

University of Alberta

The Russian Dolls

by

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of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Preface

"The Russian Dolls" is a novel in progress. The expected end-length of the novel is three hundred and twenty-five pages. The first third of the planned novel (i.e., the first one-hundred and twenty-four pages) is represented here.

"The Russian Dolls" begins at the last chronological point within the action of the novel: the protagonist, Grace, has just given birth to a baby girl, Iris. Then the novel moves forward through the earliest back-story of Grace's childhood and also forward through the back-story of her most recent past, when she is an adult, but before she becomes a mother. The action of the last two-thirds of the novel will elaborate what happens in between the furthest point in the action (becoming a mother) and the earliest point (Grace's childhood). The action will become more centered, chronologically and emotionally, on Grace's core self or, more accurately, on her selves.

A set of Russian dolls figures literally and symbolically within the plot of the novel. The novel is modeled structurally, as well, on a set of Russian dolls. The protagonist's self is composed of many versions of Grace at different ages. These differently-sized versions are nested together, within the novel, to make Grace a complete woman.

In the first third of the novel, the reader meets the littlest and the largest Russian Dolls. Dolls from the middle of the set, the middle Graces, will be introduced and elaborated on in the last two-thirds of "The Russian Dolls". The reader will get to know Grace through her relationships with her husband, her sister, her mother and father, and the various best friends and lovers she encounters.

The basic plot of "The Russian Dolls" is psychological – the child-Grace begins life with a natural well-spring of confidence, somehow loses her sense of self-worth and self-love along her journey to womanhood, and then re-discovers and embraces it again. The

novel will end at the same point at which it began – Grace has just given birth to her daughter, Iris. The difference between the beginning and the ending will be in the way the story is told.

Conceiving and writing the first third of “The Russian Dolls” has been an incredible learning experience for me, as a writer and as a human being. I’m sure the completion of the novel, to which I am fiercely committed, will be as formidable a process as the beginning of it was.

One of the first and most important things that I have learned is that it takes much longer to write a novel than I had ever anticipated before beginning one.

My original timeline for this project supposed that, upon finishing my M.A. coursework during the 2001/2002 academic year, I would immediately set pen to paper, write furiously, and have completed a finished draft of my first novel by June of 2003, thirteen months after starting it. By the time June of 2003 arrived, however, I still didn’t know where to begin. I was overwhelmed and underachieving. I was certainly not finished. At the end of the 2002/2003 academic year, I had not written a single page towards this manuscript. After completing my coursework, it took me a full calendar year, in fact, to begin sketching out a tentative outline and some preliminary characters. Even though all I had to show for a year’s work was a crude skeleton, I was still dumbly convinced that I was entirely capable of writing a full-length novel. Now, one third of the way into “The Russian Dolls”, I am sure of it.

In March of 2003, I sent Betsy Sargent a packet of outlines, character descriptions, and rough summaries. She signed on as my thesis advisor shortly thereafter. The writing began. I e-mailed Betsy the first two chapters a month later. I had finally found my way into the novel. At the end of each month after that, I e-mailed Betsy another chapter. By January of 2003 I had produced ten chapters in nine months.

From January through March 2004, I participated in English 694: Studies in Literary Techniques. It was an intensive creative writing workshop led by Greg Hollingshead. I wrote and submitted work to the workshop from “The Russian Dolls”. The course gave me much impetus to keep up the pace and quality of the project. It was a productive writing experience – I completed five chapters in three months.

In April 2004, I had a wealth of feedback from Betsy Sargent, from Greg Hollingshead, and from the students in my 694 writing workshop to incorporate into my written material. I spent April revising. Then, inspired to get to a certain point in the action of the novel, the place where this manuscript ends, chapters fourteen through nineteen came quickly. With Betsy’s help, I did another few series of revisions on “The Russian Dolls: A Novel In Progress.”

Now, sixteen months after writing the first chapter, I have come this far – one hundred and twenty-four pages and nineteen chapters in. Crunching the numbers leads me to the discovery that, writing at full tilt (i.e., along with a full-time job, volunteer work for a literary magazine, and a miscellany of other creative writing projects) I am able to write, on average, eight pages of useable prose per month. I estimate that “The Russian Dolls” will be a completed, full-length novel at three-hundred and twenty-five pages. That means, given my working pace, I will need twenty-eight months, or two and a third more years, to finish the first draft. “The Russian Dolls” is slated for completion in October of 2005. I expect at least another six months of revisions will follow.

Says Annie Dillard in The Writing Life:

To comfort friends discouraged by their writing pace, you could offer them this: It takes years to write a book—between two and ten years. Less is so rare as to be statistically insignificant....

Out of a human population on earth of four and a half billion, perhaps twenty people can write a serious book in a year. Some people lift cars, too. Some people enter week-long sled-dog races, go over Niagara Falls in barrels, fly planes through the Arc de Triomphe. Some people feel no pain in childbirth. Some people eat cars. There is no call to take human extremes as norms.

Dillard insists that she doesn't mean to say that a novel written more quickly than that is necessarily a poorer novel. Only that, "most writers might well stop berating themselves for writing at a normal, slow pace (13-14)."

While four years is a good amount of time in which to write a novel, it is, I believe, too long to take to write an M.A. thesis. And so, I give you the first third of "The Russian Dolls" with diligence, devotion, humility, and, I hope, something like grace.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Betsy Sargent who helped me find my way into this novel. Her insistence on more and better was essential to this project and her vitality and laughter were lavish.

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CHAPTER 1

At the centre of me is an orange pulse of fire. I can feel it there, always. It spits, it flickers and it falters. It expands and it contracts. Sometimes it gets paler; its edges become bleary and frayed. Other times it gets denser – redder, and impossibly concentrated. It breathes, it flashes and it seethes. It is never still. It reminds me that I'm alive.

My father once told me that when astronauts return from space they are profoundly changed. To hover above the earth like that is an out-of-body experience, he said. But even further out-of-body than your average out-of-body experience. You aren't just floating on some hospital ceiling looking down at yourself – you are looking down at everything. You are hovering above every speck, every molecule, every particle, every hope of anything at all that can sustain life for even a second. And so you can see from up there how precious it is. And how unlikely it is. How beautiful it is! And how small. How fragile. And alone.

"When you have children," he said, "it's like that. You realize just how precious something can be. How fragile a human body is. How fragile your own heart is because if anything should ever happen to that child you will be completely broken forever. It changes you. You'll see someday," he said.

When I was pregnant with Iris, I had nightmares.

I dreamt of a giant pink bunny rabbit falling through space. It wasn't a real rabbit, it was plush. But it was terrifying, believe me. It had a plastic overbite, shining plastic eyes, and a cheap blue ribbon cinched around its neck. It barreled through space towards the earth at an alarming rate.

When the thing hit the earth's atmosphere, chunks of ice hissed off its fun-fur surface and it began, mercifully, to slow down. Then it started to contort and singe. Its eyes popped off, its ears caught fire – then the rest of it caught fire until it became just a small, burning orb plummeting through the sky. It fell toward a lake – a cold, dark, northern lake with a spiky periphery of spruce trees. It hesitated for just a moment and then it dropped. It spit. It sputtered. It fizzled right out.

I'd wake up with a jaw sore from clenching.

Books will tell you that when you dream of one thing you are actually dreaming of another thing entirely – that a dream about bacon frying in a pan is really about love and that a dream about love is really about bacon frying in a pan.

But I know exactly what that dream was. I know the centre of me fizzling into nothingness when I see it.

Everybody's life contains a few moments of clarity, moments when the truth is suddenly naked and quivering at the end of your fork.

You can chew on that truth for the rest of your life or you can swallow it whole right then and there. It doesn't really matter what you choose to do with it because it will always be the truth. The truth is the truth is the truth.

At fifteen a group of friends and I pooled our financial resources and headed to "The Golden Forks" for all-you-can-eat spaghetti. We dove into huge platters of the stuff. We slurped and devoured it. We taunted and dared each other. We laughed so hard that Coke came out of Chastity's nose. When we couldn't eat another forkful we ordered more. Then we ate until, like a frozen river aching for the thaw, we groaned.

We threw our cutlery clattering down onto the formica table and reclined in our chairs. That was when Chastity noticed the red sauce

splattered all over her lap and clapped one hand over her mouth. Her reaction prompted everyone to look down until there were howls and shrieks all around. It was an era in which teenagers took great pride in the pristine condition of blue jeans that had been carefully factory “distressed.” Hands reached for paper napkins with which to frantically grind the stuff more deeply into the jean fibres.

“Club soda!” screamed somebody. “We need some club soda over here!”

But I didn’t reach for a napkin. I was stunned. I, and I alone, had a perfectly clean lap. The sauce had been halted on its descent by the front line of my bosom. I stared at my stained tee-shirt in awe. The truth was sprawled across my chest in audacious spaghetti-sauce-orange font: “You have big boobs,” it said.

I blushed as recognition of that fact spread around the table. There was hooting. There were guffaws. And it’s true – the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I do have big boobs.

When I was ten I attended a summer camp called Wampapaya. It sounds exotic, yes, but it was just off Highway #2, the nearest town being Teadium, Alberta. When it rained we moved all the tables and chairs aside and played circular games inside the mess hall.

One counselor was fond of psychology games. She would ask us to close our eyes and picture things.

You are walking through a forest, she would say, and you find an object. You pick up the object and you put it in your pocket. What is the object that you picked up?

Then she would reveal what it “meant.”

That object is your greatest strength, she might say. Those of you who picked up keys are very logical. That is your greatest strength. Those

of you who picked up coins are career-oriented. You will be very successful. I don't know what the Barbie dolls mean...maybe that you think your appearance is your greatest attribute.

"Now, everybody close your eyes," she said.

"Picture a meadow. It is a beautiful day in the meadow. There are flowers all about and the sun is shining. The grass in the meadow is very green. I want you to feel like you are in the meadow. Can you see the meadow?"

"Good. Now you see an animal. It can be any kind of animal. The first thing that comes into your mind. The animal is enjoying the sunshine. It is running around the meadow. Now it stops to rest. Good. Now open your eyes and tell me what animal you saw. And how that animal acted in the meadow. Let's start with...you."

"It was a bunny," I said. "Not a real bunny. A stuffed-animal bunny. It was pink. And it was enormous. It had very large feet. It was hopping all over the meadow and by accident it was trampling flowers. And eating them. It didn't mean to wreck the flowers though. It's just because it is really big and kind of clumsy, and that's what it eats – flowers. It's a nice bunny, really, just kind of...big...and...absurd."

"Oh," she said. "Big and absurd. Well that certainly is interesting. Can anybody tell us what 'absurd' means? I mean besides you, sweetie."

When the circle was completed there were six horses that whinnied, ate grass and pranced; five tigers that lurked around the meadow and licked their paws; four kitty cats that meowed; a handful of dogs that ran around in circles; two moose; one bear, and one gigantic, absurd, pink, flower-trampling bunny.

I held my breath in awful silence waiting for her to reveal what the animal "meant."

“The animal,” she said, “is *you*. It is how you perceive yourself.”

“Oh,” I thought. It was a moment of truth. I knew at that instant, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I was rather odd.

Later, Marla Matheson accused me of “making it up.”

“You didn’t really see that,” she said. “You made it up. Well, I think it’s pathetic that you make something up when it’s supposed to be from your imagination.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

I didn’t feel like arguing any particular point with Marla right then.

That night I turned over in my mind again and again whether it would be better to be someone who only pretended to be weird or someone who truly was weird. I didn’t reach any particular conclusion but opted to be more prudent in future mess hall psychology games. If anyone cared to ask again, I would be with Marla and the other pretty girls – a kitty cat.

Of course I was shocked when my subconscious coughed up that pink bunny rabbit and spit it into my dreams twenty years later. It had changed, yes. It had lost its aura of cartoonish innocence and took on more of the appearance of a macabre side-show spectacle.

And of course I didn’t need anyone telling me to recognize myself in that awful pink rabbit. Clad in pink fun-fur, yes, but of course it was me. The very centre of me. Falling and falling and falling. Fizzling out.

I told no one about my nightmares. They were simply too inconsistent with the rosy-cheeked, wistful, dreamy contentment with which I preferred to construe my maternity.

“How are you feeling, Hon?” asked my friend Eileen over an afternoon snack of granola, bananas, soy milk, and chocolate sauce. She

was seated across from me at my kitchen table. She had brought with her a cardboard box full of items I might need for when the baby arrived.

"If you're anything like me when I was expecting Josh and Simon and Roan, she said, you can't wait to get that damn baby out of you and into the world."

"I feel pretty good. I mean physically. I feel okay. I just feel...I feel...off-centre. Sometimes."

"Well, that's normal," she said. "Your body has to make room for the baby. So some of your organs and stuff get pushed away from where they normally are. Even after you give birth it'll take a while for everything to get back into its proper spot. Like, your spleen isn't where it's supposed to be."

"That's not what I mean. I feel fine. I mean, physically. It isn't that. It's that *I* feel...off-centre."

"You should really consider having a home birth," she said.

"No," I said. "I want the drugs. Maybe next time. I'm way too scared."

"You?" she mouthed incredulously. "Scared? Oh my God. Like *you* are scared of anything."

I forced a smile for her and then got up to put away the food.

How could I possibly explain what I'm afraid of, I thought, to this amazing woman? She's had three children in five years and each birth was more spectacularly easy than the last. She wrote a Ph.D. on pre-natal nutrition while producing her third child. She lives for her children. She's probably never had a selfish thought in her life.

Inside me, always, was this roiling hot core. Spitting, flickering, roaring at the very centre of me.

With Iris inside me I felt it shift. It moved towards the small of my back. It moved away from the center. And I dreamt it fizzled out.

They say you can't dream your own death. You can dream of dying but you will always wake up before you actually do. Either that or you don't wake up at all.

It wasn't dying that I was dreaming about, though.

"Look," said Eileen. "I don't know what you're thinking about right now but whatever it is, cut yourself some slack, okay? Pregnancy makes morons out of women. It makes us stupid and crazy. So if you are having any stupid and/or crazy thoughts, just don't worry about it at all, okay? Give yourself all the slack you need. Give yourself permission to be a moron. Because it is perfectly acceptable to be a moron while pregnant and for at least one year afterwards."

"For example," she said, "you just put the cereal in the fridge and you put the milk in the cupboard."

When Iris was born, pain whipped through me in lightning white sheets. It washed me. It struck me with hot, glaring smacks. When I squeezed my eyes shut, it spat at me. When I opened them wide, it blinded.

When this is over, I thought, can I possibly still be whole? Will I be hollowed out, emptied? Will I ever be able to feel anything at all ever again? Will the centre of me be gone, entirely? Will I have to start being me all over again, from scratch?

When I hover over Iris as she sleeps, her wee face and tiny body
furled up tight as a nut just tapped out of its shell, it is impossible to be
eloquent about the way I feel.

She is beautiful. She is perfect.

She is perfect. She is beautiful.

CHAPTER 2

We're all born perfect.

And then what?

We poop and fart. We bawl and suck. We belch and doze and grab at things. We learn to ask for more and to throw what we don't like on the floor for the dog to get at. We learn how to walk. How to talk. How to work a pair of pants. We learn how to get our own way as often as we can and what to be afraid of. We might even learn how to play a violin or to spell the word "m-u-n-i-f-i-c-e-n-c-e."

But somehow in the midst of all this growing up and improving of ourselves and our minds we become something inarguably other than perfect. We become people.

Sometimes you remember things whole. Not like you remember a phone number or someone's first and last name, but like a whole moment – every little detail, an instant in entirety. The warm smell of your skin as you lie sleeping with your nose in the crook of your arm. The headlights climbing in and out of the back seat of your parents' old Chev. The rain and the tires singing, the dark asphalt unfurling behind you in one long drum roll.

That's the way I remember being perfect. I remember it whole.

I am sitting on the concrete wall that separates our driveway and our lawn, at home, in Burst, Alberta. I'm swinging my legs back and forth, back and forth. There is hot, yellow sunlight curling around my face. My hair is yellow too. The hair and the sunlight are all mingled together and brushing against my cheeks. I am wearing a psychedelic paisley dress with matching culottes and a matching bonnet. My mother sewed that outfit for my big sister, Bonny, just as the sixties were turning

into the seventies. Now it is a hand-me-down of which I am impossibly proud. The pattern of the fabric is so complex that it seems a gargantuan miracle that a dress and a pair of culottes and a bonnet could all possibly be made out of this same, remarkable material and all belong to me. But the universe is full of such wonders.

I am looking down at my pudgy brown legs as they kick back and forth against the concrete curb. I am splendidly conscious of being the driving force behind those pudgy legs, of their outward kick and release. I am thinking: "*Me*. I kick those legs. *Me*."

All the sensory details of that instant are jumbled together in such a mess of clarity that I can't smell hot gravel without feeling grass pressing against the flats of my hands or look at heat lines shimmering on a road without hearing the sound of leaves gathering in the wind. And when I remember these things I also remember what it felt like to be a little girl with scabby knees, a messy halo of curls, and the ability to shriek like a freight train: perfect.

And then what?

We all fall away at some point. Our bodies or our intellects drag us into corruption. Our first cavity or self-conscious lie marks the inevitable march towards death and decay before we are even mature.

When Jimmy and I decided to have a baby we loaded up the car with camping gear and followed Highway 2 across the blond prairie and through the scruffy foothills. We took the Crowsnest Pass which climbs and descends through the Rocky Mountains and into British Columbia. Then we drove and drove and drove until we reached the very lip of Canada where she plunges into the Pacific Ocean. We ferried our car and all our gear further west onto Vancouver Island then and drove some more.

We were on a pilgrimage of sorts – headed for Carmanah, for the giant spruces there. We wanted so badly to be in that wet, sacred valley amongst trees so old they've become temples, every blessed one of them, when we conceived our child. We wanted everything to be perfect. Jimmy had some place in mind.

Off the island's main highway we drove kilometers and kilometers down vicious logging roads through cut block after cut block to reach the green valley. Dusty and shaken from our three-day drive, we then hiked in, carrying a four-day supply of food, water, fuel, and bedding with us to set up camp at the designated tenting area in the Carmanah Valley Nature Preserve, two and a half kilometers from our car.

The logging roads we had just reached the end of were studded everywhere with signs that read, "CAUTION: THIS IS A LOGGING ROAD, TRESPASSERS BEWARE." At first glance they looked like standard, government issue road signs. They were the same size, shape and colour. Rather than the standard squiggles and curves warning of bumps and turns, however, these signs depicted scenes of spectacular and graphic violence: hippies in small, fuel efficient cars were crushed under the tires of hulking logging trucks; small cars were smashed under giant, rolling avalanches of dropped logs; windshields were penetrated by single logs flying missile-like from the backs of trucks; and cars that looked conspicuously like Volkswagens simply careened lemur-style off the ends of the earth into nothingness.

In the empty Carmanah Valley campsite, signs warned sweetly of bears. They instructed us good-naturedly not to drink the water and to please cart out all our garbage.

We began to relax.

Once it was made, we burrowed deeply into our Gore-Tex, Rip-Stop, Microfibre nest.

I kissed Jimmy's chest, I remember. Then his shoulder, his neck, and just below his lips.

He remembered about the keys, then. We'd stopped at a Zeller's in Kamloops to have some extra car keys cut and to buy a magnetic key holder to hide somewhere on the under-carriage of the car.

"You never know," said Jimmy. "You never know."

He'd insisted on it just when I'd wanted to go for pancakes. Now he remembered that the newly cut keys were in a plastic bag in the trunk of the car where, if anything happened to our other set, they'd be of no use to us at all.

"Well, it can wait till tomorrow, can't it?"

"No, it can't. Tomorrow is...well, you know. Tomorrow you're ovulating. And tomorrow we hike and stuff. Early."

I listened to the trees creaking like bones in the deep valley below as I lay waiting for Jimmy to hike back from the car. We slept soundly. And in the morning we hiked down to them.

