



Author of *LIARS AND SAINTS*

MAILE MELOY

BOTH WAYS
IS THE
ONLY WAY
I WANT IT

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TRAVIS, B.

CHET MORGAN GREW UP in Logan, Montana, at a time when kids weren't supposed to get polio anymore. In Logan, they still did, and he had it before he was two. He recovered, but his right hip never fit in the socket, and his mother always thought he would die young.

When he was fourteen, he started riding spoiled and unbroke horses, to prove to her that he was invincible. They bucked and kicked and piled up on him, again and again. He developed a theory that horses didn't kick or shy because they were wild; they kicked and shied because for millions of years they'd had the instinct to move fast or be lion meat.

"You mean because they're wild," his father had said when Chet advanced this theory.

He couldn't explain, but he thought his father was wrong. He thought there was a difference, and that what people meant when they called a thing "wild" was not what he saw in the green horses at all.

He was small and wiry, but his hip made it hard for him to scramble out from under the horse, and he broke his right kneecap, his right foot, and his left femur before he was eighteen. His father drove him to Great Falls, where the doctors put a steel rod in his good leg from hip to knee. From then on, he walked as though he were turning to himself to ask a question.

His size came from his mother, who was three-quarters Cheyenne; his father was Irish and bullheaded. They had vague dreams of improvement for their sons, but no ideas about how to achieve them. His older brother joined the army. Watching him board an eastbound train, handsome and straight-limbed in his uniform, Chet wondered why God or fate had so favored his brother. Why had the cards been so unevenly dealt?

He left home at twenty and moved up north to the highline. He got a job outside Havre feeding cows through the winter, while the rancher's family lived in town and the kids were in school. Whenever the roads were clear, he rode to the nearest neighbors' for a game of pinochle, but most of the time he was snowed in and alone. He had plenty of food, and good TV reception. He had some girl magazines that he got to know better than he'd ever known an actual person. He spent his twenty-first birthday wearing long johns under two flannel shirts and his winter coat, warming up soup on the stove. He got afraid of himself that winter; he sensed something dangerous that would break free if he kept so much alone.

In the spring, he got a job in Billings, in an office with friendly secretaries and coffee breaks. He spent talking about rodeos and sports. They liked him there, and offered to send him to the main office in Chicago. He went home to his rented room and walked around on his stiff hip, and guessed he'd be stove up in a wheelchair in three years if he kept sitting around an office. He quit the job and bucked

bales all summer, for hardly any money, and the pain went out of his hip, unless he stepped wrong. ~~That winter, he took another feeding job, outside Glendive, on the North Dakota border.~~ He thought if he went east instead of north, there might not be so much snow. He lived in an insulated room built into the barn, with a TV, a couch, a hot plate, and an icebox, and he fed the cows with a team and sled. He bought some new magazines, in which the girls were strangers to him, and he watched *Starsky and Hutch* and the local news. At night, he could hear the horses moving in the stalls. But he'd been wrong about the snow; by October it had already started. He made it through Christmas, with packages and letters from his mother, but in January he got afraid of himself again. The fear was not particular. It began as a buzzing feeling around his spine, a restlessness without specific aim.

The rancher had left him a truck, with a headbolt heater on an extension cord, and he warmed up one night and drove the snowy road into town. The café was open, but he wasn't hungry. The gas pumps stood in an island of bluish light, but the truck's tank was full. He knew no pinochle players here, to help him pass the time. He turned off the main street to loop through town, and he drove by the school. A light was on at a side door and people were leaving their cars in the lot and going inside. He slowed, parked on the street, and watched them. He ran a hand around the steering wheel and tugged at a loose thread on its worn leather grip. Finally he got out of the truck, turned his collar up against the cold, and followed the people inside.

One classroom had its lights on, and the people he had followed were sitting in the too-small desks, saying hello as if they all knew each other. Construction-paper signs and pictures covered the walls, and the cursive alphabet ran along the top of the chalkboard. Most of the people were about his parents' age, though their faces were softer, and they dressed as though they lived in town, in their shoes and clean bright jackets. He went to the back of the room and took a seat. He left his coat on, his big old sheepskin-lined denim, and he checked his boots to see what he might have dragged in, but they were clean from walking through snow.

"We should have gotten a high school room," one of the men said.

A lady—a girl—stood at the teacher's desk at the front of the room, taking papers from her briefcase. She had curly light-colored hair and wore a gray wool skirt and a blue sweater, and glasses with wire rims. She was thin, and looked tired and nervous. Everyone grew quiet and waited for her to speak.

"I've never done this before," she said. "I'm not sure how to start. Do you want to introduce yourselves?"

"We all know each other," a gray-haired woman said.

"Well, she doesn't," another woman protested.

"You could tell me what you know about school law," the young teacher said.

The adults in the small desks looked at each other. "I don't think we know anything," someone said.

"That's why we're here."

The girl looked helpless for a second and then turned to the chalkboard. Her bottom was a smooth curve in the wool skirt. She wrote "Adult Ed 302" and her name, Beth Travis, and the chalk squeaked on the *h* and the *r*. The men and women in the desks flinched.

"If you hold it straight up," an older woman said, demonstrating with a pencil, "with your thumb along the side, it won't do that."

Beth Travis blushed, and changed her grip, and began to talk about state and federal law as applied to the public school system. Chet found a pencil in his desk and held it like the woman had said to hold the chalk. He wondered why no one had ever showed him that in his school days.

The class took notes, and he sat in the back and listened. Beth Travis was a lawyer, it seemed

Chet's father told jokes about lawyers, but the lawyers were never girls. The class was full of teachers who asked things he'd never thought of, about students' rights and parents' rights. He'd never imagined a student had any rights. His mother had grown up in the mission school in St. Xavier, where the Indian kids were beaten for not speaking English, or for no reason. He'd been luckier. An English teacher had once struck him on the head with a dictionary, and a math teacher had splintered a yardstick on his desk. But in general they had been no trouble.

Once, Beth Travis seemed about to ask him something, but one of the teachers raised a hand, and he was saved.

At nine o'clock the class was over, and the teachers thanked Miss Travis and said she'd done well. They talked to each other about going someplace for a beer. He felt he should stay and explain himself, so he stayed in his desk. His hip was starting to stiffen from sitting so long.

Miss Travis packed up her briefcase and put on her puffy red coat, which made her look like a balloon. "Are you staying?" she asked.

"No, ma'am." He levered himself out from behind the desk.

"Are you registered for the class?"

"No, ma'am. I just saw people coming in."

"Are you interested in school law?"

He thought about how to answer that. "I wasn't before tonight."

She looked at her watch, which was thin and gold-colored. "Is there somewhere to get food?" she asked. "I have to drive back to Missoula."

