.

Maybe.

Chapter 12

Having Annie

The Dana 60 Four ass in "Tom Waits Wrote the Bible", belonged to me, I'm certain. My body has never been minimal in any way, shape, or form. My rear is just like my mother's: high up on my legs, matronly, and left over from medieval Europe where there were no better heat sources for children and men. I don't know who the other, minimal ass belonged to—but for the time being, I promised myself that I would not see Dozer again until Mike calmed the fuck down.

School was out for the summer and since I was afraid to live in the same house with Mike, I headed back to Dove Valley with the girls to live with my parents.

Our cattle ranch in Dove had been in our family for over a hundred years, and my dad still did things the old fashioned way with horses and branding irons. Back in the gun fighting days, the canyons around the valley had been good hiding places for horse thieves and other outlaws.

There was new money in the banks from the gold and silver ore in Telluride, Silverton, and Ouray that attracted the best outlaws from all over the

country. Apparently, knew to ride like hell to Dove Valley, trade their worn out horse for a fresh one, and continue down to Old Mexico. The Indians living in Dove usually came out on top, because once the outlaw's horse recovered, it was usually a much finer horse than the pinto they traded it for. So the Dove Valley Indians kept trading up until they had some of the finest horses west of the Continental Divide.

Feeling like an outlaw myself, I hid upstairs in the old farm house with some books. I left the window open so I could hear the breeze blowing through Hell's Half Acre. There was no screen on the window so plenty of cotton from the cottonwood trees floated in along with an occasional yellow jacket.

No one knew what to say to me since my marriage was officially over, so everyone just carried on as normal, including the kids. My daughters were used spending summers in Dove Valley without their dad anyways.

When I was pregnant with Annie, I locked up our house in the city and moved to Dove Valley because I was so lonely there with just a toddler. Day in and day out it was just Jessica and me all alone in the big house. I never really had any friends in the city, so sometimes I'd go weeks without talking to an adult. That was the summer Mike was working at the coal mine in New Mexico and rarely came around. He said it was too expensive to fly out of the small airport,

and that it would be easier for him to drive to Dove Valley on the weekends and see us there.

I have a picture of me that summer, pregnant as hell, leaning on a garden hoe. I was smiling because my dad was the one with the camera. From the garden, I had a good view of the driveway, so on Friday evenings I would go out and pull weeds and wait for Mike's big white truck to turn in. Back then it was a huge thrill to see him coming down the long, dirt drive way. I felt beautiful and happy that summer I was pregnant with Annie, but Mike didn't seem to notice me.

I never harvested anything from my garden though because just as the tomatoes were getting ripe, so was I. I had to go back to the city in the middle of August to give birth at a real hospital.

My mom made the drive back to the city with me as I dialed Mike,

"I'm having the baby." I told him calmly. I was mad that he wasn't already there. He knew good and well I was eleven days over my due date. And I knew good and well I wouldn't have the baby until he arrived on the scene.

"Ok, I'm on my way." He said just as calmly.

Next thing I knew I was standing in the shower at the hospital with my mother. I was in a hospital gown and she was fully dressed, but we were both soaking wet. She'd gotten all the way in with me to talk me through a contraction.

“Where’s Mike?!” I screamed trying to keep the baby in until he got there.

“Oh honey, he’ll be here soon.” She soothed.

Two hours later, I was back in a dry gown on the hospital bed trying to shift my weight so the baby wouldn’t slip out somehow. Finally the doctor got very impatient with me.

“Holly! You need to stop whatever it is you’re doing! You need to push right now!” she screamed. She was furious with me for not pushing when she told me to.

“Holly, please do what the doctor says.” My mom begged.

I still wanted to wait for Mike, but the pain was getting to be too much. The doctor and her nurses wanted the baby out right away.

Finally the doctor threw up her hands,

“Do you want me to cut you open? Is that what you want?! Holly you need to push or I’m going to have the nurse go get a very sharp knife!” She said.

I considered it.

Then I thought, *No! I’d rather die than have this baby without Mike here!* But finally my body took over and there was no stopping the thing.

An hour later, the doctor put Annie on my chest and stormed out the door.

“I think she’s mad at you.” Mom giggled leaning in closer to look at little Annie who was groping around for her milk.

Hours passed and still no Mike. Jessica was sitting on the bed with me rubbing Annie's fuzzy head,

"Where's daddy?" she asked. I told her I didn't know and started to cry.

It was almost midnight when Mike finally burst through the door. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the pink blanket.

"Oh!" he said.

He came over to the bed tentatively like he was confused, like he wasn't sure if he was in the right room. I handed Annie to him. He rubbed his nose against hers and stared at down at her.

"Did you name her yet?" He asked. *Hell yes I named her already, and it wasn't any of the names you picked out! Also, I left the father's name on the birth certificate BLANK AS FUCK.*

"Yes, it's Annie." I said.

"Well she's beautiful!" he beamed. He couldn't forget about Jessica, who woke up when she heard him come in.

"Hello Noodle!" he said grabbing her up for the father, daughter twirl around he always did. "What do you think about your little sister!?" Jessica looked at him sleepily and smiled her approval at our new bundle of joy.

Mike had to go back to New Mexico the next day, but to make up for it, he sent an obscene bouquet of flowers to my hospital room.

“I bet this thing cost \$200.” Mom said looking through the flowers.

I never felt the same way about Mike after that. I didn’t know if it was the post partum depression or if it was something else.

After a few days, my mother had to leave also. I begged her to stay. I told her I didn’t have any friends, and she felt bad for me, but with tears in her eyes, she backed out the door with all of her suitcases. So there I sat alone in the big empty house with my two babies feeling very sorry for myself.

The reason I wanted kids in the first place was to stave off loneliness. I thought if I had a house full of kids I wouldn’t be so lonely when Mike was away for work. But taking care of those babies, all by myself was the worst loneliness imaginable. I once told someone, “Never have a baby to make yourself feel better...that’s not how it works.”

Our house in the city was always more of a hub than a home. We chose a house close to the airport so I could pick Mike up and drop him off whenever he needed me to.

“Goodbye Rocket Man” I’d tell him as I watched him walk through the hissing airport doors his sensible suitcase on wheels. I always packed his bag for him: two pair of dress slacks, one clean white shirt, one undershirt, two pair of jeans, three button up shirts of various color, four pair of socks and four pair of briefs.

Jessica and Annie always thought of Mike more as a friendly visitor who brought them gifts tucked in the front zipper of that suitcase: pop-up books, little bracelets, postcards, candy. He was never really like a dad back then.

Chapter 13

Fellowship of the Ring

Some things are hidden until you need to find them. My dad presented me with sixteen spiral notebooks from the 1970's. They were the [journals of my great-grandmother](#), my dad's grandmother. Her name was Ada and her dreams were prophecies like mine. She married a stranger despite the horrible dream she had about him on her wedding night. Mr. A, she called him, was a raging alcoholic, who abused her terribly. For some reason, she kept going back to him even though she was always presented with better choices. I didn't understand it, but I was grateful to read about her life and learn from her mistakes. I made up my mind I would never go back to Mike no matter how he begged me to.

Sitting in my childhood room in Dove Valley that day, I looked up from the old notebooks and wondered why I wasn't enough of a poet to bring forth a long depression or even a tear over the divorce—maybe it had been a long time coming. Maybe I had already been through the worst part.

I thought it was strange that the only thing I really cared about was Dozer. I'll never know if our fling that summer was based on honest feelings, or if it was just a strange coping mechanism. Either way, it was just the distraction I needed to get me through some pretty tough times.

When I finally told Mike I wanted a divorce and showed him that I actually had the papers, he was more than pissed. I was too afraid of him to miss him, he had crazy eyes that other people were starting to notice too.

My counselor told me that if Mike killed himself it wouldn't be my fault, "Mike is responsible for Mike" she told me, "God forbid he does do something crazy, I'll be available for you and the girls."

Yeah, for \$250 an hour, I thought. Some friends of Mike's had taken away his guns (for his own sake) and I had the papers for a restraining order. But I just put them under the divorce papers in the box. I hate paperwork.

Mike told me that if I went through with the restraining order he would kill himself for sure. "WHO WILL SEND YOUR PAYCHECKS THEN BITCH!?" he texted in all caps. My mom and dad never had to lock their doors at night because dad kept a loaded shot gun under their bed. But the nights the girls and I slept there, they locked the house up tight anyway. Dad said he would hate to have to shoot his favorite "son-of-a-bitch-in-law".

Mike and my dad had been good friends for sixteen years. They had started building a cabin together up on the mountain property the summer before...now it was just an abandoned wood frame. Dad finally went up to retrieve the hand saw and generator and came back down to the ranch looking very sad.

One day Mike threw his wedding band at me, so I bent down and I put it in my purse. That afternoon I remembered I still had it. I leaned my head out the window and looked down at the kids playing in Hell's Half Acre. "Hey kids, do you want to play Lord of the Rings?" I asked. I was the master of children's entertainment. I had been a kid in Dove Valley once myself after all.

I was looking at the ring when all of the kids burst through my bedroom door. I held it in the air and said "my preciousssssss" in my best Gollum voice. The rules of the game were simple: I would jump on my bike and ride a half a mile to Old Grandpa's place and hide the ring. When I got back, I would create a map for them and send them on their journey.

My sister and I would be the bad guys and we would stalk them and scare them once or twice to make their journey more interesting. *One can't have a hero's journey without an evil impediment.* I thought. I hid the ring in a place I was sure they could find it and rode back to the house. Then I sketched a map and handed it to the oldest.

"You are the leader of the fellowship of the ring." I told him in the most solemn tone. "You must lead your cousins to Old Grandpa's, find the ring and return it safely to me." He nodded seriously.

I went on. “There will be terrible creatures along the way who will try to steal your food or kidnap your cousins! You should take a couple of cow dogs for protection and be alert at all times.”

I led the kids behind the house and pointed to the bluffs.

“See the shadow at the bottom of the bluff?” I asked. “Yes.” they said. “The ring needs to be back to me by the time the shadow reaches the top.”

On summer evenings in Dove Valley, when the sun drops down behind the bluffs West of the valley, the bluffs South of the valley blaze up with golden sunshine. What happens next is like clock work: the shadow lying on the valley floor begins to creep up the side of the south bluffs minute by minute overtaking the pink illumination a little at a time. Say the shadow starts up at 6:00 p.m., the bluffs will be completely shaded by 9:00 p.m. (the shadow moves much faster in the winter).

Mom knows to start dinner when the shadow starts up the bluff because dad will usually walk in looking for his supper by the time it reaches the thickest sandstone layer.

Of course all the kids agreed to the rules of the Lord of the Rings game. I gave them each a bag with cookies and a juice pack and sent them out the door. Next, I called my sister and said,

“In about 10 minutes, you need to put on a Halloween mask, get on your four-wheeler and chase the kids around.”

There was silence on the phone for a few seconds and then she said,

“Bull shit, I’m way too busy for that crap” and hung up on me.

My sister always had the bigger personality of the two of us, she was prettier too. She did whatever the hell she wanted to do ever since her husband died. In the 1990’s her husband was working at the salt plant in Dove Valley. One day, he climbed a ladder to check on the chemicals in a holding tank. He got a fatal whiff of something that wasn’t quite right, and fell eight feet from the top rung onto the concrete floor.

My mom never said anything about my sister never being re-married.

By the time I got around to being the dark lord, the kids were already on their way back with the ring. I rode up beside their group and grabbed Annie by her tiny waist and heaved her on to the four-wheeler with me. It was hard to steer with her giggling and squirming and the cow dogs biting at the tires. There were little blue butterflies floating all around. In the summer, the little white butterflies turn different shades of blue and purple from feeding on the alfalfa blossoms.

I’ll pawn the ring, grow a huge garden and just live here forever, I thought.

In the evenings I walked over to my dad’s shop and watched him work on his tractor. He cursed under his breath and only stopped cranking or wrenching

long enough to slap a way a mosquito or wipe his hands on his pants. I had watched him mechanic all my life. I never understood why, but it was one of my favorite ways to pass time. It made me happy, it calmed me down. My dad and I don't talk when he is working on equipment, he'll say a few words about a "Goddamn part that they just don't make anymore", and I nod with sympathy.

Because Epistolary Never Really Died

The rain turns the gray dessication into verdant apocrypha and I dream of you. On this mesa, where once a river lived, I can see the skeletons of the ancients rising above, rising against. The giants, the remnants of islands and semi continents and steaming coal swamps, lay mounded on each other off to the West where the white phosphorous sun ignites the sky in a death plume a hundred shades of exploding gold. And you remember that day sitting up on that canyon wall watching me watch the sunset behind me in your eyes?

I hope not.

Your life is not your own, not now. You're given forever away to your blissful duty and that stranger I never knew but was always around. I'm better left as a memory than as a love and better still as a faded unaccounted for passage of days. But when I lay awake at night, with the moving cottonwood leaves snarling secrets outside, I remember waiting on you to get out of the shower. The spectre of you on my sheets and in my clothes and hanging around the air.

I dream of you. In those dreams, I find myself forever walking down a long stretch of riparian road. Along Dominquez creek. Along Plateau canyon. Then some nights I dream a highway back to you. Sometimes hundreds of them.

But you are no more alive to me than the hundred carved stones subsiding and listing and capsizing into this cemetery of eons. I hope you are there forever, or what passes for it. As one more corpse I drink into quickness.

As a dreamed highway and a path. As the clouds heated liquid soldering the flux of the end of the day.

We were all dead anyway.

Chapter 14

Mi Casita

If I had not been serious about getting my college degree, I would've settled like dust in Dove Valley and never returned to the city. Turns out it was a good decision to return, and so far, the best summer I've ever had.

Everything I took from Mike's newly remodeled house fit snugly in the back of Noble Steve, only later would I return for my garlic press. I stayed with Essi most nights, and drove around the city looking "for rent" signs. One day, I stopped at an art studio and went in. I was drawn to a small watercolor in the corner. The painting was of an old adobe house with teal trim surrounded by hollyhocks and cosmos. I was transported into the painting for a few moments and completely forgot where I was. *It's like a snow white cottage somewhere in the middle of Southwestern Colorado*, I thought.

"It's a local artist" I heard someone say. The painting was over \$400, so I told the lady at the desk it was lovely and I left.

I'm not sure what it is with me and Craigslist, but later that week I stumbled on a listing under the rentals with the heading "Comfy Casita for Rent". There was a picture attached. I couldn't believe that it was the same adobe house I'd seen in the watercolor earlier. Shaking with disbelief, I called the number from

the post, and a lady named Ester answered. I finally exhaled when she said it was still for rent.

On her two acre property she had the main house and three small casitas that she rented out to a selected few renters “who have good auras”. I told her about the coincidence. She said there were no coincidences, so I told her I would be there in ten minutes.

Ester was in her 70s and was once a very beautiful woman. That afternoon, she wore a big floppy sun hat, a baggy stretched out sweater, and blue pajama bottoms that were soaked with mud up to her ankles.

After I told her my name she asked me for my birth sign.

“Hmm, that’s strange,” she said, “You seldom see a Virgo divorcing...Virgos are so loyal.” She told me she had been divorced two or three times and that her garden would help heal me during mine.

“You seem fine now,” she said, “but you won’t be fine for long.”—I shuttered wondering what she meant by that.

Ester said I could pick all the vegetables and herbs I needed, and she showed me the rope swing for the girls. Then she saw me holding a water bottle and told me very seriously that if I lived there I must recycle all plastic and glass.

My marriage counselor wasn't impressed with the adobe house coincidence and said the living arrangement, with a bunk bed in the same room as the kitchen, was acceptable for six months at the most. I signed a year's lease anyway.

One morning Ester brought a piece of dried sage brush into the casita. She lit it with the burner on the stove and snuffed out the end. She held it above her head and swirled the delicate smoke around the room. She said it was to remove bad energy and demons...if there were any. When I was a kid I was badly allergic to sage brush. I would end up at the doctor's office with a severe asthma attack every time it was in full bloom. *Maybe I had just needed to be exorcized*, I thought.

As Ester was chanting softly, I sat at my wobbly table with my text books and wiped away tears that were falling too fast to keep up. When she asked, I told her I was crying because my girls were spending the weekend with their raging, suicidal father and I was afraid for them.

I figured that she would tell me to let the universe take care of it, but instead, she told me to get a court order for full custody.

I considered that several times, but Mike did not appear crazy to the authorities. His guns had been returned, and I never had the guts to file the restraining order. It was just a piece of paper anyway. One day I took my phone to the police station and had them take pictures of the text messages he had been sending me in all caps.

“Mam, these texts warrant a restraining order, and possibly a shot gun”. The officer said.

Mike was the CEO of a successful construction company, and it always turned into a friendly visit with the police whenever they showed up. He told them he was just doing his best to be a good father and provide for his girls. I felt silly calling the police every time he threatened to kill me, or himself, because I was the one that always ended up looking crazy.

After so many threats, I finally told him “if you’re going to do it just get it over with, but please don’t do it in front of the girls.”

Ester wasn’t lying about her garden. It comforted me like my mother sitting on the side of my bed or my dad working on tractors. It was the largest continuous, sprawling garden I’d ever seen and one of the most beautiful places I’d ever been. Ester’s had doted on it for decades and had faded wicker reading chairs scattered all around.

In the evenings, I walked down the hill from the casita, shook the sprinkler water from a garden chair and sat with a book for hours while my neighbor strummed on his guitar and my daughters explored behind every tree. There was a weeping willow tree west garden and my little girls made it their May pole,

holding onto the branches and braiding in and out with each other like I used to do with my sister when I was little.

As I sat there watching them, I silently begged God to make me a ten year old girl just for that summer so I too could peak into all of the secret places in that garden. I dreamt of being a ten year old girl with nothing on her mind except mud pies and butterflies. When my little daughters ran up to me, I pulled twigs and grass from their hair and then they were off again to roll down the hill, wild with glee, into the clover patch down below.

I had a picture of myself when I was a little girl that I'd removed from mom's old photo album. That night I pulled it out of my bag and spoke to it. "It's ok, Holly, I'm sorry you're scared and that your life is turning out much different than you ever thought it would, but you'll be ok in the end." Then I flipped her over because her sweet, toothless smile made me so sad.

