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Tornado, Kansas

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TORNADO, KANSAS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Robin Somers

December 2005

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ABSTRACT

TORNADO, KANSAS

by Robin Somers

This is a novel about a woman, Molly Gallagher, who inherits her father's farm in Kansas. A California mother of four, Molly leaves her husband and finds herself and her children homeless, whereupon she travels to Kansas. She discovers her great aunt's diary, which chronicles life on the Kansas-Oklahoma border at the turn of the nineteenth century and provides insight into the lives of Native American children enduring the devastating effects of compulsory boarding school education. The diary furthers Molly's decision on managing her inheritance; it also deepens her family ties to that place, creating the primary conflict at the heart of the story, what becomes of the land. In the end, her decision must embrace the fabric of the farm, the needs of her children to find a true home, and the truth of what it means to become heir to the exploitations of one's forefathers.

“Home, after all, is the place where we live. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children.” William Cronan

Prelude

I remember my father's voice:

Your granddad was milking the cows when my mother walked into the barn and told him she'd begun labor. He was holding her arm when he spotted a shadow and mistook it for a far off wisp of burning cornhusk. Wasn't any wisp at all. It moved too fast and the air grew too silent. Their ears plugged up and a person couldn't draw a breath. Then came the sound, like the Santa Fe. Your grandmother went ahead on her own and came out of the house carrying towels, a blanket, her wallet and wristwatches as if her labored gimp were part of the natural course of things. Dad took her from there, ushering her toward the cellar lamenting, "We're going to lose everything we've worked for, Katherine," and she replied, "God wouldn't do that to us." They watched that twister coming down the prairie toward the flint hill and the river then saw that anvil of darkness lift its sucker and jump right over the farm. A miracle. It put down on the other side of the graveyard and moved toward a second funnel. The two came together like mercury. They grew into one dark wall a half mile wide. A distant rooftop flew into the air as your grandparents shut the storm door and descended the cellar steps.

I was born three hours later. They said I was the second of God's gifts that day. When the twister wore out, damage reports drifted in one by one, along with a home-cooked meal or two. They'd found a cow with a two-by-four run clear through her. A farmhouse exploded into smithereens. One old farmer, whose property escaped damage, went back into his house when it was all over, lay down on his livingroom floor and just plumb died.

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On the day before my fortieth birthday, I started missing my father and consoled myself with a Rand McNally atlas. I lay in bed studying Kansas, its nearly perfect rectangle except where the Missouri River cut the state's northeastern corner, its near lack of topographical relief from flat prairie. I put my finger on the spot I imagined to be my father's farm, just north of Oklahoma above the thirty-seventh latitude, the exact latitude as my present home in Santa Cruz, California. I was certain these two places had been one before the earth bloomed, and I could travel back in time by tracing my forefinger along that simple, straight black line.

Two morning papers and a handful of books weighted my down comforter, but I was fixated on page one hundred and seventy-eight. Light green low elevations covered most of the state up to the Colorado border, where the tint changed to a slightly higher elevation beige. From here, the Platte and Arkansas rivers streaked back across the prairie from left to right like two bold ink scrawls with a filigree of tributaries between. The river land dipped as it reached the banks of the Missouri. Then there were the towns—Neosho, Wichita, Kaw, and Medicine Lodge—which spoke for the state's American Indian legacy.

My father was born and raised on a Kansas wheat farm. But even his love of family and the land failed to entirely claim him. He yearned to see the world and explore his options, so he moved to San Francisco where he met my mother.

Long before he died, I began to miss him. When he suffered the first of several strokes and lost the vision in his left eye, I appointed myself the sentinel of his boyhood stories. He usually told them around the dinner table. He sat at

one end of the table, my mother at the other. I placed myself at his elbow because it took work to listen to his tales. I listened hard, above the clattering plates, my children's clamor for more mashed potatoes, our guests' requests to pass the wine. I was a warrior, warding off their attempts to bushwhack his Kansas lore. His poverty stricken grandfather had emigrated from Ireland during the potato famine at the age of sixteen. He had traveled through Canada toward Massachusetts, entered the Catholic seminary, then joined the Army and fought on the side of the Yankees in Antietam. After the war, he headed west to become a hunter and trapper. He wound up in Idaho, belly-down on a ridge that overlooked the salmon-filled rivers and camas-abundant meadows of the Nez Perce, where he discerned encroaching white men who had already unsettled the natural beauty with their mines, cattle ranches, and hog farms. My great-grandfather's hunting days ended abruptly when he shot and killed a Nez Perce whom he caught stealing his game in the middle of one black night. He heard the wind's fury screaming through the conifers. At first light, he packed up and pushed southeast, following the rivers toward Kansas.

Along with his stories, my father left me the farm. I had never seen it. I grew up visualizing one hundred and sixty acres of pancake flat wheat fields, an old farm house, the cellar where he was born that violent day, the walnut orchard where he built his little fort, and his favorite swimming holes along a narrow river that wound through the farm in a way the local Indians said shielded the place from tornados.

I was still staring at the light green tint on the page of my Rand McNally atlas, imagining a vast prairie that had been plowed, planted, and irretrievably lost to progress when the telephone rang.

"Hello." My breath turned to steam when it hit the cold air of my bedroom.

"Happy birthday, sweetheart." It was my mother vaguely worried about how I was dealing with the milestone ahead. "What are you doing home? You sound depressed."

"No." I pressed the phone so hard my ear ached, and reached over for the coffee urn that Mitch had left by the bed as an apology. The comforter slipped away, and my back and arms began to sting from cold. I refilled my mug with coffee. "I'm fine."

"My forties were a wonderful time of life," Mother said. "Those were my best years."

I scanned the books that lined the bedroom wall, mostly classics, several about the Midwest, one a family history. I told her, "I want to go to Kansas."

"*Kansas*." She smeared the word. "No one goes to *Kansas*."

"I want," my voice caught, "to see the farm."

"*Jeezus Christ*," she said. "Molly dear. Kansas is like burros and Indians. No one cares."

I cared. I cared about Kansas. I cared about burros. I cared about Native Americans. She knew that. And by the terms of my father's will, I only had one year left to take legal possession or it would revert to the family trust.

"You can't be gallivanting around the country and leaving your children at home," she said. "Stay home. Stop trying to escape your responsibilities."

The line clicked, and she excused herself to answer call-waiting.

"I have to go. Long distance. Cheer up, for God's sake. Get dressed. I'll call you later."

I sat on the edge of the bed, naked and depressed in a rustic, damp beach house that did not belong to me. If I were Ishmael I would have taken to the sea, which lay only a hedge of ice plant and a field of fine sand away. Or to the lighthouse, anything bright because I needed flicker, even a glint, something stronger than coffee to roust me out of myself on a foggy morning like this one. Kansas had become a spotlight on my horizon. If I were Joseph Campbell, I'd follow my bliss. But I was Molly O'Henry, forty minus a day, mother of four children, married to a man who was the father of none of them. I ran my finger along the 37th latitude from Kansas, through Colorado, Nevada to the central California coast, then, in one yank of the bed sheets, I propelled our cat Gerome from Mitch's side of the bed. For a moment he flew, then crash landed on the floor and ran out of the room. I slid down the side of the bed and buried my face in my hands. My knees ground against the cold pine plank floor.

This is Henry speaking. That's how I found her, crying next to the bed. I slept late because my stomach hurt and when I got up my stepdad had already taken my brother and sisters to school. We're supposed to call him Mitch. I don't call him anything. I can't talk. I can't speak. I have mutism from when I saw my real dad die. I was three and don't remember. My counselor says that someday when I'm ready I'm going to open up and blossom like a flower.