The interstate ran straight across Montana, from the edge of North Dakota, where they were, west through Billings and Bozeman and past Logan, where he had grown up, over the mountains to Missoula, near the Idaho border. "That's an awful long drive," he said.

She shook her head, not in disagreement but in amazement. "I took this job before I finished law school," she said. "I wanted any job, I was so afraid of my loans coming due. I didn't know where Glendive was. It looks like Belgrade, the word does I mean, which is closer to Missoula—I must have gotten them confused. Then I got a real job, and they're letting me do this because they think it's funny. But it took me nine and a half hours to get here. And now I have to drive nine and a half hours back, and I have to work in the morning. I've never done anything so stupid in my life."

"I can show you where the café is," he said.

She looked like she was wondering whether to fear him, and then she nodded. "Okay," she said.

In the parking lot, he was self-conscious about his gait, but she didn't seem to notice. She got into a yellow Datsun and followed his truck to the café on the main drag. He guessed she could have found it herself, but he wanted more time with her. He went in and sat opposite her in a booth. She ordered coffee and a turkey sandwich and a brownie sundae, and asked the waitress to bring it all at once. He didn't want anything. The waitress left, and Beth Travis took off her glasses and set them on the table. She rubbed her eyes until they were red.

"Did you grow up here?" she asked. "Do you know those teachers?"

"No, ma'am."

She put her glasses back on. "I'm only twenty-five," she said. "Don't call me that."

He didn't say anything. She was three years older than he was. Her hair in the overhead light was the color of honey. She wasn't wearing any rings.

"Did you tell me how you ended up in that class?" she asked.

"I just saw people going in."

She studied him and seemed to wonder again if she should be afraid. But the room was bright and he tried to look harmless. He was harmless, he was pretty sure. Being with someone helped—he didn't feel so wound up and restless.

“Did I make a fool of myself?” she asked.

“No.”

“Are you going to come back?”

“When’s it next?”

“Thursday,” she said. “Every Tuesday and Thursday for nine weeks. Oh, God.” She put her hand over her eyes again. “What have I done?”

He tried to think how he could help her. He had to stay with the cows, and driving to pick her up in Missoula didn’t make any sense. It was so far away, and they’d just have to drive back again.

“I’m not signed up,” he finally said.

She shrugged. “They’re not going to check.”

Her food came, and she started on the sandwich.

“I don’t even know school law,” she said. “I’ll have to learn enough to teach every time.” She wiped a spot of mustard from her chin. “Where do you work?”

“Out on the Hayden ranch, feeding cattle. It’s just a winter job.”

“Do you want the other half of this sandwich?”

He shook his head, and she pushed the plate aside and took a bite of the melting sundae.

“I’d show you if you could stay longer,” he said.

“Show me what?”

“The ranch,” he said. “The cows.”

“I have to get back,” she said. “I have to work in the morning.”

“Sure,” he said.

She checked her watch. “Jesus, it’s quarter to ten.” She took a few quick bites of sundae and finished her coffee. “I have to go.”

He watched as the low lights of the Datsun disappeared out of town, then he drove home in the other direction. Thursday was not very far from Tuesday, and it was almost Wednesday now. He was suddenly starving, when sitting across from her he hadn’t been hungry. He wished he’d taken the other half of the sandwich, but he had been too shy.

THURSDAY NIGHT, he was at the school before anyone else, and he waited in the truck, watching. One of the teachers showed up with a key, unlocked the side door, and turned on the light. When more people had arrived, Chet went to his seat in the back of the classroom. Beth Travis came in looking tired, took off her coat, and pulled a sheaf of paper from her briefcase. She was wearing a green sweater with a turtleneck collar, jeans, and black snow boots. She walked around with the handouts and nodded to him. She looked good in jeans. “KEY SUPREME COURT DECISIONS AFFECTING SCHOOL LAW,” the handout said across the top.

The class started, and hands went up to ask questions. He sat in the back and watched, and tried to imagine his old teachers here, but he couldn’t. A man not much older than Chet asked about salary increases, and Beth Travis said she wasn’t a labor organizer, but he should talk to the union. The older women in the class laughed and teased the man about rabble-rousing. At nine o’clock the class left for beers, and he was alone again with Beth Travis.

“I have to lock up,” she said.

He had assumed, for forty-eight hours, that he would go to dinner with her, but now he didn’t know how to make that happen. He had never asked any girl anywhere. There had been girls in high school who had felt sorry for him, but he had been too shy or too proud to take advantage of it. He stood there for an awkward moment.

“Are you going to the café?” he finally asked.

“For about five minutes,” she said.

In the café, she asked the waitress for the fastest thing on the menu. The waitress brought her a bowl of soup with bread, coffee to go, and the check.

When the waitress left, she said, “I don’t even know your name.”

“Chet Moran.”

She nodded, as if that were the right answer. “Do you know anyone in town who could teach the class?”

“I don’t know anyone at all.”

“Can I ask what happened to your leg?”

He was surprised by the question, but he thought she could ask him just about anything. He told her the simplest version: the polio, the horses, the broken bones.

“And you still ride?”

He said that if he didn’t ride, he’d end up in a wheelchair or a loony bin or both.

She nodded, as if that were the right answer, too, and looked out the window at the dark street. “I was so afraid I’d finish law school and be selling shoes,” she said. “I’m sorry to keep talking about it. All I can think about is that drive.”

THAT WEEKEND was the longest one he’d had. He fed the cows and cleaned the tack for the team. He carried the horses until they gleamed and stamped, watching him, suspicious of what he intended.

Inside, he sat on the couch, flipped through the channels, and finally turned the TV off. He wondered how he might court a girl who was older, and a lawyer, a girl who lived clear across the state and couldn’t think about anything but that distance. He felt a strange sensation in his chest, but it wasn’t the restlessness he had felt before.

On Tuesday, he saddled one of the horses and rode it into town, leaving the truck. There was a chinook wind, and the night was warm, for January, and the sky clear. The plains spread out dark and flat in every direction, except where the lights glowed from town. He watched the stars as he rode.

At the school, he tethered the horse to the bike rack, out of sight of the side door and the lot where the teachers would park. He took the fat plastic bag of oats from his jacket pocket and held it open. The horse sniffed at it, then worked the oats out of the bag with his lips.

“That’s all I got,” he said, shoving the empty plastic bag back in his pocket.

The horse lifted its head to sniff at the strange town smells.

“Don’t get yourself stolen,” Chet said.