Since Ester only rented to “spiritual potentials”, my next door neighbor was a pot smoking, bee keeper, named Steve. One evening from his reading chair, Steve looked over his glasses and asked me if I’d ever had glimpses of consciousness. I didn’t know what he meant, so I told him that I didn’t think so.

“You will recognize it when it happens” He said, and went back to reading. I figured it was the marijuana talking.

Steve had a Near Death Experience in the 80s. He said he thought he unplugged the electrical cord before he bit the prongs together to fit them in the outlet.

“Man, when I saw the thick black smoke coming out of my mouth, I knew I done for.” He laughed.

That’s when he said he left his body, entered the tunnel, and saw God. “I experienced pure consciousness when I died,” He said, “you only get glimpses of it here on earth.” Then he closed his eyes, “I was surrounded by love and light and I didn’t want to come back at all.”

That summer was full and thick and Ester’s vibrant garden was bursting all around us. It was a place where I felt safe and happy for hours at a time.

Since God did not turn me into a ten year old girl that summer like I asked, being a middle aged woman would have to do. Feeling a little stuck in my body, and in my circumstances, I realized a woman has needs despite her best efforts.

Towards the end of June, I decided it might be safe to see Dozer again. I had been reading his blog, but I hadn’t talked to him since our mountain bike ride down to the Gunnison River.

By then he had a quasi-girlfriend, but he agreed to come over anyway. Had his girlfriend been his one true love with the tourmaline eyes from “Later Love”, I would have left him alone—just like I would have never walked over a grave.

I went to the Mexican bakery and bought a bag of tamales stuffed full of pork, then I asked Ester if I could use her patio for my date. She asked me the birth sign of the young man I was inviting over. I told her I would find out. She would then bring me her star charts to see if we were compatible.

Her patio was a whimsical, enchanting place with a huge stone fire place, potted plants, a braided fence, and wind chimes.

Just as Dozer arrived in his Scout, a text message came in from Mike inquiring “IS SHIT FOR BRAINS THERE YET?” I shuttered. *Bloody hell!* I knew that Mike had hacked into my old computer months ago. He had read and printed all of my e:mails to and from Dozer and others, and he threatened to show them to everyone in town. “THEN EVERYONE WILL KNOW WHAT A SLUT YOU ARE,” he’d texted.

Since then, I had purchased a new computer and formulated incredible passwords. I also bought a new cell phone and changed carriers. How he knew that Dozer was coming over that night, I will never know.

Instantly, my excitement to see Dozer turned into terror. I braced myself on my table gasping for air. I had to remind myself that the girls were safe with Mike’s mother, and I had every right to get on with my life.

I wasn’t sure how to tell Dozer he could possibly be involved in a murder-suicide that night, but I didn’t want him to leave, so when he knocked on the door,

I quickly composed myself and lead him down through the garden to a neutral place.

Dozer was oblivious to the impending doom and chatting about his day. He saw the big stone fire place and got busy gathering fire wood. This wasn't his first fire. He started it effortlessly, and then backed away from the flames which lit up his face like a demigod. His teeth were bursting through his smile and his eyes were reflecting the warm light. And I swore, if that was the last thing I ever saw, my life wouldn't have been in vain.

I drank two Modelos and began to relax. I started to feel safe there with him.

He was a Virgo, just like me, born exactly six days before and eight years later. He loved the tamales and said that he loved anything that was stuffed full or pork or bacon.

"The girl I am seeing now doesn't eat meat." He said as if he wanted to get that out in the open right away.

He talked to me openly about his girlfriend,

"She volunteers a lot in the community...she's got a green thumb...she's highly educated and intelligent." etc. etc.

Yes, the salt of the earth, I get it. I thought. I told him if he ever wanted children, he should stick with her since my child bearing days were over. Plus, my baggage was getting heavy and he'd be much better off with a lighter load.

Since I was older, he assumed that I was at a point in my life where I could handle the extra woman with little or no drama. I think my tolerance of our little love triangle amused him.

But, it wasn't so much "tolerance" as it was "damage already done". Since my heart was already broken, no man could possibly break it again. Only my daughters had the power to break my heart then.

It had just rained that afternoon and it was strangely chilly for June in Western Colorado, so I decided to run up to the casita to grab a sweater. On the way up the hill, I froze. I could see up on the lawn in front of the casita that there was a darker shade of dusk that appeared to be walking towards my door. After sixteen years I knew my husband's form very well.

When my eyes adjusted to the light, I could see that he was wearing a black sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head and I knew for sure he had a gun with him. I dropped to my knees and crawled back through the garden towards the fire. I frantically whispered to Dozer that my husband was walking on the lawn above, and to get down quickly. He looked perplexed, but he did as he was told.

We sat whispering trying to decide what to do.

Shaking, I dialed 911 and whispered to the operator that my estranged husband was trespassing and I was afraid for my life. Dozer scooted to grab the axe by the fire wood and then back to my side. We waited.

“You never told me you had a husband.” He whispered.

We watched the dark figure up on the hill peering into my neighbor’s window and then into mine.

I remember thinking about how Nicole Simpson must have felt in the moments before she died. I wish she would’ve had the vantage point that I did.

Now I know that if Dozer and I had been in the casita we both would have been killed that night.

We watched the form intently until it disappeared behind the corner, but it was so dark we couldn’t be sure if Mike hadn’t just circled back around. We sat completely still under the braided fence, barely breathing, until the police showed up ten minutes later. We walked out to meet them on the road, so as not to wake Ester. We checked Dozer’s Scout to see if it had been molested, and I filed my fourth or fifth report with the police.

But it was always a different set of officers, so I told them Mike’s information and gave them my old address where he still lived. I told them I was

worried about my daughters and they told me they would go talk with Mike and check on the kids for me.

When the police called me back a few hours later, they said,

“Mrs. Moyer, your husband was just getting back from a mountain bike ride and your daughters were playing checkers with his mother. Maybe it was someone else that you saw?”

Dozer wanted to spend the night. He said he didn’t want me to be alone in case “Bat Shit Crazy” returned. I wasn’t expecting him to spend the night. I had never spent the night with anyone other than my husband and I felt very awkward. I didn’t know the protocol for such things: like when was I supposed to brush my teeth? Since I only had one room, I didn’t know if I should change in front of him or in the bathroom. Do I pull out the hide-a-bed right away, or is that too presumptuous? Do I even want to have sex? When he grabbed me by my arm and whirled me around to his lips, I decided that I might.

Turns out, I was over thinking things, as usual, and everything just fell into place. He forgot about the earlier drama and fucked me deliberately. I couldn’t believe the universe had aligned so much sex and terror in the same night. My life had been rather dull for thirty some years, and then all the sudden...bam.

I was angry with Mike for lying to the police again. Laying there wide awake every sound made me jump.

“You should keep a shot gun in your closet”, Dozer said “...or next time I come over, I’ll just bring mine.” He yawned and pulled me in closer.

Shit! He wants to come over again?! I couldn’t believe it.

I told him I would get a shot gun from my dad next time I went to Dove Valley.

“I’ve been to Dove Valley before.” He said sleepily, “I was monitoring the water shed there for an entire summer once.”

Fuck! He was in Dove Valley for an entire summer and I didn’t know it? I rolled over and cursed my life and the missed connection.

Because of the storm that day, it was cold in the casita so I got up and pulled the pink princess blankets off Annie’s bunk bed. Dozer was holding me, but I couldn’t stop shaking. He kissed me on the back of the neck, and whispered to me, “You’re shaking.”

“I know.” I said, “I need to ask Ester how to heat this place.”

From the Floor Up

She moves back on her elbows and it falls away, everything she had on and the ocean falls through her eyes and moves down slow to her feet. We smell like beer and bikes and sweat and dust. And human. And in my dreams she is alive.

The end of the world comes and goes and you die a little, but you keep pedaling and you keep sweating until your body is nothing but a movement machine. You breathe in fuel, catalyze it in blood, and turn it to motion for the sake of motion. The world turns beneath you and offers itself up, the hills and valleys and sinewy exposed heart of her. So you lose yourself a while.

I remember crouching down and letting the sand blow around me. The world was nothing but aerial calcite and the grains were like powder. A drift formed up on my knee and mounded up over my feet. We couldn't see through it and all the technology in the world could not cut it. We could move at night with the world a cathode electric green and the heat of the quick and recently dead glowing white. But this was not the dark, this was the earth rising up to meet us. We sat for four hours with the drifts around us growing into dunes. I tore off pieces of the rag protecting my head from my drab, sand colored helmet and stuffed them in my ears and nose.

And when we came back 18 months later, the skinny Puerto Rican kid kissed his crucifix and mumbled a Spanglish prayer and told me the green lightning striking the mercury water was the end of the world. The sky turned gunmetal and mountains formed over the land and God broke over the water like Casey Jones. Then hailstorms started up and the most advanced fighting force in the world was kept at bay for a week in the falling ice.

The stormclouds come over Slickrock and I find a shelf of cretaceous river sand to hide under. Just me and a few black widows to ride it out. The cedars start to hiss and move and waver and then the cottonwoods down in the dry creek make a sound like sand blowing. The first drops hit the red alluvium and the dust craters. It's a different desert and I've been riding it for days. Down US 50, down 141. Through the old rough mining towns that are more bust than boom. And the winds caught me somewhere back around the Flume and pushed me on south. It's been one hundred fifty miles and I still can't quit thinking about her. That time we held on through the morning and night in a tent with the whole world blowing apart outside. It was rain, then snow, then ice, then rain. A cougar walked through camp in the morning and eyed us like toads.

If all the land and sea gave up its dead, into the clouds and into the blue, then I would believe in the god of all this rain. The creek swells up red and thick and the channel widens. The ledge of sandstone keeps me dry while I eat the last of the jerky and half of an oatmeal bar. I think about spending the night here, with the black widows waiting blind and hungry and the rattlesnakes looking for a place to be dry. Nature kills you much more creatively than men ever can.

The first wound of lightning opens up in the valley sky and the report knocks my teeth together. I have a flask out and death on its way to my veins while the creek eats itself. My knee and my shoulder and my back start to hurt. And sometimes

she would warm up a bottle of oil in the flowing hot water and rub along the twisted and rent muscles there. She would run her finger over the round scarred hole in my back and we would pretend she'd live forever.

And a world away from her, when we sat in the desert watching the sky turn white hot and the sand turn to glass, we would talk about home and we would pretend that we would all live forever.

But no one ever does.

This ride was supposed to be a ride away from her and them and all the cathode green ghosts in my dreams, but it only left me alone with them all. The cedars have no opinion and the sage has no advice and the cottonwoods turn ashy and fall into the creek. Me and the devil sit under the rock watching more of my Colorado washed away to Mexico and the clouds start to break. If the world was ever new, this is what it would look like. Gray green and mercury with iron rich dirt the color of blood.

While time murders my bones, I mount back up and start the trip new. The air is laden and cool, but it's harder to breathe. Gypsum Ridge is gone away and Slickrock Hill looms ahead. The sun burns back out of the silver clouds and the road starts to steam under the heavy and close heat. The novelty of this desert hanging heavy in water is lost on me because the hill is such a bitch.

And when she moved back onto her elbows and God broke over her body like Casey Jones, we thought she'd live forever. But the earth and sea does not give up its dead. It pulls them down, into the ground, into the deep. But for now, I ride across the top of the earth. Over the Jurassic remains of deserts come and gone and over the exposed rotting bones of once great mountains. The sun burns it all away and all I can see is the next few feet of road, up here above ground cruising the domain of the temporarily living and of disembodied ghosts.

At least the dead sometimes have the sense to stay under the ground out of the rain.

Chapter 15

Back from the Desert

A week later, Dozer was back from the desert with a bad sunburn. He wanted to know if there were any aloe plants growing in Ester's garden. He always needed a mission—he would never come over just to see me. If I wanted to see this Dozer I had to find something for him to fix...or something heavy for him to move.

“How was the trip?” I asked, still shocked that he was sitting on my couch.

“We had a great time, except she had way too much stuff and it was hard to carry it all.”

I wondered if I could make it a day or even a week in the desert with just the clothes on my back. I didn't have much experience with real camping. Mike had a 19 foot camper with a microwave, a full size bed, and a flat screen T.V.

What an asshole, for coming over here and asking me to rub aloe all over his back after camping with her all week, gaaah!

Oh, but his back and shoulders were broad and exquisitely carved out, and part of his tanned ass was peeked out of his jeans as he leaned forward to expose his lower back to me.

“And what should a girl bring on a week long stay in the desert with you?” I inquired.

“Well,” he cleared his throat. “I would carry the tent, food, axe, and cookware and all she would need is an extra pair of shoes, bedding, water, and a few small things like sunscreen.” He said, thinking about all of the unnecessary things she had brought along.

“Ah, I see” I said rubbing the aloe in deep.

He moaned with pleasure, “That feels really great, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I murmured, “I’m sure you would do the same for me if I had a sunburn.”

He turned his head around toward me with such a big smile it raised his brow “absolutely, and with pleasure.” He said.

If Dozer was in my bed, I didn’t sleep, period. I always felt like there was a third person in the room with us and I couldn’t decide if the feeling came from the two of us being a part of a holy trinity, if it was the girl with the tourmaline eyes, or if Mike was outside trying to look through my windows. Dozer usually slept soundly, but sometimes he struggled with an enemy in his dreams. One night while he was fighting his nightmares, I sat up on my elbow and ran my finger up his chest,

“Dozer, wake up, the Iraqis’ are coming!” I whispered and then laughed to myself. The crickets were too loud to sleep.

There was no swamp cooler in the casita and July was looming. Dozer said if it weren’t for Mike, we could keep the windows open at night and then close everything up tight in the morning. “That way”, he said, “the room will stay cool all day and most of the night”.

“In the winter”, Dozer advised, “Keep the windows closed, but keep the curtains open on the east window as long as the sun is out.”

He said adobe buildings actually breathe with the seasons and one can control the climate naturally inside without intervention from heaters or swamp coolers. I wondered how he knew this about adobe buildings, and then I remembered he knew everything about dirt.

I told him about my dream to build a giant adobe house in Dove Valley. I told him that I’d mix some red dirt in with the adobe to make it blend in with the hills there. He said Dove Valley would be a perfect place for an adobe house,

“But I wouldn’t use the dirt there, the bricks would just dissolve because of all the salt.” He said as if picturing my adobe house collapsing after a good rain.

“You’d also want a slightly pitched roof, since Dove is high desert.” He added.

I was beginning to love this man who knew a little bit about everything. A *jack of all trades, a master of none*, I thought.

“If I were to build such a house, would you help me?” I asked.

“Hell yes, I would help,” he lied, and then he smiled that smile that could kill me dead.

Chapter 16

Patching Adobe

Since I was always tired in the morning from lack of sleep, I talked to Dozer sleepily with my eyes halfway shut. If it was too hot in the casita we would drink our black coffee in the reading chairs under the big cottonwood trees in Ester's garden.

One morning I made him bacon and hoped his girlfriend would smell it on him. I thought it would be nice to have a man all to myself someday, but I had a feeling that this would never happen with Dozer, as much as I liked him.

We had honest conversations about people we knew. He said that he didn't have very many friends and I told him I didn't either.

"Just Essi and my sister...and about a thousand acquaintances" I admitted. We both agreed that we would probably have made better friends than anything else.

He poured his coffee grinds onto the dirt and sighed,

"Well, I wish we would've figured that out before the whole sex thing, I would have really liked to have you as a friend."

When I told Ester Dozer's birth sign, she said it would never work out between us.

“It just won’t work for two people with the same birth sign, except for two Pisces, because water can mix with water. You and Dozer are both earth signs, Holly, and dirt does not mix well with dirt.” She said looking up at me from her hands and knees in the garden.

“So if I were with a Pisces, it would be a muddy mess?” I teased. She didn’t get it, so I gave her a hint, “You know...dirt mixing with water?” I thought it was funny, but she didn’t.

Instead she scoffed.

“You would be better off with a Capricorn, Holly.” She said.

Well, Mike is a Capricorn and that was just fire and brimstone, I thought.

“Would you be interested in trading work for rent?” Ester asked pulling a weed loose.

“What kind of work?” I asked.

“I need someone fill in the cracks in the adobe on my house,” she said.

“Sure.” *Hell yes, I will need to know how to do that someday anyway,* I thought.

Ester said her house was built in the 1940s, and if she didn’t fill in the cracks every ten years or so, she said it leaked like crazy. “This isn’t really the best climate for adobe, but what are you going to do?” she sighed.

Ester amazed me. She seemed to be the most independent woman I'd ever seen, seventy years old and all. I think someone close to her must have talked her out of doing the adobe project herself. Some smooth talker must have convinced her that she shouldn't be on a ladder at her age. I told myself that someday I would be as independent as Ester, living on my own with the biggest garden around.

I started on the adobe patching the next afternoon. She gave me a wheel barrow, a shovel, a large spatula, and a ladder. As I was mixing the adobe in the wheel barrow two young men dressed in suits rode up on ten speed bikes. *Ah Mormons*, I remembered.

"Oh good, the Mormon boys are here!" Ester said gleefully.

They got off their bikes, put their backpacks on a chair and took off their jackets.

"Holly, these are the two lovely gentlemen that have offered to help with the patching project." She said pointing to them.

"Hey" I said. I took off my gloves as they headed towards me with their hands outstretched.

"I'm Jordon and this is Nick," the bigger one said grabbing my hand.

"Nice to meet you both" I said.

“Holly, you’ll need more water in this mix.” Ester said motioning me back to the wheel barrow. Nick and Jordon rolled up their sleeves and got to work right away.

“It’s nice of you to help Ester.” I told them. Nick had volunteered to do the ladder work.

“We help her out a lot.” Jordon said rolling his eyes.

“Yeah one of these days she’ll come around” Nick scoffed, and they both laughed.

Around lunch time I asked them, “Do you guys want some guacamole?” I had some avocados up in the casita and I was getting hungry.

“Sure” they said in harmony.

I came back down with a big bowl of guacamole and some tortilla chips.

I remembered that they might be thirsty too, so I told them I would go make them some ice tea.

They looked at each other. “We’ll just take some water, Holly, thanks.”

I had forgotten that Mormons did not drink tea, but, *come up to my casita, boys...and I’ll fuck you both*, I thought heading back up for water.

We worked until dusk, until Jordon finally said “We better be getting home now, but we’ll be back in the morning.”