I knew something was wrong when I saw her flip Gerome off the bed. She kneeled on the floor like she was praying but she doesn't even go to church. None of us

do unless we're staying with Grandma Rose. When she saw me standing there, she grabbed the bedspread and wrapped it around herself, then ordered me out of the room. I just stood there wondering why she was sad. She sighed and got up. I watched her put on a sweatshirt and her old jeans and cowboy boots. Then she twisted on her turquoise bracelets my real dad bought her when he was alive, and I don't remember that either. I was there. She said so. We were visiting the reservation, and they pulled over to a stand where Dad bought her a bunch of jewelry. As soon as Mitch goes to work, she puts the bracelets back on.

I could tell she'd been crying, so I went into the bathroom and pulled some toilet paper off the roll and put it in my back pocket just in case she started up again. Mom put her hand to my forehead and figured out I wasn't feeling so good. My stomach hurt ever since my teacher told me to draw something and she guessed it was a tornado with a red cow inside. Not even close. It was my bear wrapped in a blanket, but I couldn't tell her that. I can't talk.

On the way Downtown we passed a clown driving a VW bug. I looked at Mom. We rolled our eyes. Halloween was yesterday. I dug out my quarters for the parking meter since she hardly ever remembers. The little black circles on the sidewalk made me feel sick again so I was trying to look straight ahead and that's when I saw the witch with the bicycle, not a fake one in a costume like the clown. This one had matted black hair and she was standing in the middle of the street leaning on her bike like I've seen her do before. Her head sagged like one of those giant sunflowers and then she started to whine and pretty soon she was screaming because she couldn't move. I knew Mom was making a mistake when she reached out and asked if she could help. The witch looked at me and spit on my shoe. Mom grabbed me and pulled me down the street and we looked funny in the reflection of the windows of the used bookstore rushing across a

poster of a pretty lady with blonde hair in a white dress who was trying way too hard to keep her skirt down in the wind.

Mom went straight up to the clerk behind the checkout desk and put her books on the counter. The clerk had on funny round glasses with wires around the rim. He looked at her the same way she looks at us when we bug her while she's reading or writing. I stared at the posters on the counter wall while she asked him how much for the books. He told her he needed identification and instead of giving it to him, she had a fit.

"What the hell do you mean 'my identification?' I've been coming in here fifteen years and you don't recognize me?"

Obviously not, I thought and turned around hoping no one else in the store was listening. There were already people behind us and the first guy in line looked down at me and raised his eyebrows like he understood what I was going through. I turned my head and looked back at the poster three inches from my face. It was him, the picture on the poster I mean, an Indian. A real one. *Black Dog* it said. I could read that. He was even wearing the same necklace as in the picture. When I turned back around and he looked at me again, he knew I'd recognized him and that made two times in less than one minute that someone—the same person—understood me. A record. Mom was swearing.

"God damn it anyway. First this woman spits on me and then you can't remember me or find my god damn redemption card. I have at least twenty dollars worth of credit." *Slam*. I wanted to correct her. The witch had spit on *me*. But I froze as soon as she slammed her fist on the pile of books and then I felt her turn around and suddenly stop as if she'd hit a window. Now she was embarrassed, like this Indian guy was a giant mirror. Like she saw how bad her anger was compared to him just standing

there all calm. And my mom had a thing for Indians. And then he goes, "I don't see how anyone could forget you." Mom said something nasty like "That's bull s—t," grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the store. I looked back. The famous Indian was still watching us. I threw him one of the granola bars I'd put in my back pocket just in case we forgot to eat. I aimed too high, but he just reached up his arm and caught it in mid air.

Mom couldn't stop talking about the bookstore scene. I could tell how upset she was cause she didn't even mention the Indian man. When we stopped at Taco Bell as a treat, she asked me if I thought the clerk was rude. I just shrugged. I nodded when she said he would probably remember her from now on. Then we were going through the line at Oceanside Grocery and the checker called her *m'am* instead of Molly or Mrs. O'Henry. She hates that. It makes her feel old. I was afraid she'd go off the deep end. So when we were heading back to the car, instead of waiting until her birthday, I gave her the flyer with the picture of the Indian man that I'd taken off the counter. She stopped wheeling the grocery cart, got down on her knees, hugged me really tight and started crying again. I was glad I'd brought the toilet paper.

After that, she decided we both needed haircuts. We spent the rest of the day in Emma Mae's beauty shop, which was kind of neat because I could see out my bangs for one thing and when I was finished Mom let me go next door to the ice cream store and buy a double scoop.

By the time we got home, it was nearly dark. My brother Darwin was doing his homework in front of the TV. My twin Rosetta, just a few seconds more six than me, was sitting cross-legged dressing her Barbie doll that Grandma Rose had given her against Mom's orders, and Charlotte was working at the computer.

"Mom," she said. "I want to plan my evening." She was staring at her screen.

Mom and me had a system. She put the bags on the table and took out the groceries. She put away the cans that went on the top shelves and I put away the stuff that went in the refrigerator and the bottom cupboards. No one said anything about our haircuts.

"What do you want to do for your birthday, Mom?" my oldest sister Charlotte said. She could talk and type at the same time.

Mom didn't answer.

Darwin looked up from his homework. "What are you going to do for your birthday, Mom?" he said.

Mom handed me a jar of spaghetti sauce. "If you want to know the truth, my honest truth..." Then she thought about it. "Never mind. You'll taunt me."

"What?" My sister rolled back in the computer chair. "We won't. What is it?"

I knew she was right but I wanted to hear.

"I want to go to Kansas."

"Kansas. *Kansas*. It's a harebrain who goes to Kansas."

Mom folded the brown paper grocery bag and handed it to me. "Harebrain," she said. I stuffed it between the counter and refrigerator with the rest of the bags and waited for Mom to respond. "Harebrain. Good word, Charlie." That's what she calls Charlotte for short.

"How could anyone live in Kansas," said Darwin. "There's no ocean."

"People live there. People even move there from the ocean."

"Name one."

I looked at Darwin, who stared at Mom while he chewed the tip of his eraser. His hair was nearly white on top from surfing so much.

“We’re not moving to Kansas, okay,” Mom said. “I just want to check out Grandpa’s farm. I have to decide what to do with it. Look around and tell me one other thing I own. That’s one hundred percent mine.” Her voice rose. “Just look around. Does that painting look like mine? Does this furniture look like something I would pick out? Be honest.”

We all stared at the couch and knew what she meant. It was way too new to belong to her.

“Mom. You’re having a hissy fit. Mitch will hear you,” said Charlotte.

“Since when have you cared about Mitch?”

“Are you taking him?” Darwin asked.

“Where? Kansas? I can go alone. Unless you want to come.”

“Not me,” said Charlotte.

“What about my surfing contest,” said Darwin. “You promised me?”

“Why do you want to go to Kansas, Mama,” asked Rose.

We stared at her with our mouths open, looking like a nest of starving baby birds.

“Maybe I want to find a realtor. Maybe I want to see my roots. Your roots, I might add. Maybe I want to rent it, find out what it’s worth, you know. Can’t I just go and see what I’ve inherited without everyone laying a guilt trip on me.”

“Do you have to go there?” asked Charlotte. “Can’t you just call your lawyer or have someone take a picture?”

Then Mom reminded all of us that tomorrow she would be forty, which meant she could make up her own mind about where she wanted to go for her birthday without us giving her a bunch of crap. I was glad the day was almost over.

“Like you can afford to go,” said Charlotte.

Mom seemed extra clumsy when she took out the grater and started shredding cheese. Then she cut her finger.

“Shit,” said Mom. She ran her finger under the kitchen faucet. “Where’s your father?”

“He’s not our father,” said Charlotte.

“He’s in bed.” Darwin stared at her and shook the sand out of his hair, then said, “Don’t you own the car?”