When half the teachers had arrived, he went in and took his seat. Everyone sat in the same seat they had the week before. They talked about the chinook and whether it would melt the snow. Finally Beth Travis came in, with her puffy coat and her briefcase. He was even happier to see her than he had expected, and she was wearing jeans again, which was good. He’d been afraid she might wear the narrow wool skirt. She looked harassed and unhappy to be there. The teachers chattered on.

When the class was over and the teachers had cleared out, he asked, “Can I give you a ride to the café?”

“Oh—” she said, and she looked away.

“Not in the truck,” he said quickly, and he wondered why a truck might seem more dangerous to a woman. He guessed because it was like a room. “Come outside,” he said.

She waited in the parking lot while he untied the horse and mounted up. He rode it around from the bike rack—aware that he could seem like a fool, but elated with the feeling of sitting a horse.

well as anyone did—to where Beth Travis stood hugging her briefcase.

“Oh, my God,” she said.

“Don’t think about it,” he said. “Give me your briefcase. Now give me your hand. Left foot in the stirrup. Now swing the other leg over.” She did it, awkwardly, and he pulled her up behind him. He held her briefcase against the pommel, and she held tightly to his jacket, her legs against his. He couldn’t think of anything except how warm she was, pressed against the base of his spine. He rode the back way, through the dark streets, before cutting out toward the main drag and stopping short of it, behind the café. He helped her down, swung to the ground after her, gave her the briefcase, and tied the horse. She looked at him and laughed, and he realized he hadn’t seen her laugh before. Her eyebrows went up and her eyes got wide, instead of crinkling up like most people’s did. She looked amazed.

In the café, the waitress slid a burger and fries in front of Beth Travis and said, “The cook wants to know if that’s your horse out back.”

Chet said it was.

“Can he give it some water?”

He said he’d appreciate it.

“Truck break down?” the waitress asked.

He said no, his truck was all right, and the waitress went away.

Beth Travis turned the long end of the oval plate in his direction, and took up the burger. “Have some fries,” she said. “How come you never eat anything?”

He wanted to say that he wasn’t hungry when he was around her, but he feared the look on her face if he said it, the way she would shy away.

“Why were you afraid of selling shoes?” he asked.

“Have you ever sold shoes? It’s hell.”

“I mean, why were you afraid you couldn’t get anything else?”

She looked at the burger as if the answer was in there. Her eyes were almost the same color as her hair, and ringed with pale lashes. He wondered if she thought of him as an Indian boy, with her mother’s dark hair. “I don’t know,” she said. “Yes, I do know. Because my mother works in a school cafeteria, and my sister works in a hospital laundry, and selling shoes is the nicest job a girl from my family is supposed to get.”

“What about your father?”

“I don’t know him.”

“That’s a sad story.”

“No, it’s not,” she said. “It’s a happy story. I’m a lawyer, see, with a wonderful job driving the fucking Glendive every fifteen minutes until I lose my mind.” She put down the burger and pressed the backs of her hands into her eyes. Her fingers were greasy and one had ketchup on it. She took her hands away from her face and looked at her watch. “It’s ten o’clock,” she said. “I won’t get home before seven-thirty in the morning. There are deer on the road, and there’s black ice outside of Three Forks along the river. If I make it past there, I get to take a shower and go to work at eight, and do all the crap no one else wants to do. Then learn more school law tomorrow night, then leave work the next day before lunch and drive back here with my eyes twitching. It’s better than a hospital laundry, maybe, but it’s not a whole fucking lot better.”

“I’m from near Three Forks,” he said.

“So you know the ice.”

He nodded.

She dipped her napkin in her water glass and washed off her fingers, then finished her coffee. “It was nice of you, to bring the horse,” she said. “Will you take me back to my car?”

Outside, he swung her up onto the horse again, and she put her arms around his waist. She seemed to fit to his body like a puzzle piece. He rode slowly back to the school parking lot, not wanting to let her go. Next to the yellow Datsun, he held her hand tight while she climbed down, and then he dismounted, too. She tugged her puffy coat where it had ridden up from sliding off the horse, and they stood looking at each other.

“Thank you,” she said.

He nodded. He wanted to kiss her but couldn't see any clear path to that happening. He wished he had practiced, with the high school girls or the friendly secretaries, just to be ready for this moment.

She started to say something, but in his nervousness he cut her off. “See you Thursday,” he said.

She paused before nodding, and he took this for encouragement. He caught up her hand again and kissed it, because he had wanted to do that, and it was soft and cold. Then he leaned over and kissed her cheek, because he had wanted to do that, too. She didn't move, not an inch, and he was about to kiss her for real when she seemed to snap out of a trance, and stepped away from him. She took her hand back. “I have to go,” she said, and she went around to the driver's side of the Datsun.

He held the horse while she drove out of the parking lot, and he kicked at the snow. The horse sidestepped away. He felt like jumping up and down, in excitement and anxiety and anguish. He had run her off. He shouldn't have kissed her. He should have kissed her more. He should have let her say what she wanted to say. He mounted up and rode home.

THURSDAY NIGHT he drove the truck in, no cowboy antics; he was on a serious mission. He was going to answer her questions honestly, such as the one about why he didn't eat. He was going to let her say the things she intended to say. He didn't wait for the crowd to arrive before going into the classroom; he went in early and took his seat in the back. The class filled up, and then a tall man in a gray suit with a bowling-ball gut came in and stood behind the teacher's desk.

“Miss Travis,” he said, “found the drive from Missoula too arduous, so I will take over the class for the rest of the term. I practice law here in town. As some of you know, and the rest of you would find out soon enough, I'm recently divorced and have some time on my hands. That's why I'm here.”

While the man talked on, Chet got up from his seat and made his way up the aisle to the door. Outside he stood breathing the cold air into his lungs. He let the lights of town swim in his eyes until he blinked them clear again and climbed into the rancher's truck. He gave it enough gas so the engine wouldn't quit, and it coughed and steadied itself and ran.

He knew Beth Travis lived in Missoula, six hundred miles west, over the mountains, but he didn't know where. He didn't know where she worked, or if she was listed in the phone book. He didn't know if it was he who had scared her off or the drive. He didn't know if the truck would make it all that way or what the rancher would do when he found out he'd gone.

But he put the truck in gear and pulled out of town in the direction he had three times watched the yellow Datsun go. The road was flat and straight and seemed to roll underneath the truck, dark and silent, through a dark and silent expanse of snow-covered land. He stopped outside of Miles City, and again outside of Billings, to hobble around on his stiffened-up leg until he could drive again. Near Big Timber, the plains ended and the mountains began, black shapes rising up against the stars. He stopped in Bozeman for coffee and gas, and drove the white line on the empty road past Three Forks and Logan, to stay out of the ice that spread from the shoulder in black sheets. Somewhere off to his right in the dark, his parents were sleeping.