After hosing down the wheel barrow, the two beautiful missionaries got on their bikes and rode away. I asked God to please forgive me for the sexual thoughts I was having about them. Then I asked God to please help me control my hormones in general before they got me in even more trouble than I was already in.

Chapter 17

Monica

That night I stayed out in the garden reading late because the temperature was too perfect to go inside. I asked Dozer if he would come over and help Ester and me move a dresser from her garage, and then I sat in the garden chair and waited anxiously for over an hour before his headlights turned off in my driveway. By then, it was pitch dark outside and I decided to sit very still and just let him find me—I think everyone should play hide and seek with their lover at least once in their life.

By the time he found me in the garden, he was bristling and hard as a rock. I asked him how he found me in the dark and he said he saw the light of my phone once, but it was mostly with his nose.

“I can smell sex” he whispered.

I sat him in the reading chair, unzipped his pants and ran my fingers, my palm, and then my tongue up the length of it. Sometimes it is very convenient to be in a sun dress when there is a visitor in your garden on a warm summer night.

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The next morning, we drank our coffee inside the casita because the Mormons were outside mixing adobe and I couldn't face them. I was still naked and propped up on some pillows, and Dozer was typing on my computer. We started talking about sister wives and the subject changed to prostitution somehow.

"You know," I told him, "women go crazy if someone tries to control what they do with their own body, but those same feminists don't seem to mind that prostitution is illegal."

He smiled at me and said "I've never really thought of it like that before."

I went on, "I could make a killing as a prostitute, if I wanted, or needed to, but some congress man has taken away my right to do so" I said.

He looked at me a little startled that I had said that so early in the morning, but said,

"Yes, especially since it's the congress men love prostitutes the most."

I was delighted by the topic.

"Where is the outrage from women?" He chuckled still typing.

"I think I found my new platform." I said.

He raised his coffee mug up to salute me, "I wish you the best."

The whole time I knew him, Dozer never told me to my face that I was beautiful, or commented on the way I looked, so I was surprised when he looked up at me that morning and said, “Your eyes are so brown they are almost black.”

I told him they were beady like my grandmother’s who was part Cherokee Indian. I also told him she was still alive and living in a nursing home a mile away. She went crazy when I was in high school and refused to get out of bed, even to go to the bathroom. She had been in the same bed for eleven years, and my mother lost her soul taking care of her.

Dozer took a long contemplative drink of coffee and finally said,

“I can see how you could lose your soul if you cared for someone too much.”

Monica

You know, she said, reliability is its own sort of sexy.

I would not have normally agreed, but she was laying there, nothing but flanks and legs, on my couch. We spent the night, the day, and half another together. In the swelter of the living room with the hard summer sun we had gotten reacquainted.

Which is to say, she never really leaves. She’s not always available, but I can count on her to return.

She asks about my writing and about my working and a million other questions I would answer for all eternity if it just meant she would keep that voice coming.

That pop and sparkle and fade like an overwound single coil in a Cenozoic Stratocaster. She talks like Andres Segovia plays, like Picasso painted, like garlic roasts.

And she's dark.

So dark.

It isn't just her Latin skin. She's not the sort of dark you get from Chihuahua, Mexico, where she was born. She's the dark that boils out of the center of the earth where gravity and iron and solidus meet and meld and fall out of time. It's in those eyes, dark enough to see myself and the world behind me reflected back. I can watch myself watch her move in those obsidian eyes. It's her hair, like somebody spilled moonless night onto floor. It's so dark, it's blue in the shining of the sun. And she lays there, wearing nothing, rolling her R's and lapping up her soft vowels. She knows she's killing me as she rolls onto her back, exposed. I do not know where her shape comes from, outside a trip across the Styx. It's narrow, but over the top shapely. Thick hips, sculpted arms from whatever it is she does. Besides me.

She smokes down that cigarette and we talk a few hours about how the grass grows and the water flows and she shows me a song she wrote. It's organic and wooden, rosewood maybe, or ebony.

She knew me when I was a cold killer. She was around when I tried to be a man of peace. She's here now, with whatever in between I have found. It's a sort of love, I guess. She's not always in my arms. She's not always on call. But she is reliable. She is no metaphor, she is all flesh and bone and very real.

And she's right. That's fucking sexy as hell.

Will this end up on your blog, she asked between the slow solenoid pulses of her breathing.

You're always on that damn thing, I told her.

Liar. You never write about me.

It's the only way I'm safe from you.

And she dug into me and tried to reach past my skin and ribs and flesh and told me in the language of all Hell and beautiful, you think you're safe?

Chapter 18

Mormons, Exhaustion, and Alcohol

Nick, Jordon and I worked most mornings patching adobe and quit working when it got too hot. They always showed up in their black suits and neck ties. *Not very practical for July...but nice*, I thought. Sometimes they would return in the evening for a couple of hours. I loved having them to talk to, because I felt like they were genuinely concerned about my soul.

“My biggest dream is to build a huge adobe house of my own.” I told them one afternoon, “but if it is this much work, I just don’t know.” I said wiping my brow. Jordon, the least shy of the two, asked me when I planned to start building my dream house.

“Hopefully, I can start building when I graduate from college.” I said.

He blinked, “You are in college?”

I told him the whole story about getting married too young, having babies, and going through a divorce.

“Holly, do you believe that God loves you?” He finally asked.

“Yes, I believe God loves me.” I told him the truth.

I grew up less than fifty miles from Utah, so most of my friends growing up were Mormons. They were the best kind of people: kind, helpful, and 100% unselfish. Whenever there was a funeral or a wedding, the ladies from

the Church of Latter Day Saints were there in full force with enough food for a small army. They were the ladies of the Relief Society, and a relief they were. After everything they'd already done, they would shoo everyone out of the building so they could clean up the mess. Even if the funeral wasn't held in their big brick church, they cared about it just the same.

When the Mormon ladies left, everything was better than when they found it. Pews were oiled, floors were mopped, and table clothes were washed, pressed, and folded. The Relief Society had come to my family's rescue in Dove Valley more than once. They always left whatever it was spit and polished—you could almost see their halos.

Since I was feeling curious about God that day, I was glad when Jordon brought Him up. I told Jordon I thought that God loved everyone, no matter what religion. I also told him God couldn't be described, and if you thought you could describe God, then you were just putting God in your own image.

I was thinking about all the paintings I had seen of God and Jesus: God, surrounded by fat little cherubs, pointing down from a cloud. Or images of Jesus wearing a blue sash surrounded by children and sheep.

“What if God isn't an old man with a long white beard, separate from us, but still judging us?” I asked. “What if IT is never separated from us at all?”

“Don't you mean HE?” Jordon corrected.

“Does God have a gender?” I asked.

I wasn’t trying to upset anyone, I was just thinking about God out loud. I told Jordon that I liked Jesus, but I didn’t know if I should worship him or not. Then I asked,

“Who is right about God and who is wrong about God? --and who can prove it?”

Jordon told me that he wasn’t trying to prove anything to me about the Mormon scriptures.

“Holly, sometimes scriptures just comfort people who are suffering. It gives them hope. It makes them feel loved. It makes their life more meaningful somehow.” He said.

I thought his response was articulate and kind, and I felt safe to press him a little further.

“Do you think that every religion in the world would eventually lead to the very same God if we all went deep enough?” I asked.

Jordon was starting to get a little exasperated with me, but still he replied kindly, “I don’t know if that’s the case, Holly, but I do know God loves everyone just the same no matter what they believe.” Then he tried to change the subject.

But I changed it right back. “I think the Relief Society is very Godlike.” I told him.

“Yeah,” Nick said coming back around the house, “The R.S. rocks.”

God wasn't helping much with my hormones. I started to feel hysterical if I had to go a week without seeing Dozer. But, as the summer wore on, he became less and less of a reliable source. One day I plotted to leave my girls with Ester or Essi so I could meet him somewhere. Dozer said he was too busy working on his Scout to come over, so I asked him if I could just go over there instead.

“Can I come watch you mechanic?” I had to swallow my pride to ask.

“Fuck yeah, but bring beer”, he finally replied two days later.

When I walked out of the bright sun into his dark garage, it took awhile for my eyes to adjust to where I could see he was consumed with the master cylinder of the Scout. He said he'd been riding his bike for “two fucking weeks” because nobody had the parts he needed. Then he grumbled,

“Considering all the flat tires I've had on my bike, I could've fixed this thing already.”

He was covered in oil and I could see the vein popping out of his forehead from underneath the carriage as he violently fought something loose. Suddenly, I felt strangely calm. There is no need to talk to a man when he is in his mechanic space, so I sat quietly and drank more than half of a six pack.

After awhile, I removed my flip flops and drew little circles in a pile of saw dust on the floor with my big toe.

When he finally came up for air an hour later, he closed the hood and exhaled deeply. He walked around and opened the passenger door and threw a backpack and the Scout's owner's manual to the back seat. Then, without taking his eyes off mine, he walked over to me,

"I hardly knew you were here." He said.

He stood and smiled at me for a second waiting for me to respond.

"I was just letting you do your thing." I said. "Plus, I want you to get it running so you can take me for a ride sometime."

"Hmm." He said reaching for my beer.

He took a long slow drink of it and put it on the bench.

"So, you drank all the beer you brought me?" he said looking at the empty bottles.

"I left you some...see," I said pointing to the two full bottles.

We stood there looking at each other like two outlaws about to have a shoot out over the missing beer. Then he gave a forgiving chuckle and kissed my forehead.

He grabbed my hand and led me to the Scout.

"If it has tits or tires, it will give you trouble." He said in all seriousness. Then he led me up to the passenger door and turned me around.

"Do you really want a ride in the Scout?" He teased.

God, yes, more than anything, I thought.

“Where are you taking me?” I murmured.

“Somewhere I think you’d like to go.” He said kissing my neck. Breathing heavily, he adjusted my body over the seat. I wanted to say something about his greasy hands all over my new white shirt and down the back of my clean shorts...but I didn’t. Then he grabbed my waist with one hand and braced the dusty dashboard with the other.

Exhaustion and Alcohol

Do you think that your soul could be math?

When I think of all the cascading interrelated events and conditions that make a person whatever they may be, I wonder if the measure of your existence is like a contrail following you into the dark. To believe that some version of yourself exists inverted or stretched through some multiversal history strikes me as hokum, but maybe right here, right in this reality, our souls are right in front of us.

Could you sit and compute yourself? I think you could, given time and help. It is possible, though unlikely to happen, that a person could have the events of their life so well cataloged that they would be replicable. If you were to do that in some analog to where we are now, would you have created a person? A stunted Hebrew Gollum?

What made the Abomination of Desolation so incredibly bad? Was it that a man assumed he was God enough to make a copy of himself or that he had cruelly left a life beating without soul?

So, when you take your magic words and your human finger and write your name across the forehead of the reality you know, are you lending your soul?

I think so.

This goes back to the event horizon of consciousness hypothesis from some months back. As the person's brain loses all track of time and the last anoxic moments stretch forever, is that where reality fails as a medium? Here in

Consensusland, we can all agree on both the existence of time and its measure, but I have a feeling your brain believes in time like I believe in capital. Sure it's there in my pocket and (hypothetically) in my bank account, but I find it doubtful that it is the end-all infallible meter it is assumed to be. Yesterday a bike inner tube was worth a lot more to me than a bottle of whiskey, but it would take approximately six inner tubes to add up to 750 ml of Knob Creek.

But if your brain senses itself running out of time, or its cousin oxygen, would its creation of a slow moving, never ending reality be a rough analog to sitting next to your flat tire and getting shit-hammered on bourbon?

Chapter 19

That fall, at age 36 and a half, I started my sophomore year of college.

Mike messaged me, out of the blue one day, to tell me that Dozer was cheating on me with some college chick that was much younger and prettier than me. I was delighted to inform Mike that I was the “other” woman this time, and it was much more fun than being a wife to him.

Dozer had to take the semester off school to go back to the army. I couldn’t picture him as a professional sitting in some stuffy office in the city anyway. I knew participating in war, or preparing for war, was what he did best. I thought some kind of war journalist would be a perfect job for him. He could go live dangerously...and then write all about it. He wanted to be in the thick of it, the city bored him to tears.

I wanted to be alone, anyway. They say we desire food, shelter, sex, wealth, knowledge, and finally God—in that order. That fall, I desired knowledge and God.

The day before Dozer left for the army he was acting nervous. He had stopped by the casita to tell me something. When I asked him what was bothering him, he muttered that he wouldn’t be coming around anymore because things were going really good with his girlfriend and he didn’t want to screw it up. He had a

strange look in his eyes like he couldn't believe he'd uttered those monogamous words out loud.

I waited a few seconds for him to recant, but he didn't.

So I moved my new textbooks out of the chair and invited him to sit down—which he did—slowly and reluctantly. I went to the fridge and got a cold beer and handed it to him. He paused before opening it because I had placed my hands on his face and I was looking him squarely in the eyes.

“That’s fine Dozer,” I said, moving my hands from his face down to his zipper,

“but right now I’m hosting a going away party for you in my mouth and you're invited.”

The days are stretching on like weeks and the prospect of a month gone inflicts itself on me some nights.

To wildly understate it all, I miss you. It’s in everything I do and everything I think.

I wrote you a couple more letters, but they’re laying against my chest in my pocket unmailed. I don’t send them. I don’t know why. Maybe because that’s the last best proof needed that I really am that gone. Real gone.

But I’ll be back. For lots of reasons, though mostly for you.

And it will be strange and awkward. I mean more than usual. We are very dysfunctional people.

But I’ll have time to work on it.

Have you ever had a rifle named after you?

Chapter 20

Single Track

Only in Western Colorado is there a serious mountain biking class included in the required health and wellness courses. The first day, the kinesiology professor, Coach Lane, gathered us on the football field and told us the person who made it to the goal post last...won. Turns out, riding a bike very slow is much harder than pedaling a bike fast, or even at normal speed. The goal of this exercise was to show us that we could keep our bikes from tipping while we were completely stopped or just inching along. If we lifted ourselves well above the seat and shifted our weight just right, we could balance it.

The next week we met in the desert north of town and learned how to keep our pedals flat so they wouldn't clip on rocks. We learned to bring plenty of water and plenty of supplies with us everywhere we went. Our tests consisted of our ability to change tires, both front and rear, and to fix de-railers and chain links.

One day Coach Lane rode to the bottom of a steep bowl and hollered back up to us,

“Get your butts way back off your saddle and let off your front brake for this one,”—but we all just stood there with our bikes in trepidation and stared down at him.

“Come on...at least one of you,” he called from the bottom.

Everyone was afraid to ride down such a vertical wall, but we all met him at the bottom, eventually, either skidding or walking our bikes. My favorite “twenty something” Chelsea was taking the mountain biking class that semester also. We walked our bikes down the hill together.

“Oh, hell no.” Chelsea said.

She told me her boyfriend was a dirt biker and she preferred riding with him, on the back of his dirt bike, way more than mountain biking.

“All this, but with the flick of the wrist.” She said pointing at the infinite desert.

We learned single track etiquette: the rider going uphill has the right of way, never ride when it is muddy, and never ever alter the trail.

“Single track trails are specifically designed to be the way they are, so leave them the hell alone.” Coach Lane told us. Another key to mountain biking was to know which way a trail is designed to be ridden.

“A lot of times” Coach Lane said, “A trail is designed a certain way so there will be a steep climb at the beginning and a whole lot of down in the end...never do a single track backwards.” He said.

Or else you will go down and down, and there will be hell to pay coming back up, I thought to myself. Dozer Lee and I must have done the Gunnison trail backwards that time.

Soon we progressed to actual single track west of town. Learning to ride single track was hard at my age, but I could still beat all the “twenty somethings” up the hill. I figured it was because they all smoked and never went to bed sober earlier than 3 a.m. in the morning. I wished I would’ve started mountain biking when I was their age, and I wished I could have had one of their tight bodies, along with my wisdom of how to take care of it.

One afternoon sitting at the top of the hill with Coach Lane, waiting for the rest of the class to arrive, he muttered something about youth being wasted on the young and I laughed.

Chelsea talked me into riding with her on weekends. She was trying to improve so that she wasn’t always the last one up the hill. One day I picked her up on the way to the trail and she was beaming. “I got engaged!” she screamed holding up her tiny diamond.

I told her I was happy for her. I also told her she was acting like one of the twitterpated animals in Bambi, and she agreed.

“OMG, Holly, I’m sooo in love!” she squealed. “And I’m going to look so awesome in my wedding dress. I’ve already lost like eight pounds in mountain biking class!” She said.

Me too, I thought, eight pounds of skin.

Chelsea was fun to ride with because every time she crashed, she just laughed and got back on. One day she ripped a finger nail half way off.

“No biggie,” she said ripping it the rest of the way and wiping the blood on her shirt. Then, “Whoa, Holly, hold up!” she’d yell.

When I stopped to look back, she was laying on her stomach instagraming a cactus with tiny yellow blooms.

She was always hopping off to take pictures of cactus, rocks, and lizards. What would have been an hour ride was always a three hour ride with Chelsea, but still, I loved taking her along. She didn’t remind me of myself when I was her age, though, because I was never really that happy or carefree when I was her age.

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Essi wanted all of the scabs on my knees and shoulders from mountain biking to be completely gone by her wedding.

“The bride’s maid dresses,” she said “will be strapless, so can you find some oil or something to put on your scars?”

That fall Essi was moving into a huge house with her new fiancé. I went there every night and on weekends to help them move. Essi was from Finland, so we painted the entire 4,500 square foot interior fifty shades of blue. The renovation took weeks, and sometimes when I was painting, I pretended that I was the one

with the huge house and the amazing fiancé, but I knew I would never get married again.

I also knew, deep down in my soul, a big house in the city with a picture perfect fiancé was not what I really wanted at all.

On my birthday, I received a picture of Dozer in his uniform holding his rifle. Before he left, I had asked him to send me a picture of himself in his uniform and he had complied. I don't know if he knew it was my birthday when he sent it, or if it was just a nice coincidence. When I showed his picture to Essi she said that he looked way too young for me.

“Wow, really Holly?! What is he like twenty? You could be his mother!”

I told her he was only eight years younger than me, so there was no physical way I could be his mother.

“But still.” she said.

I thought it was strange that I missed Dozer more, after just a half of a summer together, than I did my husband of sixteen plus years.