Then Rose spoke up and said he was having a glass of wine in their bedroom, but that’s not how it sounds when she talks. More like, *Heth having hith glath of wine and watching the evening newth where we can’t dithturb hith conthentration*. If it weren’t for her lisp Rose would sound old for her age. Everything I thought but couldn’t say came out in her, plus she’s psychic.

Mom sighed out loud again before telling Charlotte and Darwin to set the table. They started fighting about whose turn it was, so since it was almost Mom’s birthday, I took out the placemats and tried to find matching silverware. She started crying for the third time and went down the hall before I could pull out the toilet paper. I concentrated on the knives, forks and spoons. Charlotte said Mom must be on her period, but I think she was upset because she’s becoming invisible.

The clerk in the bookstore didn’t recognize me even though I’d been a customer for years. Then my precious Henry gave me that flyer with the saddest most expectant look on his face, this child who’s said less than three words in the past three years, and I cried because his one kind gesture tapped into everything wrong. The looks on my

children's faces scared me. Charlotte, my oldest, so hostile. Darwin, her brother, my oldest boy, chronically glum except when he surfed. The twins, my babies. Henry harbored a wordless, despairing hope counterbalanced by Rose, who saw black as white. Then there was mother, her rebuke the result of my festering need for her approval of something she could not understand. I stared at the bills piled on the counter waiting to be paid. I was reluctant to ask my husband for his half. This was his house I lived in. His belongings decorated every surface, every table, end table, counter, desktop, and most of the floor space. He had arranged the house the way he wanted it to remain years before we met. During our first month of marriage I surprised him by replacing his framed Dali lithograph which he'd hung in the entryway with a copy of an original late nineteenth century flat-style painting by Carl Sweezy. Sweezy was a Blue Cloud Arapaho from Oklahoma. The painting was titled *Peyote Ceremony*, and it was a stunning piece, the kind of traditional piece that collectors enraptured by the romantic myth of the American Indian covet. It must have been mid-summer when Sweezy painted the scene because the bottom edge of the teepee was rolled up, allowing fresh prairie air to enter that sacred space while offering the viewer a peak inside. The people sat in a circle at the teepee's perimeter. Each held something resembling a broad feather fan. They were men except for two women whose faces and bodies were draped in red blankets. An open fire lit the center of the shelter; its smoke rose up and out the blackened opening as if the painting were offering itself to the memory and preservation of tribal culture. The piece was a gift from my father, who'd been given it from my Great Aunt Amelia when he turned sixteen. He gave it to me when I turned sixteen, and from that point on I became one of them, a white person enraptured by the beauty of Native prairie culture. By the time I returned home from work, Mitch had replaced the painting with his Dali. He left the Sweezy on the floor leaning against the wall. I had

thought he would appreciate that I felt comfortable enough to mark my presence by contributing my most cherished possessions. Pretentious, that's what he'd called me.

Mitch's silence had attracted me at first. I perceived him as possessing the same brand of quiet that characterized my father, a calm nature that comes from solitary work, self-possessed and comfortable with himself, my father's variety of quiet that comes from a childhood of working the land. When I brought up my desire to contribute to our furnishings, he refused to discuss it. I held out hope that we would learn how to tap into a subterranean intimacy where we were comfortable with each other saying nothing; we'd eventually find our way from there. One day I brought home a cat, thinking an animal might help. The kids named him Gerome. Mitch didn't say a word. Silent as the air before an earthquake. As unresponsive as hard ground. He filled the gaps in our relationship with work and wine and a few dimes of coke now and then. I had given all that up after my first husband Christopher, the father of my four children, killed himself. It had been three years without a drink or mind altering substance. One more thing Mitch and I did not share.

I tried not to blame myself about Christopher. You're not supposed to blame yourself for someone else's suicide. But in my weakest moments, the "what if" that has been hovering like a scavenger descends and finishes me off. I try to push it away. I try to order its chaos.

When I married Mitch two years ago, I came with baggage. Unprocessed grief and four kids who weren't his. It was too soon. But an irresistible familiarity drew me to him. We had three good days of marriage. We laughed over everything, small things; we were wonderfully giddy. Mitch helped Charlotte with her algebra, he promised to take Darwin surfing, and he played Black Jack with Henry and Rose to teach them to add. Then came day four. My stomach lurched when I came home and saw the

way he had parked his BMW crooked and left the passenger door open. He was loaded. I knew those signs too well. And that's how it went. We would have three calm days and then day four and the open car door would come and I'd have to order the chaos again. I spend the rest of the week leaving work early so I could get home before he did. We'd eat lots of burritos and take out food for dinner because I couldn't think straight enough to prepare good food and only knew we couldn't go empty. Lots of early bedtimes on those burrito nights when I was recovering from Mitch's drunk.

I bent over and tucked Henry into bed. Darwin, on the top bunk, was reading *Romeo and Juliet* with his headphones on. In the other room, Charlotte talked on her phone softly so Rose could fall asleep in the adjacent twin bed. When I entered my room, Mitch was in bed drinking red wine in a large stem glass.

"Hi." I shook my head and grinned.

"What are you doing?" he said. He spoke with a lazy slur.

I flipped my hair.

"Oh." He watched me walk into the bathroom. "You got a haircut."

I turned on the warm water and took a white washcloth from its hook. I waited for him to say whether he liked it. The watered-down remains of a Jack Daniels on the rocks was in the same place on the counter where he'd put it last night when he had the nerve to tell me my thighs were getting so flabby he felt seasick when he went down on me. He laughed. A pain shot through my chest, deep and sharp, as I recalled those words, and scrubbed my face harder. I could have pointed out his sexual shortcomings—his narrow chest, his flaccid belly, his soft butt, the way his penis clicked, and that same noise he made, a tepid *aarh*, every time he orgasmed, even the pungent scent of him—but what purpose would it serve except to further erode our lovemaking.

I placed Henry's crumpled gift, the flyer for the benefit, next to my car keys on my bedside table. I began to undress, folded my sweater and placed it back in the drawer, hung up my jeans, aligned my boots in the closet, dropped my bra back into its top drawer and tossed my panties into the hamper. I felt Mitch watching me as I walked across the narrow distance from the closet to bed. I pulled down the covers on my side. The sheets were cold. I settled myself and felt Gerome curled at the foot of the bed under the comforter. When I reached down to pick him up, the blankets fell away and Mitch glanced at my breasts, then turned off the television, reached over to the bedside table for his glass and swilled the last half-inch.

I propped the cat up against my knees and rubbed his soft belly. "I talked to Mother today." Mitch's wine glass scraped the nightstand. "Told her I want to go to Kansas."

His uncombed hair stuck out in thick brown peaks and little upturned purple points stained the corners of his mouth made him appear to be smiling.

"She told me I was crazy. She said the fog was depressing me."

He looked at me, eyebrows rising like a drawbridge.

"Then I went to the used book store with Henry to trade some old books for something on Kansas." Silence. "The clerk didn't even recognize me." He stared blankly at me. "I've been going there since Charlotte was an infant."

"So?" he said.

"The clerk asked for my identification. Shouldn't they know me by now?"

Mitch paused a moment before telling me I was ordinary looking when I didn't bother to fix myself up. "A book clerk doesn't get paid enough to recognize you, anyway."

I glanced at myself in the mirrored closet door. My lips were compressed with spite. I pressed my face into my palms. This wasn't going well and it was my fault. I was the one who'd brought my mother into our bed.

"What do you want from me?" he said.

I want to go to Kansas. I slid back under the covers without answering. *I am going to Kansas.* The cat nudged his face into mine and took a several strands of my hair between his teeth and tugged, forgiving or forgetting or avenging the fact that I'd tossed him off the bed this morning. I swatted him away as my husband rolled toward me. He ran his hand down my stomach to my pubic hair and started rubbing my clitoris. I smelled his red wine, cigarettes and musk cologne as I searched his narrow chest with my palm, feeling his mass of soft dark curly hair, fighting a scream. When we were finished, I turned away and listened for sounds of my children. I thought about Kansas and glimmer. I thought about the days when my father was alive.