CHAPTER 3

We were immediately soaked by a fine mist that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere in particular at once. My curly hair expanded to about twice its normal magnitude. Wide-eyed and humbled we plodded down the narrow path. Just as Jimmy had promised me it would be, this grove was awesomely, gorgeously, astoundingly beautiful. It was sacrosanct. The trees were so extravagantly large that you couldn't see the tops of them. From the perspective of their bases, the tips narrowed so far into the distant sky that they disappeared.

As the prairie sky has been said to define the color blue, this rainforest holds a patent on green. It is every shade of green. It is the Emerald City. It is Oz.

As if some 70's interior designer had ordered a world of shag carpeting, "in avocado, please," the forest was covered in a deep layer of spongy moss. The forest floor was so thickly padded by the stuff that it was like walking in a gravity-less environment. Every surface – each fallen log and cool boulder – was completely covered by a two-foot thick layer of it.

Just as we'd hoped, it was drippingly erotic. Ferns curled demurely around us. Every downy, moss-covered surface glistened with dew. Tree boughs arched towards us, long and elegant. Under the green, plump ground cover, streams giggled and whispered. And every sinking footstep beckoned us to slow up, to have a little lie-down, to set down our packs, to shrug off the clothes that bound us, to surrender.

We hiked down the path and into the deep forest. After a couple of hours, the initial shock of beauty subsided enough so that we were able to speak.

“Well,” said Jimmy matter-of-factly. “We’d better get at it, eh? You’ve packed our blanket in your day pack, correct? Or is it packed in mine?”

“I’ve got it, yes. And I checked my basal temperature in the tent.”

“Oh, really? And?”

“Today’s the day.”

“Yes, well. Now would be fine, then. I mean, if you want to.”

He shuffled the weight of our daypack from one shoulder to the other.

“We could have lunch first, though, Grace. If you want. Or walk around some more. Whatever you feel like.”

“OK then,” I said. “I vote reproduction. Then lunch.”

“Perhaps we should head off the path a bit.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I know it’s very remote and all and there wasn’t anyone in the campground when we set off this morning, but you never know when you might meet someone. I’d hate for us to be...uh...interrupted... by anyone.”

I raised the other eyebrow.

Then, as if I had never before in my lifetime been warned about the perils of stepping off paths, I set off into those trees, peeling off my clothing and tossing it item by item on the forest floor behind me while my sylvan lover conscientiously gathered everything up and stuffed it into our daypack.

We were about a kilometer off the main trail when Jimmy finally set down our pack and piled all his clothing and gear on top of it. Soon, I had him chasing me around tree trunks and over fallen logs and any of the nervous formality we’d felt earlier had dissipated.

We rolled in the moss naked as trolls. Here – pressed against a softly carpeted fallen log. There – under the shade of a quivering spruce bough misted with rainforest dew.

It was perfect.

Except, I suppose, for the blackflies.

I'm not sure how I had managed not to notice the flies before while we were hiking in. Jimmy certainly must have noticed them because he'd doused himself in bug repellent. But I hadn't. And so our love-making was punctuated by spastic fits of me slapping my glowing white thighs and shoulders.

I'd also never paid much attention to how my tongue, seemingly of its own accord, searched out the salty places on Jimmy's neck and his chest, on the soft insides of his arms. But after a few mouthfuls of "Deep Woods OFF," I noticed.

Besides that there were the pine needles. However plushy-soft the shaggy moss carpeting looked and however yielding it felt through the hard sole of a hiking boot, I can assure you it felt different on bare skin. Itchy and abrasive, it was like a wool afghan crocheted by the devil himself.

And also there was that greenish hue. Green is a beautiful color, yes. But it does not flatter the paler complexion. There is a reason why the infamous red-light districts of Amsterdam are not green-light districts. If I had hoped to resemble a wood nymph who had spent all my days flitting around that great forest naked as the day I was born, then the way the green light shone off my fish-white arms disabused me of that notion.

Other than that it was quite perfect. He fell asleep, after, curled around the base of a giant hemlock while I pondered the welts forming on

my greenish flesh where the blackflies had attacked. I carefully plucked all the spruce needles from my hair. Then I woke him.

“Get up,” I said. “It’s time to go find our stuff and get dressed. And I’m hungry.”

“Oh, sure, okay,” he said drowsily. “Sugarcakes?”

“Yes, Mister Man?”

“Where exactly did we leave our pack and stuff?”

“We left them by that big tree, remember?”

“Yeah, um, right. By the big tree.”

The reason it is so easy to get lost in a forest is that unless you’re on intimate terms with every rock and tree you won’t be able to recognize any landmarks whatsoever. It’s like looking for your car in an infinitely sprawling parking lot after forgetting to note which row you parked in.

We passed moss-covered big tree after moss-covered big tree, switched back and forth over beer-commercial-perfect stream after beer-commercial-perfect stream, and clambered over giant fallen log after giant fallen log.

We found our way back to the main path. But where we left our packs – our lunch, our shirts, our shorts, our underwear, our camera, our boots, our keys, and our water bottles – this we will never know. After a long, hungry, and ill-tempered search, we left them for dead and decided to trundle back to the campsite without any of the things that are generally understood to separate man from the beasts. I’m sure they’ve been long ago, if they weren’t instantaneously, covered by a three-foot layer of moss.

Weary, we headed back up the steep ravine panting and naked. Our unshod feet smarted from the carpet of spruce needles we trod upon and our ghastly white skin bled in spots from the bites of a diverse population of insects. Surly and swatting, we trundled onwards.

I think I noticed the precise moment when Jimmy got the urge to say it. He looked backwards at me, scratched the nape of his neck, looked down, and exhaled. Then his luminous, white buttock twitched. He held it back for as long as he could but that wasn't more than twenty seconds.

"Hey, Gracie..."

"Yeah?"

"Good thing I went back for those keys last night, eh?"

"Yeah. Good thing."

"You told me not to go, eh? Good thing I did, though."

"Yeah, Jimmy. Hooray for you."

If you have traveled extensively, or even a little bit, you know that now is, of course, the precise moment when one would look up to see a pair of German tourists staring and blinking at you, trying but failing to comprehend the cultural significance of you walking towards them, naked and scowling.

"Hello," I said to the German tourists standing between us and the path back to our tent.

"Ja, hello," they said.

"Lovely day," I said.

"Ja, lovely day," they said.

"Enjoy the valley," I said.

"Try to stick to the trails, though," Jimmy added.

"Ja," they said. Then they stepped off the narrow path to let us pass by.

Later it rained. We ate mugs of hearty chili inside our car and watched the Germans peel off in their rented Hummer.

“How come nature seems so perfect,” I asked, “but people – us and all our stuff and our weak little pathetic bodies – how come we seem so the opposite of perfect?”

Jimmy shrugged, stirred his chili and looked at me thoughtfully, fondly.

“Maybe that’s what we’re supposed to do, is be imperfect. We do it well. In fact, we do it perfectly.”

To get back onto the prairies there is a particular highway pass you can take, heading east, through the mountains. You are surrounded by mountains forever, it seems, and then suddenly, you are dropped down onto the prairie. Just like that. Every time I descend that way I feel a great swooping sense of everything being just right.

Coming back from Carmanah, we were elated as our tiny car drifted down that mountain pass. We were escorted, strangely, by a pair of Canada geese. For the entire duration of the pass those birds coasted beside us effortlessly. They rode the thermals that made this pass a highway, I suppose, long before the paving crew ever arrived. We traveled together at a speed of a hundred kilometers an hour for a distance of more than fifty kilometers. They kept pace with our car. I didn’t see them flap their wings even once.

At the bottom of the pass the geese veer up sharply. They flap and honk and gather altitude until they are so high above us we can no longer see them. The sky opens up in every direction around us then and we know we’re almost home.

CHAPTER 4

My mother has driven up from Burst for a visit. She has a gift for me. It's in her suitcase in the trunk of her car and she'll be right back with it. She expects that I will like it, she says. This one isn't for the baby, she says. It's for you, the baby's mother.

My name is Grace Elizabeth Stanley. I am someone's mother.

I rock Iris's bassinet with one bare foot and marvel at the shower of gifts I have accepted on her behalf over the last couple weeks. Snugglies and sleepers. Booties and teddy bears. Tiny tee-shirts and toques. Socks so small you have to see the feet they're intended for before you can believe they could possibly be of service to any human appendage. Expensive soaps. A little sweater so tightly crocheted that it stands at attention all on its own like armor. Blankets, bonnets, teething rings. A bib that says "Poop Machine." Little cups with lids that screw on. Books. A mobile made of delicate wire dragonflies with beaded wings. A handmade quilt. Brightly colored things that vibrate, chirp, and jingle. A picture frame made of birch bark. A wooden angel, bare-chested and hauled all the way from Bali – she is carved, painted every color, and has gleaming faux rubies for nipples.

What can I expect from my mother?

Something eminently practical, certainly. For she is a giver of practical gifts – frying pans and dictionaries, space heaters and stackable storage bins, thermal underwear and reusable shopping bags.

On my wedding day she presented me with a tool box. It contained a tack hammer, a screwdriver set, a set of pliers, an electric drill and a screw and anchor kit. It was not wrapped but a note accompanied it.

“Just because you’re married now doesn’t mean you can’t fix your own things,” it said. “With Love, Your Mother.”

Christmases, when my sister Bonny and I were children nestled all snug in our beds, visions of turtlenecked sweaters and boiled Icelandic wool socks danced in our mother’s head.

Some gifts give you a pang of guilt when you pluck them from their wrappers. You know the thing will be forgotten in the back of a closet even though it was chosen for you with care and concern. You know your Aunt Zelda truly wants you to admire her taste in floral printed towels. You know your cousin Dianne sincerely hopes you will cherish that Siamese Cat statuette for the rest of your life, that just maybe it will become the focal point of some room of yours. It doesn’t matter how much it cost or how much care went into its construction, the crux of it is that you know, the instant you lay your eyes on the thing, that you just cannot give it the love it wants from you. You know it will never decompose, it will never return to the Earth. It will spend an awful eternity locked in the miserable state of being unwanted, unappreciated and unloved, all because your barren heart can muster no affection for it at all. Not now and not ever.

My mother’s gifts are never like that though. They are useful. They are durable. They snap, whirr, or stow away neatly. They’re intended to last a lifetime of wear and tear and stoically they do. My mother gives responsibly.

“Thanks, Mom,” I’ll say when she hands her gift to me. Not, “Well, who would of thunk it!” Not, “Wherever did you find this intriguing thing?” Not, “Well, isn’t this just...just...adorable!” What I will say is, “Wow, Mom, I totally needed one of these.” And then perplexed, “How on earth did you know?”

She returns with something that bulges inside a plastic shopping bag. As she transfers the bulk of it from her grasp to mine, I know. Before I even glimpse inside, I know. By the precise weight of the bag in my hands I know – it is her set of Russian Dolls.

CHAPTER 5

My mother got these Russian dolls from her mother. They come from a place called “the war.”

They are gorgeously painted – shining, rosy-cheeked, Baboushka-clad and flower-bedecked.

As a child I reached for them often. On tiptoes, with the concentration of a cat, I would strain and inch my pudgy arm into the china cabinet in which they lived. Between the Burst Centennial collector’s plate trimmed with real gold and the delicate crane carved from a cool, smooth, single piece of jade, the dolls were nested together.

Once I’d captured the dolls, I’d hurry them into the living room to relentlessly unpack and repack them. I’d arrange them in ascending or perhaps in descending order. I’d arrange them in a circle for ring-around-the-rosy action. I’d have them perform Von-Trappe-family-style operettas. And I’d pose them for historic portraits with the tall ones at the back.

Even though I couldn’t have articulated it at the time, I understood and appreciated the apt metaphorical language that their bodies spoke. I appreciated the frankness of their unlocking hips and bellies. The way each body would produce a replica of itself that produced a replica of itself that produced a replica of itself. I appreciated the grand certainty that those dolls had been telling the same story ever since the first one was carved and that they would continue to do so for all eternity.

I unpack them now and arrange them one by one on the coffee table until the littlest one is smiling up at me. The littlest one is the eighth. There are eight in all.

But there were nine before. I remember.

I loved these dolls. I loved their stoic smiles, their rotund bellies, and their lacquered poise. I loved the way femininity and eternity was the same spiraling theme repeated again and again in each of the delicately painted whorls that made up their hair. I loved the way those whorls repeated endlessly in the garlands of flowers around their necks, the intricately patterned aprons on their hips, the low-cut and embroidery-trimmed blouses that covered their bosoms.

I loved them, yes. But for one. The ninth one. The last one. The tiny, hard, solid, red one at the centre of them all.

That one was roughly the size and shape of a lima bean and painted a solid, peevish red. A finite red. That doll had no face, no curlicued apron. That doll didn't even have two hard, little, black dots to suggest the possibility of eyes.

She was small, yes, but not inconsequential. This doll was the very stuff of consequence – she was a conclusion in and of herself. She was the stopper, the end-point, the horrible finale towards which all those other exquisitely feminine dolls danced.

She was repugnant. She was smug. I hated her.

I remember doing it now, just now. I'd forgotten about that littlest doll, about my mother's Russian Dolls entirely, in fact. She must have put them away, out of sight and out of reach after the littlest one disappeared.

"Grace, did you lose one of the dolls somewhere?"

"No."

"There were nine dolls, Grace. Now one is missing. Can you think of where it might be? Can you maybe think, maybe, where it could be, Gracie?"

Even though my mother was clearly pained by the loss of the littlest doll, by the sudden incompleteness of a set given to her by her mother and brought all the way from “the war,” I wasn’t talking.

“I don’t know where she is, Mom. Dead, maybe. Dead and gone forever.”

Here’s what I did: I removed the littlest doll from the set and returned the rest to the china cabinet between the centennial collector’s plate and the jade crane. Then I wrapped the littlest doll in fine shreds of toilet paper. I placed her in a matchbox and I shut the lid. I went to my jewelry box – my cardboard jewelry box with the tiny ballerina that twirled to “Music Box Dancer” when it was opened – and looked for something appropriate to put in that matchbox with the littlest doll. I choose a single, unusually shiny penny and a faux pearl earring of my mother’s that had lost its mate. I opened the matchbox back up and tucked those items in there with the doll. Then I sealed up the matchbox with masking tape. I crawled into the darkest corner of my bedroom closet with the taped up matchbox clutched in my hand. Only I knew about the crumpled dent in the drywall there. I had accidentally made that tiny cavern while playing with a Barbie stuffed into a roller-skate. It was a small indentation, about the size of a baseball. With my fingers I carefully hefted apart the shattered pieces of plaster. The pieces were held together only by a thin layer of paper and paint. I made a hole large enough to push a matchbox through and that’s what I did. I stuffed the hole, after, with Kleenex. Then I moved the broken pieces back into place and sealed them up with more masking tape. On top of all this I taped a picture I had cut out of a National Geographic magazine. It was of a funeral pyre surrounded by mourning women. The women wore beautifully colored saris. Some were pounding their chests. Some were extending their arms

heavenwards. Others were crumpled upon their knees. All had faces that expressed a grief so keening and bottomless that I knew suddenly by looking at that glossy magazine page that really there was no limit to the amount of pain the world could dole out in a day or a lifetime.

The winter I was pregnant with Iris I dreamt of a grass fire. I dreamt there were men who stamped on it, tried to beat it back with blankets. They built barricades to contain it and they sprayed it down with hoses. Bombers flew over it and they smothered it, finally, with chemicals. It smoldered and hissed, then fell silent. In the silence the men jumped in their trucks and headed back to their families.

I opened my mouth to speak. I opened my mouth to speak but it was empty, useless. It didn't know any words.

The fire went underground. It stalked through the thick, dry root mat just beneath the waving prairie grasses, silent and invisible.

I pressed Jimmy's hands to the small of my back.

"Can you feel that? There? It's hot. It burns."

He smoothed my hair. He stroked my back. But always his hands travelled away from the tough, hot terror I kept knotted up there and towards the mound of my belly. Then the concern in his eyes would melt into a blissful tenderness that was too complete to admit anything else.

Jimmy is in the kitchen making tea. He pops his head through the doorway and sees me turning the Russian Dolls over in my hands, sees my mother perched on the edge of our sofa.

"Oh," I say. "Oh."

And then, "Mom...I know where the little one is. I hid it. I don't know why. But I know where it is, I can tell you exactly where it is."

Before driving back home to Burst my mother tells me that what a new mother needs most of all is sleep.

“As much as you can get,” she says. “Sleep now, while she is still so wee. It’s not a long time – you’ll be surprised.”

That evening I wake to Jimmy’s weight settling gently onto the mattress beside me. I am curled around Iris, who softly sighs.

“Did you hear the phone ringing?” he asks.

“No, did somebody call? Who was it?”

“Your mother. She said not to wake you. She told me to tell you that she found the sarcophagus.”

“Oh, good,” I tell him.

“She said that you’d know what she meant,” he says.

“Yes,” I say, “Yes, I know. That’s good. That’s just right.”

Then I leave him to stare and wonder beside me as I fall back asleep so quickly that I barely have time to think, “I am warm. And everything is just right.”

CHAPTER 6

Bonny and I are wrestling on the living room floor. Bonny is seven. She goes to school and has long hair. She is allowed to wear lip gloss and nylon stockings on Sundays. Today is a Sunday, but she's taken off her nylon stockings and neatly folded them on top of the piano bench so they won't get ruined.

"That," says my mother, "is why Bonny is allowed to wear nylon stockings and you are not. Bonny is careful with things."

Just now Bonny has me carefully pinned against one leg of the piano. My shoulder blade is grinding against it. My blouse is untucked and is crawling up my back. This is bad news for me because the carpet is burning the length of my spine where my back is exposed. We both know that Bonny has me pinned. She can easily keep me restrained in this position. I am madly pawing at the carpet and flailing my legs. I am flinging and thrashing and fighting beneath her. It is my intention to slide myself underneath my sister. The activity of my legs on the carpet lengthens my knee-high socks so they flap ridiculously off the ends of my feet but does absolutely nothing to weaken Bonny's hold on me. She looks bored by the predictability of all my furious but ineffectual activity.

Eventually, my back burning and my limbs exhausted, I stop struggling. Bonny raises one eyebrow and does not let up. Not yet.

I try another tactic -- a terrible, high-pitched wail. I have perfected the timbre of this wail. Surely my mother will be moved by the virtuosity of it and will intervene on my behalf. She is in the kitchen. But she is expert at ignoring the brutality of two little girls gathering power in their muscles. She thinks it's healthy -- the clash of bodies with nothing better to do than to grow up in spite of each other.

When I am sure that both Bonny and my mother are entirely unperturbed by the pathos of my wail, I let it trail off pitifully.

I remain limp and still except for my chest which grabs raggedly for air. I can feel that Bonny is bracing herself against the likelihood of a second wind. But just now I do not want to prolong the inevitable. I admit defeat. It is Sunday and I am beat. Again.

Bonny relaxes her grip slightly. She purses her lips into a cruel smile and narrows her eyes wickedly. She is calm and efficient. She tosses her hair and settles into a measured, thoughtful expression. She is a masterful performer -- and when devising careful methods by which to torture me, she is in her principal role. Sometimes she makes me say things like, "Bonny is the Queen of the World and is more beautiful than me and is smarter too." Sometimes she makes me do things for her -- awful things like spritzing her feet with the Tinkerbell perfume that I'm not allowed to touch or even look at without her permission.

"Sweetheart," she drawls at me. "Honey-boo-boo," she coos. "I bet I know something you'd like..."

I do not grant her the benefit of a response.

"I bet you'd like to wear my nylon stockings, wouldn't you, honey-boo-boo? I bet you'd like to wear them just for today, wouldn't you?"

This is obviously a ruse.

"No," I say. "I hate them."

"You hate them? Oh, I wish you didn't hate them. Because you are such a good little sister. You are so sweet and so cute, and I just really, really want to do something nice for you today."

I adjust my neck so that my shoulders aren't pressed so uncomfortably into the carpet.

"I don't want to wear your stupid nylons," I mutter.

"Yes, you do. You want to wear them really bad. Say that you do."

She gives my ribs a sharp little jab with one of her elbows.

"I don't want to wear your ugly nylons."