Chapter 21

One day, during mountain biking class, my bike chain broke beyond repair so I took my bike to a shop next to the college. The mechanic who fixed my bike was named J.B. He had tattoos all over his body, knarly teeth, and sexy blue eyes.

“You can leave it with me and come back later,” he said, “It’s same day service.”

I told him I would just stick around and watch him fix it. He shrugged and broke the chain away with one clean motion.

Wow that was just the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen, I thought catching my breath.

When men are working on cars or tractors, it’s always a mystery what they are doing under the hood. All of the moving parts on bikes, however, are completely transparent. I could easily see his methods even though he was working very quickly.

Then I smiled to myself— *since I am a major component of what keeps the bike in motion, I wonder if he would he like to work on me also?*

That semester, I kept having mechanical problems on purpose just so I could stop in and have J.B. work on my bike. I liked the way his eyes lit up every time he saw me walk through the door

“You again?” he’d say. Then one day when he was airing up my rear tire, he whispered to me so his boss could not hear,

“Next time you need something done on your bike, bring it by my apartment after hours and I will just fix it for you for free...I’ll make you dinner.”

J.B. was adjusting my new bike helmet the first time I wanted to kiss him. He was looking down intently and tugging at the strap under my chin trying to get it to fit just right. For some reason, I knew that if he just lifted his head slightly, he would be mine for as long as I wanted him.

Chapter 22

Murderous Intent

After Halloween, I got a text from Dozer who had just arrived at the airport. I was surprised to hear from him. *Maybe I've had a bigger impact on him than I thought. Shouldn't he be calling his girlfriend first after a month away? Maybe it was me he named his rifle after?* My mind was going a million miles an hour.

I had just returned from Dove Valley with buckets and buckets of apples from my dad's apple orchard and Essi and I were making apple pies in her sprawling kitchen.

“So, are you going to have him over then?” Essi asked. “I thought he had a girlfriend...and I thought you liked that bike mechanic?” She wondered.

“Yes,” I said, “I’m going to have him over and I’m going to give him a pie.” *What would be more patriotic than giving an apple pie to an American soldier?* I thought.

Essi set down her rolling pin down and asked,

“Why do you do what you do Holly?”

I just shrugged and told her I wasn’t sure.

“Well, I hope you are using some sort of birth control...you are almost forty you know...the last thing you need is a baby.” She reminded me.

Before Dozer arrived at the casita, I latched my best red lace set on under a practical, I don't care what I look like sweat shirt and put the pie in the oven to warm it up. The room began to smell like cinnamon and vanilla and my good neighbor Steve finally knocked on the door to ask what I was cooking. I shoed him out so I would have time to fix my hair and eyes.

“Save me some?” he begged. I told him I would,

“Good, I’m going to go to the store get some vanilla ice cream then.” He said backing out the door. I was pushing him the rest of the way out with the screen door. It was easy to move him out because he never resisted anything.

That afternoon, there was the best autumn breeze coming in through the window. I could see the bright orange pumpkins peeking through Ester’s garden below, and I could smell a hint of wood burning in the air. There was always some renegade in the city with a wood burning stove somewhere.

By the time I heard the knock on the door, my bones were rattling and I could barely breathe. When he came in, Dozer saw that the windows were wide open, so he asked right away if Mike was still stalking me. I lied and told him no.

He looked happy to see me.

He sat down and I placed a slice of pie in front of him. He took a deep breath like he was trying to take it all in all at once.

I asked him why he came to see me first.

I used too much butter in the pie crust and it dripped down his chin before he wiped it away with his shirt sleeve. Then he finally said,

“She didn’t necessarily want to keep in touch while I was gone.”

He seemed a little sad and quickly changed the subject.

“This is really good pie.”

Then he asked me about school and if I was seeing anyone. I told him I was too busy to see anyone while he was gone.

“I missed you.” I confessed.

I asked him if he missed me too, but he avoided the question with stories about the army.

When there wasn’t anything left to tell me, he reached over and pulled my sweatshirt up over my head. His fingers snagged on my lace as he reached around for the latch.

“Are you wearing this for me?” he asked, but I ignored the question just like he'd ignored mine.

When he had me completely naked, he looked me over.

“Looks like you’ve been playing rough.” He whispered when he noticed all of my bruises and scratches from mountain biking.

He grabbed my ass with one hand and my left breast with the other and buried his head in my neck,

“Goddamn.” He said.

I was in fighting shape and I was glad he could see me like that before I succumbed to my age.

“Tell me you missed me”, I begged.

Janiva Magness was singing “You Were Never Mine” in the back ground.

“You’ll know soon enough” he whispered providing what had been out of my hand for too long.

I never really lost you...you were never mine I sang along in my head.

At first he adhered to the rhythm of the song, and then he released it and pounded away any doubt I ever had.

Reissue, October 2009

There's something about you. Like a '68 GTO. Maybe more like a Le Mans.

It's a shape. You are not an understated body, that is no lie. You got that balled up lithe look of a mountain lion in a tree. When you move, you ripple and your skin moans mercury over your muscle and lank.

But sometimes you remind me of a litre sized Ducati. Yeah, piped up and jetted out.

It's a rumble you do. Not all the time, just every so often. Your voice falls to some demon contralto like a right angle twin with desmo valves and a open inducted throat. I can feel it in the floor and in my skin and it's asking and begging to have the throttle wide open and the motor mounts straining.

Maybe you're like my Jag.

Something different and sort of perfect and never the same. You respond. There's no settling into it. The way you can strip off the gray and blue and cotton sensible civilization covering you up and slide into silky sheer red instinctual animal skin.

And then claim it isn't for me.

You hate the blues.

But if rock and roll is really just spit and sweat and Black Snake Moan, then
you've got it down.

Yeah, Five to One, baby, one in five.

No one here get's out alive.

Chapter 23

Cherry Peppers

I didn't see Dozer much after that. As he was leaving he noticed a handmade clay pot with cherry peppers sitting on my sidewalk. A few week's earlier I had transplanted a miniature variety cherry peppers from Ester's garden. I knew the peppers would catch his eye. How could they not? They were a vivid red and looked so beautiful planted in the turquoise pottery. He just stood there for a minute looking at them. I thought it was a little strange when he asked me if he could take them home with him.

He said he wanted to cook something with them. I knew that he was going to give it to his girlfriend, but for some reason, I wanted her to have them...so I told him yes.

After I waved goodbye, I walked back into the casita and said to her, "Someday, he'll love you as much as the girl with the tourmaline eyes, but for now, just keep doing what ever you're doing because it seems to be working."

--

The bike mechanic was the only one around that could beat me up the hill on mountain on a bike. What made J.B so remarkable was that he'd survived a

horrific car crash six years earlier that had nearly left him paralyzed. He had spent two years recovering with a broken back and neck. The doctors told him if he ever did move again, his movement would be severely limited his entire life. But, boy, could the man move on a bike.

His riding was just as inspirational to me as Dozer's writing, and I couldn't believe all the ways God showed me He loved me.

Off his bike, J.B. sometimes seemed a little old and awkward. He had to look me directly in the eyes when I talked to him because he was at least 80% deaf. He had to read my lips so if I wasn't looking directly at him when I was talking, I had to start all over. Over the years, I learned to save my words with J.B. and to choose them wisely.

J.B.'s life had raked him over. Before the car crash, he was a bull rider, and a traffic cop in Las Vegas. Once I tried to get him to eat healthier and he told me "My body is not a temple, Holly, it's more like Six Flags." He said his mother worried about him, and when I met her, she told me she prayed for him every morning before she did anything else.

Dozer Lee slowly stopped returning my texts, so I began to focus all of my energy on J.B. instead. Mike forgot about Dozer and started focusing all of his

energy on J.B. too. So I told him to always look over his shoulder when he was locking up the shop at night.

“I can handle your ex.” He scoffed.

We rode single track together on weekends and I became very attached to him. I can honestly say I was never doted on, or dreamed about, until I met J.B. – It took me three years to love him as much as he loved me, and it took me at least that long to find out about his dragon.

After reading his blog one morning in December, I sensed that Dozer needed a mission that involved a chain saw so I asked him to go with me to cut down a Christmas tree. I felt terrible about contacting Dozer behind J.B.’s back, but I was done with school for the semester and I was feeling restless. Plus, I decided it could be a fun and platonic mission into the BLM wilderness for the two of us like old times. Luckily, he made up a story about a meeting he had to go to, so I went to get the tree by myself.

I was feeling depressed that day.

Christmas cards were starting to stream in from intact families of four. I wondered if this is what Ester meant the first day she met me and she said, “You seem fine now, but you won’t be fine for long.” In fact it was the first Christmas I

didn't really even want a tree, but I felt like I should get one to keep things normal for the girls.

I'd left my boxes of ornaments and tinsel at Mike's, so I had no idea what I would decorate the thing with once I got back with it.

Back when I was happily married, I'd have a gigantic tree up the day after Thanksgiving. By the first of December, my house would look like an army of elves had visited. There were lights, expensive Victorian ornaments, and glittering tinsel hung everywhere. The entire month of December, my big marriage house smelled of Christmas cookies and candles. By December 20th, I'd made a plate of divinity for everyone in the neighborhood and had mailed over 300 Christmas cards with a picture of my perfect family sitting in front of the fire place in matching sweaters or pajamas.

Trudging through the BLM wilderness with my ax, I was feeling very much alone. I was singing "If we make it through December" by Merel Haggard, wishing I had a man, or anyone, who was worried about me my kids around Christmas time. I'd be happy starving if I just had that. If I'd written a Christmas letter that year, it would've gone something like this:

“Dear Friends and Family, What an exciting year it has been! As I sit here in the snow, pondering the birth of our savior, I am thankful for all of the blessings I had up until the time all hell broke loose.

There is no picture of our family this year because there is no family. We all feel like shit and we all look like hell. Mike went crazy and nearly lost his company. Luckily, his partners did an intervention and forced him to get his act together. No worries, y’all, he’s on crazy pills now.

I decided to go to college, because God knows, I’ll need something for my resume when I graduate at 40—I haven’t had a real job in ten years. All those years staying home with the kids, playing Martha Stewart, didn’t really count for much I guess.

Recently, I’ve taken up mountain biking. Call it a midlife crisis if you want, but frankly, I don’t really care what you or anyone else says about me anymore. So you don’t want your kids coming over to play with my kids anymore? Fine bitch, keep your kids away! Shelter them from my domestic mess. Keep telling them about good choices and bad choices. I wouldn’t want them getting any ideas.

Meanwhile, I can’t afford much food or gas, let alone the ornaments to decorate this goddamned tree I am about to cut down.

When I got home from the mountain, I went straight to the liquor store, passed up the wine, and straight to the hard stuff. When I got home, I sat there sipping the awful stuff as my daughters colored on paper. I had instructed them to color circles, cut them out, and hang them on the tree. I also popped some popcorn that they could string up like they did in the old days. They ate all the popcorn, because there was no supper. They colored about seven circles bright red and got bored with the whole thing. And that was the first time I'd ever used whisky as a pain killer.

Chapter 24

Dozer texted me two days before Christmas with no mission other than sex. Without thinking first, I told him I was home and that he could come over if he wanted to. As soon as he walked through the door, he saw my pathetic Christmas tree with homemade paper ornaments leaning up against the wall in the corner. He apologized for not being there to help me cut it down. I told him it took me a long time to cut the tree down with my little ax in the freezing cold,

“You’re not very reliable anymore”, I told him.

He looked down the floor and countered,

“Actually, I’m more reliable than I’ve ever been in my life...just not with you.”

I could tell he regretted coming over. By then, he had changed his mind and he was trying to tell me why he couldn’t stay long—but speaking never came as easily to Dozer as writing did. And although he fought for them, he couldn’t find the words that he needed to stop me. He started shaking when I undid his pants,

“You shouldn’t have come here,” I told him. “Now you’re just starting it all over again.”

When we got dressed, I pulled my best cast iron skillet out of the cupboard and used my last two pieces of bread to make him a perfectly browned grilled

cheese sandwich. This was to apologize to everyone involved for what I had just done.

Chapter 25

Murderous Intent II

One night in January J.B. looked up at me and said “I don’t want anyone but you, and I don’t want you seeing anyone besides me either.”

I blinked at him a little startled. I had to think for a minute. The first thing I thought about was Dozer—I wasn’t ready to give him up just yet.

But, J.B. is a hundred times more reliable than Dozer. I thought.

On New Years Eve, I asked both men to come visit me in Dove Valley. I told them my parents were traveling and we could have the whole ranch to ourselves. I told them both that I could use some help with the cows. I figured the chance of them both showing up was slim to none.

As I expected, Dozer made up an excuse about not being able to afford gas, but J.B. was practically half way there, on his bike, before I finished texting him.

J.B. squeezed my knee under the wobbly table prodding me to answer him. I bit my lip and looked at the ceiling.

On the other hand though, I thought, I was married sixteen years and it would be stupid to agree to a monogamous relationship again so soon. Plus, I haven’t heard from Dozer in over a month. Dozer had been posting pictures of

colorful vegetarian meals in his blog along with boring stories about his new found contentment and happiness.

“I’ve never been happier with another person.” Dozer had recently posted about his girlfriend. I was jealous as hell. *The fucker has been domesticated, posting photos of stuffed squash, jalapeño bread, and pumpkin pure.*

“J.B., are you jealous?” I teased.

“No Holly, jealousy is an ugly emotion.” He said. “I’m just very proud of you and I want to protect you. But, I can’t really protect you if you are running around with other men.”

And with that, I made my mind up right away.

“Ok” I said, and it was done.

J.B. beamed with pleasure and squeezed my knee again. “It means a lot, Holly.” he said.

Yes, it’s the right thing to do. I thought to myself. *Besides, Dozer never, ever said my name.*

--

The divorce process is a painful one, especially if it is dragged out like mine was. I needed money to finish school and pay rent on a bigger place for the girls.

Mike and I went back and fourth—without lawyers at first. Everyone always asked me why I didn't keep the house. I told them it was because it was a money pit. The truth was I knew Mike would never leave and I was too afraid of him to wait it out.

Mike was still terrorizing me with his text messages in all caps. Sometimes J.B. would commandeer my cell phone to screen the messages coming in from Mike.

"I'll let you know if it's anything important" he said, "otherwise I'll just delete them so they don't upset you."

Every now and then he would look at my phone and mutter, "Such a tool" and then hit the delete button to beam the hurtful messages from Mike into space.

I was glad J.B. didn't have my phone when I received the last text message I ever got from Dozer.

It was a Friday and I was sitting in my truck in front of my daughter's grade school waiting for the bell to ring.

"Beer?" was all the text said, but I knew exactly what it meant. Full of resolve, I remembered the agreement I made with J.B. earlier. Suddenly tears started streaming down my face. I knew being attached to J.B. wasn't the real reason I couldn't be with Dozer anymore, it was something much bigger than that.

That was your very last chance with me, I thought.

A blast of cold air brought me back to reality. Annie had opened the passenger door and was climbing in.

“Hi mom, why are you crying?” she asked tentatively. I wasn’t crying, I was sobbing, so I couldn’t answer her.

“Is it for daddy?” she asked, “...because he cries about you all the time.”

--

One night as J.B. was leaving my house on his bike, I got a message from Mike, “HAS THAT FUCKER LEFT YET?” His angry messages in all caps weren’t affecting me as much anymore, but this one made me nauseous. I felt like there was something about to go seriously wrong. Next thing I knew I was on the way to the scene of an accident.

By the time I got to J.B., there were several people standing around him. One lady was holding a towel over his head that was soaked with blood and a man was picking up pieces of his bike that were scattered all over the road. Several people were walking around on cell phones like they had all called 911 at once. From the ground, J.B. told me that Mike had run him off the road, “He drives a big white Dodge diesel, right?” He groaned.

I asked everyone around what they had seen, but nobody knew what caused the accident. “Did you hear tires screech or anything at all?” I asked them, but they all just shook their heads no. The lady holding the towel said, “I was just walking out to get my mail and I saw him lying here.” She said J.B. wouldn’t let her call 911, so she called me instead. It took four grown men to pick J.B. up and put him in my truck. He leaned his bloody head against the passenger side window. Blood was everywhere and it was obvious he had broken ribs, but he was more worried about his bike.

“It’s a \$5,000 road bike...I hope it’s not totaled.” He groaned. But it was. He wouldn’t let me call his parents. “No, please don’t, I don’t want to bother my mom with this one, it’s no big deal.” He said.

By the time we reached the hospital, J.B. couldn’t remember anything at all, including who I was, so I called his parents. His dad answered the phone. At first he seemed very concerned, but after he talked to the doctor and found out that J.B. wasn’t going to die, he said

“Holly, can you call us tomorrow and let us know how he is doing? I don’t want to upset his mother tonight.”

It took two days for the swelling on J.B.'s brain to go down. He said it wasn't the first time he'd been in the hospital with brain swelling and broken bones and it probably wouldn't be his last.

“Do you really think Mike ran you off the road?” I asked.

He thought about it for a minute and closed his eyes, “No, I think I just hit a pot hole at high speeds.” He finally said.

His daughter, Tara, had flown in from Arizona, and was standing by his bed stroking his hair. She kept looking at me like she didn't trust me. I thought to myself, *if Mike succeeds at killing J.B., it will be my fault.*

So the day J.B. got out of the hospital, I broke up with him...for his mother's sake.

Chapter 26

Mike and Me

Mike was late for the final divorce hearing. He didn't look at me when he walked in, but once he sat down, he crossed his arms and didn't take his hateful glare off me the entire time, even when his lawyer leaned in to console him, he still didn't stop staring. The judge went through the forms one by one. I was glad that he was recording everything that was said. I told the judge I had been a stay at home mom for ten years and the income from teaching aerobics and my online cookbook was minimal.

Mike scoffed and said, "If Holly could just get paid for all of her whoring around, she'd be rich enough to pay *me* child support."

His lawyer took a deep breath and closed his brief case. The judge then considered Mike's net income of a quarter of a million dollars that year, and wanted to know my estimated graduation date.

"May 2013" I told him.

"And Mrs. Moyer, it says here that you would like to change your last name back to your maiden name...which would be Miss Wilde?" the judge asked.

"Yes sir." I replied.

“Fine” said the judge, “Holly Wilde it is.” I hadn’t been called Holly Wilde since I was 18. It felt strange, like I was another person altogether. I thought of the little girl with the missing teeth I used to be. Holly Wilde then and now again.