It was still dark when he reached Missoula, and he stopped at a gas station and looked up “Travis” in the phone book. There was a “Travis, B.” with a phone number, but no address. He wrote

down the number, but didn't call it. He asked the kid at the cash register where the law offices were town, and the kid shrugged and said, "Maybe downtown."

"Where's that?"

The kid stared at him. "It's downtown," he said, and he pointed off to his left.

Downtown, Chet found himself in dawn light among shops and old brick buildings and one-way streets. He parked and got out to stretch his hip. The mountains were so close they made him feel claustrophobic. When he found a carved wooden sign saying "Attorneys at Law," he asked the secretary who came to open the office if she knew a lawyer named Beth Travis.

The secretary looked at his twisted leg, his boots, and his coat and shook her head.

In the next law office, the secretary was friendlier. She called the law school and asked where Beth Travis had gone to work, then cupped her hand over the receiver. "She took a teaching job in Glendive."

"She has another job, too. Here."

The secretary relayed this information on the phone, then wrote something down on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Down by the old railroad depot," she said, pointing toward the window with her pencil.

He pulled up at the address on the piece of paper at eight-thirty, just as Beth Travis's yellow Datsun pulled into the same parking lot. He got out of the truck, feeling jittery. She was rummaging in her briefcase and didn't see him right away. Then she looked up. She looked at the truck behind him and then back at him again.

"I drove over," he said.

"I thought I was in the wrong place," she said. She let the briefcase hang at her side. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

She nodded, slowly. He stood as straight as he could. She lived in another world from him. You could fly to Hawaii or France in less time than it took to do that drive. Her world had lawyer downtowns, and mountains in it. His world had horses that woke hungry, and cows waiting in the snow, and it was going to be ten hours before he could get back to get them fed.

"I was sorry you stopped teaching the class," he said. "I looked forward to it, those nights."

"It wasn't because—" she said. "I meant to tell you on Tuesday. I'd already asked for replacement, because of the drive. They found one yesterday."

"Okay," he said. "That drive is pretty bad."

"You see?"

A man in a dark suit got out of a silver car and looked over at them, sizing Chet up. Beth Travis waved and smiled. The man nodded, looked at Chet again, and went into the building; the door closed. Chet suddenly wished that she had quit teaching the class because of him, that he'd had any effect on her at all. He shifted his weight. She pushed her hair back and he thought he could step forward and touch her hand, touch the back of her neck where the hair grew darker. Instead he shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. She seemed to scan the parking lot before looking at him again.

"I don't mean any harm," he said.

"Okay."

"I have to go feed now," he said. "I just knew that if I didn't start driving, I wasn't going to see you again, and I didn't want that. That's all."

She nodded. He stood there waiting, thinking she might say something, meet him halfway. He wanted to hear her voice again. He wanted to touch her, any part of her, just her arms maybe, just her waist. She stood out of reach, waiting for him to go.

Finally he climbed up into the truck and started the engine. She was still watching him from the

parking lot as he drove away, and he got on the freeway and left town. For the first half hour he gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white, and glared at the road as the truck swallowed it up. Then he was too tired to be angry, and his eyes started to close and jerk open. He nearly drove off the road. In Butte he bought a cup of black coffee, and drank it standing next to the truck. He wished he hadn't seen her right away, in the parking lot. He wished he'd had a minute to prepare. He crushed the paper coffee cup and threw it away.

As he drove past Logan, he thought about stopping, but he didn't need to. He knew what his parents would say. His mother would worry about his health, driving all night, her sickly son, risking his life. "You don't even know this white girl," she'd say. His father would say, "Jesus, Chet, you let the horses without water all day?"

Back at the Hayden place, he fed and watered the horses, and they seemed all right. None of them had kicked through their stalls. He rigged them up in the harness, and loaded the sled with hay, and they dragged it out of the barn. He cut the orange twine on each bale with a knife and pitched the hay off the sled for the cows. The horses trudged uncomplainingly, and he thought about the skittery two-year-olds who'd kicked him everywhere there was to kick, when he was fourteen. The ache in his stomach felt like that. But he hadn't been treated unfairly by Beth Travis; he didn't know what he had expected. If she had asked him to stay, he would have had to leave anyway. It was the finality of the conversation, and the protective look the man in the dark suit had given her, that left him feeling sore and bruised.

In the barn, he talked to the horses, and kept close to their hind legs when he moved behind them. They were sensible horses, immune to surprise, but he had left them without water all day. He gave them each another coffee canful of grain, which slid yellow over itself into their buckets.

He walked back outside, into the dark, and looked out over the flat stretch of land beyond the fences. The moon was up, and the fields were shadowy blue, dotted with cows. His hip was stiff and sore. He had to pee, and he walked away from the barn and watched the small steaming crater form in the snow. He wondered if maybe he had planted a seed, with Beth Travis, by demonstrating his seriousness to her. She wouldn't come back—it was impossible to imagine her doing that drive again for any reason. But she knew where he was. She was a lawyer. She could find him if she wanted.

But she wouldn't. That was the thing that made him ache. He buttoned his jeans and shifted his hip. He had wanted practice, with girls, and now he had gotten it, but he wished it had felt more like practice. It was getting colder, and he would have to go inside soon. He fished her phone number out of his pocket and studied it a while in the moonlight, until he knew it by heart, and wouldn't forget it. Then he did what he knew he should do, and rolled it into a ball, and threw it away.

RED FROM GREEN

THE SUMMER SHE TURNED FIFTEEN, Sam Turner took her last float trip down the river with her father. It was July, and hot, and the water was low. Hardly anyone was on the river but them. They had two inflatable Avon rafts with oaring frames—Sam and her father in one, her uncle Harry and a client from Harry’s new law firm in the other. In the fall, she would be a sophomore, which sounded very old to her. She’d been offered a scholarship to a boarding school back east, but she hadn’t officially accepted it yet. Applying had been her father’s idea, but now he looked dismayed every time the subject came up. Everyone said what an opportunity it was, so much better than the local schools, but neither of them could bring themselves to talk about it.

Sam had been down the river every summer for as long as she could remember—in a dozen rainstorms, and in hot sun that burned the print of swimsuit straps into her shoulders. Harry, her father’s younger brother, sometimes brought his friends, who passed the bottle of schnapps to her when her father was away from the campfire. She liked the smell better than the burning taste. She knew all the campsites and the cliff-shaded turns of the river, and the long flat stretch through pasture at the end. It was a four-day float trip, or five if you dawdled, or three if her father had to get back to work.