I am beginning to comprehend that Bonny has chosen her best torture for today. She gathers, between her lips, a menacing, shimmering bead of gob. She leans over my face and she lets dangle one long, quivering strand. She lets it fall mere inches above my terrified eyes before she slurps it back into her face at the last dangerous second. As I watch that string of gob, I do not breathe.

"I think that you do want to wear my nylon stockings, sweetheart. C'mon. Say that you do."

"Okay."

"Okay? What's okay?"

"Okay, I'll wear your stupid nylon stockings."

"Oh sweetie," she says. "Not if you don't want to. I only want you to wear them if you want to wear them. You do want to wear them, don't you, sweetie?"

She lets that saliva slide down her bottom lip and hang there, portentously. Then she slurps it back in and then again she lets it hang there.

"I want to wear your nylon stockings, Bonny. I don't think they're ugly – I want to wear them."

"Well," she says retracting her spit and licking her lips. "Well, well. Like I said, you are a precious little sister and I would just love to do something nice for you. So, I will lend them to you for today. If – you

can guess the number I am thinking of. It is a number between one and infinity. Guess.”

She glances around the room as if casually waiting for my guess, but I feel her hold tighten around my wrists.

“Four,” I venture.

“Wrong. Guess again.”

“No.”

“What?”

“No. I don’t want to guess anymore. So don’t let me wear your stupid nylons.”

The gob resurfaces between her lips.

“Seven,” I say.

“Nope, it is not seven. I will give you a hint. It is a much, much higher number than seven. It is closer to infinity than it is to seven. Guess again.”

I am very still as that thread of saliva quivers above me. I do not want to make any rash movements that might cause the glistening filament to weaken and break. My mind is searching desperately for a much, much higher number than seven. For a number closer to infinity than it is to seven.

“One hundred!”

One hundred is the highest number I know of and Bonny knows it. I am five years old. It is my belief that one becomes a grown-up by officially making one’s fortune and that one’s fortune is the awesome sum of one hundred dollars. Then one lives out the rest of one’s years spending this one hundred dollars. Unless, of course, one wants something like a house or a car which itself costs one hundred dollars. Then it is necessary to make another hundred dollars, besides your first,

which is very difficult because one hundred dollars is essentially the same thing as all the money in the world.

Bonny finds my concept of higher math amusing. She knows a lot that I don't and she takes abundant, sadistic pleasure in educating me against my will.

"No, Dummy," she says, slurping the gob back into her face. "The number I am thinking of is a much higher number than one hundred."

I feel dread seeping up my limbs and into my chest. I know, in this instant, that my world is about to expand in an uncomfortable way.

"You know what, Dummy? It is a higher number than even two hundred."

Two hundred. I have never conceived of such a thing as *two* hundred before. But now I can see it quite clearly in my mind's eye. There is a stack of one hundred dollar bills and then there is another. There are two hundred stacked dollar bills. *Two* hundred.

"It is a higher number even," she says, "than two hundred plus three hundred plus four hundred."

I gasp. I reel in illumination. The dollar bills and the hundred dollar bills are stacking and arraying themselves at an alarming rate.

I can count to a hundred. And now, I understand that it is possible to count to a hundred one hundred times. That would make...

"One hundred hundred!"

It is an epiphany. It is a crashing, blinding, splitting, smashing moment of clarity. Bonny, with her silver thread of saliva and her shining hair sits above me like a deity. She is the triumphant goddess of wisdom and war. She is Minerva.

Minerva shakes her head no.

No, one hundred hundred, that beaming number, is not the right one.

And then it happens.

The thread breaks. The gob drops. Bonny's spit is in my mouth, and I buck her off in one terrible spasm. She claps one hand over her mouth and her gaze settles like dust upon me in the awful silence that follows. Her expression is half horror, half delight.

There is nothing halfway about the horror I feel. And this time there is no ignoring the piercing howl that rises out of me and fills the house with indignation.

"I'm sorry, Gracie. It was only a game. I didn't mean to. I swear I didn't mean to."

Now my mother is between us, brandishing a dishtowel.

"Bonny, what on earth did you do to your little sister?"

"Nothing, we were just playing, Mom, I swear."

"She spit in my mouth, Mom! She spit in my mouth!"

"You girls just can't play nice, can you? You just always have to cross the line. Now, Gracie, you go wash up. And stop crying. It isn't the end of the world. And Bonny, go to your room. Now."

"I didn't mean to spit on her, Mom," Bonny pleads as I stumble towards the bathroom. My stretched-out socks trip me and I crash dramatically to the floor. I tug them off my feet and lurch on down the hallway. I fling open the bathroom door and rush to the sink to crank the cold water. I am spitting and crying and gulping cool water all at the same time when I look up to see my mother gazing at me with her arms folded across her chest.

"That's enough, sweetie. Now go to your room until you calm down."

“But I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Well, stop carrying on then. I mean it.”

One hand on my shoulder guides me away from the sink and into my bedroom. My feet dumbly follow the insistent pressure of my mother’s strong hand. I want to be held and coddled by her. I want to bask in the pure light of her sympathy. I deserve it; really, it is owed to me for the terrible burden I alone must bear – the burden of being Bonny’s little sister.

Bonny: she who rains cruelty, malice, and spite down upon me daily. Bonny – who I surely recognized today in our Sunday school lesson about the malevolent, ill-tempered God of the Old Testament.

We coloured in pictures of Job today in the cool basement beneath the creaking floor of St. Mary of Magdalen Church while the sermon droned and the adults shuffled in their pews. Miss Miller told us the story of Job, of his many trials and of his blessedness, while handing out colouring book images for us to embellish with a box of communal and broken crayons.

Green was the colour I chose to nuance Job’s festering sores. Black was the crayon that scribbled the terrible storm that destroyed his crops and carried off his children. Red was what the bandits wore who stole Job’s camels and his cows. And orange, gorgeous orange, was the colour that glowed beneath Job’s one hand which he clasped to his visible, flaming, and radiant heart.

Bonny leaned over my shoulder while I deployed this sumptuous crayon and hissed, “Hearts are red, dummy.”

Typical Bonny. Know-it-all Bonny. Malevolent Bonny. But, as Job himself would, I only smiled at her with all the warmth my trial-weakened, tribulation-racked body could muster. Then I placed one hand

over my heart and looked up towards Jesus, knowing that He saw how bravely I endured, how stoically I turned the other cheek towards Bonny, never once renouncing His name.

My mother, however, with her crossed arms and the dishtowel she still brandishes, does not recognize any sort of biblical martyr in me. She does not caress me fondly, nor does she try to ease my burden with her benevolent light. She clicks the door to my room shut and leaves me alone.

“Stay here until you are good and simmered down,” she tells me through my closed door. Then her footsteps disappear into Bonny’s room.

I sit down on the carpeted floor and hug my knees.

Is enduring Bonny’s cruelty not enough? Must I now be punished by the terrible confinement of this bedroom just because I suffer like any other human being would?

I am mad. I am mad, mad, mad, mad, mad.

I am so stinking mad that I periodically scream. This has no effect on the room around me or the chattering sparrows outside my window or the snarling lawnmower up the block.

There are things strewn around me that tempt me to forget about my anger. My Barbie dolls, plastic and pert, entreat me to ignite their empty bosoms with my own crackling ego. My train set, toppled over on its side, with its precious cargo of giraffes, tiny passengers, and seashells strewn across my floor, implores me to intervene: to rush the injured to the hospital and to breathe fire once more into the lifeless locomotive engine.

But I resist those careless toys. I hold onto my anger. I grip it tightly and I do not let it slip away.

I cradle it. I keep it hot. I nurture it until it hatches into a fire-breathing, tiny-dragon of a plan.

And then I feel calm enough to pull it off.

I slip through my door and down the carpeted hallway noiselessly. My mother is in the kitchen now, humming the theme song from “Front Page Challenge.” I am already beside the piano before she pauses and listens.

I remain still until I hear her sigh and her humming resumes.

I reach for Bonny’s neatly folded nylon stockings. I lift them from the piano bench and sneak backwards with them in my hands towards the hallway. Down the hallway, past Bonny’s bedroom, I sense her listening at her door. I freeze where I am. I hide the still folded nylons behind my back, anxiously. She opens her door a crack and spies me with a gasp.

“Mom! The little snot’s snuck out of her room! Mom!”

I scamper down the hallway into my bedroom and shut my door just as my mother’s loud footsteps round the corner from the kitchen into the hallway.

I know Bonny couldn’t have seen the nylons.

“Girls?” my mother calls.

She yanks Bonny’s door open first, which gives me ample time to stash my booty under my mattress and to position myself innocently behind my train set.

I hear Bonny whimpering to my mother about my escape, about my treachery. When Mom opens my door, though, I am pushing my train around on the floor. I look up at her, with eyes as wide as I can make them, and blink slow and uncomprehendingly.

My mother sighs.

“I told you,” she says, “to stay put. So stay put.”

The door clicks shut once more.

I gather my knees under my chin again. The sparrows are still chattering, the lawnmower still snarling. Something is different in this room, though.

"I hate you, Bonny," I whisper out loud. "I hate you a hundred hundred times."

Then I think of a hundred hundred twice. I think of two hundred hundred and then three hundred hundred and suddenly I am reeling, dizzy, nauseous.

Still grabbing my knees, I roll over onto my side and let my suddenly hot cheek rest against the carpet. It is Sunday and I am beat. I am exhausted.

I let go of all those numbers pressing against the back of my eyes and I let everything turn orange and then into nothing at all.

I know I've fallen asleep but not for how long when my mother opens my door and says, "Well, well, well. Look who told me she didn't need a nap."

It got dark while I was sleeping. This I can tell because my mother is a silhouette in the door frame and the light of the hallway is spilling in from behind her and the smell of the chicken and tomatoes she's made for dinner is all mixed together with the warmth and the luminous sound of her voice.

CHAPTER 7

“The trouble with going to school,” says Bonny, “is you don’t get to sleep in no more. You can sleep in on Saturday, sure, but the rest of the week – most days – you have to get up early. You have to get up when it’s still dark out and if you don’t, you’ll miss your bus. When you’re just a baby,” she says, “like you are, Gracie, you can sleep in as much as you want. You don’t have to worry about catching your bus. When you’re older, though, and you have to go to school, well – you can pretty much say goodbye to sleeping in.”

I was born in October which means that even though I’m only five I will be starting school in September. Grade One.

“And then there’s the actual schoolwork,” says Bonny. “Don’t forget about that. There’s assignments. And tests. You have to write and do math. Schoolwork can be very difficult,” she says. “Especially, if you are quite stupid. I’m not saying that you are quite stupid, Gracie, but I think that, maybe – well, you just might find the schoolwork difficult. Quite difficult.”

“Bonny. . .” my mother says.

She turns the steering wheel of our large, powder-blue Chevy with the entirety of her upper body so that we swing widely around the lazy corner and down the big hill towards downtown.

Though the streets we navigate almost every day in small-town Burst are wide, slow, and entirely predictable, my mother pilots our car through them as if it is an ocean liner and they are Niagara Falls.

“Shut it,” she says to Bonny. When driving, my mother has little patience.

Bonny purses her lips and tosses me a quick, tight glance that deftly assures me that whatever respite my mother's driving-related anxiety has bought me from this particular line of conversation is temporary.

I look outside the car window at the petunias growing in front of the post office. They are purple, pink, and crimson. They spill over the sides of the three old tractor tires they are planted in. The tractor tires have been painted white. Around the perimeters of the white tires with the purple, pink and crimson petunias spilling out of them are rings of blazing marigolds. The cumulative effect of all those flowers planted in tires in front of the post office is beautiful, I think. They are breathtakingly beautiful and I wonder who planted them there, who waters them?

Surely the grim lady who puts postage stamps on crooked and smashes parcels all day with her great, malevolent, post-mark couldn't be responsible for orchestrating that kind of beauty in the world – or could she? The Chev rolls past the post office and down Main Street.

It is mid-August. Days are brilliant and hot. Everything vegetable is ripe and resplendent. Human flesh, when it catches your eye, is tanned and lean. It bears no resemblance whatsoever to the startled white stuff that glared out from underneath shorts and tank tops mere months ago. Here, in Burst, Alberta, in mid-August, it is impossible to survey the landscape – to look from the green, rolling hills to the low, lush, river valley – and imagine that it could exist in any other state but this verdant, perpetual summer. September – that lone, autumnal month that frontlines the next eight months of winter is incomprehensible, unfathomable, inconceivable. It cannot exist.

Nevertheless, the paper has announced that the back-to-school shopping sales commence now, and my mom, Bonny, and I are en route to the drugstore to pick up school supplies. We've received lists in the mail that indicate which supplies we'll need and who our home room teachers will be. Bonny has Miss Marchowsky. I have Mrs. Blard.

As my mother angles our car into the drugstore parking lot, I can feel Bonny readying herself to resume her harangue on how miserable my academic career is going to be.

"Miss Marchowsky is real nice. Everyone says so," Bonny says as we swing our legs out of the car and shut the doors behind us. "Mrs. Blard, though, well, I've heard she spans kids if they need to go to the bathroom. I've heard she spans them for anything at all. I hear she's really hard on kids, especially stupid kids."

"Bonny," says my mother. "Zip it. Gracie, your big sister is just trying to scare you. Don't listen to anything she says."

"Oh, sure," says Bonny. "Don't listen to anything I say. I wouldn't know anything about going to school. I mean, I am in grade three now, but that doesn't mean that I'd know anything about school."

I don't care what Bonny says, really. I'm looking forward to starting school.

I'm looking forward to carrying a lunch box, like Bonny does, and to riding the bus. I'm looking forward to sitting in a desk and to coloring every day. I've heard a lot about recess, from Bonny, back when she used to torment me with stories about how much I was missing by being too young for school, and I am most definitely looking forward to recess.

At the drugstore Bonny and my mother pick out the things I'll need according to the lists the school sent out.

I get a pencil case with pencils, a pencil sharpener, and a pink eraser already in it; some lined notebooks; and a new pack of pencil crayons. Next we go to the hardware store where I pick out a lunchbox for myself. The one I choose is yellow and has Big Bird on it. Bonny gets a red one with Snoopy. All in all, Bonny gets a lot more stuff than me – coil scribblers and ballpoint pens, a binder and a pack of looseleaf paper – but I don't care. I am elated. I am elated up and down the aisles of the drugstore, the hardware store, and all the way home.

At home, I spread my new things neatly out on the living room carpet around me. I sit over them. I gaze at them fondly, sighing tenderly, and I position them just-so on the floor.

Then I pack everything that fits into my lunch box, snap it closed, and set it down upon the neatly stacked notebooks. I gaze and sigh tenderly at that. Then I unpack everything, marveling over each individual item as I do. They have the new smell, these things. I breathe deeply of their perfume. They are mine.

Grade one will be even better than I thought it would. What tells me this for sure is my brand-spanking-new pack of pencil crayons. It, of all these spectacular possessions, is sublime.

There exists in the world an ecology of crayons. This ecology is regulated by laws of natural selection that determine that some crayons will survive while others will perish. Such laws are especially unkind to crayons such as sky blue or sunshine yellow that correspond to an abundance of goodness in the world. These laws are also particularly tough on any crayon needed to precisely nuance a work of art – kitten nose pink, blood red, flame orange: such crayons as these, if they live long enough to survive being handed down in an old coffee canister or a shoebox, will invariably be broken, stubby, or, best case scenario, in dire

need of sharpening. The only crayons that ever thrived in any set I've ever gotten my mitts on were depression-grey, brown, browner, brownest, and of course, puke-green. I'd taken it for granted that it was impossible for a set of crayons to exist in this universe in which no essential color was extinct, or at the very least, tragically endangered.

But this pack of crayons – this pack is entirely unscathed, uncorrupted, undivided by the world. It contains every color I could think of and then some. Indian Red. Cerise. Periwinkle!

On the label is a pencil crayon rendering of a vast and rugged mountain range. This pack of crayons, like the drawing of the mountains the crayons are named after, speaks to me of infinite possibility and of limitless bounds.

I do not want to break the seal so instead I gently lift and carefully peel it back. I pull a single crayon out at random – a blue one, and I pass it under my nose like a fine cigar. Then I hold its unsharpened tip for an instant on my tongue. Neither the scent nor the taste of this crayon speaks at all of its blueness.

My mother has been clattering around the kitchen making lunch and now she is calling Bonny and me to the table.

I replace the crayon in the same spot from which I have separated it from the pack and I smooth the sticker back down, re-sealing the plastic case. I bring the pack to the kitchen table with me and position it carefully beside the tomato sandwich and the tall glass of whole milk my mother has set out for me.

"What's the big deal?" Bonny asks me, shrewdly observing the reverence I have for my new crayons as she munches on her sandwich.

I do not know how to express what they mean to me. So I don't try too hard.

"I like them," I say.

"Everyone has those crayons," she tells me.

The way Bonny looks at me makes me nervous. I have learned that sometimes, with Bonny, it's best not to reveal too much about what you revere, what is important to you. So I turn to my mother and attempt to change the subject.

"Yummy sandwich," I say.

My mother nods at me and in the silence that ensues Bonny reaches forward and deliberately swipes the crayons towards herself. She holds up the pack as if studying them. The sly smile Bonny gives me, though, reveals that what she is really studying is me. More precisely, she is studying the exact level of anxiety that taking the crayons away causes me. Anxiety noted, she tosses them back.

My mother frowns at Bonny, but doesn't say anything.

"What are you girls going to do this afternoon?" my mother asks.

"Planning on getting some fresh air, I hope?"

"I'm going to Amanda's house," says Bonny. "We made popsicles yesterday but they weren't frozen enough to have."

"To the Walkers', again? I don't think so," my mother tells Bonny.

Bonny frowns. "What? Why not?"

"I'm having Mrs. Kowaliuk over for coffee. I was hoping you could take Gracie over to the park and watch her there for an hour or two while we chat."

"What? No. Mom! Why can't she play by herself?"

"Bonny, we've been over this so many times, really. It won't hurt you to spend a bit of time with your little sister at the park on a beautiful day, now, will it?"

“Yes,” Bonny says. “Yes, it will hurt me a lot.”

My mother sighs. “And why is that, exactly?”

“Because she’s gross and she picks her nose and she’s clumsy and whenever she does something stupid like fall on her face and then goes bawling all the way home, I get in trouble for it.”

“Now, that’s not true, Bonny. You know it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. And she steals my stuff and she wrecks it too and she doesn’t even get in any trouble for it because she’s your precious little baby.”

I’m not sure where Bonny’s going with this, but I figure now might be a good time to start defending myself.

“Nuh-uh,” I say.

“Really now,” says Bonny. “You don’t steal my stuff and wreck it, huh, Gracie?”

I shake my head no.

“Oh really?”

“No,” I say.

Then there is a whistling silence like a bomb falling.

“So where are my nylon stockings, then, exactly?”

It’s been days, and I’ve forgotten all about my thievery. Now, I remember – with a quick knotting tug at my guts – and I start. I stare furtively down into my milk glass.

“I dunno,” I say. But even as I say it, I feel Bonny and my mom’s eyes on me and I know I’ve given myself away.

My mother rubs her forehead with the palms of both hands, then folds her arms across her chest and looks at each of us, waiting for an explanation.

“What on earth are you girls talking about?”

"I can play at the park by myself, Mom," I say.

Bonny finishes her sandwich and pushes her plate away. Then she dabbs at her mouth with a paper napkin.

"My nylon stockings are missing. I asked your precious baby if she took them, but she said she didn't. I think she stole them and is hiding them somewhere."

"Is this true, Grace?" my mother asks. "Did you take Bonny's nylons without asking?"

"She said I could borrow them," I say.

"No, I didn't," Bonny insists.

"Well, give them back to her now, Gracie. Honestly, what is the big deal?"

"The big deal is that she probably wrecked them because she wrecks everything," says Bonny.

"Nuh-uh," I say again.

"Well, give them back then," says Bonny.

Now I feel righteous and sure of myself. I climb off my chair and hurry into my bedroom to pull the stockings from underneath my mattress. I hear Bonny and my mother get up from the table to follow me and I hold the stockings triumphantly above my head as they enter my doorway.