On the morning of my fortieth birthday Mitch drove to an old Gold Rush town in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. He was one of a team of lawyers for a land development firm in the final stages of defending a project to transform a thousand-acre cattle ranch of oak woodlands and golden poppies into a golf course and ranchettes. He had written the environmental impact report and his team of lawyers was scheduled to present it before the town's planning commission. When I had first met him, I hoped that environmental law inferred saving a hillside or field of wild lupins from becoming a shopping mall once in awhile. On the contrary, my husband had become an expert in legalizing land rape by negotiating mitigations to compensate for the irretrievable loss of natural habitat.

I stood in the middle of the livingroom staring at the birthday card he had placed on the counter before he left. When I opened the card, a crisp one hundred dollar bill fell to the floor. The card's French script lettering and pink roses looked like something he'd bought last minute at the gas station. Inside he'd written a promise of a summer backpacking trip along the Pacific Crest Trail starting at whichever point I wanted. He was good at making promises—bad at keeping them.

Scents of garlic and warm chocolate filled the kitchen. Charlotte had made spaghetti. She and Rose had baked a cake. They decorated the top with tiny Mexican skeletons because my birthday fell on November 2, the Day of the Dead. As my deceased husband liked to say, I “was born on the Day of the Dead—*Dia de los Muertos*—the day the veil lifts and spirits dance with their believers.” He was one. The

kids and I planned to place a piece of birthday cake in the front doorway like Mexican people do on this holy day, offering food to their deceased ones.

Henry shoved something into my hand, the crumpled flyer he'd given me yesterday. I had left it on the nightstand. This must have been the cue for the three of them to sing "Happy Birthday." When they finished, Rose put her arms around my waist and looked up at me.

"You are the most beautiful mommy in the world."

I stroked my little girl's hair. She melted into me, soft and loving.

"Aren't you going to the Grange Hall?" said Charlotte.

The question surprised me.

"The benefit. To see that Black Dog guy."

I didn't know what she meant.

"The flyer, Mom. Geez. Hello."

"You have to do something," said Darwin.

"I am doing something," I said. "I'm with my favorite people about to eat pasta and a homemade chocolate birthday cake."

Darwin, who inherited his father's intensity, waited for me to respond further. I silently thanked the ocean gods for the way a simple wave could wash away his gloomy film. Darwin was eleven when his father killed himself. He had been an artist; he ate organic and recycled before recycling became an industry. He had earnestly believed that no one owned the land, that we're only stewards in this life, which was probably the main reason the children and I don't own a house today. Chris and I had some good times; moreover, we loved each other. A woman can love a junkie. Even a good woman, a nice woman, perhaps especially a nice one who doesn't know how to turn down love, especially the roguish kind. And when he kicked the dope and made my

dreams come closer to true, life failed him and his spirit left. Right there under the living room stairs with our three year old twins sitting in their booster chairs. Eleven o'clock in the morning. I was at work when it happened. Darwin and Charlotte were at school. Only the twins saw him hanging by a rope from the top stair, saw the wooden chair we'd bought at the flea market kicked out from beneath him. The neighbor suspected something was wrong when the twins didn't stop crying. Henry hasn't spoken since. Rose seemed unaffected except that she began to talk about a place she'd never been. She described this place in detail down to the lightning charred tree stump sticking out of the middle of a lake. If she weren't my child, I'd swear she'd once lived there.

"It's okay, Mama," Rose said, assuring me that Charlotte would babysit while I went out to do something special for my birthday. It was part of their plan for me. I looked down at Henry. He had already weighed the situation and his expression said that if I went out as a normal adult should on her birthday things would *be* normal, and if I didn't, his idea for my birthday—his entire being—would have somehow failed.

The fog drifted like golden tulle under the lamps of the Grange Hall. The parking lot was full and a small crowd hung out on the porch. One man, smoking, wore a long brown braid and a black cowboy hat. He tilted his head back to exhale. I ducked the smoke and wound through a half dozen people, several who greeted me with a quizzical nod. I felt like I did not belong, but I was used to that. The ticket taker, a woman with long silver hair and a gentle face, sat behind a long table with an open cash box and a roll of red tickets. She wasn't charging admission, but I was expected to pay a donation. Small stacks of handouts had been arranged at the end of the table. I gave the woman a five-dollar bill, and she tore off a ticket and handed it to me. I picked out

flyers while people drifted in, the man in the cowboy hat and a few others I recognized from the porch. Half of the metal folding chairs were taken and half of the crowd still milled about. It was an earthy crowd, lots of long skirts and long hair and turquoise. The wall clock showed eight o'clock. I gave myself one hour. After that I would go home.

"Someone's waving to you." The silver-haired woman's face brightened. She said "someone" as if it wasn't just anyone. I turned toward the stage and realized that "someone" was the man on the poster who'd made that smart ass comment as I was leaving the bookstore. His back hair was pulled back in a ponytail that reached the small of his back. He was smiling at me from the stage. He pursed his lips and pointed with them to a seat up front by the center aisle. I scanned the poster. *Stevie Ray Black Dog*.

"Don't lose your ticket." The gentle-faced woman touched my arm. "It might be your lucky night."

By the time I reached the front of the room and sat down, Stevie Ray had gone back stage. The conversations around me made me feel exactly how I knew I would feel— alone and self-conscience—so I started reading the collection of literature I'd taken from the table: Stop the Relocation of Elders from Ancestral Lands--Repeal Public Law 93-531; Fishing Rights Taken from First Nation; Uranium Tailings on Native American lands; Stevie Ray Black Dog from the Black Hills Speaks on Genocide; Free Marion Daniels.

Stevie Ray's hand on my shoulder startled me. His fingers were delicate for his height. He bent over and put his face close to mine. I could smell his hair. It smelled liked corn.

"Glad you made it."

He had a nice voice, low and full throated, a subtly rich and monotone way of speaking that curled his English at the edges.

“Why don’t you hang around when it’s over?” he said.

I said I would. “For a couple of minutes.”

When he returned to the stage, I scribbled notes on the back of a flyer to keep my hands busy. *Stevie Ray*, I wrote, *built like a stick figure on the wall of a cave, like an upside down triangle. Shoulders broad, torso tapered, short, thick neck. Worn jeans hang low on narrow hips. Faded red tee shirt tucked in. Turquoise on glabrous brown skin.* I counted four pieces—the thick silver bracelet on his right wrist, the ring, and turquoise disks hung from each ear lobe. He was oblivious to the audience, including me, as he set up a rack of different sized wooden flutes next to the microphone.

When Stevie Ray began to talk about Marion Daniels, I imagined pitching the story to my editor. According to Stevie Ray, Marion was wrongly found guilty of killing two police officers in South Dakota. He looked grave when he talked about Daniels. Then he spoke about the forced government relocation of thousands of Navajo and Hopi from their ancestral homes in Arizona for coal. I thought, if not a story about Marion, perhaps my editor would consider a story about the relocation. Or about Peabody Coal and Enron. I filled out one flyer and began scribbling on the next.

“The government continues to dump its uranium waste on our reservations, to sterilize our women, to relocate us for the coal that belongs in the ground as mother earth’s liver, to take away our fishing and hunting rights. It’s not just the Indian who suffers from this. When the earth becomes lifeless our children become alienated from mother earth’s cycles. When we fail to teach them that the environment is sacred, we will all suffer. I’m telling you this. The rest is on each of you.”