Mike flew into a rage. “Now she’s too proud to have the same last name as her own children!” He screamed. His lawyer tried to calm him down.

The child custody was all planned out. I would have the girls three quarters of the time and Mike would have them a quarter of the time because of his work schedule. We were also ordered to live within thirty miles of each other until Annie turned 18. I wanted full custody of Shiloh too, but since it was Mike who had saved her life with the operation, I didn't even ask for the dog in court. Plus, I knew that she would be the best thing in the world to sooth the dark moods he had. When the gavel finally pounded, I felt completely washed over with relief and I burst into tears. Mike’s lawyer led him out of the court room by the arm and I could hear him say quietly, “Her tears aren’t for me,” and then he screamed, “They were never for me!!”

When I got home that day I sat for hours in a trance silently looking out the window. That’s when the tears finally started flowing for Mike and Mike only. I always thought on the day of the divorce I would be bitter, but instead, I was filled to the brim with love for my ex husband. As I sat there, I began to remember things

I hadn't thought about in a over decade. I remembered Mike and I moved to Denver the day after we got married. On what would have been our honeymoon, I sat in the car outside the university all day long while he registered for classes. I was in complete culture shock, and he was too, but he never let it show. Moving from a small town to a very big city was major trauma for both of us.

Mike taught me how to drive in city traffic too. At first, he would drive me to work and return every evening to pick me up—but after several weekend lessons with him, I could drive almost anywhere in the city I wanted to go. He had been so patient and brave sitting in the passenger side of our first car, “Don't take for granted you can just turn left when there is a break in traffic, Holly. Sometimes there is a red arrow and you need to wait for it to turn green...always look up.” He said. To this day, I can drive anywhere in Denver without blinking an eye.

I'll never forget the time Mike went grocery shopping with me. As we were rolling our cart full of groceries out the sliding doors, we passed a sad woman surrounded by four little dirty faces. She was holding back tears and her children seemed hesitant and somber like they were walking up to an open grave. Mike stopped dead in his tracks, turned around, and followed her back into the store. When he returned to the car, he was carrying a big bouquet of flowers. When Mike had seen the sad woman, he went straight to the floral department and bought flowers for her and me.

“I thought she might need some flowers too” He grinned.

He bought me flowers all the time, sometimes out of guilt, and sometimes because he was just thinking about me.

Mike never once left anyone stranded either. When we were married, I sat by the side of the road at least a dozen times while he helped some stranger change a tire or look under their hood. He never walked or drove by anyone that looked like they might need help.

I also missed the way he loved on our two little daughters when they were babies. He could get them giggling like crazy when he mimicked Tigger or Yogi Bear: “Annie, look at how big you’re getting! That’s wunnerful!” he said tickling her chubby little legs.

Besides my truck, “Noble Steve”, he nicknamed everyone and everything. My oldest was “Noodle”. He called me “Pooh”, and Annie was “Botcho-nacho-von-slosh’nberg the third.”

He had gotten married too young too, and as his wife I never once worried about my future because I knew he always had it under control...what pressure that must have been for him all those years.

I guess Mike’s definition of a good husband was to provide, and provide he did. He always told me he was working hard so we’d have enough money to do whatever we wanted someday. I subscribed to travel magazines for as long as I

could remember. I had them piled up by the couch, and I always had my nose in one. “Oh, I want to go to there!” I’d say pointing at a picture of some beach. “Or maybe South America? Wouldn’t it be fun to cruise down the Danube?” I’d ask him.

He’d sigh under the burden of my dreams. “Someday, I’ll make enough money to take you anywhere in the world you want to go, Holly.” He said.

That day of our divorce, I forgave him for everything...and I hoped that someday he would forgive me too.

Chapter 27

All the men in my life gone in the same month, I thought. The loneliness was unbearable. It was the first time I'd gone without sharing my bed with a man and/or a baby for almost two decades. It was strange sleeping alone month after month. I missed the way J.B. slept behind me with his right arm reaching around to cup my left breast.

I regretted signing a year's lease on the casita. In the summer, the girls could run around the garden, but in the winter, we were all cooped up in the suffocating space together. We all had a miserable case of cabin fever. Day after day we would sit at the little wobbly table with Phineas and Ferb on the tiny T.V. I did my homework and the girls drew pictures. One day my oldest daughter saw a commercial for the "Phineas and Ferb Live Show" and begged me to take her and Annie to Denver to see it.

Traveling over the pass to Denver anytime between October and May was sketchy. I'd been on trips where it was smooth sailing on dry roads the entire way and I'd been on trips where I slept in the car because they'd shut down the interstate.

"Depends on the roads." I said.

"Please, mom, please." they both begged.

I took one look at them and knew I had to take them to Denver no matter what.

"Ok" I said and they jumped up and down and hugged each other.

There they had sat all winter, coloring quietly in the corner, while their parents waged war on each other. There they sat in the shadows for two years while their very own mother did algebra and strange men.

Happiness filled the casita—now we all finally had something to look forward to! It may not have been an epic hero's journey like the Lord of the Rings or Homer's Odyssey, but it was our own. I would drive my two daughters to Denver come hell or high water and re-new their little spirits!

They got on the phone right away. "Grandma, we are going to Denver to watch Phineas and Ferb Live!" Annie yelled into the phone...then her smile suddenly disappeared, "Grandma wants to talk to you" she said handing me the phone tentatively.

"Holly, you're not really thinking about driving to Denver this time of year, are you?" my mother said. "Maybe you can go in the spring when the roads aren't so terrible." She went on.

"But the Phineas and Ferb Live show is *not* in the spring," I cried, "It's now!"
So the evil impediment on our hero's journey is my own mother...what the fuck?

"Mom, just stop! You are always telling me what to do and you need to stop!" I started to cry.

My daughters froze as all the bottled up rage inside of me came raining down on my mother. I told her how she had practically been a slave to her mother for eleven years, and by God, it was not going to be the same way for me!

“If you go insane and end up in a nursing home shitting yourself when there is nothing physically wrong with you...you are on your own...I will not give up my entire life to take care of you the way you did for her!”

Next, I told her that I had lived with Mike and extra year on her behalf because she had been so judgmental about my divorce. I told her, and I told her some more, and when I finished, she was crying too.

“Grandma is going to die soon, you know,” she sniffed “...and I’m so sorry, Holly, I never realized I was like that” she whispered.

Two days later I got a \$100 bill in the mail with a note from my mom that said she loved me and to “have a fun and safe journey”.

The roads were bone dry to and from Denver, and when I looked over at my daughters on the way back from the show, I felt like they trusted me again.

--

A couple months later I was sitting next to my grandmother’s bed in the hospital. I had been by to check on her everyday since she had been in the coma. Today was different, though, her mouth was wide open and every time she exhaled, the breath

came out of her body like something was shaking it out. I called my mom in Dove Valley and described what was happening.

“Death rattles!” Mom gasped. “I’m on my way.”

My mother knew this because she had seen at least a dozen people die. She was the one everyone called on to sit with their dying relatives when they couldn’t. They knew she could handle it—no one could face death like my mom. My mother had a beautiful singing voice and she knew the words to at least a hundred hymns by heart.

“I just sing them to sleep,” she said.

She always told me that death was just a transition...like being born.

“A baby is comfortable in the womb and the last thing they ever want to do is come out.” She said. “Dying is the same thing, we are comfortable in this world and don’t want to leave. Dying is a reward, not a punishment.” My mother said death was like waking up from a dream in the morning.

I wondered if she would be relieved when grandma died. Grandma had taken a huge toll on everyone in the family, especially my mom. Grandma was born and raised in southern Oklahoma. She got married, had three kids (my mother and her two brothers), and got divorced when my mom was a toddler. Living as a single mother in the 1950s couldn’t have been easy, but not only did grandma do it, she got her Master’s degree. My grandma was the principal of a high school in

Albuquerque, New Mexico for many years until she started feeling depressed.

Noone knows what brought it on, but after awhile she was full blown crazy lying there in bed 24/7 wearing adult size diapers.

My mother pleaded with her to snap out of it every day for eleven years, but Grandma never did. Doctor's say that when someone is in a coma, their body is there, and everything is working, but something almost tangible has left them.

That's how it was with Grandma all those years. Something left, and something else slowly took its place...something that was sad and dark. I thought I could talk her through it. "Grandma, you just need to change your thoughts to more positive ones." I told her.

She looked at me with her black, beady eyes and said "Oh, I've tried that Holly, but it's something other than just my thoughts, I hate everyone and everything."

Before she had slipped into the literal coma, she suffered a stroke. The stroke killed the part of the brain that was making her crazy, so six months before she died, we had our old grandma back. The same grandma who bought my sister and me a blue plastic swimming pool when we were little. The same grandma who filled the pool with a garden hose and sprayed us when we tried to get in before it was full. The same grandma who made us whipped cream from scratch and walked with us to the library in the summer.

I was relieved when my mother walked into grandma's hospital room two hours later. She took one look at Grandma and turned pale, "I'm glad you called, Holly...she'll be dead by morning." She said. My mom kept her coat on and sat softly on the edge of the chair next to Grandma's bed.

I went to get some fresh air and some coffee, and when I came back my mother's head was on my grandma's chest. She was half singing, half crying, "You were a good mama...you were a good mama...you were a good mama."

Chapter 28

Sea of Cortez

I had a math hold on my account. I had to take Algebra 113 next semester...or else. There was no more putting it off. I was sure it wouldn't be a car wreck or cancer, but algebra that would kill me. It had been twenty years since I had taken math, so they advised me to start at math 060 and work my way up to algebra 113. *I'll never wrap my brain around this*, I thought. Now I was way behind my schedule.

Luckily, twenty something Chelsea told me she loved algebra and would help me anytime I needed it.

Also, it was spring break and I could escape from the horrors of math for a few weeks. My mom's best friend Patti invited me to stay with her in San Carlos, Mexico. To get there, I would need to fly to Phoenix and catch a midnight bus to Mexico. This was another hero's journey, but this time, it was for my own soul. My mother was about to say something about Mexico not being a safe place for a single woman alone on a bus, but I think she bit her lip.

Since I was alone all the way to Mexico, I let my imagination lead me around. When I really went deep, it felt like there were one or two people in my life that I had carried from one life to the next for a million years.

From a Notebook.

Let's run away, me and you.

To old Mexico.

We'll take our guitars and our whiskey and our bad decisions. I'll go to the bank and take out my savings. We'll drive to Baja. We'll spend the night above San Felipe, watching the Mexican fires and smelling the charcoal cookfires.

We could cross over the scrub and beautiful and beatific and forever desolation to the Pacific. We could sleep there, in the cool breeze of the ever loving blue ocean air. I could buy us a boat. We could pilot it up and down the coast. We could find a cove, Our Cove. That would be the name. And we could live there, me and you.

I have a friend with an orchard, and he would let me take some saplings. I have a friend with a vineyard, he would let me take some cuttings. We could start a vineyard there, in our dry and lovely ground. The coastal wedge melange would grow a nice vineyard. And the call of the fields and the vines and the orchard would beat away the dark and cold call of the Sea. The call that breaks my heart every day, here, where I have to live.

And we could build a small stone house, me and you. And play our guitars to the ever holy and sanctified Pacific, living on the Sea. And we would live off of corn,

beans, quash and antelope. We would live on chocolate and wine, spices and chiles.

And when the vermillion armies of the sun march to the west and put the gilded cities of the atmosphere to the torch, we could sit and love each other, with our guitars and wine.

And we would have children, some day, me and you. Strong and stout and lovely. And sun golden. Like me.

And unto the end, when our ashes are returned to the sea, we will live. You and me. And I will never roam again and you will never leave and we will never be cold or sober or hateful and I will never hurt another living thing.

I love you, but like that Mexico, you don't exist. With your coal black eyes and your all day shake and heartbreak of a smile.

When I got to San Carlos, I bought my daughters hand-made embroidered dresses and dried up sea horses. Then I took myself down to the Sea of Cortez and fetched Dozer Lee a handful of tiny six sided crystals from a vendor. I'd heard, from a geology professor, that crystals only had four sides, and when I thought of Dozer's fossil and rock collection on his bedroom desk, I wanted him to have them more than anything.

The sea soothed me. It was a rare gift to the landlocked. For some reason, I didn't think about anyone but Dozer in Old Mexico. *Is it because we've lived here together before?* I wondered. *As lovers? Or maybe we were Poncho and Lefty?*

Writers have noted, and it's true: the sea is blue from the sky, green on the beach, and clear in your hand. So the closer you get to the sea, the closer you get to the source of all things. It's like on the chart in my old middle school science room: ocean water evaporates, collects in the clouds, snows down on the mountains, melts into Spring Creek, and flows into the salty Dolores River in Dove Valley. Then the Dolores River meets up with the mighty Colorado River that flowed through Utah and Arizona, down to Mexico, and right back into the ocean.

Then, brilliantly, the whole cycle begins again. I remember my science teacher saying that the Colorado didn't quite make it to the gulf anymore.

By the time it reaches the delta in Old Mexico, the once mighty river is nothing more than a muddy sump because it's been completely used up and dried out.

How much does the sea miss its river now that it has stopped coming around? I thought drawing in the sand with a stick.

Dozer told me he was baptized in the Dolores River, and since I was too, I always felt a strong connection to him near the salty river even though we had never actually been there together. He said Dolores meant "sorrow" in Spanish, but

to be sure, I walked over to ask an old Mexican woman selling beads and shells on the beach. I thought it was strange she was selling the same shells that I could have easily picked up on the beach on my way towards her. “Si, Dolores is Virgin Mary of Sorrow.” she confirmed, and then she clenched her fist and held it up in the air, “Dolores is pain and sorrow!” she said a little more passionately.

We were both baptized in the same river of sorrow. I kept thinking about it on the slow bus back to the U.S.

Chapter 29

I kept the tiny six-sided crystals in my coat pocket for months hoping to run into Dozer on campus, and a few days before summer break I finally did. He was coming out of the library. “Hey you.” I said walking up to him. I was glad I was having a good hair day. He stopped in his tracks and paused a second before turning around.

“Wow, hey...I thought that was your voice.” He said.

Small talk commenced regarding school and the weather. I told him I changed my major from the humanities to business because it was more practical in every way. “When I graduate, I’ll be a Landman,” I told him. He looked confused, so I explained: “It’s someone who does oil and gas leases.” I said.

He said I would be good at anything I decided to do. I appreciated the compliment and stared down at my feet.

“I had to sell the Scout,” he finally said as if apologizing. We both paused for a moment of silence for the Scout.

I envisioned my favorite day dream pop like a bubble.

“If it has tits or tires, it will give you trouble,” I said nostalgically.

He leaned in and kissed my forehead because he remembered too.

Then there was another moment of silence for that summer.

“I have something for you.” I said reaching into my pocket. His hands were shaking a little when I put the tiny crystals in his palm. “Where did you get these?” he asked holding them up and studying them against the sun. “I went all the way to the Sea of Cortez and brought them back for you.” I said feeling a bit like Indiana Jones.

“I’ve never seen a crystal with six sides before.” He said.

“I thought of your rock collection when I saw them and I wanted you to have them.” I said.

“The Sea of Cortez, huh?” I could tell he was jealous. “Did you know the Colorado River doesn’t make it to the Sea of Cortez anymore?” He asked “It’s just a dry delta now, but I hear they are going to change all that and get it flowing all the way to the ocean again someday soon.”

So there was my last geology lesson from him.

“That would be really great.” I said. “You know, I never paid attention to geology until I met you.”

We smiled at each other and thanked each other a thousand times with our eyes before we parted again for another year or two. I’m not sure, but I think he watched me walk away.

Hello, Darkness

It's in the way she moves. And she moves. She moves like a blackened universe closing down and falling into some other place. Some other time.

I'm fairly sure, I tell her when she is not around, that you are the destroyer. An Apollyon of some minor hell, sent by the greatest Satan to occult the minor demons that cavort about in the verdant field of planar thought.

Goddamn it. Were there some less righteous life I could be living, one steeped in some sort of hatred, I would take it. Let the wind blow again, like death on the door. Passover should come, with devil blood on the door scaring off the holy.

But in her, I find some sort of holy moving darkness. It's a forever sump. It's where time goes to die, and die slow. Not that you can tell, not in the sump of forever. It's all one time and one life and one universe come and gone. And come again.

I find it preposterous that the universe will, at some point, collapse in upon itself and explode out again and again. In no experience of mine has the universe ever done so. It proceeds into greater chaotic rumbling resonating messes of fate. And then it flickers and it fades and it is gone forever.

Forever is such a meaningless word.

Some sort of minor Vishnu, maybe. Never a Satan, but some sort of devil.

Chapter 30

The Landmen

Chelsea and I were the only two women in the Landman program. We sat in class together surrounded by twelve or thirteen other classmates. All of whom were six foot, 200 plus pound oil field workers. They'd flirt with her and she would brush them off her tiny shoulders. At age 22, I wondered why she had settled on a husband so quickly. Her fiancé was handsome enough. He'd graduated a couple of years ago and was working at a bank. Everywhere Chelsea went she had at least five satellite friends floating around her.

"Make sure you don't give up all your girlfriends like I did when I got married." I warned her. After the divorce, I was down to just Essi.

Now that she had a motorized dirt bike, she never wanted to mountain bike with me anymore. But she did help me with math. I couldn't believe the amount of time she gave up for me. I told her I would pay her, but she refused. When Chelsea talked algebra, I actually understood it.

"Holly, don't be afraid of the itty-bitty letters, they won't hurt you!" she teased.

One day when we were doing algebra, she asked me,

"Do you remember that talk you gave about love letters in speech class that one time?" I told her yes, but I felt bad about it.

“Well, I told Jordon to write me a love letter!” she said, “A real one with a pen and paper. He’s working on it as we speak.”

The day Chelsea listened to my speech about love letters, she said she wanted someone to write her a love letter more than anything in the world. I wondered if she would like to get one as much if it was forced. I told her to let me know how it turned out. She said she would tell me all about it, but said I couldn’t actually read it, because,

“knowing Jordon, it will be very sexual.” She said.

“Good enough,” I said. I was happy for her.