Bonny claps one hand over her mouth at the sight of them and I feel an Olympian's rush of victory.

But my mother's disappointed face and Bonny's triumphant one confuse me. There is something wrong. I expect my mother to be pleased that I haven't done anything too criminal and Bonny to be upset that I'm able to return her stockings reasonably intact. But their faces say otherwise.

"See?" says Bonny. "She wrecks everything."

Then I look at the nylons.

They are shredded. They are ragged and torn. They've been obviously and viciously attacked, if not by a five-year old such as myself, then perhaps by a bear, a mountain lion, or a velociraptor.

"Oh Gracie," says my mother, plucking them from my withering grasp.

"Gracie, Sweetie, what have you done to these?"

I am trapped.

Hot fire flashes in my belly and rushes up into my chest. It scorches the back of my neck, sets my eyeballs ablaze. I stamp my foot.

When I slid the nylons under my mattress, they were perfectly intact. I have not touched them since, yet now they are fantastically ruined. It must have been Bonny. There is no other explanation. Bonny, brilliant strategist that she is, has left me with nothing I can say or do to convince anyone that I'm not wholly responsible for the ruin of the nylons. I stamp my foot again. I've been had.

"I didn't do anything bad," I say. I am belligerent and burning. "I didn't do anything bad, Mom."

Bonny rolls her eyes, crosses her arms and says nothing. She is sure of herself. She is smug.

My mother looks back and forth between Bonny's upturned face and mine – mine begs for mercy, Bonny's for vengeance.

"Okay," says my mother. "We're going to settle this later. Bonny, take your sister to the park. Now. Go."

"But, Mom!"

"Go. Now."

Bonny's protests do nothing but irritate my mother so, tactical genius that she is, she switches tactics.

“OK, Gracie, c’mon now, let’s go,” she says.

She takes my hand and gently leads me out towards the back door.

“Should we take our bicycles, Gracie? That would be fun.”

She’s a sprightly nanny, a concerned caregiver.

“Bye, Mom,” she waves. “We’ll see you later.”

Even when we’ve pedaled around the corner and completely beyond my mother’s line of sight, Bonny doesn’t drop her Mary Poppins act. She’s coos at and consoles me all the way to the park.

“Go play on the swing set,” she tells me when we get there.

“You wrecked them yourself,” I say, throwing my bike down on the grass.

“Well, you shouldn’t have stolen them,” she says. “Now you’re in big trouble.”

“That’s not fair,” I say.

“You know what’s not fair, Baby? That I have to take care of you all the time because you are too stupid to be left by yourself.”

“I’m not too stupid.”

“Oh? You’re not? Good. Because I’m leaving. You – stay here.”

“Bonny! You’ll get in trouble!”

“No, I won’t. And do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because no one will know I’m leaving you here by yourself. Because you aren’t going to tell anybody or say anything. Ever. You are going to sit here and wait for me to come back. And when I do, we can go home together and you can say how much fun we had playing together at the park.”

“I don’t want to,” I say.

“You don’t want to what?” she asks.

“I don’t want to play by myself.”

“Yes, you do,” she says. “And do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because if you are a good little sister, for once, and you shut up, I might let you off the hook for the nylons. But if you aren’t – if you go home crying to Mom because you fall on your face or you scrape your knees or you don’t like being here by yourself – well, then I’m going to make things a lot harder. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Have fun. Go play on the swings.”

And then she pedals up across the grassy park, down the gravel alley, onto the pavement, around the corner and is gone.

I climb to the top of the high slide and stand on the platform with my eyes shut. I think about the crayons. I think about the picture of those mountains on the pack of crayons. I wait with my eyes closed for the volcanoes in my belly to stop belching fire, for the snow to gently settle on the sharp mountain peaks.

I could be at the top of those mountains, I think. I could be there right now. Then, that is where I am because I have climbed. That is where I am and it is very, very, high.

CHAPTER 8

Like most towns, Burst is held together by the roads that run through and around it. The paved streets and the gravel alleys bind the manicured lawn-green pieces, the blond fields, the brown patches of dusty bare earth, and the darkly treed areas into an improbable whole, like solder piping binds a work of stained glass.

This park – this grassy scrap of green – is located at the very edge of Burst. It is held onto the rest of town, just barely, by a loop of gravel road that runs in a full circle around it.

I'm by myself. Bonny won't be back for a long while, I'm sure, and there's no reason why I should have to stay here with no one to play with or to watch me play if there is someplace I'd rather be – which there is.

Just like a traffic circle, the gravel road that runs around this park has four exits. If I take the north exit the road will quickly turn from gravel into pavement and veer me steeply downhill towards Main Street and the stores there. If I take the South or the East exits I'll find myself moving through the predictably square blocks of stuccoed bungalows, carports, driveways, and brick planters full of geraniums. But if I take the West exit – the one overgrown with grass and weeds because nobody ever takes it – I'll find myself no longer within the town of Burst at all. I'll find that I've crossed over into someplace else, somewhere beyond where there are no more roads.

This other place isn't wilderness, exactly. Nor is it cultivated farmland. It is, in fact, a chunk of town that has long ago been abandoned – a no-man's-land that is being reclaimed by glorious weeds and bowing grasses.

That is where I'd rather be. That is where I want to go right now.

On my bike, I pedal out of the park onto the looping gravel road. I pedal west and I keep pushing until the road narrows into no more than a path and I don't stop until it empties into an overgrown clearing surrounded by alder bushes and poplar trees. The clearing is full of dandelions, daisies, clover, fox-tails, yarrow, fireweed, Queen Anne's lace, goldenrod, and wheat. I climb off my bike and let it fall over into the long grasses. I inhale deeply. There is the yellow, sticky odor of wildflowers; the green, quenching smell of trampled grass; and the warm, brown scent of sun on my skin. I let myself fall backwards into this splendid garden of weeds and they catch me, surely, with a soft woompf.

The sky is blue. The sky is so blue that it is dizzying and I have to close my eyes.

I'm not allowed to be here. Not that I've actually told anybody about this place – I haven't –so it's not that I've been explicitly forbidden to come here. All the same, I'm quite sure that I'm not allowed to be here.

I'm mad at Bonny and I dread going home to face the tribunal: Mom, Dad, and *her*. I dread searching for an explanation for what happened to Bonny's nylons. Even if I tell the truth to all those looming faces – that Bonny wrecked her own stockings just to get me in trouble – I know it will just sound like a clever, well-thought-out lie. And I'd just be in worse trouble from Bonny later.

So if something terrible happens to me, here, at the end of the grassy, rutted path into no-man's-land, all the better. Maybe Bonny will get blamed for leaving me alone. Maybe Bonny will get blamed for letting me wander off the edge of town.

I sit up now and pull my knees into my chest. I pluck a dandelion, pop off its head, and rub it against my knee to color my skin yellow.

I know a secret about dandelions that a babysitter told me once: the French call them “Piss-en-lit,” which is a swear word. It means “piss in the bed.”

“Piss,” I say out loud.

“Piss,” I say again.

“Piss. Piss. Piss and shit!”

These words are electric and copper-tasting like the positive tips of batteries pressed to my tongue.

I giggle gleefully. I’m far too energized to sit still so I get up and stomp through the clearing.

There used to be a house, here, in this clearing. You can tell because of the dirt pile in which, if you dig, you can find the occasional rusted-out tin can, shard of broken glass, or fragment of china. You can also tell because of the boarded-up spot which conceals, I’m sure, an old well. And, of course, there’s a patch of rhubarb convinced it’s the pride of someone’s garden.

I go to the boarded-up spot. The boards are held together by rusty metal braces and in the center of them is a rusty iron ring. The whole mess stinks of creosote and looks medieval, like a drawbridge or a castle door. As per usual, I pull on that ring. I pull and pull and pull but nothing at all budes.

I stomp up and down on the boards. From underneath comes an empty sound. It is a hollow, thunking resonance that insists, positively, that there is nothing at all for a long, long ways below those boards.

Then I make my way to the dirt pile. I’ve already collected an impressive array of things from it. I’ve sorted them into variously sized tin cans that I’ve also plucked from the pile and lined up neatly around it. Some of my cans contain just bent nails and broken glass, but there is also

a marble and odd-shaped stones. The best find so far is a piece of china with a faded but still visible rose on it. Just now, I can't find that rusty can with the china fragment in it. I look for it frantically and finally do find it, just here, where I left it, among the rest. It hasn't been looted or burgled at all. I dump its contents into the palm of my hand. There is one piece of broken green glass, two pieces of broken clear glass, four pieces of broken brown glass, a ribbon of neon pink plastic flagging tape, and the china fragment with the rose on it. The still shiny, glazed surface of the scrap of china is wrought with the finest, most delicate, spidery cracks –awesome in their complexity. I put these things back and begin to dig for more.

I don't know how long I am absorbed in the digging – sifting sand, pebbles and dirt through my fingers – before my world is suddenly and forever changed. I don't know how long I sit sorting rusty screws into one can, rusty nails into another, and broken glass into a third until I look up and find myself suddenly plucked out of my current, cozy reality, cracked open, and scrambled like an egg.

Adjacent to this clearing is an abandoned gravel pit. It is a lusterless place – treeless, colorless, and devoid of birdsong. I don't bother it and it doesn't bother me. The rest of creation seems to have exactly the same attitude towards it so I am baffled when I hear the faint crunching sound of someone, or something, moving over gravel.

I can't see into the pit from where I am because my view is blocked by a large hill of sand. The abandoned pit is surrounded by many such sand hills. There is a flat clearing in the middle of all the sand-piles (I've seen it before) where the earth was lifted and sorted by machines. And around the clearing is a great wall of mounded heaps of whatever was left over from the sorting process.

There is definitely someone moving quickly around the inner perimeter of those mounds now because a plume of dust rises and forms a wide ring around the old pit. The faraway crunching sound gets closer.

I contemplate trundling up the sand hill that is blocking my view to see exactly who – or what – is disturbing the dead stillness of that place. But my surprise holds me still. I am slack-jawed and wide-eyed when the nubbily black specter of a bicycle tire appears, like some terrible sun, on the horizon of sand above me. Then it disappears as suddenly as it came. A column of dust rises where the tire just was. Then there's a woosh and a clatter and the tire re-appears followed by an entire bicycle and an entire boy too at the summit of all that sand. Boy and bike are backlit by the sun, silhouetted, and for an instant motionless.

Then they fall. The bike comes skidding down underneath the boy, who digs his heels into the sand to slow his descent. He loses his grip on the handlebars, and the bike keeps moving down the hill, more quickly than the boy. The bike lands in a jumble at my feet. The boy hits the ground running, but his momentum propels him forward into his own crashed bike. The boy trips on the bike.

As the dust settles, I wait for the wailing and the tears to start because it must hurt and he is a young boy, no bigger and probably no older than me. I would certainly let out a great howl if it happened to me. But he just springs right up and gives his bike a good glare. He looks at me, then down at the ground, and then up at the sky.

“Aw...shit,” he says. “Stupid bike.”

He wipes his hands on his jeans and I am in love.

My heart, which was moments ago ticking away as surely and unobtrusively as some plain old wall clock, is now whirring and ringing

and clanging and whistling and sproinging and screaming, “Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!”

His name is Dallas.

Dallas has not, apparently, just been struck speechless. Dallas does not seem even remotely surprised to find me here. Dallas is cool as a cucumber.

He’s not from town. He’s from the country. But he and his mom are living in town for a while. Just for a while. His dad is still living on the farm because someone has to make a living. It’s not because his parents are fighting that he and his mom moved to town. His parents don’t fight ever, he tells me.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Six.”

“Are you going to grade one?”

“Yeah.”

“Who is your teacher?”

“I don’t know.”

“Mine is Mrs. Blard. Are you scared to go?”

“No. Pffft. Are you?”

“No.”

“Pffft,” he says again. “Don’t be scared.”

He starts to rub his elbow which is quite scraped and he twists it around to get a good look at it. It’s bleeding and there are tiny bits of gravel stuck in it. It is positively nasty and makes me scrunch up my nose.

“I should go home,” he says. “I’ll probably see you at school.” Then he pushes his bike out of the clearing towards the road that goes back to the park, the road overgrown with grass and weeds because nobody ever takes it.

He hops on his bike, but before he pushes off he turns and looks back towards me.

“Hey,” he yells pointing to his elbow, “I’ll show you my scab later.”

I watch him pedal away and when he is gone I do what any reasonable girl would do in such a situation – I run whooping through the clearing, my limbs flapping wildly around me, my heart soaring like a great honking vee of wild geese.

His name is Dallas and he will show me his scab later. His name is Dallas and he’s not from town; he’s from the country. His name is Dallas and I love him.

I run and jump and hop in mad, noisy, thrashing bursts. I let out a series of high-pitched “eeeeeeeeeees” and I hug myself repeatedly. I trip and roll and spin. When I am too dizzy to run I fling myself towards a sprawling patch of fireweed and I lie where I land, gasping for breath, my eyes squeezed tightly shut. Each great gulp of air is sweeter and deeper than the last and eventually my heart stops beating quite so fast and I open my eyes and let the familiar blue of the wide sky calm me down.

When I pull myself up and look around I find that I’m not in the clearing with the dirt pile and the covered up well anymore. I’m in a wider clearing. It is surrounded densely by poplar trees and I’m not sure which way I might have come from.

I think vaguely that I’ve felt enough powerful emotions for one day.

“And so I *can’t* be lost,” is the way this surfaces in my conscious thoughts. “I’m *not* lost.”

At first I think I'm standing in a field of blooming flowers. They have green stalks and orange petals with black flecks. It is a magnificent field of blooming orange lilies.

Then I notice that the flowers are moving. Fluttering, I suppose, in the wind. But, in fact, the air is absolutely still: the few wispy clouds in the sky aren't budging and neither are the leaves that usually whisper and clatter away on the poplar trees. Those petals aren't being moved by wind – they are moving decisively and according to their own volition. In fact, certain blooms seem to be lifting themselves off their stems entirely and fluttering over to attach themselves to different ones.

I cock my head and look closely.

I am standing in a field of monarch butterflies.

I have seen a monarch butterfly before. I thought it beautiful. But this...this...this...this moving field of colour and loveliness – there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them. They are alighting, resting, and hovering on the long grass all around me. They are spectacular. They are the most spectacular, gorgeous, magnificent sight I have ever seen.

His name is Dallas and he fell at my feet. Now I am surrounded by infinite splendor. It is just so terribly much that I have to close my eyes to prevent myself from swooning back into the grass.

When I discover my sense of something like composure, I squat down to study the butterflies more carefully.

Something seems odd. The butterflies don't seem the least bit frightened of me. They don't even make a pretence of fluttering away from my movements. But besides that, something seems gravely wrong.

Many of the butterflies are stuck together. Like drinking straws crammed end to end and made to fit together, these poor creatures are caught inside one another's slender bodies. The entire back end of one is

enveloped by the entire abdomen of another so they appear like Siamese twins – two sets of wings and two heads, conjoined at the rear. How odd and how tragic is their fate. They cannot fly thus – they are doomed.

I must help them. How lucky for them that I came along! Can I hope to save them all? I can try.

I reach my fingers slowly towards the nearest stuck-together couple. They do not even attempt to fly away. As I pluck them off the stem, their wings beat ever so softly but not, certainly, in an attempt to fly away. Then I try to separate them by pulling on each of their thoraxes. But the gentle pressure I apply so as not to squish their delicate bodies does nothing. They are stuck together really good.

I try harder. I try still harder; then I drop their remains in horror when I know I've crushed the life out of them entirely. Shaken, I reach for another pair – maybe these two will be easier to save than the last. They aren't. Neither are the next pair. And when I step backwards in dismay, I realize that I have crushed more butterflies: those that were behind me. I cry out and step sideways, then cry out again.

There is nowhere I can go, there is no direction in which I can turn, there is no move I can make that does not involve the crushing of delicate butterfly bodies. What monster am I to trample through this moving meadow of insects? How can I hope to make it out of this terrible clearing? Where am I even? I want to go home. I feel anxiety spike and grip my guts, gathering up its dreadful power.

Then I hear a level voice say, "Hey."

I turn flailing and red-faced towards the voice.

"Hey, Gracie, just stop moving, right now. Just stay perfectly still."

It is Bonny. She is stepping through the grass nimbly, like a deer, and coming towards me with one hand extended.

“Don’t start crying,” she says. “Just don’t even, okay? Hey, Gracie, take my hand. There you go. Come on now, you won’t step on them if you be careful, like me, okay? C’mon. See? No problem. We’re not even touching them. Okay? C’mon, let’s go get your bike. It’s time to go home. C’mon home with me.”

CHAPTER 9

When we got back from our pilgrimage to the big trees I was sure. Every twinge, every pang, every gastro-intestinal gurgle told me I must be pregnant.

I waited, fingers crossed, willing my period not to come. It didn't. Then I waited one more nearly sleepless week until, according to the *Veri-Sure Accu-test for Home Pregnancy*, I could throw myself out of bed, scurry to the bathroom, tear open the box, pee on it, chant "C'mon, C'mon, C'mon" for what had to be at least one minute, then screech-dance back to the bedroom to jump on Jimmy and wave the marvelous urine-sogged thing in his face.

We hugged, kissed, and laughed. We tussled, giggled and goo-gooed. Then he threw me onto my back, propped himself up atop me, and said, masterfully, "I'm gonna make you pancakes."

"No way," I said. "I'm gonna make *you* pancakes."

And so we found ourselves in the kitchen pouring batter into cast iron skilletts in the shapes of lovey hearts, sturdy cocks, and puffy vulvas.

"What's that one supposed to be?" asked Jimmy.

"This one? This one is a poopy diaper. For you."

"Oh, yum," he said. "Dibs on the poopy diaper."

I called my mother. She wasn't in. Jimmy called his mother, Roberta. Roberta was "overjoyed at the happy news."

Then we called Gord and Eileen.

"Congratulations," said Eileen. "Now go back to bed and go back to sleep! For the love of God, woman, sleep! Sleep while you still can!"

We called Jimmy's brother Andrew. We called Shari. We called Beth and Brian, Tad and Sandy, Rod and Laura, and Anna. We called my cousin Lynn, Jimmy's cousin Lori, Aunt Rae and Uncle Vern.

After breakfast we left the dishes on the table and curled up on the sofa with our faces pressed together in the sunny spot. I dreamt of an orange tree. Jimmy dreamt of a tractor. When the phone woke us up, the sunny spot had traveled all the way across the living room and onto the kitchen floor.

"Good afternoon, Grace. This is your mother returning your call."

"Mom. I've got some news."

"You're pregnant."

"Um...yes, as a matter of fact..."

"How long?"

"Uh....four weeks."

"Gracie..."

"What?"

"Have you told anyone else?"

"Well, Mom, I told Jimmy and then, of course, you were the first person we called."

"Good. Honey, four weeks is very early. Don't tell anybody yet. Something could go wrong."

"Mom..."

"Just trust me, Grace. Don't bother telling anybody else. If something does go wrong, you won't want everybody to know about it."

"Why would something go wrong?"

"I'm not saying anything will go wrong. But sometimes things can go wrong."

"Oh. Okay."

“Gracie...”

“What?”

“I’m very happy for you. I’m sure nothing will go wrong.”

Jimmy got a job at a lab supervising the cultivation of a crop of hydroponically grown sphagnum moss. It paid well and he got to “save the world,” as he put it, “one biodegradable maxi-pad at a time.”

I took a job at the Workers Compensation Board, tucking paperwork into file folders. The pay was cruddy and the work was futile. It was a temporary position, only eight months until the woman I was covering for would return from her maternity leave. Perfect, I figured. It was something to do until February, and the money would work out okay.

We redid the kitchen floors. Jimmy fenced the backyard in. I sewed curtains and bought potted plants.

I miscarried in August.

“Go home and go to bed,” the doctor told me. “It’s all you can do. You just have to wait for everything to pass on its own. Take something for the pain. Try not to worry. You’re young. You’ll be able to have plenty more babies.”