Her uncle’s client was the reason they were on the river so late, when it was all sandbars and rocks. Sam hadn’t been told that exactly, but it was the feeling she got—that they were going for the client. He had come from somewhere else, and was staying in Montana only for the case. She met him at the put-in, unloading the gear. Harry introduced her as his niece.

“You got a name?” the client asked.

“Sam,” she said.

“Layton,” the client said. He was younger than her uncle, and he wasn’t tall, but he was big in the chest and arms. He set a full cooler on the ground and put out a hand to shake hers.

“God, I like being up here,” he said. “I’m part Crow, part Blackfoot, part Sioux, I think. Part Jewish.” His eyes were blue. He let her hand go. “You have perfect teeth,” he said. “Did you have braces?”

“No,” she said. She was awkward at fifteen, and praise made her suspicious.

Layton said, “This is gonna be fun.”

Her father and Harry drove both empty trucks downriver to the place they’d take out three days later, to leave one and bring the other back. Sam stayed with the boats, and Layton volunteered to stay with her—to keep her safe, he said. They sat on the bank with the gear, sliding the coolers along the

grass as the sun moved, to keep them in the shade. Sam was reading *The Thorn Birds*, bought at the supermarket along with the ice and groceries on the way out of town.

"It's not on your reading list," her father had said, dropping it in her lap in the truck. "But it's the best thing they had."

The boarding school had sent her a summer reading list with thirty books on it, books like *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Tender Is the Night*, but in her reluctance she'd forgotten to bring one along.

Layton took out a shotgun, to clean and oil it. "I bet you're a crack shot," he said. "Montana girls like you. I bet you've got your own guns."

Sam shook her head and kept reading. He brought the gun over to show her the sight, which was just a notch of steel on the barrel. He crouched close to her shoulder and she could smell the oil on the gun.

"You don't need a fancy sight for a shotgun," he said. "You ever fire one?"

"No," she said. Her father had guns, but he hadn't been hunting since her mother died. She barely remembered her mother; she'd hit black ice driving to Coeur d'Alene when Sam was four. She sometimes wondered if her father had quit hunting because he'd been busy taking care of her, or if he'd just stopped liking to shoot things.

"Ho, boy," Layton said. He stood up. "We gotta take care of that. Get you a pheasant."

"It isn't bird season."

"No one'll know out here," he said. He ran a cloth over the barrel.

"There are houses on the river," she told him. "It's not very remote."

Layton laughed. "Remote. That's a good word."

She felt her cheeks heat up, but didn't say anything.

"I don't need *very* remote," he said. "Just a little remote."

Sam knew that her father wouldn't tolerate poaching, so she left it for him to take care of. But when he and Harry drove up, her father just looked hard at the shotgun and started loading his boat.

They put in that afternoon, and in spite of the low water they got to the first campsite before dark. Her father had a two-man tent for himself and a burrow for her—a waterproof sack just big enough for a sleeping bag, with a mosquito net at the top. She set up the burrow with her sleeping bag inside, and Layton and Harry built a fire and talked about the case.

Harry was childless, and had been jobless on and off. He had always seemed to take pride in being the wild younger brother—Sam's father was a district judge—but something had come over him a few years ago, and he had gone to law school and managed to pass the bar. He was a big man with a belly, and everyone liked him. He was trying to get out of debt, and the lawyer he had joined up with had given him Layton's case.

There were four other plaintiffs, all lab workers with neurological damage from exposure to organic solvents. One of them couldn't remember her children's names if someone nearby was wearing perfume. Diesel fumes, bathroom cleaners, scented soaps, new carpet—anything could set her off. Another had stopped driving, because she didn't always know whether a red light meant stop or go. Layton was a key plaintiff, because he had nothing in common with the women except the lab where he had worked for a month on the wiring, and his tests matched all of theirs. It was good, too, to have a man involved; people were less likely to assume that he was inventing his symptoms. But his symptoms were milder, and he'd had to be cajoled into joining the lawsuit, and then into sticking around to go to depositions and have more tests. Sam guessed the river trip was part of the cajoling.

"I dunno," Layton said, standing over the fire ring. "I lose my car keys sometimes, but I did that before. I'm not very litigious. I might just take that job in Reno and scrap this whole thing."

Harry frowned at his tower of twigs. "When you could be here?" he said. "Fishing and hunting?"

"It's not even bird season yet," Layton said, and he winked at Sam. "If this thing drags out much

longer, I'll go nuts."

Harry said nothing, but worked on the fire.

THE NEXT MORNING Layton was in the water before breakfast, fishing in waders, which no one ever brought in a boat on the river—they just waded out in shorts. He caught a little brown trout, clubbed its head, and threw it in the raft. Sam's father held the fish to the marks on the raft's rubber bow and said it wasn't big enough.

"Pull on the tail a little," Layton said. "It'll stretch." He was already moving back into the current, and the fish was dying. Sam saw Harry give her father a look, and her father put the fish in the cooler.

They packed up early and got on the river. Sam rode in the front of her father's raft, lying across the cooler that slid into the metal frame. She read for a while and then fell asleep with the sun on her back, waking to jump in the water and drag the raft over sandbars.

At camp that afternoon her father went fishing and she walked away from the river, up toward the hills. The grass in the open was pale yellow, and the path through the trees spiked with sunshine, but she was thinking about boarding school. She had a sense that she wasn't equipped for it. And she was wondering if she really had perfect teeth, and if anyone but adults would ever care. When Layton came through the trees she knew she'd wanted him to show up, though she hadn't known it before. His attention was different from other adult attention.

"I brought you something," he said.

She waited, but he kept on up the trail, and she followed him. They got over the first hill from camp, and up a second, higher one, and down again into a clearing. There weren't any farms or houses, and they were a long way from the river. Layton reached under his shirt and pulled out a small pistol, dark gray, with a short, square barrel. There was a fallen tree ten yards away, with small branches sticking up, and he stood an empty beer bottle upside down on one of the branches. The last of the beer stained the bark of the tree. Then he walked back and gave her the pistol. It was still warm from his skin, and heavy.

"Nine-millimeter Ruger semiautomatic," he said. "My pride and joy."

"Can they hear it?"

"I don't think so, with those hills," he said. "Anyway, we're legal. We're not killing anything."

He took her right hand and shaped it around the gun.

"One hand like this, arm straight, just like the movies," he said. He reached around her shoulder and positioned her left hand. "The other underneath." He kicked the instep of her right foot. "Bring this leg back."

Sam stepped back and pointed the gun at the bottle, not really breathing, with his chest against her back.

"Close one eye," he said. "Cover your target with the barrel. The gun's going to kick up, but it'll drop right back where you need it. You only need to squeeze a little." He let her go and stepped away.