I don’t know why I chose such a practical field of study. I had no intention of being a Landman when I graduated. Nothing sounded more mind numbing than sifting through property records at the courthouse. The price of natural gas was way down and the only place to get work in the industry was North Dakota. All of us had guaranteed work in North Dakota when we graduated, but who would want to be a single woman living up there in the winter?

What was happening up in Wiliston was like the gold rush of the 21st century. The state was bursting at the seams with oilfield workers, from all over the country, who couldn’t find work anywhere else. We were both thinking it, but Chelsea is the one who finally said it,

“Holly, we could probably make more money as prostitutes in North Dakota than we ever could as Landmen.” Then we laughed and laughed.

I think it's important to leave the earth better than we found it, but I'm no environmentalist. I'm not sure we should reject the gifts that the earth gives us. The stuff was created to grow back, it's cyclical, it regenerates. Today's environmental movement comes from a belief in lack, that there is not enough to go around. Kids today just don't understand where energy and food comes from. They think lights just come on and food magically appears on the grocery store shelves. This new generation of travel blogging, soy latte drinking, half neutered males (I'm picturing Josh Fox) have never rose up at 5am, fed the animals, started up a tractor or drill, and toiled in a field or mine all day. They don't know what it takes to survive and protect. If you're a woman and feel like there is something missing, but you're not sure exactly what: it's real men that are missing, the black coffee drinking type.

Environmentalists project ineptness on to nature. Nature doesn't choke on fossil fuel (aka ancient sunshine), She uses the CO₂ released from combustion to grow more plants to feed more people. It's a perfect cycle: bio, to compression, to carbon energy, to CO₂, back to bio. I didn't learn this in school, it's an understanding I received while meditating.

Argue all you want, but basically it comes down to your world view: you either believe humans or a virus on the planet or you don't. I believe Nature sustains us abundantly and wholeheartedly. I believe if you are here you are meant to be here, and that goes for all 9 billion of us. Don't believe that the planet is over populated, either. The entire human race could fit into the state of Texas and be less crowded than Hong Kong. Michael Roads said it best, "More than anything, we need to honor nature. Trying to save nature based on fear is an illusion, but to honor nature is the truth".

Our big assignment that semester was a title chain for a gas lease. Our professor brought us a ten pound stack of paper and told us to chain up the title.

"Who has the mineral rights when it is all said and done?" he asked, "Who owns the dirt?"

The professor said that we were not to use a computer. We were to do it the old fashioned way with poster paper and pencils.

To chain title, you start back in the late 1800's when the property was first carved out, or patented, and then go through each conveyance document to see who transferred it to who and when.

Chelsea and I headed to the cafeteria with our poster paper and our mountain of title work. As soon as we wrote the first patent down we knew it would take

weeks. It was her idea to computerize the thing and transfer it to the poster paper later.

“You are brilliant!” I told her, and I meant it.

“Thanks,” she said, “now I’ll have more time to partaaaaay.” She gathered up all the papers and went home to Jordon.

Here’s what my friendship with Chelsea taught me: twenty somethings weren’t stupid and I didn’t hate them...I was jealous of them. All through my twenties I never had one once of fun and I never felt like I fit in with girls my age. By the time I was nineteen, I was already married and working very hard. I was jealous of the girls at the university because they were living the life that completely passed me by.

When I turned 21, I remember Mike and I went to a party at his university. I got good and drunk and missed work the next day—well, that was the first and last college party I ever went to.

The only friend I had during my 20’s was my 70 year old next door neighbor, Marjorie. There just weren’t many friends, adventures, good times, or even life lessons to remember from that decade, and I regretted it deeply.

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I was late for Chelsea’s wedding so I slipped in and sat in the very back row. The wedding was in a small church at 4:00 on a winter weekday afternoon.

Maybe that was why there weren't many people there. I was the only person from school, so I felt flattered to have been invited at all. The music started and everyone stood up. I looked back to see Chelsea. She was wearing a simple handmade gown and she held a handful of Shasta daisies. She looked to me like she just stepped off the last stair coming down from Heaven. She was all a-glow like she knew a secret that nobody else knew (a tip for soon-to-be-brides, have your wedding during the golden hour of the day for free enchantment).

Her one and only bridesmaid was her fourteen year old sister, who doubled as her flower girl.

Jordon rocked back and forth nervously as she walked towards him. It was easy to see that he was in some sort of a trance and couldn't look away. She met up with her dad at the front, who lifted her veil halfway up to kiss her gently on the cheek. He whispered something in her ear and she giggled. Then confidently, her father gave her hand over to Jordon and sat down.

When I walked down the isle at my wedding, my lip twitched like Elvis, but twenty something Chelsea was the picture of grace and composure. I swear, nothing on earth looked as beautiful as she did that day. I'd shed a tear at plenty of weddings, but I sobbed at this one. I wasn't the only one though—tissue was flying everywhere.

When Chelsea started to cry, everyone held their breath as Jordon reached up and gently brushed her tears away with his finger. Then he tilted his head and crinkled his nose to keep from crying too. I knew he would take great care of her.

As long as I live, I will never forget that orange light filtering in through the stained glass on the west side of that church. You will forever remember the details of the moments in which you are overcome. Chelsea looked like something out of this world, maybe an angel, standing there in the soft prisms of light.

Later that day, I wondered if anyone felt the same way about Mike and me during our ceremony all those years ago...and how disappointed they would be with us now.

Chapter 31

Noble , My Ass

Meanwhile, Dozer Lee accepted the friend request I sent him on Facebook a year earlier. I'd forgotten about it. I quickly learned he'd dropped out of college. He had a "nothing worth mentioning" job during the day and was the lead guitar player in a hillbilly band at night. One day, he invited me to a show. I sat in the back in a dark corner and sipped whisky with Chelsea.

The night we went to see Dozer and his band play, they were opening for a cover band, who was opening for Reverend Horton Heat. *He always was good at foreplay*, I thought. When we saw him take the stage, I was happy to tell Chelsea that Dozer was an old lover,

"Oooh he's so fine" She said.

I had no idea about the music I was about to hear, but all the girls in the theater anticipating the music, had all of their secret tattoos showing. Every one of them, including Chelsea, looked like waitresses or hookers in some midnight diner. I was the only one around wearing jeans and a sensible cotton t-shirt. If my V-neck started slipping down too low, I pulled it back up. I was certainly the only one around with no tattoos.

There were no butterflies, roses, six shooters, bleeding hearts, and naked women on my body. Dozer and I had discussed my tattoo free body once before.

He told me that he'd never really been with a girl without a tattoo before—I remember him running his fingers up and down my back,

"you just don't see girls without tattoos" he said.

Dozer's band was good. I didn't know he was such a proficient musician. He'd never played for me before, but I guess it explained all the guitars he had in his room. Their lead singer had a nice twang and could bend the harmonica. As they wrapped it up, smoke was swirling in the light beams and the audience was getting good and drunk. That's when men of all shapes and sizes began to swarm around the table where Chelsea and I were sitting. When one of them got the courage to lean in and say something to her, Chelsea flashed her little diamond,

"I'm taken." She said.

The Reverend Horton Heat is a rock-a-billy band out of Texas. The band consists of three men: the Reverend, a bass player and a drummer. My intention was to stay seated in the dark corner so Dozer wouldn't know I was there, but by the time the Reverend was halfway through, I was in ecstasy and didn't really care if Dozer saw me or not.

I never knew music could be like that. I felt like my very soul was pulsing with the music. By then, Chelsea had pulled me down into the crowd with her.

After a while, Dozer walked up behind me and gave me a hug.

"I always knew you would make a good groupie," he said.

I laughed and hugged him back. “I loved your show!” I had to yell. It was too loud to talk so we just stood there and smiled at each other.

Before long, Chelsea was back standing next to me, sipping on her drink, and watching Dozer and me very closely. Since she was both drunk and intuitive, she leaned into us and yelled,

“You guys should kiss!” Without even noticing it, gravity had pulled Dozer and me dangerously close to each other. He looked a little spooked and backed away very quickly.

“Oh, no! The two of us really shouldn’t kiss!” He yelled at Chelsea. “You ladies enjoy the show!” Then he backed away from us, like one of us was holding a gun to his head, and disappeared into the crowd.

When the Reverend left the stage, everyone started screaming,

“Horton, Horton, Horton!” including me.

I felt like I would die if he didn’t come back on stage. After 25 years of touring, the Reverend knew how long to stay away before casually walking back on stage and swinging his guitar back around. He took his stance, gave a half smile, and hit that secret cord for the girls who were really listening. It was as if he knew when we were just ripe enough to be picked. It was like a long sword pushed clear through. It was like the last few thrusts pushing me over the edge.

Music can produce a collective transcendence if people are really in to it. Intelligence operates in all kinds of ways and in all kinds of different places. For instance, when everyone is in the same place, pulsing, we all become the same thing.

Suddenly, I felt overly tired. I wrapped my arms around the waist of the stranger, who was standing closest to me, and I began to cry. We stood there in the same embrace that Murray and I had been in when we walked out of the cemetery in New York. The stranger was a tall, skinny boy with a damp hooded sweatshirt. He put his long arm around my shoulders and he seemed to understand why I was crying,

“This is the fifth time for me,” he yelled.

Chapter 32

Comparing Gardens

Smokes Like Lightning

“Why did you quit? Was it your girlfriend?”

No. My girlfriend has been very inspirational in many creative outlets, maybe not as much in writing, but she’s not the reason I stopped. I read through the archives and saw in them, at least at the supertextual level, a narrative of great conflict. The best writing plumbed it fairly well, the worst is immersed in it.

The conflict, simplified, is a real need I must have had to reconcile who I was, am, to a larger theme of conscious creation that was not allowing me to enter. That sort of melodramatic sounding sentence is exactly what I hate most in bloggers.

It sounds like a great over-supposing of the importance of who I am to myself and others. It’s that sort of narcissistic bullshit that I hated. But it is valid to the question I had to answer from several people, and sometimes the truth, like sex, is embarrassingly affected. That is the nature of both acts, obviously.

The conflict was with violence. Not anger, as anger is lauded, generally. Not with passion or zeal, as both of those are also lauded, therefore of no real consequence. It was the violence. Violence has defined the greatest moments of my life, but I hated violence.

I can think of the times my parents, both loving and beautiful people, beat me down. I can think of the times me and my brothers fought and bullied each other. Being the youngest, I had a distinct size disadvantage, but I had ruthlessness. I won a lot of those fights. The defining moments of a short and somewhat legendary attempt at marriage were explosive and angry and physical. And that physical violence was so detestable to me that the fights took on an aspect of spiritual battle, a somewhat vaporous concept.

There were times in my life I loved causing death and harm to other human beings and the creations of their hands. Then I spent years feeling guilt over my complicity. I spent years getting in fights in bars, at random public events, a couple of times in sanctioned arenas, and in a lot of alleys. And I hated that moment when the fight is over and all

you can see and feel and know is the great pain and guilt and a misplaced helplessness.

I was struggling so hard for peace, when I was writing all sorts of polemics about the value of natural people and natural places. I surrounded myself, physically and intellectually, with peaceful, harmless people who wear natural fibers. I detested anything dishonest and forced upon nature, like guilty chastity or teflon coated cookware, which to me was a disavowal of a person's humanity, and thus Nature, the final greatest deity.

Last summer, on a sort of relationship drama fueled whim, I joined the Army, what for I could go to Afghanistan with a deploying unit. So far in my life, the only thing I'm any good at is war. I can be a warhorse, and I understand the environment of the militant. I don't understand scholastics, I am terrible at most jobs, but I get the military. I get that feeling.

And somewhere around the fifth time I wrote her off forever and gave her away to the whims of hers I could never control, I was knocking down anthropomorphic targets in a field with links of 7,62 flowing out of a M240B machine gun and I felt peace. There I felt at peace with myself, surrounded by warriors who never needed me to explain why I trained to destroy. I never had to explain how slogging through mud a foot deep and learning the finer points of killing someone with a bayonet was fulfilling.

And I have rectified* nature with violence. If I am being honest, I am acknowledging my desire to enforce my dominance onto others, and to back my opinions with lightning and blood and the absolute rush of anger powering movement. The honesty killed the conflict. And I slowly quit feeling any sort of need to write.

I still write, but it's songs about shooting people and irresponsible drinking. Usually in the same song. I'm in an Electric Hillbilly band. I play guitar to people that want to hear, and we are achieving, slowly, more success than words would ever gain me. And so, I quit writing words.

But: I drive my girlfriend slightly insane with just the sorts of questions the former readers hear would love to read. I realize what a piece of crap this whole rambling, inconcise spill of words is, and I hate it. I hate that I am so far out of practice.

And all I can do is miss it. And I miss it. As surely as blood.

**Rectified can be taken many ways, in this case I mean it in more of the mathematical/engineering sense than the crass and assumptive literal definition.*

I was sitting in Dove Valley swirling dark red wine around in a glass, thinking about J.B. I'd just gotten back together with him, but almost instantly had changed my mind about him again. I went to Dove Valley that summer mostly to avoid him. A few months after we got back together, I'd finally admitted to myself what I'd known all along—he was an alcoholic.

Little things started to add up: like when his daughter, Tara, was visiting him after his bike accident, she told me that he was probably drunk when he crashed. He had a driver's license, but no car. It also explained his teeth and the little pooch of his stomach that never went away no matter how much he rode his mountain bike.

He had these little plastic vodka bottles that he kept tucked deep down in his bag and coat pockets. He tried to hide them but every once in a while I would stumble across one when I did the laundry, or in the bottom of a drawer or in the corner behind some books. One day I found one under the passenger seat in my truck. I had a re-occurring dream I was wading ankle deep in theses little, empty plastic bottles, which I guess could've been a reality if we gathered them all up and put them all in one place.

After J.B. and I got back together, he stopped caring if I saw him drunk or not, and stumbled around my apartment. He wasn't a mean drunk, like my great grandmother's husband, but he was a proficient one. When he asked me if I would marry him, I told him I would if he could go an entire year without drinking. I knew he couldn't though. He'd go three or four days, get the shakes, and start up again. We were in a holding pattern, and I hated patterns. It bothered Annie the most. "Mom, J.B. is so annoying!" she'd say. When he was drunk he would try to pet her hair or carry her around on his shoulders.

What kept me from breaking up with him again was his sweet sober side that seemed to love me with a furry. Plus, he treated me and my daughters like goddamned queens. He was kind and the most considerate person I had ever met. He wanted to please me more than anything.

What to do, what to do.

"So what if he drinks too much." My sister said, "he's loves you more than anyone else ever has."

Then my mother said "Well I personally wouldn't be in a relationship with an alcoholic, but that's just me...you should do what is best for you."

I about fell over dead.

Not only was there the alcohol issue, there was also the new grandparent issue. Before we got back together, J.B.'s middle daughter had a baby girl. After he got over the fact that she was only 16 years old, he became overjoyed with the news and bought everyone he knew cigars. The baby was the screen saver on his phone; and his new granddaughter, Rose, was all he wanted to talk about when we reconciled,

“I’m a Pa Pa!” he exclaimed.

I was happy for him, but I was mortified for myself. There was no way in hell this child would ever be allowed to call me “grandma”. I was only in my late 30’s for God’s sake! I’d used birth control religiously since I was sixteen years old, just so this sort of scenario would never happen to me. I planned my first pregnancy so I would be at least fifty years old before I had grandkids. I didn’t want to be associated with this grandbaby in any way, shape or form.

J.B. kept calling me in Dove Valley asking when I was coming back, but I couldn’t give him an exact date.

“When will you be back?”, “I miss you so bad.”, “Come back Baby Girl, please.”

I told him I would come back in August for school and we would go from there. That summer I got busy helping my dad clean up the ranch. My Old

Grandpa had been a hoarder, a pack-rat in human form. Everyday Dad and I put on our work gloves and heaved all kinds of things into a huge dump trailer. There were sixty years of National Geographic's, fifteen welders, broken windows, tires, margarine tubs, and 50 gallon drums filled with God-only-knows-what.

“Get a whiff of what’s in there and it will kill you pretty dead,” dad said.

I backed away.

There were also around 30 old, rusty cars, mostly diesel Volvos with doors hanging on the hinges and aged, ochre yellow foam peeking out of seat covers.

One day Dozer posted on Facebook that he was looking for a welder, so I went to Old Grandpa’s place to look around. I wanted him to have one, so I asked my dad if I could take one of them. “Why do you need a welder?” he asked.

“It’s for a friend.” I said.

“Alright, pick one out.” He said pointing to the row of them.

I picked the biggest, bad-est one there was and dad helped me load the beastly thing into Noble Steve and strapped it in tight. I was going to make a quick trip to town with it and return in a day or two. Another hero’s journey, only this time it was for Dozer’s girlfriend. Dozer wanted the welder so he could build her a garden cart. I had no intentions of letting J.B. know I was back in town.

By that time, I had moved into a larger apartment. When I pulled into my driveway, J.B.'s daughter, Tara, was parked in my spot. She had moved from Arizona because she had some falling out with her mother. Her plan was to live with J.B. and attend the same college as me.

“Hey, what’s up?” She said.

She looked a little startled to see me standing there in my own apartment.

“Dad said I could come do my laundry here, I hope you don’t mind?”

J.B. had a key to my apartment and he did his laundry there too. As a matter of fact, I hadn’t touched a load of clothes since I’d met J.B. He did all of my laundry too.

“Dad will be glad you are back, he totally misses you.” She said. She had brought her computer and was playing video games at my table.

She had J.B.’s handsome symmetry, and I hated to admit it, but her mother must have been very beautiful too.

“I miss your dad too.” I said. *It just wasn’t how I missed someone who was really gone.* I thought. I didn’t think J.B. would never be really gone.

“Are you avoiding him or something?” She asked looking up from the computer. Her straight forward question caught me off guard.

“No...I mean a little... maybe...well yes.” I stammered.

“He loves you a lot you know.” She said.

“He drinks a lot.” I countered.

“He has a heart of gold, though.” She said painfully.

Then she told me he’d been sober for years before the car wreck, but started drinking again shortly afterwards,

“Life always pushes him down and he just keeps getting back up. He never complains about anything.” She said.

That was true, I never heard J.B. complain about anything. Whenever I broke up with him, he didn’t demand to know the reasons why, he just quietly went back to what he was doing before he met me. I was the one that always came crawling back because I didn’t like being alone. He never blamed me for anything or asked me any questions about our time apart. He just came back when I asked him to; and when he did, he just loved me the same way he always had.