I called my mother.

“Something went wrong,” I told her.

“Oh my Gracie, I’m so sorry.”

“Me too.”

“Well. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other like you always do. Try not to worry. Keep your chin up. It’s not your fault, it

was nothing you did. And you're so young. You can have plenty of babies if you want."

"Yeah, I know, Mom."

"Gracie..."

"Yeah?"

"Just don't get your hopes up so much next time. Gosh, aren't you glad you didn't announce it to the whole world now?"

"What a bloody mess. What a terrible, miserable, bloody mess," I told Jimmy.

"We'll try again. Whenever you're ready. It'll all work out."

"Sure."

"Gracie..."

"What?"

"I'll take care of you."

"I'm okay, Jimmy. I'm fine."

"I know. But I'll take care of you anyways. How about some tea?"

"No, thanks. Really, Sweetie, I'm okay."

"Would you like something to eat?"

"No, thanks."

"Do you wanna go away? On a trip somewhere? I'll take time off."

"Not really."

"Me neither. How about a nap? We could go for a walk."

“I’m not tired, Jimmy. And it’s so cold out. I don’t want to go for a walk. I think I’ll just curl up here and read for a while, okay?”

“Oh. Okay. Good idea. I’ll make you some tea.”

I was pregnant again in December. December through until February.

“Good news,” said my boss. “Vera has decided not to come back after her mat leave. She’s going to stay home with her new baby. So...congrats! It’s all yours – a permanent position here at the WCB!”

I worked in what was called the dungeon: a sunless sub-basement containing long rows of reinforced steel shelving upon which infinite tiers of dusty files were lined.

In the office building that towered into the sky above me thousands of people were employed by the board. They worked on cases, processed claims, talked to clients, did paperwork, answered phones. They labored on computers at ergonomic work-stations. They wore business attire and carried commuter mugs. They joked in the elevators and hustled down hallways carrying cellophane-wrapped veggie plates from the cafeteria.

Any paperwork done on cases created before 1970 was brought down and placed on a squeaky trolley for me to file manually. I worked alone. I would scoot down the hallways behind that whining trolley looking for (according to its case number) a particular faded, cardboard file folder. I’d wheel over a ladder if I needed one, pull out the correct file, open it, tuck whatever form or letter had to be tucked inside it, and start looking for the next one. Occasionally a gruesome photo of some work-related injury would fall out. Once in a while the elevator maintenance guy would come to chat with me about skidoos or about skidooing.

In June several large boxes appeared beside my trolley. A letter announcing a 1.8% increase in rates had been printed and mailed to every active client of the board. Each had to be filed according to its case number. There were hundreds and hundreds of thousands of them. After two days of stuffing them into files I did the math. On my own, it would take me until the year 2012 to complete this task. I took the elevator out of the sub-basement and went to my boss's office to point this out to him.

"Yes," he said. "And?"

I went back down to the dungeon. I took my security tag off, set it down on my trolley and walked outside squinting into the sunlight.

"I'm stuck," I told Jimmy when he came home.

"What do you mean?"

"I just have no idea what to do with myself. It's not supposed to be like this."

"Oh," said Jimmy, "Okay, I'll take you camping. We can leave on Friday. I know where we can go."

CHAPTER 10

We are driving down a logging road in B.C. It is dark. It is well past midnight. The road is rutted and empty. The road is blank and wide. We are surrounded by a dark line of trees and there's nothing to see, really, in the swath our headlights carve across the dusty ruts and jumbles of the road, except for the little bit of weedy green that spills over onto it from the sides.

Inside the car our moods are grim. Jimmy drives with one arm extended fully on the steering wheel, his posture exaggeratedly upright, his jaw stoically set.

There is a guidebook bent open on my right knee to a page with directions to "Joy Lakes Recreation Site." The location of the campsite is circled emphatically on the map and in Jimmy's handwriting it reads "Sweet! Come again!"

I let out a long, bothered sigh and shuffle the maps sprawled on my lap so that they crinkle and snap theatrically.

"Three kilometers," Jimmy says.

We hit a bump and the door of the glove compartment falls open and thwaps me on the kneecaps. In an effort to match Jimmy's grandiose display of quiet suffering, of extreme forbearance, I push the compartment gently shut and say nothing.

This is not the first campsite we have been unable to find in the middle of nowhere tonight. It is the third. Neither is this our first time up this particular stretch of road. We've doubled back over it twice already and are now making our third pass.

I am not expecting an improvement in our moods anytime soon.

Our plan was to set up camp long ago at Axe Meadows Recreation Area while it was still daylight. Then we'd cook supper over a fire, pass a bottle of red wine back and forth, snuggle deep into our down-filled and self-inflating bedding, and wake up in the morning with nothing to do but breathe fresh air.

But Axe Meadows has, evidently, vanished completely off the face of the earth and, like a good little camper, left no trace behind. We searched up and down every gravel side road that led off the highway for a stretch of more than twenty kilometers and, had it been there, we certainly would have seen it.

We decided to press on to the next campsite. According to the guidebook, which I had begun to refer to as "The Cryptonomicon," Ram Falls was only forty-five minutes down the highway from where Axe Meadows was supposed to be. Furthermore it was well marked and only a couple clicks off the highway. As the sun fell completely, Jimmy offered to take me to a hotel.

"Like I packed for six hours so that I could stay in a hotel," I tell him.

"Well, then, let's drive back that way one more time. We're looking for what again?"

"A large, brown sign that says 'Ram Falls 2K'. It should be after the 'Ducks Unlimited' sign but before the 'Mission Creek Trailhead' sign."

"Right."

We never found that sign. We found the Ducks Unlimited Sign and couldn't miss the Mission Creek Trailhead sign, but between them we saw nothing remotely like a place where one could turn off, a place where a sign saying "Ram Falls 2K" could even reasonably once have been.

Again, we pressed on.

“Look,” says Jimmy, “I was here not that long ago, okay? Every freakin’ campsite along this pass can’t just have suddenly disappeared, all right? We’ll find it just don’t...don’t...and stop...just relax, okay?”

Thwap – the glove compartment strikes my kneecaps. I slam it shut and Jimmy tightens his grip on the steering wheel.

“Four kilometers” he says.

Since all the official signs promised in the guidebook are missing, we have decided, this time, to look for Joy Lakes based on odometer readings and the rather vague “landmarks” indicated on the hand-drawn map provided in Jimmy’s guidebook to the most obscure campgrounds in western Canada. Just now we are looking for a turnoff that should be located eight kilometers from what’s labeled on the map as “really big culvert.” From there we will proceed to look for “fairly big rock (grey).”

Then the car jerks to one side and the front end starts shaking. There is the unmistakable “thwacka-thwacka-thwacka” sound of flaccid rubber slapping the road.

“Oh, perfect,” I say.

Jimmy pulls the car over and we get out to inspect the damage. The right front tire is flat. It is very flat.

“Great,” I say. “Wonderful. Now what, Jimmy?”

Jimmy shrugs.

“Oh, well I dunno, Grace. We could change the tire, I suppose. Or we could just light the car on fire and run away. Which solution do you think might be best?”

“Well of course we should fix the damn tire, Jimmy. I don’t suppose you stuffed any tire changing tools into your backpack, though?”

Because I sure didn't. I mean, do we even have a spare? Do you even know how to change a tire?"

I say this as if it is highly likely that Jimmy will have no idea what to do with a flat tire. As if he may have pawned the spare long ago for beer money. As if he is not the most unrelentingly reliable person on earth – calm and capable in any emergency, prepared for every eventuality, and irreproachably well-versed in all manly arts from repairing old lawnmowers to opening wine bottles without a corkscrew.

He snorts at me.

"Well, of course there's a spare, Gracie. In the trunk," he says. "And a jack and tire iron too, last time I checked." He moves to ruffle my hair but I glare and duck. Then he pops open the trunk and removes all our baggage from it. He pulls back a carpet panel to reveal a hidden compartment that indeed contains a spare tire, a car jack, and a tire iron.

He gets to work jacking up the car while I kick gravel around with the heels of my boots. I look up at the stars occasionally and am awed, each time, at how many there are out here on a clear night, away from the cancerous orange glow of city skies.

As he slides the flat tire off and lifts the spare onto the axle, Jimmy begins to hum. He is at his happiest when fixing things. He is at his happiest when something goes wrong, so that he can fix it with his manly tools that he keeps stashed in secret compartments.

Occasionally I glare at his turned back, darting fire at the nape of his neck. But to no avail. When he begins to tighten the lug nuts, Jimmy breaks into a full-out whistle.

Then he gives the tire a spin, eases the car down, stands up, kicks the tire, makes a satisfied little cluck with his tongue, tosses the tire iron

into the air and catches it with a majorette's flourish. He grins at me and reaches out to squeeze my arm.

"Nice, Jimmy," I say. "Way to go."

As he turns the key in the ignition, I answer the helpless, inquiring look he gives me with, "It's late. I'm tired. Let's keep moving."

"Five kilometers," he says after our little car tosses and lurches further down the surly road.

The glove compartment falls open and I push it firmly shut.

"Six kilometers."

The glove compartment falls open onto my knees and Jimmy screeches to a halt. He flings open his door, stomps to the back of the car, digs furiously through his backpack, yanks out a roll of duct tape, tears a strip off with his teeth and tapes the glove compartment shut. He throws the roll into the back seat, slams his car door and puts it into gear again without saying a word.

"Seven kilometers."

"And...that's eight kilometers."

"Okay..." I scoop the guidebook off the dash and press it to my bosom as if this might somehow exact some honesty from it. "Look for the very next turn-off... anytime now... keep your eyes peeled... it should be on the right.... There!"

Jimmy swings the car to the right and we proceed for a short ways until we reach a chained and locked gate with a "PRIVATE – Forestry Services Road – KEEP OUT!" sign bolted to it.

"Okay, back up," I say. "Must be the next one."

He takes the main road to the next turnoff and then heads down that.

The road looks entirely abandoned. It is narrowed by leafy alders branching in on it from both sides and sports a mohawk of long grass between two deep wheel ruts.

“This can’t be it,” he says.

I shrug. “Tell that to the Cryptonomicon.”

I hold on to the door handle as our car bounces down the uneven road.

It’s like entering a void. The main road was dark and silent. But here, on this forgotten road, light and sound seem to be disappearing at an alarming rate from all around us. The trees change from silvery and moonlit to black and silhouetted against the darkening sky. The silence is unnerving.

“Not a popular campsite, huh, Jimmy?”

“Well, that’s why it’s a good one, Grace.”

Then we see a small miracle in our headlights. It is a grey and, indeed, fairly big rock. It has the words “Joy Lakes” spray-painted on it. Encouraged, we keep on down the narrow, dark road and reach, finally, a clearing where the moonlight is strong and a lake shimmers on the dark horizon ahead of us. The road leads us down towards the metallic-looking lake and past some empty campsites. We can make out a concrete boat launch and some more empty campsites. Jimmy drives slowly past them.

“Let me know if any of these sites catches your fancy, okay?”

They are indistinguishable. In each stands a massive pebbled-cement picnic table and a firepit made from an iron barrel dug into the ground.

Sitting bizarrely and proudly in the middle of everything are two, tall, ceramic toilets. They are back to back and mounted on concrete

podiums. They glimmer in the starlight, bask unashamedly in the fresh, open air.

“Well, I don’t remember that,” says Jimmy. “Weird.”

“Very weird,” I say.

We drive around the campsite one more time, then Jimmy pulls into a site close to the lake. He switches off the ignition, then the lights. We get out of the car and stretch in the dark and the cold.

“Do you want me to light a fire?” Jimmy says.

“No, thanks, I just want to go to bed.”

“Well, I’ll set up the tent then.”

“No, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t set up the tent. Let’s just sleep under the stars.”

“You’re cold,” he says. “Let me make a fire.”

“Okay, fine, make a fire.”

“You don’t want me to make a fire?”

“No, I just want to go to bed.”

“Well, I’ll set up the tent then.”

Jimmy pops the trunk and yanks out our therma-rests, sleeping bags, and tent. He slides the tent out of its nylon sack, gives it a shake, and lays it out flat on the ground. Then he slides the poles out of their nylon sack and lines them up beside the sagging tent in the precise order in which he will set them up.

I toss a therma-rest onto the gravel beside the car and pull a sleeping bag out of its stuff-sack. I undo my boots, kick them off onto the ground, and crawl in.

“Uh...Grace?”

“What?”

“Um...if you are planning to sleep on the ground like that you might want to consider putting a groundsheet underneath your mattress.”

“I might, huh?”

“Well, yes, you might. Unless, of course, you enjoy waking up in the wee hours of the morning shivering because you are totally covered, heel-to-toe, in condensation.”

“Fuck condensation, Jimmy,” I say.

“What? What?” says Jimmy again as if Condensation is an ancient and venerable Godhead of his whose name I have just most gravely blasphemed.

“What is your problem, Grace? Just what is your problem?”

“Well, apparently my problem is that I am not quite intelligent enough to sleep on the ground. I need advice from you on how to do it properly. I’ve made my bed, but before I lie in it, I need you to fix it for me, Jimmy, like you fix everything.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just...nothing,” I say.

With the elegance of a concert pianist, Jimmy unzips the front of our tent in one clean, musical phrase. He jumps in, drags his bedding in after him, then zips it back up with another grand flourish.

After a couple minutes he doesn’t call for me. So I pick up one of my boots and I wing it at the tent.

Nothing.

“Jimmy? Jimmmmy...”

His feelings are hurt. After sixteen hours in a small car, I have finally managed to take the shine off his unrelenting cheerfulness. I have at last gained a reprise from his optimistic reassurances that everything is going to be all right, that we’re having a great time, that everything is

going according to plan and tomorrow will be such a wonderful, bright day.

I search my belly for the kind of satisfaction that usually accompanies such small victories as this. But it isn't there. I don't feel even a flicker of the stuff. I am flat as paper. I close my eyes against the brilliant stars above me and see a pale yellow curling underneath my eyelids. I try forcing myself to relax into the down bag which has already warmed around me. But I'm either too tired or not tired enough to sleep.

Jimmy owes me an apology. I take a crack at mustering enough self-righteous fury to come up with an adequate reason I could put to him as to why he owes me an apology. But it isn't in me. I don't feel angry. I don't feel much at all. I am lusterless beneath these stars.

"Jimmy, I'm cold," I say finally. "I'm cold and I'm scared of condensation."

I get up and I shuffle towards the tent, sleeping bag in tow. I know he hears me approach, senses me standing there.

"Look, Jimmy," I say finally. "I'm sorry that I'm barren and unemployed and mean."

I wait for him to protest. To cry out, indignant, "Grace! That's not how I think about you! How could you ever...!"

But there's only the whirling of the stars, the shivering of the lake, the silence of the trees.

So I am left standing in my wool socks in front of our tent, in front of Jimmy's tent, a sleeping bag clasped in one hand and the other one empty.

CHAPTER 11

When I was twenty-three, right after taking my LSAT's, I headed out west to tree-plant for the summer. My sister Bonny had been doing it for years, and she always came back bragging about her bankroll and commanding anyone who went near her to "Touch my bicep. Go on, touch it. Eh? Eh? Not bad, eh?"

So I asked her to get me a job. Bonny was en route to Australia with her Spanish boyfriend when Silver Bear, the planting company she'd worked for, sent me a letter of employment with instructions to be at the Greyhound bus station in Prince George, B.C., on May 1st between two p.m. and 2:30 and to look for Phil and "the van." I was to gather a long list of items, some obvious, some entirely mysterious to me – moleskin, caulks (corks), planting bags (harness or hip with cool sacs), reflective tarp (9x12), bug dope, gripper gloves, emergency whistle, spade, tent, bedding, and, followed by three exclamation marks, duct tape!!!

The Greyhound station in Prince George was swarming with tree-planters. Grunge-clad young men and women leaned against every upright surface, their backpacks slung casually at their feet. They sprawled across every horizontal surface, too.

I pulled my bulging pack from a mountain of nearly identical ones in the luggage bay, able to identify it by the conspicuous fact that the shovel lashed to it was the only one that gleamed. In the parking lot, there were at least twenty vehicles that looked like they might be "the van." Each had a way-too-cool young man either hanging out the driver-side window or leaning up against the front-end of the vehicle. Almost all of them held cigarettes which they smoked with theatrical indifference.

“Here, Rookie, Rookie, Rookie,” one of them called out across the parking lot to no one in particular. “C’mon, little Rookies. Come to Papa now.” He held a cardboard sign that said “Green Roots Planting Co.” Others held signs that said “Bear Claw” or “Tiwashawen.” I didn’t see anything that said “Silver Bear” and when I asked around, I only received a few apathetic shrugs in response.

It was Phil who found me.

“You Bonny’s sister?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

He crossed me off a list he had crumpled in the pocket of his flannel shirt.

“The van’s in the parking lot. It’s the white one with the dented passenger side door. Get in with the other rookies and wait for me. We leave in twenty. Oh, and no smoking up in the van.”

There were six of us plus Phil when the van pulled out of the parking lot and headed away from Prince George. Four were Québécois boys who swore at, insulted, and punched each other jovially for the duration of the long ride.

“Salut. Hello, there. I am François from la Ville de Québec. What is your name and where are you from?”

“I’m Grace. Hi. From Edmonton.”

“Edmonton! Say this is not the truth.”

“This is not the truth.”

“Oh, you are funny, huh? Do you know what we call Edmonton in Québec?”

“Uh...no.”

“We call it Edmonotone.”

“Oh.”

“You understand the joke, huh? ‘Ed’ and then ‘monotone.’

Monotone is a French word for, like, boring. Because it is very boring in Edmonotone.”

“Yeah, I get it. Cute.”

“So why do you live there if it is so boring?”

“I dunno. I guess I don’t think it’s more boring than any place else.”

“You are so wrong about that.”

“You’ve been there?”

“I did not say that.”

“I’m from Alberta,” I told him. “I’ve lived in Alberta all my life.”

“Yes, I can tell that by looking at you.”

“Oh,” I said. Then, frowning, “What do you mean?”

He paused before saying something in French that I didn’t understand. He said it quickly, shrilly, and while ducking in anticipation of a torrent of blows and exclamations that his companions did indeed rain down upon him.

“Forgive me, Mademoiselle,” he cried. “I am sorry, just a joke. Juste une blague!”

I laughed weakly then stared out the window and sighed.

“Hey,” said the other rookie, sitting beside me, who’d told me his name was Don. “Are you having fun yet?”

I assumed it was a rhetorical question and said nothing. I just pushed a meek grin his way and then went back to staring out the window.

“Hey,” he repeated. “I asked you if you were having fun yet.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. “I heard you.”

“So...are you having fun yet?”

“Woo hoo,” I said.

“That wasn’t very convincing,” he told me. “You know what?” this time miming punching me in the arm, “You should lighten up. You should smile more.”

Phil rolled down his window to smoke. The cold air rushing into the van made enough noise to drown everything else out. I was grateful for the noise. It made conversation with Don impossible.

We weren’t told where we were going or how long it would take, and I didn’t feel like being the one to ask. I felt that I should know where we were headed. I felt that I should be unimpressed by the newness and strangeness of this experience, that if I was at all cool I’d know precisely what my role was and how to play it.

By the road signs I gleaned that we were headed North on Highway Sixteen. We passed Vanderhoof, passed Telkwa, passed Smithers.

I thought perhaps the Québécois boys had fallen asleep because they’d stopped insulting and abusing each other. But their brief silence was broken by a loud and embellished fart by François and the immediate pummeling of him by his friends.

Don turned to me and rolled his eyes, smiling.

“Don’t mind those guys,” he said to me. “They’re just being guys.” He said it as if he was always having to apologize for them, as if they were his buddies. He said it as if they’d acknowledged his existence at all since we’d left the bus station six hours ago.

“Don’t bother with any guys,” Bonny told me before she left.
“Just get up, eat, work like a dog, eat, and go to bed. And that’s it.
Okay?”

“Sure,” I told her, without the slightest intention of following her
advice. Now I considered it.