She missed the bottle completely on the first shot, and the kick surprised her: the gun's explosion shot through her hands and shoulders and down into her legs. The second time she blew away the upended bottom. The third time she hit the broken-off neck. Then there was just a little triangle of glass sticking up from the tree.

"Go for it," Layton said.

She did, and hit it, and there was nothing left but a stub of branch.

"Hit the branch," Layton said.

And she did. She'd never been so proud of anything. Layton reached out and rubbed the top of her head, quick.

"She's a sharpshooter," he said. "You're not afraid of the kick yet, so you're not anticipating anything. You've got to keep that."

"Okay," she said. She could feel herself grinning like an idiot.

"Those perfect teeth," Layton said.

She closed her mouth and looked at the scarred tree where the bottle had been, which made her want to smile again, but she didn't.

"I'm sorry," Layton said.

"That's okay," she said.

When they walked back to camp, Layton veered off, so they came from different angles. Her father and Harry didn't say anything. Sam thought they must have heard the shots, but she figured they could have been Layton shooting alone. She had hit quarters propped in the tree bark, and made a smiley-face in a piece of paper. In the pocket of her shorts she carried an exploded hollow-point which Layton said wasn't legal to buy anymore, and a warped quarter. Layton slipped the folded smiley-face into the camp garbage bag, and told Harry he didn't think there were pheasants out here any more all.

Sam's father was making enchiladas, and chipping ice for margaritas with a pick. He made one without tequila for Sam. Layton asked for a virgin, too—alcohol made him nauseated since the work in the lab—and got out a little stereo with batteries. Sam's father said it would ruin the silence of the nature, but pretty soon he was dancing at the cookstove, singing along with reggae covers. It was still light, and the swallows dived in the canyon. Her father two-stepped over with a big plastic spoon and a chip full of salsa, singing in falsetto, "No you ain't—seen—nothin' like the Mighty Quinn." He gave her the chip and kissed her on the forehead.

Her uncle Harry had too many margaritas and started talking about the case, about those poor sick women with their lives ruined, and the gall of the lawyers who said they were making it up. When it got dark he went to bed. The other three sat close around the orange coals of the fire, and her father made up blues songs on the harmonica.

After a while, Layton said, "I need someone to walk on my back if I'm gonna row tomorrow. I'll ask you," he said to Sam's father, "but I'm guessing you weigh about two-fifty."

Her father didn't say anything, he kept playing harmonica.

Layton looked to Sam, who looked at the fire.

"It just takes a minute," he said. "I threw it out on a job, and rowing that boat messed it up."

Her father kept his eyes closed, the harmonica wailing. Sam stood up.

"Shoes off," Layton said.

She slipped off her sandals and left them by the fire. Layton lay on his stomach on the ground. "Okay, step on careful," he said. "Right in the middle." She stepped, squeezing the air out of his voice. "Now the other foot," he said. "Keep your balance." She could feel his ribs beneath her toes. "Now walk forward, slowly, then back," he said.

She did, and her father got up from the fire. "I'm beat," he said. "We should get an early start tomorrow."

Sam looked at him and he nodded, as if agreeing with himself. He put away his harmonica and disappeared into the dark where his tent was pitched. She could hear the rustle of nylon and the whir of the zipper, and then the night was quiet.

"One more time," Layton said. "That's so great. Now if you kneel with your knees between your shoulder blades, that's all I need."

She knelt like he said, lowering her hips to her heels, looking down at her bare knees and the

short hair at the back of his head. "Now hold it there," he whispered. "Oh, God."

~~Then he didn't say anything. The right side of her body was warm from the fire, the left side was cold. It was too cold at night to be wearing shorts. She heard her father roll over in his sleeping bag inside the tent, nylon against nylon.~~

Layton's hand came back, and touched her hip. "You're tilted to this side," he said. She straightened. "There," he said, but his hand stayed on her hip. She thought about what to do. His eyes were closed and he seemed to have forgotten the hand. After a minute it slipped under the back of her thigh, touching her skin. She took his wrist and moved it away. The hand paused in the air, then slipped back under her thigh, over her shorts, touching between her legs with a shock like the jolt of the gun firing in her hands. She started to stand up, awkwardly, but he found her calf and pulled her back down. "Stay," he whispered.

She was on one knee, half-straddling his back in the dust, and he rolled over, facing her. His hand slid up her leg to the small of her back and held tight. His eyes were cloudy and intent, focused and unfocused, and she'd never seen a man look that way before.

She pulled away then, and he let her go, and she left the fire and climbed, trembling, into her burrow. She lay awake long after the moon rose, listening to the sounds in the camp: to her father snoring, and Layton finally putting out the fire, and the unzipping of his tent, and the rustle of her going to bed. She kept her hands between her thighs for warmth and the feeling there was sharp and aching, but she didn't know what to do about it except lie awake, breathing, until it went away.

WHEN SHE WOKE UP, Layton was out in the river again, walking downstream and casting at the banks. It was the brightest day yet, and a mayfly hatch hovered over the water, the current dimpled with the open mouths of rising trout. Her father poured the last of the hot water into the oatmeal in her cup, and she ate standing. In her shadow on the ground, she could see her hair, three days uncombed, sticking out on one side. She smoothed it down with her hand.

On the long flat stretch to the takeout, Sam rowed for a while. Her father pointed out a kingfisher in the brush along the banks, an osprey nest perched on the top of a tall tree. When she got the boat stuck on a rock, her father didn't say anything, but took the oars backward and pried it off. Layton and Harry stayed well ahead. It got hot, and she slipped off the raft and dropped under, feeling the cold current in her hair and clothes.

Layton didn't look at her at the takeout. They deflated the rafts and packed up the truck with the drained-energy feeling of a trip being over, and she changed into dry shorts in the trees. Her father drove and Harry had the other window, so she was squished with Layton in the middle, his left leg pressed against her right.

They dropped her uncle and Layton at the put-in with Harry's truck, and drove home in silence. Sam tried to keep her eyes open, but fell asleep. At the house, they unpacked the truck and hosed out the coolers, and when she gathered up her book and her river shorts, the hollow-point fell out of the pocket onto the grass.

Her father picked up the bullet, rolled it in his hand, held it between his fingers. It was copper-cased, splayed out in a blossom of dull lead where the tip had been.

"Where'd you find this?" he asked.

"I shot it." She waited for the next question.

He said nothing, but held out the slug to her, and she took it.

He picked up one of the dry-boxes and carried it into the shed. For a while she listened to him unpacking, putting pots where they belonged, not noisily or angrily, just putting them away. Then she

went into the house and filled out the final form for the scholarship to boarding school, and in the morning she put it in the mail.