He picked out a light colored flute, one with a dark brown bear totem attached with leather tongue. Then he began to play a Native song that was high and plaintive, a deer hunting song, every so often bringing the song to a breathless end note that sounded like a woman's cry of longing. When he closed his eyes and began to sing, I thought of my first husband. I hadn't heard this kind of music for awhile, not since my first husband and I attended sweatshops at the university. When I watched Stevie Ray, his long shiny black hair and dark brown skin, his long, thin bow legs, something inside me came back to life and I became those end notes, yearning for something I couldn't name.

I wiped the corners of my eyes just as the young man next to me passed the donation basket. I pulled out another five dollar bill and passed the basket to the woman sitting on the other side of me, a plain looking woman with long loose hair and beaded earrings who resembled the woman at the entrance. She smiled at me as I rose from my chair to leave.

At the t-shirt table I checked out tapes, trying to find one by him, trying to look like I was doing something instead of waiting around for him. Then, his fingers on my elbow, like a rare dream that takes you where you want to go.

"That was good," I said. "You have a beautiful voice."

Stevie Ray said something. I had to ask him to repeat it.

"Let's go to the cafe off the main street," he said.

When I told him I had kids at home, he pointed to the phone. "See if they'll let you stay out a little longer." He lifted my hand and tapped my wedding band. "You're married."

I nodded. He turned his head and scanned the room. The gray hairs at his temple relaxed me in an odd way, as if I had something on him, as if this sign of age eliminated the younger competition and I had a better chance of keeping him.

“What about you?”

“If I had a woman, she’d be here.”

I looked at his face. He hadn’t answered the question, not really. “You do this for a living?”

“Come on to beautiful women?”

I laughed and shrugged him off. “No, the performing.” I tried to shine his come on, but he had flattered me and I hoped it was true—that he found me beautiful.

“Once in awhile I get paid to sing. And you?”

“Four kids.”

“That it?”

I couldn’t tell if he was kidding. “I’m a reporter.”

He became more alert and tilted his head.

“I’ve been taking notes on you.” I looked around for a pay phone.

On the drive to the café I told him about Kansas and my father’s farm.

“You have a farm?” he said. “Let’s move there.”

I laughed. He said the craziest things. “This place and that farm are on the same latitude? The thirty-seventh. Do you know what that means?”

“What do you think it means?” he said.

“They were the same place before the earth bloomed,” I said, as if he, being Indian, would understand my metaphysical musings.

“Cool.”

I waved my arm between shifting gears, emphasizing my point. Stevie Ray surprised me again when he grabbed my hand in mid-air and held it for a moment. As

we walked from the car along the sidewalk, he took my hand and held it until we arrived at the café. I felt giddiness coming on.

Stevie Ray ordered coffee, black, and tore the tops off three packets of white sugar, which he dumped in all at once and didn't bother stirring. I ordered chamomile tea.

"So, where are you staying?"

"With friends. I'm from Colorado, but I travel a lot. Want to get back to Indian Country. It's nice out here. Liberal." He looked at me. "Beautiful."

I watched him talk and wondered where exactly Indian Country was today.

"Wherever there's more Indians than wasichus." He grinned. "Let's get a motel."

I nearly spit out my tea. "We just met."

"Why waste time." He sounded irritated. "We're going to end up doing it anyway."

A despicable thing to say. I turned him down, but tempered my rejection because I wanted him and hoped he'd ask again before the night was through. He made my heart smile and the lust I felt for him oozed.

After the café, I drove him along the shoreline and wished the fog would clear so I could be the first one to show him how beautiful it was when the lights of the city wharf reflected on the bay. I tossed his proposition back and forth: I should absolutely not have sex with this man I'd just met, but I deeply wanted to make love to him. With each volley, the breath of our words, thoughts, and our electricity sparked as he danced and I sidestepped toward our unnamed bed.

"I don't have a place to sleep tonight," he said. "We left the benefit too early and I didn't get a key or an address or nothing from my friends."

Even his bullshit sounded like sweet, urgent courtship. "You could stay at my house," I said. "You could sleep on the couch."

"How far do you live from here?"

"Not far." I considered the children's reaction when they found Stevie Ray of the poster in the house when they woke up. Maybe he'd play his flute for them. Henry might think his plan had worked. Darwin might snap out of his mood. Charlotte would tell her grandmother that I'd brought a strange man home to spend the night. He would have to leave before dawn.

"Want to hear a love song?"

Of course I did.

He looked straight ahead. "I wrote it," and as I drove us back to town, he began to sing in Ute, like he had at the benefit. "In English, *'I love the way my girl turns my head, whistling through the clouds for father sun, whistling until the sun comes out. I love the way my girl whistles in my ear, sweet, sweet love songs.'*"

That's all it took. It didn't take much, and when he confessed he did not have enough money to cover the motel, that didn't stop me either. I opened my backpack and fished out the birthday card from Mitch with the hundred dollar bill, choosing to believe everything Stevie Ray said, including his promise to pay me back the next time we met.

We wound up at the dingiest motel in town. The room was small, the furniture was plastic, the indoor-outdoor carpet soiled, the light dim and the bedspread thin and worn from years of covering the kind of people who couldn't afford better or were too eager to do what we were so eager to do.

His hair gave out a musky scent as he loosened his braid, jet black falling past his waist. I wanted to comb it with my fingers, but he kissed me instead.

“Okay,” he said, as if I’d passed a readiness test. He set me on the edge of the bed and told me to take off my clothes. He undressed, scooted me toward the head of the bed, pulled down the covers, and watched me slip between the nubby white sheets. He lay on top of me and pushed himself between my legs, and that was good because I was ready. His back fanned out beneath my palms as he bent his head and kissed my breasts, then my mouth. I touched the small scars on his chest, my fingertips shining like small moons next to his smooth brown skin. He buried his face in my neck. I ached from the feel of him. “Easy, easy,” he said. Easy it was. His black hair fell on either side our faces. His breath smelled like biscuits. I tasted salt on his shoulder before I arched my head and we came.

He rolled me over and sat me on top of him, ran his hands over my breasts.

“Do you have a home?” I asked him.

“It’s a long story. I’ll tell you more next time I see you.” He squeezed my hips and raised his head, straining to watch the place where we merged, then he grit his teeth, threw back his head and screamed. He grabbed my waist and gently rolled me onto my back, kissed me softly on my stomach.

“Delicious,” he said, getting up and heading for the bathroom. I ran my fingers along the silk between my legs, feeling our mix of thick sexual juice and my apricot fullness. It would take one minute, less, to reach that blissful peak again. But I worried how Stevie Ray might react if he came back into the room and found me masturbating to a climax. I got out of bed and began dressing while he finished washing himself over the sink basin. He appeared disappointed when he came back in and saw me sling my backpack over my shoulder. I could not be sure.

“Kids,” I said before he could ask.

He lay back down on the bed, hands under his head. “I’m going to stay here, smell the sheets, dream of you, think of that pleasant feeling.”

I looked at his body stretched out on the bed, the ends of his long black hair touching his belly button, the Sundance scars above each pectoral, his relaxed uncircumcised penis and dark balls.

He held my hand as we walked to my car. He opened the driver’s side and helped me in. “When can I see you, again?”

I shut the door and rolled down the window, trying to tamp down my eagerness. Tomorrow would be good, but I didn’t say so.

“I’m going to a pow wow next weekend,” he said. “Want to go?”

I nodded. When he kissed me on the cheek, I reached out to smooth a stray hair, but he grasped my hand and kissed it. When he turned and walked back toward the room, the motel blended into the night except for a small porch light outside each room and the yellow and blue neon sign, *Seaside Mote*, that was missing its last letter.