CHAPTER 12

I am standing in front of Jimmy's tent, in front of our tent, unsure of my next move. My wool socks are beginning to absorb moisture from the slightly damp ground and my sleeping bag rustles when I shift my weight from one foot to the other.

When Jimmy is mad he pushes sharp little lunges of air through his nostrils. I listen for those respiratory stabs now but hear nothing. Jimmy makes neither small sound nor tiny movement. He's listening hard though -- so hard that I think he's producing an almost audible static, a crackling sound, like some people swear they can hear the Northern Lights make though scientists can detect no audio frequencies from them.

I could appease him easily enough, I suppose. I could unzip the tent flap, barge on in there, flop down and tell him, "I love you! I love you! I love you!" until he completely and utterly liquefies, as Jimmy tends to do. And it's not like I wouldn't mean it. I do love Jimmy, of course I do. It's just that I don't want to liquefy him presently. I don't feel like it. I feel about as much affection as an overcooked vegetable might feel for a thin sauce.

"Nighty night, Jimmy," I say quietly. Then I trundle across the campground with my sleeping bag and mattress.

There is a strange smell here, like cooked turkey or running water or sun-bleached sheets, or all three at the same time. I recognize the smell but can't put my finger on what it is. My eyes, adjusted to the nearly total darkness of this place, can make out the odd shapes of the trees around the site. The evergreens look bristled as if they've been combed the wrong way with a stiff brush. The deciduous ones look strange too -- blunted, leafless, and impossibly gnarled.

I scan the campsite for a clearing closer to the lake, where there are some long grasses softly lashing the shore. I crawl into my bag, peel off my wet socks, and pack my feet tightly into the narrow bottom. Other than that I don't bother trying to make myself too comfortable. Not only do I find the rocks poking into my shoulders and back somehow gratifying but I know Jimmy will be unable to stave off his protective instincts for long. His imagination will set forth all kinds of bears to stalk me, dampness to plague me, darkness to devour, ruin, and devastate me. He'll come get me soon enough. He'll lead me back to our tent. He'll zip our bags together and he'll tuck my hands and feet into the warm nooks of his body. Then he'll feel better. I won't, not especially, but who cares? I'm miserable anyway.

When I was a girl, five or maybe six, I was plagued, for a while, by a spate of dreams of falling. They were, I now realize, excruciatingly typical. I'd start out soaring through a cloudless sky and then remember, suddenly, "I can't fly." I'd flail, Wile E. Coyote style, and plummet.

I was ragged with sleeplessness when I begged Bonny to let me crawl into bed with her. She told me to get lost, I remember, until probably the third time she woke to find me hovering wide-eyed and ghoulish over her pillow. She lifted the covers back and wearily gestured for me to get in.

"See if I care," she said. "But no drooling in your sleep and no picking your nose in my bed."

After a while she added, "I suppose you might as well tell me what's wrong."

I described my dreams and Bonny shrugged and rolled over, yawning.

“Oh, is that all?” she said. “Well that’s easy enough. Use your wings. Instead of falling, just fly, stupid.”

“But Bonny,” I said. “I can’t. I don’t have wings in my dreams. I’m not a bird, I’m a girl.”

She snorted.

“Oh, really,” she said. “Well fine then. Suit yourself.”

Now I tell myself in Bonny’s eight-year old and impossibly sagacious voice, “Just fly, stupid.” It worked then, I remember.

I drift and bob for a while in my tiredness. I let my feet go down first. My heavy, heavy legs pull the rest of me under as my hair floats up and hovers above my face.

I dream of rows upon rows of file folders on sagging shelves. I dream of a number sequence long as a hallway. I dream that I am wrong. The number is wrong and so am I. I dream of Escher-esque dead-ends and of vanishing points. I dream of footsteps tapping out a coded, succinct message above me: “No, wrong. No, wrong. No, wrong.”

When I wake it is to a splashing. I think, in my confusion, that it is Jimmy coming towards me from out of the lake. Jimmy, arms open, bending gracefully towards me with lake-weed trailing from his shoulders.

But it is a heron lifting a fish heavily from the surface of the water. Its wings beat hard against the surface as it rises. Its long legs dangle absent-mindedly from its straining body. I see that the sun is up. I see that I am covered, head to toe, in condensation.

I shiver out of bed and stretch, fully clothed except for my bare feet, into the pink dawn. I scan my surroundings for my boots and then I notice what is wrong with this place.

It is burnt.

From blackened hill to blackened hill, Joy Lakes campground is completely, absolutely burnt. The decimated trees, the ashen ground, the charred picnic tables, the scorched gravel road, all are black and burnt. My hands and feet are blackened. My clothing and bedding is charcoal-smeared.

It is remarkable, the desolation of this place, and I can't help but love the look of it. The awful wretchedness, the shameless despondency, create a landscape so incontrovertibly unhappy against the blazing, rosy dawn that it manifests an extreme, adolescent sort of beauty. Around the lake the grasses are intact, or perhaps re-grown. And there are some small, yearling spruces pushing their way up from the ashen earth. The tiny trees are so earnest and hopeful in all this mess that it sends a small whoop coursing up from my belly and I spill a clear little laugh out into the morning.

I creep close to the tent to find my stray boots and I lace them up, sockless. I hear the suck and whistling sound of deeply sleeping Jimmy and decide to leave him there, just like that, for a while longer while I explore.

"Ah," I say aloud when I see the toilets. High upon their concrete pedestals with the full attention of the empty campsite, they appear as great orators about to speak.

"Ah ha," I say. The walls that used to contain them have fallen away completely. Some metal hardware is littered in the ash around them: nails, a crooked toilet paper holder, a hinge. Their lids have melted into Dali-esque droops that seal them shut.

The firewood shed is no longer roofed but does contain neatly stacked piles of charred logs.

I notice that I'm hungry, and so I dig through the car for some fruit. I want to go for a walk and I want to wake up Jimmy.

"Gracie?" Jimmy says suddenly from within the tent.

"Yes? I'm here."

"Good. Gracie?"

"Yes?"

"Does the lake look cold?"

"It sure does."

The tent shakes and bustles, the zipper buzzes quick and insect-like, and Jimmy streaks towards the water, howling and naked.

I wait for him on the shore holding my sleeping bag out with both hands like I'm offering a warm and absorbent blanket with which he could dry off, not the soggy, synthetic and ash-smeared thing it is.

"Grace," says Jimmy from the lake.

"Yeah?"

"This campground is burnt."

"It sure is, Jimmy."

Despite the short time it takes him to hoot, whoop and screech his way back from the lake, across the pebbly shore, and into my arms, I have something new to tell him when he arrives. A decision that rises to the surface with such a clanging buoyancy that I know it's a good one.

"I'll go back to law school," I tell him. "I want to. And besides that, if we really want to have a baby, it would probably be a good idea to find it an inconvenient time to arrive. It's foolproof. And if not, well, then I'll be a lawyer. There's that too, eh?"

CHAPTER 13

We spilled out of the van into the moonlight.

“Shhhh,” Phil told us with one finger to his lips. “Dudes are trying to get some sleep.”

He pressed his driver’s-side door gently shut and waved us into a group. The Silver Bear planting camp consisted of a series of large, white, rectangular tents with hoses and cords snaking out from every direction through the grass. They were all connected to a smallish tent in the middle. We stood behind the biggest one. When I peeked around the corner I saw a cluster of smaller tents along the lakeshore, clustered together across from a squad of parked vans, campers and an RV. Everything was zipped, tucked, snuggled and sleeping.

“This is the mess hall,” Phil whispered, gesturing towards the biggest one. “Breakfast is at six. Van leaves at 6:45. You guys go ahead and grab your sleeping bags. You can bunk in the mess hall. There’s no point setting up your tents tonight, you’ll just piss everyone off with the noise. Your foreman will come find you in the morning. Grace, you get to sleep in the van.”

“Grace,” François said in a concerned whisper that imitated Phil’s, “you get to sleep in the van. With me.”

Phil looked hard at François. He held his gaze on him for an uncomfortably long time, as if he were methodically pondering whether his next move should be a violent one. The rest of us shifted nervously. We looked from the trampled grass to the starry, ragged horizon and back to the trampled grass.

“Volunteering for shitter duty on your first night here,” Phil said, finally. “Man, that’s enthusiasm. I’m impressed. I’ll tell your foreman.

I'm sure he'll be impressed too." Then he spun around and turning to me said, "You can lock it. From the inside."

In the morning I woke to someone pounding on the passenger-side window.

"Hey, yo! Let me in all-fucking-ready!"

I'd had no idea what to expect of camp life. That's what I'd thought, anyway. But, waking suddenly, what immediately crossed my mind was, "This is not at all what I expected."

I opened the door for a guy with copper-coloured hair who scrambled in to grab a pair of boots from the floor. The morning air smelt cleanly of cedar and melting snow.

"You better get all this gear out of here," he told me. The guys and I had left all our packs in the van overnight, and I was nestled in between everything. The copper-headed guy looked at me worriedly, as if I must be enormously stupid to have singly brought all this gear myself, enough for five people. He looked deeply concerned like he'd had some sort of premonition about all this and knew that it was precisely this stupidity, my stupidity, that would get us all killed.

After he left I crawled into my carefully planned "first-day-of-tree-planting" outfit inside my sleeping bag: worn-out jeans, a frayed grey wool sweater with holes in the sleeves, a dirty down vest, and scuffed hiking boots.

"You look tough," I told myself, hopping down from the van. "You are tough. One tough cookie." I sauntered towards the mess hall.

As I ducked inside I was grateful to be completely ignored. I looked around briefly then headed for a limp mound of pancakes and sausages. Behind the steaming stainless-steel tubs of food a large woman sat grunting softly into a cup of coffee. I smiled at her. She raised her

eyebrows and looked me up and down. When her eyes rested on my hands, she snorted into her coffee. Then she wiped her face off with her sleeve.

“Hello there, Princess,” she said. A tall guy leaned in front of me to grab a stack of pancakes, and she said to him, “Look at this one here, eh? Finally they’ve sent me somebody to do my dishes!” She chortled loudly, but as soon as I started to laugh along with her she stopped and scowled at me.

“Well,” she said. “Where’s your plate at?”

“Oh,” I said. “In my pack. I’ll go dig it out.”

“Never mind,” she said. “No time. The vans leave in ten minutes.” She reached into a tub behind her and handed me a Melmac plate and a tarnished spoon.

I looked at the spoon then back at the woman.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Oh, don’t mention it. It’s the least I could do considering all those dishes you’re going to be doing for me, Princess.”

I reached into the bin of pancakes and dropped one onto my plate. Another fellow leaned in to grab a stack of eight. He tossed a few sausages on top and grinned at me.

I saw Phil sitting down on a bench with no one next to him, so I slid in beside him. He didn’t look up at me right away. He continued to study a creased, dirty piece of paper while I tried ineffectively to cut my pancake with my silver spoon.

The guys Phil sat with all looked up at me though. Skeptically, as if there was something very wrong with me, as if I might have been a moose in a hunter’s cap and jacket.

“This isn’t a rookie table,” one of them finally said.

"This is the foremen's table," said another.

"Oh. Sorry." I got up to go but Phil grabbed my shoulder and pulled me back down.

"This," he announced, somewhat reverently, "is Bonny's sister."

"Oh," said the guys.

Phil looked at me tenderly then.

"*Uh oh*," I thought. I'd seen that look before, had learnt to recognize its significance. Affectionate, wistful, dusted with a silvery nostalgia – it meant that at some point this man would get very drunk and confess to me his deep and unrequited love for my sister.

"Hi, Bonny's Sister," a blond and chiseled man said to me.

"You're on my crew. You got your shit together?"

"Yes," I answered instinctively.

He cocked his head to one side.

"Of course you do," he said. "Right on."

Cam helped me load my gear (my shovel, bags, and tarps) from Phil's crew's van to the racks on top of ours.

Before we took off he introduced me to the rest of the crew by saying, "This here is Grace. She's got her shit together."

One of the planters drove the van while Cam followed behind with a truck full of seedlings in cardboard boxes. We drove for almost an hour, away from the camp and towards the cut blocks we'd spend the next couple of days reforesting. I'd expected us to camp where we worked. But we were on a different cut-block every few days, while the main campsite stayed put.

The rest of Cam's crew was comprised of veteran planters. Not only had they all been planting for at least one previous year, but they'd started this season at the end of March. They were bleary, grimy, wild-

haired guys who stared at the toes of their boots. It was seven a.m. I thought it prudent not to be too chatty.

Each planter was dropped off along with ten boxes of trees on a cut-clock about a kilometer further down the road than the last one. I was dropped off last.

"There's a hundred and fifty seedlings in each box," Cam informed me, ripping one of them open. "Ten bundles of fifteen trees each. You got ten boxes here, so that's a thousand five hundred trees. Plant them all today, if you can. You get ten cents a tree, so that's a hundred and fifty bucks. Minus your camp costs, and you make a hundred-twenty in a day. Not bad, eh? When you're good, you can plant more. I'll be dropping off more boxes for the rest of the crew later today. I come by from time to time to, to check on everyone"

Cam clipped my crisp, new planting bags to my hip-belt and instructed me to put it on.

"There you go," he said, tossing his short, blond hair so that you could tell he was used to wearing it long. "You can stuff about eight bundles into your hip bags. Then, you have to come back to your stash for more trees. Make sure you tarp the trees in your stash while you're out planting. Otherwise, they dry out. There are fines for untarped trees. Seriously. They're just babies – straight from the nursery."

"I'll be bringing more trees for everyone at lunch time, except for you. If you can get through all these today, I'll be seriously impressed."

When I crawled back into the van nine hours later, I was ready to collapse. I'd only gotten through six boxes. Tired, blistered, ogled, and sore, I was definitely ready for bed. But first, I had to set up my tent. More than a couple of guys from various crews came by while I was trying to figure out which pole went through which sleeve to announce

their skepticism that I'd be able to complete the task of setting up my tent at all. When I was done I looked around for some of them, for anyone at all, in fact, to witness my victory. But there was no one. I checked my watch. 8:45 p.m – fourteen hours since we'd pulled away from the campsite in and headed to the cut-blocks, my gear bungeed to the roof racks. The sun was still shining down vigorously enough so that it was melting the dirty, leftover patches of spring snow scattered around the campsite.

I examined my hands. The right one was dirty and scratched from being plunged into the cool earth again and again. The left one was fine. I hadn't been able to get the feel of tucking the slender tree roots into the holes I'd opened for them in the ground until I tried it bare-handed. Now my hand felt like it had been scoured with steel wool. I looked at a dirty patch of snow. I looked at my hand.

"Hey," a guy's voice called to me. "Are you Princess?"

"I'm Grace," I told him. I was hunkered over a patch of snow, icing my hand.

"Right. Whatever. Princess Grace. The cook has been looking for you. You're on dish duty. You'd better get over there."

"What? Really?"

"Uh...yeah. Really."

"But... can she do that? Can she make me do dishes? I didn't do anything wrong."

"Wow. You really are a Princess, huh? It's not just you, everyone has to do them. It's your turn is all. You'd better go. You're not supposed to leave them this late."

The cook gave me a gruff lecture, a bucket of slop, and a warehouse-sized can of Comet.

“The slop pit is down that path there, Princess. I did most of the dishes already. I have to be up at four in the morning to make breakfast, you know. So scrub these pans. Then scrub the sink. Scrub it good. Use the comet. I’ll be checking it. If it isn’t scrubbed good you get to do it again tomorrow.”

The burnt-on-meat pans took me about an hour, until 9:55 by my watch. The sun was still up. I started in on the sink.

A guy who introduced himself as Jeremy came by and politely informed me that he had pot for sale.

“Also cigarettes, condoms, Tequila and Jim Beam. I’m the only one who sells this stuff here. Except the cigarettes. Jake sells American Spirits. You don’t want those though. I sell good cigarettes, Canadian ones. Just so you are aware, you can have all the pot and cigarettes you want if you have sex with me. The pot is of the finest quality B.C. bud.” He smiled, gave a courteous bow, and stood waiting to be formally dismissed. The civility of his manners left me entirely disarmed.

“Thank you,” I replied, unable to think of anything vaguely appropriate to say.

“Knock on my door anytime. I’m in the camper-van with the floral curtains.” He pointed it out to me, then left.

I finished scrubbing the sink, crawled directly into my tent, and woke up in the morning with my clothes still on.

“You did a good job of that sink, Princess,” the cook told me earnestly as I grabbed an eight-stack of pancakes. I nodded.

I was looking for a place to sit when Dan flagged me eagerly over to his table. “Hi Grace, it’s me! Dan! Dan from the van. You remember me right? Hey, smile! Hey, are you having fun yet?”

I sat down and replied that yes, I was having a tremendous amount of fun. But Dan had already found another victim.

“Hey there, Crew-Buddy. Are we gonna plant some trees today or what? Hey, why don’t you sit down here, huh? Hey, how’s it goin, eh?”

The guy looked wearily at Dan before sitting down. He looked at me too, but when I returned his gaze his eyes darted away quick as lake-trout.

“Hey Grace, this is Billy. Billy is on my crew. Hey, are you having fun yet, Billy? ”

“Dan,” Billy replied, “I’m having so much fun I could just shit myself.”

I laughed out loud.

“My name’s not Billy, though.”

“It’s not?” asked Dan, incredulous.

“Nope. It’s Jimmy. Hi, there,” he said. “I’m Jimmy.”

CHAPTER 14

Jimmy didn't look at me or at Dan for the rest of the meal. He had eyes only for his pancakes. He didn't eat them with any particular gusto, but he stared at them with such intensity that I thought he might be trying to re-heat them telekinetically.

Dan told us about his crew, about why he preferred a steel-toed boot, about the way his Mom made pancakes, and about the blister that had formed on the heel of his left foot.

"It's a doozy," said Dan.

Jimmy wore a blue down vest and a pair of ragged shorts on top of a pair of white, full-body long johns. There was duct tape bandaging almost every bit of skin on his planting hand. It was wrapped strategically around each of his finger joints; it capped every fingertip; and was a long strip ran across his knuckles. Whatever skin was still visible on Jimmy's hand was dark with scrapes and ground-in dirt. Like me, he must have preferred the pain of planting bare-handed to the clumsiness of a glove.

A tall fellow, Jimmy's head seemed large, even atop his broad shoulders. He was long limbed and sat as if curled protectively around something that rested on his lap or as if he'd just been punched hard in the gut.

I'd been trying to catch those quick lake-trout eyes of his again with a few careful glances in his direction. He was lost entirely, however, in the depths of his breakfast plate.

"Freaky guy," I thought. "Totally anti-social."

When I stood to leave, Dan promised to keep me updated on the status of his blister.

“See ya,” I said to Dan and the freaky guy as I collected my dishes from the table.

The freaky guy didn’t look up.

“The really fascinating thing will be to see how much worse it will get before it will begin to heal,” said Dan.

Don’t look back, I told myself as I exited the mess hall. Just don’t even bother.

When I did, Jimmy’s eyes were following me out of the tent with a gaze of such helpless, unconcealed longing that I instinctively started, turned, and sprinted away.

Some people wear their hearts on their sleeves, sure. I’ve caught glimpses of them in stranger places too: in the palm of an out stretched hand, along the tilt of a neck. But that guy – that guy – that! That was extreme.

An odd feeling pooled at the center of me. Horror, I suppose. It whirled inwards and spun around. It sloshed, sputtered and slapped like an unbalanced load. I sensed a lengthening of the noises and the motions around me, as if I had been plunged underwater. Then I realized that I hadn’t taken a breath for far too long.

“Whoa,” I thought, inhaling sharply then exhaling slowly. “Steer clear of that guy. God. He’s got it bad.”

I work across my cut-block in even, straight rows. The land is well prepared. “Creamy,” Cam, called it when he dropped me and my trees off here in the morning. I lift and let my shovel fall easily into the loose dirt. I yank it back with one hand while grabbing a seedling from my hip-bags with the other. I bend, slide the tree into the hole, lift the shovel out, and

kick the hole shut again with my boot. The sapling stands straight up out of the ground at attention. I give it a little nod.