She said nothing at first, and life went on as usual: she finished *The Thorn Birds* and saw her friends and ate dinners with her father. They talked about the weather and the cases he'd heard, and then after a week she told him that she'd accepted the scholarship.

He frowned at the table. "Oh," he said. "Good. That's great."

She wanted to ask why he had left her by the campfire, but instead she said, "Orientation is the last week of August. I should get a ticket."

"Sure," he said. "Right." He looked straight at her, and his eyebrows knit together. "I'll miss you here."

She felt a flood of warmth for him, an overwhelming feeling that it was a mistake to go away. He hadn't meant to leave her there. He hadn't known what would happen. He definitely hadn't meant for it to happen. Again she wanted to ask, to make sure, but instead she took her dishes to the sink, and the moment was over.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE she went away, there was a legal brief on the kitchen counter, with the names of her uncle's other plaintiffs but without Layton's. When she asked about it, her father said Layton had left for a job in Reno, and had taken himself off the case. He'd decided his symptoms weren't so bad and it wasn't worth it. He got little rashes under his eyes and he couldn't drink—so what? He'd needed to stop drinking anyway, he said. There wasn't anything keeping him in Montana, and it was too much of a hassle to stay involved from Reno.

Her father drove her to the airport, and carried her bag right up to the gate before saying, for the first time, that he didn't really want her to go. She cried all the way down the jetway, and the man in the seat beside her gave her a packet of Kleenex to stop her nose from running, and patted her shoulder when they landed in Salt Lake.

Someone from the airline told her where to change planes, and from Boston she took the bus she'd been told to take, though it seemed impossible that it could be the right one. She was red-eyed and nervous, but had decided that she didn't know anything, and the idea of going away was to learn.

Her dorm was in a cluster of stately brick buildings surrounded by trees, set apart from the little town, and the walls of her room had been painted over and over, for generations. She read *The Portrait of a Lady* there, and also *The Beach House* and *Candy*. Fifteen was old at boarding school. Most of the kids' parents didn't want them at home, and, knowing that, the kids seemed to know everything. A girl down the hall had done Ecstasy with her boyfriend back in Maryland, and had sex for three hours straight. Sam's roommate, Gabriela—whose last roommate got the Latin teacher fired—was surprised and impressed that Sam was a virgin.

There was a phone in the hall, and when Sam's friends from home asked for her, Gabriela said, "They sound so western." One of them, Kelley Timmens, had just sent Sam a letter about a boy she knew: "*We didn't have sex,*" she wrote, "*but imagine as sick as you can imagine—without having sex.*"

Gabriela had laughed, reading the letter, and asked, "What does she mean?" Sam called home every week or two, and her father reported on people who'd asked about her, and she told him what she was doing in school. When she told him she was going to New York with Gabriela for Thanksgiving, he sounded startled. He said, "I'd get you a ticket home," though they hadn't talked about it before.

"I know," she said. "But it's two days of flying, for two days there." That had been Gabriela

argument.

~~“Where will you stay?”~~

“With her mom.”

There was a silence on the line, and she imagined the quiet empty house around him.

“What happened to Harry’s chemical case?” she asked.

“It got dismissed,” her father said. “They needed that guy. What was his name? On the river.”

“Layton,” she said.

“Layton,” he said. “You can’t blame him. He wasn’t really that sick.”

“And the other people?”

“They can’t work,” her father said. “They have these awful headaches, all the time, and they can’t go out.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a tough case,” he said.

He asked a few questions about school, and then they said goodbye and Sam hung up, thinking about the woman who couldn’t drive because the chemicals in everything made her forget which light meant stop and which go. She lay back on her bed under Gabriela’s Charlie Parker poster and stretched her leg up to her face so her nose touched her knee, which was something Gabriela did. She brought the leg down and stretched the other one up.

She thought about the parties there were supposed to be in New York, and the boy from Exeter. Gabriela was thinking about sleeping with, and the dime bag Gabriela was trying to get. She thought about her father eating dinner alone on the dark winter nights, with no one to talk to. And her friends—Kelley Timmens and the others—laughing in the hallway of her old high school, with its rows of lockers and the fluorescent lights reflected in the shiny floors. She thought about the pink cleaning stuff the janitors used, the smell of it in the mornings when she got to school, and the shampoo dispensers on the walls of the girls’ gym showers that said “Montana Broom and Brush.” She thought about her father nodding to her, after saying goodnight by the campfire, and about the aching feeling later as she lay in her sleeping bag, and how she hadn’t understood what it meant. She smelled Gabriela’s honey soap on the back of her wrist, and then her roommate walked in.

“Where are you?” Gabriela asked. “You’re doing that spacey thing again.”

Sam smiled. “No, I’m here.”

“You’re not. You’re off in Montana or something. Do you have any letters from sick Kelley?”

“No.”

Gabriela looked disappointed, but then she brightened. “I have to tell you what just happened in the library,” she said. “You know that reading room you can lock?”

Sam nodded and rolled over to listen, tucking her pillow under her arms and her chin. The detergent on the pillowcase was Mountain Fresh. Gabriela flopped down on the new rug, and tossed back her long, conditioned hair. The rug was cream colored and Gabriela ran her hand across it, smoothing the fibers down. She looked a little flushed. “Okay, here’s how it started,” she said, and the story, full of longing and intrigue, began.

LOVELY RITA

IN 1975, Steven Kelly was twenty-three and newly orphaned. His father had died of pancreatic cancer two years earlier, and Steven had quit a construction job to move home and take care of his mother. She had relied on her husband so absolutely, all her adult life, that she had never filled a gas tank on her own, or looked at a tax form. In her grief, after his death, she shifted her dependence to Steven. She told him it was lucky she'd had a son, as if no daughter of hers would be able to master a gas pump, either. When she died of the same cancer as his father—one of the doctors described it as mercifully quick, but there was nothing merciful about it—Steven felt like a boxer losing a fight, not knocked out but dizzy from the blows.

His mother showed him pictures when she was sure she was dying, of herself as a grave little girl in a white First Communion dress, with hollow-eyed Italian relatives in suits. She told him stories: his father had tried to start an ice cream business as a young man, but the unsold, unrefrigerated ice cream would melt by the end of the day, and he would end up eating it himself, dejected. Her mother had once won a beauty contest, scandalizing the family, in a bathing costume that came down to her knees. It was as if his mother was trying to make a safe place for her family in his brain. She died as she was becoming a real person to Steven, not just the more helpless of his ever-present parents, and so she was frozen in mid-transformation, neither one thing nor the other.