When I arrived home, the birthday cake we’d placed on the front porch was still there. Gerome greeted me and began licking the frosting. By now, my elation was eroding at an exponential speed. I felt alone and afraid. I opened the door to Charlotte and Rose’s room. The boys were asleep on the floor. I tried not to wake them and went to my room, remembering the way it felt when he’d first taken my hand by surprise, and the song he’d sung. *My girl whistles to the sky and drives the clouds away. I love the way she whistles in my ear.* Something like that. I whispered *I want you* into my pillow as if its softness were Stevie Ray’s hair and let my fingers travel to the moist tangible remains of him and me.

Nine days later, I left Mitch and the weathered redwood beach house that he inherited from his grandmother. I sat on the edge of the sand that stretched to the sometimes soft, sometimes rough breaking waves that pushed and pulled me to sleep because nothing else could, and I wondered where exactly that thirty-seventh latitude stretched from here. I had reached that edge. I literally looked out to the Pacific Ocean from the California shoreline, the continent's furthest western. I was tired and looking for something. I reached the parenthetical state of being forced to look within, because there was no place left to go. I had to pack. Our clothes, the kids' toys, my Sweezy, and books I had already taken to my mother's before Mitch returned from the foothills. Without our belongings, the house didn't look any different, more spacious perhaps, as if the housecleaner had spent a few extra hours straightening things, but not empty, not as if five people who had lived there for more than two years had just moved out. I took photographs and the stunted saguaro that had survived my neglect. I bid farewell to this beautiful stretch of beach and left.

On the day Mitch returned, I went back to pick up Gerome. Mitch was standing at the stove sautéing apple sausage and red bell peppers.

"Do we need to talk?" He raised his head from stirring.

I shook my head. "Too late."

"A little sudden, don't you think."

If Stevie Ray hadn't come along, I would have stuck it out a while longer. I didn't say that. Instead, I looked at his half empty wine glass and said, "I spent your gift card with the hundred dollar bill on a motel room with a man I just met."

He jerked his head from the frying pan. "I'm surprised."

“That someone wants me?”

He knocked back a mouthful of wine. “You are a self centered, neurotic, lazy bitch.”

“I’m not lazy.”

“You’re a fucked up, ungrateful parasite.” He poured another glass. “And your kids hate me.”

“I hate you. They don’t trust you.” He seemed more hostile and drunker than I’d seen him before.

“How could they trust me when you encourage them to hate me,” he said. “You revel in it. You fucking revel in it. It’s your twisted, screwed up way of getting back.”

For what, I wondered. I wanted him to elaborate. He reached around to his back pocket and took out his wallet. After fumbling with the contents, he held out a picture of himself in a black convertible Porsche with a woman sitting beside him, right beside him, like on the gear shift console, massive red curly hair, not even that attractive. He liked redheads. Said many times they had flair. Liked their temper. She was smiling. I studied the car, baffled. Mitch didn’t own a Porsche, not ever. Then I studied the background. They were posed in front of a motel, an old pink adobe, with a sign “Sonora Inn” hanging from the entrance.

“We’re even,” he said. “Did you get all your shit out of here?”

“You’re having an affair?” I said.

He stuffed the picture back into its hiding place.

“Is that recent?” I asked.

“Just get the fucking cat and don’t come back,” he said. “I’m not paying alimony. Don’t even try.”

I couldn't get my feelings sorted out or my thoughts together or find the words for either, so I concentrated on the cat. Gerome went limp when I picked him up and pushed him head first into his carrier. My hands were shaking.

"I hate that fucking cat." Mitch shouted from the kitchen. "And don't bring it back. Don't think you can ever come back."

It was the eleventh day of the eleventh month when I left my second husband for another man. I left because of the way Stevie Ray's skin liberated my touch. I left because of the way Mitch's felt like shame to my touch. But the real reason I left, I didn't even know yet.

When I brought Gerome into the kitchen and set him down, my Mother didn't seem to notice.

"Sit down, Molly," she said. "I have something to say."

An inexplicable dread rose inside me. I held my breath waiting for the albatross to smack me in the head.

"You've made a big mistake. You should try to work it out," she said. "That's what mature people do. Your kids are going to suffer from your packing them around. Someday you'll pay dearly."

She had enjoyed my marriage to a well off professional more than I had. In my mother's eyes, I had returned to the failed upper middle class status I plummeted to when I married my children's father. Even my presence at her house had caused her social status to slide a notch or two. I imagined her reaction to Stevie Ray Black Dog and decided I would never spoil my time with him by telling her.

I looked at her long, strong fingernails and the way they wrapped entirely around her coffee cup, hands and nails that I had not inherited. I studied her ample bosom and the steadfastness of her peremptory breathing. I would have been a different woman if I'd been endowed with her breasts and sturdy nails. They would connect me to her like some mysterious, genetic bonding. I needed my mother to endorse my feelings. I yearned to share the authentic parts of myself so much that I started to muffle the voice of my better judgment, the voice that reminded me this is the woman who told you *Kansas is like burros and Indians*. The more honest I tried to be, the more aggressive her retaliation.

"Isn't this better than if I'd moved in with another man, or stayed in my marriage and continued to be miserable?"

"What man?"

The sting that comes of sharing with my mother flared. No, I didn't dare mention Stevie Ray. "I'm just saying, I'm here, now."

Mom pointed toward the other room. "You certainly are. A tent in my living room, teenage makeup in my bathroom and already five times the dishes in my sink. I've never seen so much laundry. Molly ..." She looked stricken, as if she had identified something terribly tragic in me. She leaned forward and stroked my cheek, then ran her hand along my jaw. "Hold still." She plucked a single black hair from beneath my chin.

I called his pager a few times. He never returned the calls and he never got around to taking me to that pow-wow. I didn't know where he lived—some place I imagined between here and the Mississippi. Arizona. Colorado. Oklahoma. South

Dakota. Indian Country. Canada for all I knew. I called him whenever I could drum up a reason—once when I decided to run the story of Marion Daniels’ incarceration by my editor. Again, when I moved out and wanted him to have my new number. Once I watched the breaking news about a forest fire on the Apache Reservation and could not control the impulse to call after watching the interview of a tribal official whose voice sounded painfully like his. Another time I fooled myself into believing that he hadn’t tried to reach me because something horrible had happened. But really, I just hoped he’d be there on the other end and we could start up again. I handled the whole thing as if he were an addiction. The craving will pass, I told myself. Don’t buy into it. But it didn’t pass. I have relived that night many times, the smell of his breath, the salt of his skin, the feel of his hair, the sound of his voice singing and coming. If I knew which way he’d gone, I would send a prayer in his direction.

My editor Hal shouted, “Molly, get over here.” I could tell by the tone of voice, the flatness of those ice blue eyes, and the pockmarked face devoid of expression that he was going to chew me out. I was in the middle of writing a school board advance. As I pushed back my chair and approached his desk, his eyes followed me like yellowjackets to meat. My story was up on his screen. He asked me if I had a quote from each feed store in the county before I filed.

“Well did you?”

I couldn’t think fast enough.

“It’s an easy yes or no answer.”

I wasn’t easy. Nothing felt easy. I’d called Western Tack and Feed, Hales and Simmons, and Larkin Valley. “I called three stores.”

He swiveled in his chair, reached into a bottom desk drawer, and pulled out a phone book, tossed the book on his desk the same way Mitch used to toss me money to pay the bills. “We don’t want to lose ads because you ticked off the competition.”

I had my own phone book back at my desk. I looked straight ahead so he couldn’t see my lips tug down at their corners as if they’d lost their defiance of gravity. Rachel, the police beat reporter and my best friend, sat in the desk next to mine. She mouthed “asshole,” then slipped her hand under her desk and flipped Hal the finger.