“Fare-thee-well, Tiny Tree,” I think, each time, and take a wide step one meter to the right. The cloud of blackflies and no-see-ums that swarmed around my head while I planted the last tree takes a full second to catch up with me and so there is a strange moment of silence, a brief respite from the buzzing. Then, when it resumes, it seems louder than before. Drop, yank, slide, kick, step, silence, buzz. Drop, yank, slide, kick, step, silence, buzz. Drop, yank, slide, kick, step, silence, buzz. The day is cloudless.

I avoid the freaky guy for a full week. It isn’t hard, really. I simply refuse to catch him staring at me.

Except when I’m washing dishes and he keeps squeezing past me and into the lunch shack to grab a brownie, another brownie, another brownie, and then another one.

And once again when I’m waiting for the outhouse and he’s the one who steps out of it. I keep my cool, though. No problem.

Then I’m standing over the wash basin after a long, hot day, contemplating which will sting more: to bathe my scraped, grimy planting hand in the dirty basin of water that sits before me or just to leave my hand as is with the mud caked on. I opt to wash it and am about to break the surface of that brown water when the basin is whisked out from underneath me. It’s him. He tosses the water over his shoulder.

“Wait here,” he gestures. He sets a steaming kettle down on the ground beside me, then hurries down to the lake shore with the basin. He swishes it around, fills it a bit, and sets it back down on the stand in front of me half-full of clean, cool lake-water. He adds hot water from the

kettle and gestures for me to put my hands in.

I am grateful when I do. It is so soothing. Next, he fishes a little bottle out of a leather pouch in his pocket and screws the lid off. He pours a few drops from it into the water.

It smells like trees. It smells like the trees around Burst. It smells like the trees around Burst in the heavy days of summer. It smells like home.

“What is this?” I ask as he returns the bottle to his pocket.

“Something I made,” he says.

“Oh,” I say.

“Oil of Gilead. Its Balsam Poplar buds steeped in Olive Oil.”

“Ah,” I say.

“It’s a natural antiseptic,” he says.

“Oh,” I say again.

I ease the grime off my sore right hand with my left one and massage some of the pain out. Then I remove my left hand, my shovel hand, wipe it on my jeans, and leave my planting hand in there to soak a while longer.

He pulls his sleeve up and places his right, planting hand in the water too, alongside mine.

“He’s making some kind of move,” I tell myself. “You’d better scram if you don’t want him to make some kind of move.”

But I don’t. And he doesn’t. He just rests his hand in that soothing water beside mine. We leave our hands in there just soaking very near each other but not touching and neither of us says or does anything for a long time. Then the red-headed guy comes up behind us and startles us both with:

“Can I wash my hands all-fucking-ready? God.”

The water has just cooled, there is a restless line-up for supper
shuffling into the mess hall, and a breeze has puckered the surface of the
lake.

I excuse myself for dinner and feel the freaky guy watching me as
I walk away.

I breathe deeply. I can smell the lake.

CHAPTER 15

In my stifling hot tent, I take a break from ordering myself to fall asleep to inquire, “So what did you expect? If not this, exactly, what did you expect?”

More of a social scene, I guess. It’s not that I didn’t expect to work hard. But I didn’t expect *only* to work hard. I expected Frisbees and six-packs after a good day of planting. But everyone is so completely resigned to just working, eating, and collapsing straight into bed. How can they sleep in this heat? I watch the distorted shadow shapes of black-flies crawling over the outer shell of my tent. From this perspective they are large as cats. The Northern sun is so hot and long that their wings are transparent even through the orange fabric of the tent. They crawl slowly and lift off. Others land. Is everyone seriously sleeping right now, but me?

“No stashing trees. No holding up the van in the morning. No fires.” These were the rules outlined by the supervisor before he commanded us all to “Have a fantastic season and make lots of money.”

“Why no fires?” somebody asked. “It’s a government campsite. There’s fire pits. There’s even chopped firewood right there.”

“Because I said no fires,” the super replied.

I roll over on top of my sleeping bag and wipe my sweaty face with my sweaty forearm. I unzip my tent a crack and peek outside. There’s nobody about.

Given the ratio of men to women here, I’d expected quite a bit more flirting. I mean, really. It seems, now, that everyone just looks at me as if they’re sizing up how much of a fight I’d put up for my food ration, should it come to that.

There's only the freaky guy making eyes at me. And I'm certainly not up for breaking his great, bleeding heart. He seems nice. Too nice. Way too nice.

The sun is up at five in the morning and it doesn't even begin to drop until well after ten. I check my watch – 9:25 p.m. While we work, our tents cook in the sun for a full eighteen hours. It might be bearable if I could open the flaps and air the thing out for more than a millisecond without vast swarms of insects immediately colonizing the insides. I'm drenched in enough poisons to make sure the little buggers don't gnaw much of my flesh off while I work outside. But still, they hover and buzz out there. They follow me from tree to tree. They follow me to the van, to dinner, to the bathroom, and to bed.

It would be so lovely just to sit outside and wait for the sun to come down. But without a good fire to repel the little bastards how could it be bearable? When you're moving around briskly their incessant buzzing is enough to drive anyone mad. Never mind sitting still for the tiny beelzebubs. So, I lay awake in my stifling, hermetically sealed tent, turning like a rotisserie chicken, waiting for the sun to fall so I can sleep. Later, I'll wake stiff and shivering in the absolute dark and the cold.

What I crave above all else is the cool of the outdoors and the smoky shelter of a good fire – the soothing flicker of it, the gentle warmth, and the circular conversations it draws close.

Could there be a loophole somewhere in this “no fires” rule of the super's? A little something-something, somewhere, between the lines, that I'm not quite seeing yet?

I sit up. I reach for my backpack and I dig out the waterproof matches I've packed in a little film canister there. I go outside, breathe in the cool, green lake smell, and set my eyes to finding some tinder.

It's not hard to find what I need to make a small teepee of dry sticks in the pit outside my tent. It catches easily, lights with a single match. I add some larger sticks then wander over to the woodpile for some split logs.

My fire burns small, smoky, and wickedly good. The bugs, at once, keep their distance and the sweat on my back, chest, and neck cools pleasantly.

I don't know if it's the smell or the crackling that tips the other planters off, but within minutes of my striking the match they begin to crawl, like refugees, from their zipped dome-tents and to stand, then sit, around the perimeter of the fire.

They arrive with bottles, smokes, smiles, and first names.

CHAPTER 16

Mrs. Kowaliuk and my mother are seated on the living room sofa in front of a coffee cake when Bonny and I return home from the park. Their hands are folded limply on their polyester-clad laps. They look up at us briefly and then back down at the cake on the table in front of them. They stare at the cake as if perhaps waiting for it to speak.

We feel awkward, Bonny and I. We look back and forth between my mother and Mrs. Kowaliuk, but there seems to be a lot of pressure in the room to look only at the cake and to say nothing. So that's what we do.

The cake is in a square pan. It is lightly browned on top and sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar. There are two pieces removed from it. One sits on a plate in front of my mother, the other in front of Mrs. Kowaliuk. Neither of them has taken a bite out of her cake.

My mother and her friend both wear polyester slacks flared at the bottom. But my mother is wearing a white blouse with a soft, mauve scarf tied around her neck and Mrs. Kowaliuk is wearing an intense polyester shirt with profuse red roses sprawling all over it. The roses are large and bloom jaggedly across her girth.

There is a long while when nobody says or does anything until finally my mother stands up, sighs, and smooths down her pant legs.

"Hello girls," she says. "Mrs. Kowaliuk is here." She says this earnestly, as if the fact of a five-foot high and five-foot wide woman in purple, lime and red polyester seated directly across from us on our living room sofa may actually have escaped our attention.

"Hello, Mrs. Kowaliuk," Bonny and I chorus.

“Hello, my dears,” she says. “Oh my, Bonny, you are growing up just as straight and as slender as a reed, aren’t you, dear?”

Bonny glowers at Mrs. Kowaliuk.

“My, oh my, but you are such a pretty little thing,” she says, undaunted. “You look just like your mother, you lucky girl.”

My mother begins to collect dishes from the coffee table then. She picks up the square pan that the coffee cake is in and she walks into the kitchen with it. She scrapes the freshly baked cake into the garbage with a spatula. It slides off the plate and into the garbage with a dull “phump.” She lets the garbage can lid clank shut, picks up the coffee pot off the warmer, carries it back into the living room with her, refills Mrs. Kowaliuk’s cup, refills her own cup, then sets the warm pot down on the coffee table and sits herself back down.

“Oh, dear,” she says then. “...Did you girls want cake? I don’t know why I just threw the whole thing in the...heavens. Did you want cake?”

The whole house smells of its sugary goodness. She slides her piece towards us and it trembles, moist and alluring, on her plate.

“Oh, dear,” she says again. “You girls can have my piece, please.”

Mrs. Kowaliuk looks at me then and tells me I can have hers.

“Your sister can eat your mother’s piece and you can eat mine,” says Mrs. Kowaliuk.

But she doesn’t push it towards me like my mother pushes her piece towards Bonny. Instead she gestures that I can come and take it.

Bonny scoops up my mother’s plate and clattering fork and heads straight to her bedroom with it. Her door clicks promptly shut behind her.

“C’mon then, sweetie,” says Mrs. Kowaliuk to me.

I walk tentatively towards the piece of cake. My instincts tell me that as soon as I reach for it Mrs. Kowaliuk will reach for me.

I reach for it.

Mrs. Kowaliuk reaches for me.

She scoops me up in her great lap and she flattens my face between her palms. She covers one side of my face with rubbery kisses and then she pats my belly and bounces me up and down on her knee. She patty-cakes my hands together, she tousles my hair, she presses her face into my neck and inhales deeply, then she seizes me in a bear hug and doesn't let go until I stop squirming completely.

She pats my bottom as I wriggle out of her lap and towards the cake. I flee with it into the kitchen. I pull myself up onto a counter where I can keep an eye on my mother and Mrs. Kowaliuk in the living room but where they couldn't be bothered to see me if I keep still enough. I munch quietly and try to keep still enough.

"Children are such a blessing," Mrs. Kowaliuk tells my mother.
"A blessing indeed."

She pats my mother's knee and squeezes it.

There is another very long silence while my mother and Mrs. Kowaliuk stare at the place where the cake used to be.

"But, my dear," Mrs. Kowaliuk says, "this joy of ours does tend to walk too often with sorrow, doesn't it?"

My mother lets her head fall forward.

"Hand in hand," she says. "Always has, always will. We cannot turn our backs on joy. And neither can we turn our backs on sorrow."

My mother looks tiny then. She looks small, sad, and fragile. She is crying and I am incredulous. I let the last crumbs of cake fall from my fingers and then I am motionless.

Sorrow? What sorrow? How is this possible? *My* mother? Bonny's and *my* mother? *She* can feel *sorrow*? She does feel sorrow? Right now? All this time that Bonny and I thought we were getting away with the grand deception of "playing nice in the park together," it was my mother who'd been deceiving us – here, in the living room, with Mrs. Kowaliuk, feeling sorrow.

Affectionate, displeased, busy, amused, concerned, ignoring me and therefore fine – this is the full range of emotions I'd previously attributed to my mother.

Now there is an impossibly small and faraway version of her in the living room and I am barely breathing.

She looks at Mrs. Kowaliuk and shakes her head slowly in disbelief.

I shake my head too.

"The funny thing is," she says, "I didn't even want it. I was so looking forward to Gracie going to school so that I could start work again. It had been my plan, I mean, all along. But then – a baby and I really wasn't prepared and I thought, "no – I don't want this at all. Then that...well...bloody disaster and now..."

"Oh, my dear, patience, my dear," says Mrs. Kowaliuk. "You will feel right again. You will. You can take it from me. You will feel just as right as rain again."

"I can't help but think..." says my mother. "That maybe it's my fault. That it died – you know, maybe because I didn't want it enough."

"Oh, honey," says Mrs. Kowaliuk. "Don't you worry about that one lick. They come whether you want them to or not. In fact, sometimes I think not wanting them makes them grow all the better. I can't imagine

there'd be many of us left to tell the tale if a baby didn't make it every time his mother had some doubts."

Then Mrs. Kowaliuk laughs and my mother does too. She daubs at her eyes with the back of her hands. Then she stands and stares down at Mrs. Kowaliuk until she stands up too.

"I'm sure you're right," she says. "Thank you so much for coming, Joyce. You are such a good friend."

"Oh nonsense," says Mrs. Kowaliuk. "You know, dear, I do think you should go back to work again. I've always thought that keeping busy is the best thing for whatever it is that ails you. And I've always said so."

After my mother closes the front door and we hear Mrs. Kowaliuk's car rumble down the street, I hop gently down from the kitchen counter and scuttle across the floor to the hallway exit.

I wait poised by the doorway for my mother to make her next move so that I can take off in the opposite direction. I feel, inexplicably, that I must not be caught by her. I mustn't be caught having seen her so small and sad, so faraway and miserable.

For a long while she doesn't move at all. Then she turns away from the front door and walks down the hallway. I scamper into the dining room attached to the far side of the kitchen.

I hear her speak to Bonny's bedroom door.

"Bonny, honey? I'm going to the store to get groceries for supper. You girls can stay here, though. I'll only be gone twenty minutes. Okay? Keep an eye on your little sister."

Bonny says nothing through her closed bedroom door, but my mother replies to her as if she had.

"Thank you, Bonny. You're a dear."

Then my mother grabs her purse and is out the front door.

That is when I do it. While my mother is at the grocery store, I un-nest the smallest of the Russian dolls, the one I hate, and I entomb it in my bedroom closet.

Then I shut my closet door. Then I shut my bedroom door. Then I shut my eyes and I forget all about it.

By the time she gets back I am kneeling on the carpet and Bonny has me in a headlock.

“Bonny is Queen of the World,” I am saying, as unconvincingly as I can.

Our mother enters through the back door, puts a bag of groceries on the counter, then finds Bonny and me in the living room.

“Girls,” she says.

We both look up at her but Bonny doesn’t lessen her hold on me.

“I’ve got something for you, girls.”

She is gripping a small shopping bag from the drugstore. She comes into the living room where we’ve been wrestling and she sits down on the piano seat.

“Bonny, let go of your little sister please.”

Bonny steps back and releases me suddenly so that I fall forwards and am barely able to catch myself with my hands before my face hits the carpet.

My mother looks at me sympathetically but puts one finger to her lips and says, “Shhhhh.”

She rattles the shopping bag in her hand.

I very badly want to know what’s in that bag so I decide not to burst into tears at this latest outrage.

“I bought a little something for you. But...and I want to make this very clear...if something is to happen to these, I will not be replacing them.”

She pulls out two of the plastic eggs that contain nylon stockings. She hands one to Bonny and, astonishingly, one to me.

“You will not,” she says, “I repeat – you will not be getting another pair of these from me. So take good care of them.”

“But... Mom! That is so unfair,” says Bonny. “She wrecks *my* nylons and you buy a new pair for *her*? That makes no sense!”

“Did I say it made sense?”

“But...but...Mom! That is *so* unfair!”

She straightens the soft little mauve scarf around her neck. “True, sweetheart,” she says to Bonny. “But that, indeed, is the way that it is.”

Then she stands and heads for the kitchen. She pauses at the doorway, turns to us and says, “I so wish you girls wouldn’t fight. I just don’t want you to fight over things. Things are not important. People are important. Little girls are important. Nylon stockings are not even a little bit important.”

She sighs deeply and swings into the kitchen where the jangle of pots, the rush of water in the sink, and the back and forth pop of the refrigerator door opening and closing is so ordinary and familiar that it assures me that nothing at all could possibly be wrong with my mother. Not today. Not now. Not ever.

CHAPTER 17

If you took a map of Alberta and a ballpoint pen and stabbed the map exactly at its center you would make a little dot that could be used to locate the town of Burst. If you looked down at it from an aerial view the landscape would appear to have been smoothed down flat by an even, patient hand and then, as an afterthought, creased and folded just so in the center, so that someone could tuck something precious into the fold there. That is the valley of Burst. In the winter it is filled with snow and the howling of coyotes. In the summer it is full of life.

My mother cried, she told me, the first time she saw it. She wasn't expecting anything to be there, is the reason. She was driving north down Highway #2 towards a job interview in Beaver Flats. She was used to driving on prairie highways. She was born in Saskatchewan and she had lived, all her life, in a scraggly prairie small town that was loosely strung to an infinite series of other scraggly prairie small towns by a highway that sprawled along forever between them all. What my mother was doing, she was sure, was heading from one ugly town to another, which was a perfectly reasonable thing to do considering that's what towns were like – ugly.

When a road sign announced Burst, Alberta, was twelve kilometers away she didn't expect much. Several kilometers of flat, frayed asphalt later, the highway swooned into the valley of Burst. The trees drew themselves protectively around my mother as she cruised into town and she saw, over the dashboard of her Nash Rambler, that everything bowed towards a fine, strong, brown river that coursed through the center of it all. As far as I know, it is not at all possible to roll into the valley of Burst from the flat prairie surrounding it in every direction and not find it

beautiful. My mother wept. She parked her car on Main Street and she didn't bother calling up Beaver Flats to tell them that she wouldn't be making it to the interview. It was the end of August. It was one of the fat, golden days that conclude a summer in Burst.

When winter comes to Burst, it comes fast. It barges on in and it overstay its welcome. It comes before the leaves have hit the ground. It comes while your skin is still tanned and smells of sun. It comes before the tomatoes are ripe.

But first there are those heavy days of August. The sun takes longer than usual to get anywhere and can be seen, always, in spectacular displays of indolence, just leaning against the horizon, hanging out. In yards, apples weigh down tree boughs; in ditches, wild rose bushes slump under the weight of red, smooth rosehips; and in the country, blond fields of ripe grain bend their lazy, swollen heads towards the ground – heavy.

Today it is hot and sullen and I am lethargically swinging in a tire that hangs from a great, slouching tree. I'll be starting school in a week. The week after that the killing frost will arrive. Before a month has passed, this park will be thinly covered by snow and this swing will be white and hard with frost. But that doesn't matter at all right now. These are the heavy days of summer. And I am waiting for Dallas to arrive on his bicycle and to ask me, "What's up? Are you playing anything, Gracie?"

"Oh, Sweetheart" my mother told me before I left the house, "I wouldn't wear your nylons to the park if I were you. You'll ruin them, and I won't be buying you a new pair, I told you that."

She looked at me with affectionate chagrin.

"I won't ruin them," I assured her.

“Oh, Sweetheart,” she said again, biting her lower lip.

“They don’t even look good,” Bonny interjected. They’re way too big for you. Seriously. They aren’t supposed to be all bunched up in the knees like that. And the toes aren’t supposed to hang out of your sandals. Honestly. And, you will ruin them, Gracie. Seriously.”

The first thing that happened, I suppose, was that some of those sticky husks that the poplar trees drop, the ones that look like squashed beetles, fell onto the knees of my nylons. Either they fell on me when I was on the tire swing or maybe they got there when I knelt on the ground to peek inside the tire tunnel to see if Dallas hadn’t already arrived and might be hiding out in there.

So I’m on the swing trying to pick the sticky poplar husks off the knees of my very grown-up and dreadfully alluring nylon stockings before he does arrive. We’ve met here, at the park, every day since he fell from the old gravel pit five days ago, and I know he’ll come today. I peel the husks off easily but the sap is impossible. The tips of my fingers get sticky with the gunk, so I try to remove that by rubbing them against the eraser-like surface of the rubber tire. It is fairly effective except that my fingertips turn black with tire grime. So I wipe them off on the back of my skirt, the part that nobody can see because it is at the back of me. When I hear Dallas’s bike crunching gravel down the alley, I am posed quite nicely, I think, on the swing.

I wave and he does a few quick, spiralling loops in the gravel before steering onto the grass and across the park towards me.

He doesn’t brake at all as he approaches. He simply jumps off his bike and lets it careen off to one side as he, propelled by his own momentum, careens into the tire swing, my tire swing, with a hard “Oomphh.”