They left him the house he'd grown up in, but no money, once the taxes were paid. Their small Connecticut town, where he had spent a happy, bike-riding, bait-fishing childhood, was being transformed by the building of a nuclear power plant. When finished, the plant would pull in water to cool the reactors, which would raise the temperature of the river and kill all the fish he had grown up fishing. There were angry, impotent protests, and there were jobs for anyone who could wield a hammer. Steven hated the plant—everyone did—but he couldn't sell his childhood house, so he took one of the jobs.

The plant was two miles long and a mile wide, and still being laid with pipes. Steven was hired to build scaffolding for the pipefitters, then take it down and build it somewhere else. It was a union job and they'd been told to make it last, so they worked in threes: while one worked below, the other two would climb to the top of the scaffolding and sleep. Someone usually duct-taped a transistor radio to the mouthpiece of one of the paging telephones, so music blasted through the plant. When the security guards got close to finding the radio, it would be rescued, and the music would stop, until the guards went back to their usual stations. Then the radio would move to another phone and the music would start again: "Born to Run" blaring over the clanging and drilling and sawing and hammering.

Steven's best friend from high school, Acey Rawlings, also worked at the plant. Acey had joined the Coast Guard for a while, but lost interest, and was home living with his mother. Any social status Steven had in school came from Acey's reflected cool, and now Acey had mythologized their teenage years, believing them to be as perfect as high school years could be. They had missed the Vietnam draft by the skin of their teeth, and Acey considered luck to be something they had rights to, and could count on.

Most nights after work, they went to the bar, to drink beer until the hammering in their heads subsided enough for sleep. So in some ways nothing had changed since Steven was sixteen: he was still drinking beer with Acey, except now it was legal, and less exciting. It was on one of those nights that a girl showed up, hanging around. She was too skinny, with small tits and narrow hips, and she leaned on the bar next to Steven in jeans and a tank top and ordered a gin and tonic. He reflected that it was difficult not to talk to a girl standing next to you in a tank top, no matter how tired you were.

"Are you old enough to drink that?" he asked her.

She showed him her license. It said she was twenty-three, five-foot-six, 110 pounds. He could have lifted her right into his lap. Eyes: green; hair: brown. Her eyes were oversized, and ringed with green eyeliner and black mascara. He showed the license to Acey at the next barstool, because he could already feel that Acey's interest in the girl trumped his. He was going to have to get out of the way. Then he noticed the name on the card: Rita Hillier.

"I know you," Steven said.

"You do?"

"We went to grade school together. You moved away."

She narrowed her made-up eyes at him. "Did you have a lot of cavities?" she asked.

"No. I mean, not more than normal," he said.

"Did I ever kiss you?"

"No."

She shook her head. "Then I don't remember."

He could have told her that her father was the first person he had ever seen falling down drunk, but that seemed unfriendly. "You sat in front of me in Mrs. Wilson's class," he said. "You showed me how to cheat on spelling tests by keeping the practice list inside your desk, and pretending to look for an eraser."

"I did not."

"You think I don't know who corrupted me?"

"I remember cheating on math, later," she said. "Not spelling."

"Your dad used to walk you home from school."

Her eyes lost their gleam, and she looked at her drink. "That was me," she said. "They took her driver's license away."

"Is he all right?"

"I think so."

"Do you see him much?"

She frowned sideways at him. "You ask a lot of questions."

Acey kicked him under the bar.

"This is my friend Acey," Steven said. "We went to high school together, but not grade school. He doesn't ask so many questions."

Acey smiled his handsome smile at her, leaning forward over his beer.

Steven withdrew to the men's room to let Acey move in. Behind the closed door, he stood looking at the filthy urinal, feeling disoriented by his brief return to third grade. Mrs. Wilson had caught him cheating on the spelling test, but he hadn't turned Rita in. It was his first and maybe only

major act of chivalry. He got a zero on the test, and a C in spelling, but his parents had never asked about the sudden drop in his grade. He guessed that Mrs. Wilson had told them about the cheating and they were too embarrassed to mention it. Rita's dad wouldn't have cared if she cheated—the old drunk might even have applauded it, as wily—but it had seemed important to protect her from the disgrace.

When he went back out to the bar, Rita had her head bent close to Acey's, the deal sealed, and Steven put his arms around their shoulders.

“Let's go out for a midnight nuclear protest,” Steven said, and Acey whooped with eagerness.

They drove down to the marina, stole a Sunfish from a slip, and sailed it across the river. Acey manned the tiller and Rita stood precariously in the bow and danced in the wind. When they got to the new plant, they yelled until the lights came on and the security guards came running down to the water to see what was going on. It was a pointless thing, hassling the security guards who were just looking for guys like them, getting a paycheck. But it felt good to yell on a warm night. Rita was surprising loud. When the guards threatened them, fat and breathless in their tight uniforms, there wasn't a wind left to sail the Sunfish, so they laughed and paddled back for the marina with their hands. They could see a few stars through the haze. When they got back to the slip, Steven was starting to sober up. Acey left them to go pee off the end of the dock, and Rita said, “I'm sorry I got mad when you asked me if I see my dad.”

“That's okay,” Steven said.

“I don't see him at all,” she said. “I don't know where he is.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Do you remember him?”

“A little.”

“What do you remember?”

“Not that much, really,” he said. “I just remember him picking you up at school. He seemed like a nice man.”

She looked at him skeptically, and he pretended he was telling the truth. Then Acey came back buttoning his jeans. He bear-hugged Rita, kissed her hair, and took her home.

AFTER THAT, Acey was in love, and he couldn't shut up about it. He talked about Rita all the time, how amazing she was, how unlike other girls. He did it at the plant, where people weren't used to such happiness, and he made himself unwelcome. The married men only smiled and made jaded little jokes—*Wait until the blowjobs run out*—but the lonely ones found it intolerable. A raffle was held for a car, and someone needed to unload, with two packs of playing cards cut in half on the bandsaw, and Acey made a big show of buying a lot of tickets, and asking specifically for the heart face cards, so he could give the car and the winning card to Rita. There was open glee in the plant when he didn't win.

Even though Steven knew Acey was driving everyone nuts, and guessed there would be some attempt to take the Romeo down a notch, it still took him a minute to realize what was happening when a high, spooky voice came over the PA system one afternoon, filling the whole plant, calling out, “Riii-ta, lovely Riii-ta!” Then it made a kissing noise and hung up.

The guys around them were already laughing, and Steven saw knowledge dawning on Acey's face. He thought he should have taken Acey aside long before and told him to keep his mouth shut.

The high voice came again, asking, “Rita, where are you?” Then the kissing noise.

Acey stalked to the closest paging phone, holding a wrench like a weapon, the guys still laughing behind him. No one was at the phone, of course. When Acey turned back with the wrench, he nearly bumped into a white hat, a liaison for the client. Normally someone saw the white hats coming so

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