I thumbed through the yellow pages, not especially upset that deadline had passed and my story wouldn’t run. It could run tomorrow. The declining equestrian population and its economic effects on the county wasn’t going away anytime soon. Several times

I'd tried to convince Hal to let me write a story on Stevie Ray. It was a conflict of interest, but Hal didn't know that and I couldn't help myself. Hal said I should have written an advance. Stevie Ray, he said, was just an Indian trying to make a living out of being an Indian. Hal the Asshole. Then I pitched the Marion Daniels story. Hal had heard of Marion, but got him mixed up with Leonard Peltier. He reminded me that this was a local newspaper or news and record, not an investigative publication. Furthermore, he said, Daniels was not only in prison half way across the country, he was an old story. He'd done a bad thing, and I could leave the left-wing politics to the alternative news rags.

I hated my job. I hated the way it slowly drained my desire to write. I hated the trifles I had to transform into news. I did not want to work here and I despised Hal's petty despotism. A voice that started small and grew into a chorus told me I wouldn't be feeling so trapped if I'd talked things over with Mitch before I'd pushed our differences to the point of no return. *And don't come back.* I shouldn't have told him about Stevie Ray and the *Mote* motel. That loathsome mental chorus repeated its refrain: I'd screwed up. Mitch had provided a home for the kids and me for more than two years. Heat rose from my collar and I began to sweat until my blouse stuck to the small of my back. I could have been planning that backpacking trip he'd promised me for my birthday instead of pitying myself for having to write stories that I didn't care about. Then I remembered the photo of that woman in the Porsche and the first time Mitch started talking about how redheads turned him on.

A tiny black spider crawled on the carpet at my feet. It inched across the room, reminding me of the spider I had seen that night with Stevie Ray. I'd rolled down my

car window after he'd asked when he could see me again, believing he wanted to see me again. A small black spider had been crawling along a stray hair toward his scalp. I reached up to smooth it down, see if it was real, but Stevie Ray had flinched. He grabbed my hand and kissed it. I'd forgotten about that spider until I saw this one crawling on the rug as if it meant something. Maybe my lover had lice. Maybe Stevie Ray was a louse.

"Speed it up, Molly. I need your story."

The phone was ringing. The owner of Watsonville Feed answered. He verified that there were far fewer horse owners in the county because there was far less open land, and the demographics and job industry had changed over the past fifteen years from agricultural to service, construction, and recreation. People stabled their horses these days. Business was so bad and the land so valuable that, my man on the other end of the phone admitted, he had caved. His store and property were up for sale. I typed the information between graphs, checked the punctuation and spelling, knowing Hal wouldn't catch my typos. I re-filed the story and got up from my chair.

"Molly. I need your story."

"Goddamn it." The newsroom went dead quiet. Rachel leaned back in her chair, and watched me, eyes wide. She took the plastic top of a pen she'd about chewed to death out of her mouth as if she were expecting to come to my rescue.

"Stop picking on me," I yelled. "I am sick of it." I went into the lounge and poured myself a cup of hours-old coffee. When I walked outside, Rachel was already on the back steps smoking a cigarette. She offered me one. I hadn't smoked in three years. When I finished, I asked her for another.

When I walked in from work, the twins sat cross-legged inside the door flap of Darwin's purple and yellow three-man tent that had remained in the livingroom since we pitched it five months ago. They were watching television while Mother sat at the corner card table teaching Charlotte how to play Mah Jong and sipping a martini from a thick, long stemmed, oversized glass. My mouth watered. I wanted to drink from a glass like that and nibble on a green pimento-stuffed olive. I stuck my head inside the tent and kissed Rose and Henry who hardly budged and craned their necks around my body to get a clear view of the television. I went over to Charlotte and gave her a hug.

"Mom. You're choking me." She raised her face and kissed the air beside my cheek.

I patted my mother on the top of her head and rubbed her shoulders. "Any messages?" She wasn't drinking her martini.

"No," said Mother. "Are you expecting any?"

"Always." I started down the hallway.

"What? You're mumbling. Speak up."

I didn't have the energy to repeat myself. Too many meaningless words. I was sick of words. Darwin was lying on my bed in the spare room, reading. I sat down and swatted him on the butt.

"So what kind of miracle is this?"

He didn't answer.

"What are you reading?"

He still didn't answer.

"You're mad."

"Anything's better than hanging out in the livingroom, which is supposed to be my room, and listening to them. Charlie's a total bitch and Grandma backs her up."

He groaned when I tried to make a joke. "We should split them up. Charlie can have your tent and you can sleep with Grandma."

Romeo and Juliet fell to the floor.

"When are we going to get our own place?" he said. "It's been five months."

One night with Stevie Ray had not been worth this way station of gloom. Food and rent, which had tripled in the three years I had lived with Mitch and continued to inflate, would consume my entire salary, and I needed to start paying property taxes on my dad's farm, due next month. At this rate, I could never make ends meet without my mother's roof over our heads.

"This is going to have to do."

Darwin stared at the ceiling with his arms at his side. "Even Mitch was better than this."

"Now he has a name?" I nudged my son over, picked up the novel and lay down beside him. "Show me where you left off."

"At the beginning."

I read:

*"Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
where civil blood makes civil hands un-
clean.*

*From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life.””*

I used my best storytelling voice. Before I finished the prologue describing this ancient town torn by enduring family rivalries and healed by the death of two young “star-cross’d” innocents, my son was asleep. His face looked smooth, without worry. His eyelids sunk a bit, making him appear immensely vulnerable. I examined his smooth skin, a smooch of hair around his upper lip and cheeks. His body was already longer than mine. He would fill out even more to become an interesting looking man, like his father. Tonight he had his father’s sadness, even in sleep.

“Mom, you’re staring at me.” He turned onto his side.

That night I slept on the livingroom floor in Darwin’s tent with the television controls on my chest and the twins pressed to on either side of me. I woke up to twenty-four hour news and turned it off, vowing to call the airlines in the morning and book a roundtrip ticket to Kansas by way of Oklahoma City. I would save some money by staying at my aunt and uncle’s ranch in Osage County on the outskirts of Ponca City. The Kansas border was only a few miles north from there. I would be an easy drive from their place to my father’s farm and back. The children would have to stay here with Mother. She wouldn’t like it. Not at all. If anything went wrong, I’d never hear the end of it.

It was midnight when my plane landed in Oklahoma City. I imagined the young, shifting mountains of California rising and falling into the ancient plains of my father's birthplace and the filigree of rivers and tributaries that spread east from the Rockies toward the Missouri. I imagined the farm and the river that wound through the middle of that quarter section of land, protecting it from tornados.

Elman stood at the baggage claim in his El Paso Petroleum cap with both hands in his pants pockets, scanning the tops of everyone's heads, presumably looking for me. His expression didn't change when he saw me and continued perusing the crowd, but Aunt Harriet recognized me immediately.

"Molly." Her outstretched arms were ready to hug me.

Elman looked disappointed. "You're short," he said. He said it two more times as I followed them out of the airport to the parking lot where he'd left his Ford pickup. He was a tall, thin man and could have been attractive except for his bulbous nose. Harriet must have sensed me staring.

"That man's lost forty pounds in half a year," said Harriet.

"Forty pounds," Elman repeated, "thanks to Harriet."

His jeans bagged in the buttocks.

"He eats everything he wants, just not as much as he wants. None of them fad diets. Just good old common sense."

Elman hoisted my luggage into the bed of the pickup behind the cab and motioned for me to sit between him and Harriet. I didn't want to sit squished between an aunt and uncle I just met, but by the time we hit the highway, I'd become comfortable with their

bodies pressed on either side of mine. They were in their mid-seventies and one of them smoked, judging from the smell of stale cigarette butts. We made conversation about my children, what grade they were in, who they looked like. Nothing serious. They didn't ask me about Mitch. I was grateful for that. They both wanted to know how my mother was getting on without my father, Harriet's brother. It wasn't until I heard myself answer that I realized my mother didn't seem one bit different since my father had died. No more or less sad or happy, as if nothing had happened.