I have just regained my balance on the swing when he asks, "Are you playing anything? What's up, Gracie?" It is everything I asked for in this day. I close my eyes while my heart, crunching gravel, does a few quick, spiraling loops of its own.

"I can't play today," I tell him. "I'm wearing nylons."

"Oh," he says. "Too bad. I wanted to go to the creek."

I lean back in the tire swing and look towards the sky as he falls back into the grass and examines the scab on his elbow.

Near the horizon the clouds look yanked apart and torn but higher up they are cartoonish and whole. I see a puppy chasing a fire truck. I close my eyes.

Me and Dallas – racing to the edge of the park. Me and Dallas – swinging as high as we can. Me and Dallas.

"I guess I can go," I say. "To the creek."

"Sure, if you want," he says, righting his bicycle and climbing onto it. "I'm going there anyway."

Then I'm chasing after him, he on his bike and me running behind. I'm swinging my arms in great, wide circles, stomping up a cloud of white dandelion and poplar fluff, and yelling "Whee! Whee! Whee!"

Dallas jumps off his bike and lets it fall on its side at the trailhead. Then we pick our way down the treacherous path to the creek together, on foot.

Since we met, Dallas and I have been best friends. We've had nothing but fun.

Today, though, something is wrong. Maybe because the creek is so far. The path down to it is outrageously steep and gnarly. Our feet are soaking wet and we're hungry, but the path up is even more steep and

gnarly, so I guess we stay too long. I don't know, but Dallas has never been mean before and he's mean now.

There is a chorus of frogs at this creek who are endowed with the capacity to read human minds. The fact that they are mindreaders is evident in that they make a holy ruckus whenever, but only whenever, you pay absolutely no attention to them whatsoever.

Just beyond the hard edges of your thoughts, those frogs are a choir of Baptists a hundred strong. Just beyond the perimeters of your concentration, they are a noisy parade following a marching band following a carnival. Just beyond the absolute limits of your consciousness, those frogs are a colossal throng of throngs hollering gargantuan, raucous praises to a multitude of universes. As soon, however, that you think of them at all – the very second, in fact, that the word “frogs,” or the shape of the idea of “frogs,” or the shadow of the notion of the thought of “frogs” enters your stream of consciousness – they fall completely, utterly silent, and all at once.

Then, as soon again as you forget about them – as soon as you start thinking about something other, they resume their holy ruckus, and how. I have tested this reality many times and it is unfaltering.

It's not that they hide from you when they know they're on your psychic radar. Other than being totally quiet, as far as I can tell, they don't alter their behavior one iota. They observe you only by their silence. And for this reason they are terribly easy to catch. I find them easy to catch, anyway. Dallas, however, seems to have trouble.

It's strange – Dallas is a fearless jumper, a relentless climber, a fast runner. He's nothing if not capable. He pops wheelies with balletic ease. He can ride his bike with no hands and with both feet balanced on the seat. He can leap onto a low branch of one of the elms by the skating arena and,

with what looks like zero effort, pull himself up onto the flat roof, scamper across it, and jump back down the other side, in seconds flat.

But these unhurried, helpless frogs elude him entirely. They jump sluggishly away from his grasp. They scatter lazily and dive languidly out of his frustrated reach. I just scoop them out of the water. I'm holding one in my hands now.

"Grace," Dallas commands. "Give me that frog."

I comply, but even in what should be a straightforward transfer the frog escapes from between Dallas's fingers.

He smashes the water where the frog disappeared with the flat of his hand. I shield my face from the spray and then reach down for another. I hold it in my palm like an apple. It belches.

"Give me that frog," Dallas commands again. But there is something murderous in his tone. I'm reluctant.

"No," I tell him.

"Why not?" he says.

"It's mine," I tell him.

"Grace," he says. "You give me that frog, now."

I close my hand around the frog and hold it to my cheek. I don't look at Dallas. I just look at the muddy water of the creek gushing by.

"No," I say.

Then both his hands are on mine and he is furious and mad. He's trying to squeeze the frog dead in my own grip.

"You're squishing him," I howl.

I jump away from Dallas and let the frog leap clear of both of us. Then I turn to face him.

His eyes narrow and he pushes me hard on the chest so that I fall backwards into the creek.

Dallas! My sandy-haired Dallas! Dallas with the crinkly eyes and the narrow chest. Dallas with the freckled nose and the suntan. Dallas who can run up the slide backwards and jump off from the very top. Dallas whose smooth grin quickens the muscular rhythms of my heart. Dallas has pushed me backwards into the creek so that I've landed hard on the slimy rocks and my clothes are filling with water.

I do what any sane girl would do. I whup him.

Dallas is an only child. He's used to the complacent handlebars of a bicycle. He is not used to the tangle of muscle and fury that is an enraged six-year-old girl. He's no Bonny, that's for sure.

It is easy to knock him down. It is easy to twist his arms into the mud. It is easy, with my knee on his chest, to hold him down and to make him say sorry.

All the way back up the hill to Dallas's bike he says nothing. He walks fast so that it's hard to keep up. Where there are branches, he holds them aside just until I catch up, then lets them snap back in my face.

When we reach the top of the hill, he starts crying. He doesn't howl or wail like I do when I cry. He sits down by his bike, puts his face in his hands, and makes no sound at all.

I shift my weight from one soggy, mud-encrusted foot to the other.

"Are you made because I whupped you?" I ask.

"No," he says, into his hands.

"You're not crying because I whupped you?" I ask.

"No way," he says.

The sun is huge, low and yellow. The fluffy clouds from before have sunk into the horizon. There's the sound of traffic, far away. There's the sound of wind in the leaves and a bird scolding, maybe, a cat.

"Why are you crying?"

He stands, whirls, stomps one foot on the ground, and yells: "I'm crying because you got mud in my hair!"

"Oh," I say, perplexed and concerned.

"Don't cry about that," I say. "It's not really bad," I tell him.

He wipes his nose and face on his sleeve and glares at me. Then gets up and starts pushing his bike furiously, but without getting on it, towards the park. I run behind him till we arrive.

"I'll fix your hair," I tell him.

He lets the bike fall to the ground and I lead him by the arm over to the tire swing and gesture for him to climb on. Then, carefully, I touch his hair where there's mud clumped into it. Delicately, I separate the muddy strands from the less muddy strands, so that eventually, the dirt falls away from the hair. I work at it for a long time. I concentrate. It is an intricate and painstaking labor.

When I'm done, I notice a different bird making noise now. It's the one that my father says sings, "Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada, Canada." Over and over again.

"Sweet Canada, Canada, Canada, Canada." The bird's call is sweet, melancholy, and desperately pretty.

The sun looks mooshed against the horizon like an over-ripe citrus fruit. The light it throws is golden, lurid and sticky.

Dallas has relaxed completely into the tire-swing. His skinny, denim-clad legs dangle almost to the grass. I climb onto the swing beside him and I hold his hand. He doesn't pull it away. He holds mine back. We watch the sun set.

When I close my eyes, I keep expecting to see the details of Dallas's scalp and hair seared into my visual memory. But, invariably, I

see only a huge, black orb against my lids – a negative / positive image of the sun.

“I love someone,” I tell him, finally, when the sun has sprawled out completely along the horizon.

“Really?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say with resolve. “I love...a boy.”

“Really, Gracie?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“I love a girl,” he says.

My heart leaps like a thousand frogs towards him. The choir takes an expectant, collective breath. They are about to sing.

“A very pretty girl,” he says, looking at me with intensity.

“Me?” I ask, incredulous. “Is it me?”

“No, not you,” he says. “A pretty girl.” He says this frankly and plainly, as if it may interest me but should cause me no particular pain.

“She lives on your block, I think,” he tells me. “She has long brown hair. Her name is Bonny.”

When I arrive home I am bawling hot tears. My mother whisks me automatically into the bathroom and plops me down on the sink. She pats me down with her hands, she holds my head still so that she can stare into my pupils, she inspects me for blood and for breakage.

“Are you hurt?” she asks.

“Yes,” I nod.

“Where?” she says. Her hands are scrutinizing my limbs with a series of squeezes and tugs.

I clutch my stomach.

“Do you have a tummy ache, Gracie?” she inquires.

“No,” I shake my head.

“What is it, Gracie? Can you tell me?”

“My feelings are hurt.”

“Ah,” she says. “Your *feelings* are hurt.”

I nod.

I tell her most of the story, minus the part about the whapping, and minus the part that it is Bonny who Dallas claims to love. Meanwhile she runs a bath and peels my muddy clothes off.

Even in the telling of it, I don’t stop bawling. I’m furious. Furious because there is no doubt in my mind, in my heart, in my gut that I have been fiercely, inexcusably wronged. Why? Because not only do I want Dallas’s love, but I *deserve* his love. I am good for it. I, with my hot orange insides. I, with my strong, thumping heart. I’d hold his hand every day. We’d have fun and I’d be nice to him all the time. I’d pay back that love ten-fold with my own. I would.

I finally stop wailing in a moment of quiet guilt when my mother dangles my nylon stockings in the light. She runs them through her hands, examining them, then tosses them into the sink with a wet splat.

“I did wreck them,” I confess.

“Pish,” my mother says. “Nothing a little nail polish won’t fix.”

CHAPTER 18

"That's not enough trees," I point out to Cam, my foreman, as he unloads them from the back of his truck and onto my tarps.

"Yes, I know, Grace. I'll drop more off before lunch."

I'm at the far end of the area we're planting today. He's delivering my stock last, and it looks like he's given most of it away to the planters closer to the start of his drop-offs.

"Promise?"

"Yes."

"You won't forget?"

"I won't forget."

He forgets.

I plant every bundle of trees I have in the ground by one o'clock and then plunk myself down onto my tarp beside all the empty boxes. I should be making money right now. But I've no more trees. He gets a cut of every tree I plant. He should be making money right now.

"Dumb-ass," I think.

If he doesn't come, I'll be stuck here for five more hours with nothing to do.

Maybe I should walk up the road and see if I can score some trees from another planter. Not very likely. If I'm out, they are probably at least low on trees themselves. But it beats sitting here doing nothing, I guess.

The next cut-block over isn't that far, especially if I cut through the patch of Alders down the slope. But I don't want to miss my foreman if he does come with a trailer full of trees on his quad so I decide to stick to the road. I trundle on down it to see what I can see.

The area has been logged in kilometer-long strips. The gravel road connects alternating stretches of haggard, stump-covered land with stretches of dense, spruce forest. The spruces are draped in witches' hair. The long, black strands of lichen look precisely like crimped, mangy hair snagged on branches during a supernatural flight. I decide to take a bathroom break so I enter the macabre forest. The ground is crunchy underneath my boots and there are tangles of blueberries everywhere. I have a little feast. Then I continue down the road.

I discover several piles of bear scat. Funny, I think, how I'm compelled to venture into the woods to do my business, and the bear is compelled to venture out of the woods to do it on the road. For a while I remember to make plenty of noise – humming, whistling, shouting – so that I won't surprise a bear who might be hoping for a little privacy on the road. Then my noise turns into song. The sun is high and hot and I belt out an extreme version of Van Morrison's "Moondance."

"It's a marvelous night for a moondance," I sing, loud and theatrical.

"Booooo-aaaah bwaa bwaa bwaaaah!"

I arrive at the cut-block that neighbors mine, a kilometer from my own. I don't see the planter, but I see his or her stash of trees. I lift up the tarp to see how many they've got. Enough, definitely, for their day, and probably a box or two extra to spare. The trees would be heavy to carry down the road and I could only do a box at a time. I should have brought my hip-bags, but I left them, stupidly, by my empty stash. My numbers will be way down. What a waste of time. Better than making no money this afternoon at all, I suppose. I wonder whose block this is? I expected it to be Jake or Tianna's, who I'd thought had been dropped off last before

me, but I don't recognize either of their day packs plopped atop this stash. Who knows? I never pay attention in the mornings.

I am squinting towards the horizon, wondering in which direction I should go if I want to catch up with whichever planter owns these trees when I hear a soft "Ahem" behind me.

I turn and it's the freaky guy. Jimmy, I suppose, is his name. Whatever. From Luke's crew, not from mine. Damn. He'd have no good reason to share trees with me. It would be a pain to work out payment for planting them between our foremen.

"Can I help you?" he says.

"No," I say. "Thank you, I'm fine."

"Ah," he replies.

There is an uncomfortable silence in which he waits for me to explain what I'm doing on his block and I realize I'm way too embarrassed to ask him for trees. Why, exactly, I should be embarrassed is unclear to me. And how I should go about explaining my presence on his block without asking for trees is likewise unclear.

"Was that you singing on the road?" he asks.

"No," I say. "I don't think so." I put one finger to my chin as if trying to remember if I'd just now been belting out a ten-minute version of a 1970's mega-hit, complete with horn and guitar solos, or no.

"Nope," I say, definitively.

"Ah," he replies.

I am most obviously lying to this guy, for reasons unfathomable to myself.

He reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out a flask.

"Bourbon?" he asks. "Jim Beam?"

“Oh yes. Thank you,” I say, reaching for the proffered flask, as if this was surely the reason I’d come here. I down a swig, hand it back, say “See ya around I guess!” and speed away back down the road.

“Ask for trees, stupid,” I tell myself. “Ask for trees now, Grace. Just what is the big, stupid deal?”

“Oh right,” I say to Jimmy, thwacking myself on the forehead with one hand as if to scold myself for my poor memory.

“You know what? I’m out of trees. I was wondering if I could borrow a bundle from you.”

“A bundle?” he asks. “That won’t last you very long, eh? You want a box or two?”

“No, a bundle is fine,” I tell him.

He picks up a box and hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I tell him. Then I head promptly back down the road.

“What an odd, unnerving fellow,” I think. “Why does he look so damn intense all the time? I wish he wouldn’t look at me like that. Sheesh.”

I plant the box slowly. It is obvious that Cam, my foreman, has forgotten about delivering more trees, and that I might as well make this box last because it’s going to be a long afternoon. When I come to the end of the row down the slope by the alders, I stretch and look around. I realize that I can actually look over into the next cut-block from here. I swat at the haze of bugs that collects around me. The blocks are much closer together towards the back than they are by the road. Then I spot Jimmy. He’s planting the area on his cut-block that is absolutely closest to mine.

“Whoa. That’s a little psycho,” I think.

I move up about a hundred feet and start planting away from him. Before I'm done the next row, though, my hip-bags are empty, and I'm out of trees. So I head to my tarps to soak up some sun and to maybe take a nap until Cam gets here on the quad that will take me back to the van that will take our crew back to camp. I make a little nest out of boxes and spare clothing, douse myself in high-test bug dope, lie back, and admire the sky. It is blue blue blue. The clouds in it are compact and burly. I see a big, plump toe testing some swirling water. The toe and the water turn into a vanilla milkshake. The milkshake tips over and, in slow-motion, a motorcycle rolls out of it. I doze for I don't know how long, then awake to an irregular movement and an irregular noise somewhere. I prop myself up on my elbows and look around. It is him – Jimmy. He's planting trees.

He's just planting trees.

But he's not planting trees on his block. He's planting trees down the middle of the logging road towards me.

The middle of a logging road is not where one plants trees.

He is whistling. He's whistling as if he's working very casually down the road, as if he's doing exactly what he should be doing, as if he's doing what he's paid to do.

He's clowning, I guess. I don't say anything. I stifle a surprised little laugh and I wait for him to plant his way towards me and to explain himself. But when he's near he doesn't say anything, either. He doesn't acknowledge my presence, really, he just keeps whistling and planting. When he gets to where I'm lying, he plants a tree at my feet. Then he plants a tree a little higher near my knees, one near my shoulder, over my head, and all around me until he's come full circle to my feet again. He moves back one pace then plants another circle of trees around me, and

another, whistling the whole time as if nothing at all is out of the ordinary. Then he plants all the way down my block towards the slope by the alders, he plants his way on through the alders, and over onto his own block again.

I am still lying there in a circle of trees when Cam arrives in a plume of noise and gasoline fumes.

“What the fuck?” Cam says, cutting the motor. “Did that guy from Doober’s crew plant all these fuckin’ trees down the road?”

I nod.

“What a fuckin’ weirdo, eh?” says Cam.

Yeah, I think to myself. What a nut. I wonder what will happen to those trees? Will the checker make him pull them out and replant them? Will they be left there to grow up with the rest of the little seedlings until they’re all ready to be cut down again and a logging crew dozes them over to make another access road? He seems to be in love with me, that guy. I wonder why.

“Whatever,” says Cam. “Not my crew, not my problem. He wasn’t, like, bothering you, was he?”

I shake my head, “No. But you didn’t bring me more trees, Cam.”

“Oh fuck, right,” he says, cheerfully rolling his eyes. “That must have sucked. Well, other than that, how was your day, Grace?”

CHAPTER 19

Jimmy leans against the car to inspect The Cryptonomicon. We're going for a hike through the Joy Lakes area. To me, it would appear that every direction is the same – burnt. But Jimmy wants to see if he can navigate to a natural spring he visited years before.

“You'll love it,” he tells me.

We prepare our daypacks. I bring oranges and chocolate. Jimmy brings a flashlight, some emergency matches, a tiny first aid kit, water, and some Jim Beam. I double-check the car for anything we might have forgotten. There's nothing.

“That way,” says Jimmy.

We hike steadily. We gain altitude fast. There's no path, anymore, to follow, which is fine, because there's no brush or brambles to block our way. The springs are, supposedly, at the centre of a flat meadow which exists at the summit of this smallish, blunt, and bald mountain we're climbing. It's easy to see which direction to head – up.

From this higher altitude we can see that the burn goes on pretty well forever. There is nothing in any direction but desolation and blue skies. The heels of our boots kick up black dust. Other than us and the hopeful foot-tall pines, the only sign of life we encounter is, of course, blackflies.

We hike mostly in a comfortable silence.

When we stop for some water and chocolate, Jimmy asks me how I'm going to get back into law school.

“I'll write a letter of apology,” I say. “To Prof. Von Scott. And to Milo. I'll beg.”

Jimmy raises his eyebrows. He looks skeptical.

“What?” I ask. “You don’t think that’ll work?”

“Well,” he says. “Of course it would work, but...”

“But what? You don’t think I know how to apologize? I can swallow my pride, you know. I can...beg.”

“Of course you can,” he says.

“I will,” I say.

“If you say so, Grace.”

“What do you mean, ‘If you say so, Grace?’ I said I will and I will.”

“I know you will, Grace. If you say so. I mean that.”

“Oh. Okay. I thought you meant that...um...sorry.”

Jimmy pulls me towards him and smooths down my brow. He pushes my hair back away from my face and kisses my eyelids.

I relax and let the sun warm me.

“Did you plant all these little trees here, Jimmy?” I ask him. “Did you plant all these little pine trees around us?”

“Yes,” he says.

I giggle.

The natural spring, when we find it, is so beautiful that it gives me an odd sensation of being elevated, of floating. It is water – just water – burbling out of the ground and disappearing quite quickly again back into it. There are a few wet, clean stones around it. It is surrounded by a ring of the greenest grass I’ve ever seen. And, superbly, there are irises growing in a wide circle around that. Out of the ash, out of the charred, black ground, there are hundreds of purple, indifferent, and totally spectacular irises growing.

It is amazing, I think, how whenever you turn to nature to be replenished in some vague sort of way, what you get is some outlandishly

specific sign. It lacks subtlety, really. This bobbing, amethyst, and insistent message of life moving ever onwards is garish and it is lewd.

I'm turned on, in any case. With my rain jacket I try to make a little nest for me and Jimmy in the dust. But he casually pulls a tarp and a soft fuzzy blanket from his pack.

"What did you bring that for?"

"You never know," he tells me. "When there will be an emergency. A love emergency. I like to always be prepared."

We make love until we and our blanket are covered, completely, in black ash. We smear the stuff on each other then, laughing. We paint each other's faces with it, each other's backs, necks and legs.

When we start hiking again, our eyes begin to burn. We start to move more quickly down towards the lake but it is a couple hours away still. It is a struggle not to rub our eyes with our charcoal-smeared fists. Our eyes sizzle, water, and sting.

Then, as if we had asked politely, it starts to rain.

(to be continued...)

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