Now his daughter set at my wobbly table and begged me to be good to her dad.

I had a feeling it wasn’t the first time she had pleaded with a woman.

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After Tara left, I messaged Dozer about the welder anyway. I couldn't keep it in my truck, it needed to be moved, but I resolved not to invite him in.

"You bring me strange gifts," Dozer said lifting the welder out of my truck. He had his girlfriend's dogs with him and they were running around marking their territory in my yard. *He might as well be driving a fucking mini-van.* I thought.

"Why don't you write anymore?" I finally had the nerve to ask him.

He just shrugged. "Good question."

He made no excuses, so I didn't probe him about it further. Dozer gave the strap across the welder one more tug.

"Thanks again." He said.

I didn't want him to leave, but I didn't have much else to say to him.

"How's your girlfriend?" I asked.

"She's awesome. She has an amazing garden this year. I'm building her a garden cart with the welder" He said.

"I have a huge garden, and a chicken coop in Dove Valley this year." I told him.

I wanted him to know that if he left her, and went with me, he could have eggs and meat with his vegetables.

“Cool, are your tomatoes going crazy too?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said waiting for him to offer to leave his girlfriend, move with me to Dove, build our adobe house, and live happily every after—but instead he gathered up the dogs and put them in the back seat of his truck.

Save my life! Don't make me beg you! “Can you come in?” I asked.

Dozer just looked at the ground for a second and then said that he'd better not.

“You're one woman I never want to regret, Holly.” Looking me in the eye like he meant it. Then he gave me a quick, unsatisfying hug and got in the truck.

“Me too,” I said choking back tears as he drove away.

I couldn't believe he'd said my name.

Chapter 33

Wet Desert

I think after that is when I finally gave up on the idea of Dozer. I resolved to make it work with J.B. We were two people that found each other only because life was not working out for us the way we intended. A few weeks before school started back up, we headed to Moab, Utah with our mountain bikes and a tent. As soon as we set up our tent at the KOA, we climbed inside for our third session of love making that day (him being a grandpa and all). I looked over at him as rain started pounding our tent. He reached over and cupped my breast,

“We’ll stay plenty warm, I promise” He said. We stayed in the tent for nearly three days before it was dry enough to ride,

“Now, we’ll never get the smell of sex out of this tent.” I said helping him fold it up.

Finally we were headed for the single track northwest of town. Like it sometimes was with the two of us, Noble Steve was the only vehicle in the parking lot always waiting for us when we returned, like a lonesome horse tied up to a fence.

J.B. was a diehard mountain biker and I was becoming one. I couldn't comprehend how he could ride for twenty miles at a time drinking and smoking the way he did, but we set out.

"I've ridden every day you've been gone," he said pulling out ahead of me. *I'll never catch him.* My head was throbbing and I was fighting for breath. I stopped to suck on my asthma inhaler, while he was at least a half mile ahead puffing a cigarette,

"I love the trail today, it's super tacky." He said when I reached him.

He always kept me in sight on way or the other. He never really rode off and left me.

"Yeah it feels so smooth." I lied.

"Ready?" he asked. "No, I need to catch my breath first." I bent over gasping and grabbing my knees with my palms.

"Take your time, Love" He said.

I'll never deserve him. I thought. One day, I was astonished at his goodness and I asked him,

"where did you come from anyways?"

What I meant was: What dimension? Which angel factory? What part of heaven? He just blinked at me and said,

“Indiana.”

When I was finally ready, he leaned in for a quick dry kiss and we were off again. I straddled my bike at the top of a vertical rock garden and watched him roll it effortlessly like his bike was some sort of a hover craft. I got off and walked my bike down the thing.

“Ready?” he asked when I got to the bottom.

I nodded yes and he was off again. When I caught up to him eight miles in, he was looking up at the sky,

“We need to get back Love.” He said it a little ominously.

I looked to the south west and a dark cloud was peeking over the red sandstone in the horizon and as if on queue, a flash of lightning emerged from it.

You don’t want to be caught in the desert in a rain storm.

Desert sandstone, although beautiful, is not much for soaking up rain—so a good rain will cause dangerous flooding conditions within minutes. Strangely enough, more people drown in the desert than die of thirst. The ravines and

arroyos here can fill up very quickly and become a violent torrent of hundreds of rushing rivers that could wash anything and everything away,

“Yeah, let’s get the hell out of here.” I said turning around sharply.

“We can’t go back the way we came,” he said pulling out his map, “we’re eight miles in...we need to find a short cut to the fire road...which is four miles that way...”

It hadn’t started raining yet, but the air was thick with the promise of it, so we peddled fast. Just when I was thinking we might make it. BOOM! A bolt of lightning lit up the sky and the rain started bursting out of the dark cloud which was now immediately above us. Water was already rolling in the cracks, not from the rain above us, but from the rain up valley. It had reached us. I thought we were pedaling very fast, but as soon as that happened we both went into turbo, ducking our chins into our chests for cover as the rain came roaring down on us.

“Peddal!” he yelled back at me.

Shortly, it was impossible to pedal as a thick coat of red mud coated our tires and clogged our gears. He wanted to get off the trail right away so we didn’t rut it up in the mud and then he got a little desperate,

“We’re going to get up high on the top of the ridge and then walk down to the fire road when we get closer...he need to be up much higher!” he yelled pointing to the easiest route up the cliff. *Two bikers found dead in desert North of Moab.* I thought. *Great, then we’ll be the tallest structure and we are carrying medal bikes!* KABOOM! CRACK! I hesitated; I didn’t want to make the climb. I was weighted down with heavy red mud.

“You just have to decide if you want to die quickly by lightning or slowly by drowning!” He yelled half teasing, half telling the truth.

I scurried up the hill after him. “We need to leave our fucking bikes and run!” I screamed.

“We’re not leaving \$10,000 worth of mountain bikes in the desert!” he yelled back.

And so we walked along the ridge desperately seeking the fire road. The water was like a ferocious beast boiling down below us multiplying like a thousand rivers meeting the ocean all at once. I heard him say we still had a mile to go and I swore to God that if he didn’t strike me down, I would be a better person and help people more.

The lightning was so close I could feel the static on the back of my neck and my ears were ringing. At first, it was like the wrath of God in the Old Testament,

but then, for some reason, I knew that the God I desired was not wrathful at all... it was then that my fear of dying turned into something else completely. In the midst of it, the storm became beautiful and mesmerizing. Goethe said the “greatest achievement man can make is amazement” and I was amazed with this storm. With all the power of the universe flashing and crashing around me...like all of the beautiful things God wanted to show me hailing down from the sky all at once. It was like the end of the Fourth of July show, when they shoot off all the brightest and loudest firecrackers at once.

The Utah sky was bursting in colors like soft red, vivid purple, and pitch black. By the time we reached the fire road, I was completely overwhelmed with bliss from the storm.

I had stopped worrying about dying because I didn't feel like I'd really be going anywhere different if I did. When I became the storm myself, my fear of the storm dissolved away.

I was soaked to the core, my body was covered with goose bumps...but I was warm all over.

We scraped the mud off our tires and resumed pedaling on the benign gravel road towards the parking lot. The water was rushing beside us down Forest

Service engineered ditches. *This is our best ride yet!* My heart was doing summersaults and a childhood giddy-ness was enveloping me.

As usual, I was happy to see Noble Steve sitting in the parking lot—*Fools riding in this weather*, my old truck seemed to say. There was a small ditch to ride through before we reached the parking lot.

“Don’t ride through that ditch!” I heard J.B. yell just as I headed into it.

Suddenly my bike was washed out from underneath me and I felt the strong current sweeping me away. I began to panic as I lost my footing.

“J.B.!” I screamed.

In an instant he had me by the arm and was pulling me up the bank, but my bike was long gone.

We had to wait for the water to subside before we could cross to the truck safely. We sat in the truck for two hours eating and napping until the sun came out. Surely, a lonely truck cab, with fogged up windows is a holy place.

Once the rain stopped, we got out and hiked down valley to find my bike lodged under a rock... somewhere over the rainbow.

Chapter 34

Hello Darkness II

My cell phone rang around 9:00 p.m. It was a mutual friend of a friend.

“Chelsea passed.” She said.

At first I thought she was saying Chelsea passed the class we had taken the semester before. We’d both done some goofing off, so we were both afraid we might have flunked it. I’d barely walked away with a ‘C’. I didn’t know what her grade ended up being because she never brought it up.

“That’s great.” I said hesitantly.

“No, Chelsea passed away today.” The girl said. The meaning of it almost pushed me over and I started shaking.

Chelsea died instantly. She was riding dirt bikes in the desert with Jordon. According to the story I heard, she was following him up a steep hill, lost control, and rolled her 300 pound bike backwards down the hill over the top of her. Her tiny body didn't have a chance. The accident was all over the local news that night.

They said "a local woman died in a motorcycle accident in the desert north of town this afternoon."

When a twenty something dies, do you call her a girl or a woman? I wondered. I was glad they called her a woman because rumor had it that she was pregnant.

Her funeral was packed. She was married in a little church, but her funeral took place in a mega one. One of those churches with a cafeteria, a bookstore, and five preachers on staff. Her pictures came one after another in the logical order of her life on both big screens. "Tiny Dancer" was playing in the background.

"She'd been in ballet classes her entire life, so this is a tribute to here." Someone said.

Again, it was like whisky. It stings in your throat and then feels like nothing at all. The pictures kept coming. There she was with her dad when she was a

baby, her first steps, her second grade picture with the missing front teeth, her awkward eighth grade picture with braces...her wedding.

I tried to remember what my mom always told me about dying but it didn't seem to comfort me at all.

So I tried to pretend that death was the most romantic thing that could happen to the newly weds. Now, as long as he lived, Jordon would never have anything in his heart except pure love and admiration for her. Now, he would never get bored with her and want someone else. He would never see her as a bitter middle aged woman waving divorce papers in his face. *He is left with only good memories.* Even when he is an old man, he will dream about her at night, and whenever he hears her name, or gets a whiff of her in the air, he will stop dead in his tracks. Their love is beautifully preserved.

Oh! but she was just a baby! She was in love. She was about to finish college. Her entire life was ahead of her! She was going to be a mother? I was completely overwhelmed with the empty space she left.

There was a reverent silence when Jordon got up to say goodbye to Chelsea. I thought he was very brave to try.

“Um,” he sniffed and just stood there. Still silence.

“Um, onetime Chelsea asked me to write her a love letter. It was hard because I couldn't think of words good enough to describe how pretty she was and how she made me feel...”

A terrible silence fell, because everyone could see that Jordon was holding the love letter in his hand.

“Anyway, I hope she can still see what it says, and I hope she knows I mean every word of it.” He swallowed hard, and I prayed just as hard that he wouldn't read the letter out loud. He didn't, instead he turned and tucked it under the flowers on Chelsea's casket,

“I love her more than anything and I always will,” he said.

As Jordon walked back to his seat, I felt like I was under the same 300 pound dirt bike that crushed Chelsea. I couldn't breathe. The room started spinning and I felt like I was going to throw up. I made my way out of the pews and ran out of the church gasping for air.

I didn't make it to the first week of class...I couldn't face not seeing her there.

Chapter 35

Entropy

That's about the time my depression started moving in like the evening shadow creeping up the vermillion bluffs in Dove Valley. The first thing I did was quit my job at the gym. It was too hard to motivate people when I wasn't feeling it much myself. J.B. started taking Jessica to school in the morning, because after a rash of tardies, I stopped taking her at all.

Sometimes I would wake up and she would be standing at the end of my bed with her back pack.

“Mom, please get up! I'm going to be late!” She'd beg.

When I did finally drag myself out of bed (and sometimes J.B. had to physically drag me out) I went through the motions of the day. I couldn't taste food and I couldn't feel anything. It wasn't just because one of my friends was six foot under—it was the complete entropy of purpose. There was also the constant flow of fearful thoughts. At first I tried to swim through them, but one came after another until it was like a raging river sweeping me down stream.

Turns out, four years of college was just a way of stalling my life after the divorce, because I had no idea how to make a living. So I got some school loans and had lived off them for four years. Now that my last semester was approaching, I still didn't have the slightest idea of what to do or how to do it

The devil kept reminding me that I was nearly forty years old and way too far behind to catch up. Forget retirement, I hadn't had a real job in eleven years.

“Holly you can't drop out of school, you are too close.” J.B. was sitting on the side of the bed with his hand on my hip pushing on it gently. I pulled the blankets over my head. My tears were making a sauna under the covers and it was getting hard to breathe. I knew he was right, but my while my room seemed hard, leaving it seemed impossible.

Nothing on my resume fit a career geared towards the oil and gas industry. It had more than enough white space. I was kind of like a ballerina applying for the

mafia, or a housewife applying for a truck driver position. *I've changed hundreds of diapers, I can handle your dirty job.*

Then there was my ever failing cookbook. I started writing it when Jessica a baby. I remember typing the recipes whenever she was sleeping in her basinet. It was mostly family friendly casseroles. It took me over two years to type. When it was finished, I got busy contacting publishers, but since the market was already saturated with cookbooks I received hundreds of rejections.

No matter—I decided to self-publish. The book was the kind that needed to be self published anyway. It needed to be in a 3-ring binder because it had grocery lists that needed to be removable. The cookbook was brilliant. It had 30 weekly meal planners. Each weekly meal planner had five easy dinner recipes and a complete grocery list for those recipes. Anyone who bought my cookbook could choose a planner, remove the grocery list from the binder, and return home with everything they needed to cook the entire week...I used it all the time, I thought it was brilliant.

I thought I would need a patent for such an amazing idea, so I hired a patent attorney that took a couple thousand dollars before he told me a copyright would be sufficient. Next, I asked someone in my MOMS Club (who left a high profile marketing job to stay home with her baby) to design a cover for me. I thought she

was doing it as a favor. I thought we had a deal: I would babysit for her and she would design the cookbook cover. I babysat her two snotty, dirty boys every Saturday for three months—and she still sent me a bill for \$1,500.

But still I never gave up. I had so many ideas coming to me all the time. I dreamed about my cookbook, so I kept a notebook by my bed. I woke up in the middle of the night to jot the ideas that came to me in my dreams. I sent my book to news stations, food editors, Bunco groups, and book clubs. I spent a small fortune on shipping and labels. I went to home business-get-togethers where there were pitiful tables with pitiful homemade signs advertising pitiful homemade stuff. I went around to tables and bought the homemade soaps, the homemade prayer books, and the homemade scarves. Treat others how you would like to be treated. If I acted interested in their life's work, perhaps they would act interested in mine?

But no one ever came to my table to even flip through my cookbook. So I sat there cursing all of their jasmine scented, hand-sewn home businesses straight to hell.

My mother came to Denver to help me prepare for trade shows. My neighbor came over and we set up an assembly line for the cookbooks. We hole-punched reams and reams of paper, and inserted them into white binders until two o'clock in the morning. Then my mom stood behind my booth serving up the

apple crisp recipe we prepared the night before. People were raving about my apple crisp. A delicious combination of apples, cinnamon and vanilla with a velvety butter rum drizzled over the top.

“I must have this recipe!” they wailed, their eyes rolling back in ecstasy...licking their plastic plates clean.

“It’s in the cookbook I told them.” holding up the copy. Well, one or two shoppers thought it would be reasonable to buy the recipe from the artist that created it. But everyone else just complained and said they’d just get a recipe for apple crisp off the internet. After awhile, I just started handing cookbooks out for free.

Something kept me going though. Someone would tell me that my book saved their life in the kitchen, or a food editor in Ohio would write an excellent review and I’d get fifty orders. I would skip to the post office because my dream was alive and well. I felt like whenever I got an order for my cookbook I was also getting a strong dose of love and acceptance.

Never, never give up! I told myself. I built an online store for the books and waited. I promoted it some more, but still nothing happened...so I canceled it. Then I caught the cookbook out of the corner of my eye and said “No, I’ll never give up! It’s such a great book!” and started another website from scratch. I hired

marketing consultants and PR people, but cookbook sales were slower than molasses on a cold day.

When I got a divorce, I wasn't that worried about how I would make money because I knew I was just on the edge of a big break through, I'd sale 100,000 copies for \$5 each! Easy peasy.

I started taking photography classes so I could take beautiful pictures of my recipes. I uploaded those pictures to foodgawker.com but they rejected nineteen out of twenty of them: awkward angle, bad lighting, food styling all wrong they'd say. I wondered what was wrong with me? If you've ever looked on the world wide web, you can see every other person and their dog has a food blog. Anyone can get their goddamned cupcake picture accepted at foodgawker.com!—Anyone, that is, but me.

Before the food photography, I got the idea for a cooking show. It just so happens that my next door neighbor at the time was a videographer. He was as excited as I was to film the first episode of my cooking show. I would explain my cookbook, cook a gourmet meal, and post the video on Youtube. The only problem was that his new wife wanted to be in the show. I didn't really want her to be, but he convinced me that it would be best to have someone to make small

talk with on the video in case there was a lull in the cooking action. I finally agreed just to be nice.

The video sucked. We looked like Abbot and Costello fumbling around with ingredients. She kept reaching over my body to grab things and she had a very high pitched laugh that made my ears hurt. I think the video is still on Youtube. It got about 60 views and cost me about \$1,200. Funny thing about the whole cookbook fiasco was that Mike never once gave me a hard time about it. He always supported me even when I spent godly amounts of our money trying to get it off the ground.

This cookbook thing went on for over a decade, and my cookbook dreams slowly began to turn into cookbook nightmares. I wouldn't jot ideas down on the notepad beside my bed when I woke up anymore, because it was all I could do to shake the bad dreams away.

Fifteen years in the making. It was thousands and thousands of dollars. And thousands and thousands of hours worked...all for nothing. My cookbook was one of the biggest heartbreaks of my life. One night after a bad cookbook dream I woke up and walked straight to my laptop. It was 4:00 a.m. I pulled up my cookbook website, called the customer service number and cancelled it. No more!

Now, Yahoo webhosting has the best customer service on the planet, and I

almost kept my website just so I could keep talking to them. The customer service rep asked,

“Now Ms. Wilde, are there any other web hosting packages that might be better suited for you?” I had a lump in my throat “No thank you, not this time.” I could barely whisper.

J.B. called from work wondering why there no daily recipe posted, and I told him I never wanted to hear the word recipe ever again, and I burst into tears. My dream was gasping for air and this time I couldn’t and wouldn’t revive it the way I’d done before. It was an epic failure no matter how I looked at it. “No Holly, your cookbook is really good, please don’t give it up, everyone loves your recipes.” He begged.

Chapter 36

Soup for Helen

Then, out of the blue one day, a man contacted me to see if I could take hot meals to his ninety year old mother. He said he would pay me \$50 per meal. I snapped out of my depression for three whole days. Yes! That's it! I love to cook! I will get ten clients and make \$500 a week taking food to old people. That's what my passion for cooking can be all about, helping people in real life with their dinner dilemmas! Why hadn't I thought of it? It would be my own

business and a way to pay off my school loans. Fuck the oil and gas industry and also fuck trying to sell cookbooks online. I had a new plan!

The man told me his mother was a vegetarian, so I was surprised when ninety year old Helen called me up and told me in a frail voice that what she really wanted was chicken noodle soup. I was happy to accommodate her because chicken noodle soup was one of my specialties. Well, I had boiled and deboned an entire chicken when Helen called to say that actually, she would prefer a vegetable minestrone. Undeterred, I went to Vitamin Cottage and purchased all of the ingredients for the vegetable soup. After the soup was hot and ready, Helen called again and asked if I'd used whole wheat pasta.

“Of course, yes, I used whole wheat pasta.” I said fishing out the white flour pasta.

I cheerfully made another trip to Vitamin Cottage for the whole wheat stuff.

Finally, a perfect soup for Helen! I was happy to feed her! Now I just had to drive twelve miles down the interstate and follow a grid of farm roads to her secluded home. Helen opened the door and clasped her hands together in delight,

“Oh bless you dear!” she exclaimed.

It felt so good! Not only was I making \$12 in profit (\$50 less organic ingredients and gas), I was also helping someone in the process. I felt such relief

driving home from Helen's. I thanked God over and over for finally steering me on to a career path. Catering! Why had I never thought of it? Other than mountain biking, I loved to cook more than anything. I had at least a thousand recipes from my cook book that I was ready to unleash on the city. I went to work writing my business plan for my catering business as soon as I got home. I was happy as hell.

A couple of days later, I got an email from the man in Denver. He said his mother hated the soup and he canceled the service. I wrote him back and told him there was no charge. I pushed send and just sat at my computer staring at the screen. The feeling was nothing more than empty... I went back to bed.

I gained thirty pounds in eight months. My body lost all shape and my hair turned grey at the roots. Had I been a man, I would have grown a beard and pulled off a decent Santa at Christmas. I started wearing J.B.'s clothes to school because I could no longer fit into my own. I had to pull out my old nursing bras because my boobs got humongous. The only thing I was still resolved to do was provide the basic necessities for my daughters and finish school. I somehow managed to do those two things. I also continued to eat too much, drink, and have sex with J.B. because they were the only things that made me feel good.

I was barely pulling C's in school and dinner for my daughters was usually drive through, cold cereal, or soup from a can. Everything else in my life flew out the window. The thing that scared me the most was that I would stay in bed for eleven years like my grandma did. Night time was the worst. For the first time I got a glimpse of the dark, indifferent place my Grandmother had been all those years.

While I was going downhill, J.B. was on his way back up. He'd been attending AA meetings religiously for five months and he'd traded a bike to a dentist in town for over \$5,000 worth of dental work. The better he got, the worse I got. As we passed each other on the steep hill of our lives, him going up and me going down, he grabbed me and tried to take back up with him, but I wouldn't budge.

I expected him to let go any day, and just let me roll back down, but he never did. Instead of leaving me, he turned his love way up.

Every morning it was the same thing: J.B.'s alarm would go off at 6:00 a.m. He'd pat his pillow and I'd roll on to it and fall back to sleep. I'd consider getting up, but it seemed too hard. Finding something to wear was torture. I knew good and well nothing in my closet would fit, gaps between shirt buttons, and my jeans

were impenetrable. My best effort was a long, stretchy tank top that would cover stretchy leggings.

After he said his prayers, J.B. delivered Jessica and Annie to their schools, and came back into our room softly with my hot coffee.

He'd pull the pillow out from under me and stack one on top of another. Only once I was sitting up, and he was sure I was fully awake, would he hand me the hot coffee. After my first sip, I'd murmur that it was delicious and perfect because it always was. Once the cup was safely down from my lips, he leaned into kiss me on the forehead smooth my hair.

"Good morning beautiful, did you feel the earthquake last night?" he asked.

"Yes, twice." I say blushing.

"No, not that," he said smiling. "There was an earthquake in Dove Valley last night. Everyone is talking about it on Facebook"

I thought it was strange that J.B. didn't ask me why in the world there would be an earthquake in Dove Valley. I would have told him what was causing the earthquakes if he would have asked. There were certain things J.B. concerned himself with, and certain things that he didn't. I called my sister, who lived a half mile away from the epicenter, to see what she thought of it.

"Our house didn't just shake, it bounced, the dogs were hysterical!" She said.

The earthquakes in Dove Valley are getting worse. The people in the city feel them too, just an eerie window vibration ninety miles away, but at the epicenter, there is always a KABOOM!

When you pull up the USGS maps online, you will see little orange dots covering the planet. Each orange dot represents an earthquake. Surprisingly, there are at least ten earthquakes happening on the planet every day. Most of them are on the edges of continental plates near exotic places like Indonesia or the Solomon Islands. Earthquakes are caused by massive continents sliding past each other, colliding into each other, or even drifting away from each other.

I'm one of the few people around that knows what is really causing earthquakes in Dove Valley, a tiny town in the middle of the North American continent because Dozer told me all about it.

Dove Valley isn't a river valley at all—it's a paradox because the river flows across the valley instead of down the valley like rivers normally do.

"Dove Valley wasn't formed by the river, it was formed when a salt dome collapsed millions of years ago." Dozer said.

When the red river flows across the salty valley, it picks up 205,000 tons of salt from the ground water and soil annually.

It's important to know this is because the little river is a tributary to the Colorado River, and the mighty Colorado supplies water to 30 million people and

irrigates 4 million acres in the United States and Old Mexico. We have a treaty with Mexico to make sure the salt in the valley doesn't end up in the Colorado River.

The act of taking the salt out of the little river and then pumping 14 tons of salt back into the earth every month, with a 16,000 foot deep injection well, is what is causing the earthquakes.

Apparently, the earth doesn't want the salt back.

In addition to the earthquakes, one or two cows go missing in Dove Valley every year. As the salt dissolves, deep caves and caverns are created under the surface, we call them sinkholes.

I have picture of my ol' Grandpa Tom down in one of these sinkholes rescuing a new born calf. Whoever took the picture was looking down on him from the edge of it. Gramps was wearing a hard hat with a bright light attached—the kind old uranium miners used to wear. He was holding the muddy calf and looking up at the camera with his big toothless smile.

Now stop taking pictures and bring me a God damned rope.

Before he left for work I told J.B. about what I dreamed while on his pillow: That morning I dreamed he was riding up one side of the Colorado National Monument on his bike and I was hiking up the other side with a friend. Even though he was riding, I beat him to the top. I waited and waited for him and

thought that maybe he was in an accident. Just before I was about to call for help, he appeared on his bike and took me in his arms. A crowd of friends and family suddenly appeared around us (Chelsea too). We said some wedding vows, turned into birds, and flew away.

I didn't tell him that my worst re-occurring dream was the one where he started drinking again.

He smiled and said that my dreams were getting stranger and stranger every day.

Chapter 37

Sedona

Then he told me to pack my bags because he was taking me to Sedona to get some sunshine.

I didn't want to go.

For one thing, I knew he would want to ride bikes there and there was no way I could muster that. I was thirty pounds over-weight and it felt like I was covered in cobwebs.

We arrived in Sedona a few days later. Our first stop was a bike shop with an, old spongy wood floor. Locals didn't share their best single track with just anyone, but J.B. was a bicycle insider and so we left with a hand-written map. A handwritten map is like a treasure map, the golden ticket, the Holy Grail. We had to carry our bikes to the top of the hill, but it was worth it.

I was out of shape and too top heavy to be riding around like we had been. J.B. was usually completely finished with a cigarette before I caught up to him. When I finally reached the summit, I removed my camel back and let my chest fall forward. My boobs looked to be about eight pounds each—the water pack had balanced them out until I drank all the water in it. *When did those happen?* I thought looking down at them. The last time my boobs were that big, I had just given birth...eleven years ago.

I sat down while J.B. went to snapping pictures of the unbelievable panorama surrounding us.

“This place is un-believable” he said turning his phone sideways to get a panorama picture.

It didn't look like he was in a big hurry so I took a meditation pose (well kind of, I couldn't bend my right knee all the way in). *Focus on your breath and do not think about anything...Ohm.*

It took a while to relax, but soon a strange dialog began—stranger than most I'd had with myself before:

I can top even this, something said.

It felt much different than me just thinking. I opened my eyes and looked around. J.B. was sitting quietly too.

Everything is already perfect, It said, stop trying so hard.

Despite all my depression, my life had been pretty great overall. That's when all my happiest memories came flooding in all at once, in no particular order. A memory would come, I'd feel the fullness of it, and then another would take its place. I wondered if that's what they meant by "life flashing before your eyes".

In the span of about ten minutes I thought about all the times I'd had an over- the-rainbow-experience. I figured it was what my old neighbor Steve called

"Glimpses of consciousness...when it happens you will know it," he said.

It's when the light softens and all worries disappear. You can enter an enchanted universe, but you can only do it when you're stone cold sober:

-Driving with Murray in New York

-Watching the sea otters in Monterey with Mike and the girls

-Morning talks with Dozer in Ester's garden

-The flash flood in Moab

-Sitting on the beach by myself in San Carlos

-Chelsea...at both churches... for both reasons

There were many, many more too even back to my childhood, things I hadn't remembered before.

Then there is J.B.—He got your ass on a mountain bike and showed you all of the secret places. He leadeth you beside still waters, over mountain passes, down slick rocks, through dark and yellow forests, and up to ancient ruins. I opened my eyes again to see J.B., he was just sitting there waiting patiently.

After my meditation on the top of the red rocks, I was ready to let everything go and ride down hill back into town as fast as I could. I had pizza on my mind, not because I was sad, though, but because I was hungry.

As I approached a steep hill, I stopped and looked it over. It looked to me like a vertical cliff of jagged rocks and erosion leading to straight to the ER. *Oh Hell no.* I thought. I got off and walked down the thing. It made me think of Chelsea that day in Coach Lane's mountain biking class when he yelled up at us,

"Come down at least one of you!" and we walked our bikes down together.

Then, as if she was walking her bike down the hill beside me—for some reason, I asked her out loud— "Riding your dirt bike while pregnant?" I could see

her pretty face in my mind considering my question...And then...I felt her response back to me with every ounce of my Being;

“Riding your mountain bike while fat and forty?” She teased.

That’s when I knew we were both o.k.

Chapter 38

How it Ends II

But nobody wants to hear about too much happiness for too long so I won't write anything about the two years after I got back from Sedona. They were two

very good years. I loved J.B. and he loved me. He came home to me every evening like a loyal puppy, and I'd sleep in the crook of his neck at night.

"I've got you, baby. I've got you," he'd say pulling me in even closer to him.

I knew if something ever happened to our friendship it could never be replaced.

What's more, I never thought about Dozer anymore. He went back to Iraq. I wanted him to come back safe, but I did not miss him. I was finally in love with J.B. after all the years he loved me first.

Another strange thing about those two years...Mike and I were starting to become friends again. We never talked on the phone, but he stopped texting me horrible messages IN ALL CAPS. Instead, he was texting pleasant and reasonable things like: "Are you getting Annie from school?" or "WTF, when did Jessica get boobs?"

Although I very seldom saw Mike's face, he stopped peering at me ominously from behind his kitchen curtains every time I came to pick up or drop of the girls. Instead, he started opening the door to let Shiloh out to greet me.

Always Shiloh ran towards Noble Steve wagging her butt. I open the door and she jumped up in my lap and licked my face like,

“Hey I remember you! I like to see you when you come! I am happy living here! Come back again tomorrow okay?!”

Then she jumps down and runs back towards the front door. It’s 30 seconds of pure bliss every time this thing with Shiloh happens. It’s a gift Mike gives me regularly, whether he knows it’s a gift or not. After the girls are all bucked up, Mike’s front door opens again and Shiloh runs back inside.

Years later, Mike told me that it was Shiloh that saved his life...and I believed him.

My dad still checks his rain gauge every day whether it rains or not. His reoccurring dream is that the Dove Valley salt dome collapses a second time.

“It could you know,” he said, “with all the rain, and the government pumping the diluted salt back into the ground.” I could picture the salt dissolving away below my feet as it rained. He said it wasn’t the collapse that would kill everyone and their cattle, “it would the thick red dust that would fill the air from here to Denver.”

“Like volcano ash?” I asked.

“No, it would be ten times worse than volcano ash because of all the clay in the dirt” he said, “every living thing for miles around would suffocate in a matter of hours”

Earthquakes or not, my plan was to finish college, and move back to the ranch in Dove Valley for good. J.B. was up for it. We'd build an adobe house and I'd grow a garden.

"I'm ready to get married!" I told J.B. one night and I was happy because this time I really, really meant it. He picked me up off the ground and held me so tight it popped my back. It would be in the fall with just our family and some mountain bike friends! His little grand-daughter Rose could be the flower girl! We'd have homemade apple pies instead of cake! Planning my fall wedding to J.B. made me happier than I'd ever been.

Then just three weeks later, Essie told me that J.B. smelled like a distillery.

"I doubt that" I said. "He he hasn't drank in two years."

I noticed her jaw tighten as she backtracked. Then she blushed,

"...Oh" she said, "maybe it was something else I smelled, sorry."

Deep down, though, I knew she was telling the truth.

You see, J.B. has this dragon that has shadowed him ever since he had his first sip at age fifteen. The dragon breathes down his neck and it won't let him go.

One night J.B. got up in the middle of the night and pissed in one of my potted plants. When I screamed at him, he stumbled to the coat closet and tried to put on one of Annie's coat to leave.

"Where are you going?! You can't drive! Please stop." I yelled as he stumbled across the front yard.

And with that, my heart, that he had sewn back together slowly over the years, became completely unraveled again.

--

I'm writing this from Dove Valley, moving my lawn chair from one shady spot to another on Hell's Half Acre. Last night J.B. asked me what I wanted from him.

"I want you to kill your dragon and save me!" I cried.
He backed away from me as I pressed down my skirt.

"I'm sorry," He said.

"I don't think I can ever do that."

J.B. moved to another town and I miss him so much. What kills me is he will never miss me like I miss him. I know that anytime he starts to miss me, he'll just drink until my memory fades to black.

I know it's cliché, but everyone comes into your life for a reason:

Mike came into my life for my two little girls,

Murray came into my life to reveal the truth about my marriage,

Chelsea came into my life to show me that life is short and to make the best of it,

Dozer came around with the scriptures to comfort me during my suffering,

And J.B. helped me realize that true love is loving someone no matter how broken they are.

The Gone

The slanting beams of light scraped clean the corners of the room. The piles of clothes and darkness held onto small points, crucified, where the heavy blinds failed to occult the day from the room.

There were her thoughts. Memories, unwelcome and ruthless.

There were the nights where the whole night sky of the ceiling flamed above with the grasping and sighing. There were the conversations, ideas submitted to the medium of sound, that lit the corners of the mind with sacred silver fire. There were both, and vacillations untold between the two. There. On that bed.

You can sense The Gone. You may not know hate when you see it or violence in another's words, but The Gone is a real thing. And it was everywhere. The room, constricting and claustrophobic had a great gravity and void of immense empty space where once bodies had shared and minds had mated in the air between. The Gone bleeding out in the holy sepulcher of the dark.

Spiritual death among the still quickened breathed in the world entire.

In the desert, past the confines of her there would be a truck crossing some bridge over the playas and bajadas.

The Gone would be there, too, but in higher form. In the form of honesty and the return of a lover to his estranged. Eight years sober, but never clean. Never without it in him and through him, that hunger and need.

And the needs of a person are their world entire. He had been sober and been happy, but all for her. For the need, for his real love, he was never sober or happy. Those were not the requirements of that love. The love of any substance is the love of the holy darkened self.

And so she sat watching her glass go clear and the lines form like tree rings as the water evaporated into the expanding universe of The Gone.

Finally, I logged off my computer, got on my single speed, and headed straight for the Dolores River. I peddled as fast as I could, so they pain would move to my legs, away from my heart. I couldn't stand the emptiness I was feeling, but I knew empty space was the only remedy for it. When the single track ran out, I leaned my bike behind a pinion tree and continued on foot.

As I continued down the canyon, I knew that once I got past the vibration and whirring of the salt plant, I'd emerge into a thick and blissful silence. Complete and utter stillness is what makes the Dolores River canyon special. A mile or two

in, I stopped dead in my tracks and listened, I was far enough from the salt plant to know the whirring and buzzing I heard was nothing other than silence. It's a place so lonesome that it feels more like freedom than loneliness.

By the time the Dolores makes it to Dove Valley it is slow and low despite all of the rain. Most of it had been diverted upstream by bean farmers. The silence in the canyon doesn't scare me, though, instead it's a feeling was quite the opposite of fear.

In her memoir, my great grandmother [Ada](#) wrote that she was baptized in the Delores when she was 40, the age I am now. She was baptized after her middle son died in an explosion. She was baptized when she felt the heavy burden of sorrow and sin weighing her down. She didn't understand why children were baptized.

“What do little children know about sin?” she wrote

I think she wrote that line about me. I remember when I got baptized, she was there. I was six or seven at the time, and I thought she was an ugly old lady with grey hair, sagging skin, with brown nylons cutting into her calves.

So after my baptism, the Dolores took the burden of my sins, along with the red dirt from its banks, forever and indifferently away towards the Gulf of Mexico.

Dozer once wrote that the Dolores River sounded to him “like someone’s voice after you’ve stopped caring.” And that day, when I stood still and listened to it, that’s exactly what it sounded like, only quieter.



[Voxproletariat](#)

[Read Ada’s Memoir Here](#)

[Salt River Confessions](#)

If you loved the story, please let me know

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