"She's fine," is all I said. "Her same spunky self."

"Uh huh, uh huh," said Harriet.

"Ornery as ever, you mean," said Elman. "Sometimes the only thing between us old folks and the grave is orneriness."

We drove through Oklahoma for miles without a moon or so much as a street lamp. I couldn't see the landscape, but even so the openness was overpoweringly vast and monotonous. Elman and Harriet's ranch was located on Osage tribal lands. The land used to belong to my Great Aunt Adelia on my father's side and her husband John Rain, who was Osage. When they died, none of John's children wanted to ranch, so Harriet and Elman stepped in.

Elman pointed into the dark and described the long finger of Kaw Lake that ran along the roadside. As we drove, I wondered how it would be to live in these parts, jogged into the moment by potholes and sudden dips or a wild animal appearing in the headlights.

When we approached the metal gate to their ranch, Elman slowed the truck to an idle as Harriet got out, unhooked the chain link and pushed the gate forward; she stood by the side of the road until he'd driven through. It was one of those things they'd done so many times it didn't require a word between them. I could smell grass and wisteria as we drove over the cattle guard and down a long dirt driveway to their doublewide trailer.

Harriet said the doublewide wasn't much, but she and Elman preferred it to the stone house my Great Aunt Adelia and her husband John Rain used to live in. She led me to my room, carrying a small stack of faded green towels. Framed photographs of relatives hung on the dark grain plywood wall beside the bed. I wondered if any of them could be my father or grandfather, or which of the women might be Adelia. I guessed the one in the white cowboy hat sitting on horseback to be my Great Uncle John Rain. He was the only one with brown skin. The woman sitting sidesaddle behind him must have been her, a pretty woman, slim and intelligent looking even as she balanced on the rump of a horse.

Harriet and Elman were old enough to retire from ranching. But Elman proclaimed retirement would kill him and that his Harriet wouldn't have anything to do if she didn't have him to keep an eye on. She had already cooked oatmeal and was cutting a coupon off a cereal box by the time I rose and walked into the kitchen. It was nearly ten o'clock. Elman sat at the counter picking on homegrown strawberries and drinking thin Midwestern coffee. Everything was worked in—a dark brown shag carpet and walls of dark mahogany wood paneling; replicas of farm landscape paintings hung in ornate gold frames. A piano took up an entire corner and along each wall were shelves full of

knickknacks and family photographs, several of them wedding pictures. I cringed when I imagined my aunt and uncle finally getting up the nerve to ask me about my marital status.

"Well, little lady, what do you want to do today?" Elman's drawl was much more pronounced than Harriet's. Harriet had grown up in southern Kansas. Elman moved to Texas when he got out of the army and considered himself a Texan down to his boots and that inflection which had mellowed from fifty years of marriage to Harriet. He looked Texan. In fact, he reminded me of Lyndon Johnson.

"That's okay you're staring at that nose," said Harriet. "That's what comes of watching so much W.C Fields. You probably don't remember W.C. Of course he didn't just watch. I told him one day that if he didn't stop drinking I was going to leave him and find another man." She glanced up at me as she poured milk into my oatmeal, and I could tell she had something serious to say.

"We women can't put up with that kind of behavior. It's just like those bad habits seep right into the genes and get passed on down to the next bunch. I told him if you want for me to stick around and be the mother of your children, you'd better quit the sauce. Well, he didn't at first. You can see that plain as day. Just look at that protuberance. But I kept complaining and one day he just up and quits. He hasn't had a drink for, what, how long? Elman, you tell us now."

Elman grunted. "It's bad luck to boast."

Harriet turned sideways and wiped her hands. "Men are like that. So pent up with their pridefulness. It's always been that way." She went over to the sink and rinsed dishes, and then placed them carefully into slots in the dishwasher. By contrast, she had

the fine nose of a hawk. Her skin was olive compared to Elman's ruddy cheeks. She wore her gray hair in a tight bun wrapped around her head. Last night I'd walked down the hallway to the bathroom. Her bedroom door was open, and I saw her at the dressing table when her hair was down. She had taken the tail of it and swung it over her shoulder to brush the tip.

I stared at my oatmeal. "I'd like to see the farm."

"We can do that for you, little lady."

"And I'd like to visit Aunt Adelia's grave."

Elman and Harriet shot each other one of those looks that long-married couples share. Then Elman looked at me sideways.

"Everybody loved Adelia. She was smart." He put a punch in that last word before leaning his palms on the counter while getting up from the stool. I looked at Harriet.

"It's true," she said and whisked his dirty dishes away. She wiped her hands on her starched apron and went into living room. I sat there finishing my cereal alone.

"Molly," Harriet called from the living room. "C'mon over here dear when you're finished. I want to show you something." She stood by the bookshelves at the far end of the trailer holding a shallow cardboard box. Inside the box was a flat square object wrapped in silver blue foil.

"It's a picture of her," she said, wedging her bent fingers between the edge of the box. She pulled it out and carefully unwrapped the brittle foil. Aunt Adelia sat in a chair with two young boys on either arm. They were dressed in dark suits and starched white shirts. Their blue-black hair was cut straight along the forehead and ears.

"Are those her children?" I asked.

"She didn't have none of her own," said Harriet. "Barren, I figure. I don't know who they are. They all look alike to me."

I cringed slightly, knowing that by the time I figured out what I should say, it would be too late.

"Why wasn't I born with those looks?" Harriet stared hard at the picture. I searched for some resemblance between Adelia and her. Charlotte had Adelia's cleft chin. Her hair, which she wore up, was thick and light blonde. No one in the family had hair that thick, except Charlotte, but hers was red as a Sequoia. But I recognized myself in the deep set of Adelia's eyes, the introspective way she appeared to seek something out of reach.

"Was he handsome?"

"Who?"

"John Rain."

"I suppose she wouldn't've married him if he weren't."

"Did you like him?"

"He was a hardworking Indian. A full blood."

She stared at the picture as if she were waiting for it to speak. "I remember when she gave this to me. I had just met Elman and she made a big mystery of it. Said 'there's a story that goes with this picture', but she wouldn't tell it to me." Harriet looked at me as if I might have an answer.

"I loved Adelia," she said. "Everybody did. She had a heart. And did *she* write. They say she'd hole up for hours writing in that journal of hers." Harriet handed

me the picture. I studied Adelia's eyes and the two boys at her side. I turned the picture over. Someone had taped a lock of black hair to the cardboard backing.

"What's this?"

"Part of it, I suppose. Don't know. Oh." She put her hands on my cheeks. "I'll be right back." I was mesmerized by the picture of my Grand Aunt, looking for signs of myself in her. Harriet shouted at me to put the picture back and come out to the stone house. Then she hollered for Elman, but even at its loudest her voice was weak and refused to carry. When he didn't answer, she came back and led me the rest of the way into the house.

In the daylight I saw how the ranch land stretched for miles in all directions with nothing but the horizon hemming it in. A big weathered barn sat across the yard, and Elman had parked the truck short of its sliding doors. The vacant limestone bungalow was built on top of a slight rise about fifty yards up the road. Two sorrel horses stood against the barbed wire fence that ran between the barn and bungalow. They watched Elman push a wheelbarrow of alfalfa toward the gate. "Haw, haw." He scared them back while he opened the gate and made them keep their distance while he tossed two plates of hay into an old tire. Once he went back out the gate and turned away, they went right to it. They were beautiful. When he saw me watching, he automatically looked at the ground, so I couldn't see his face under his white straw cowboy hat.

"Molly, honey, up here." Harriet ducked into the house. As I walked across the dirt yard, the morning sun warmed my back and filled me with a sense of contentment I hadn't felt since Stevie Ray. I felt alive.

I was breathing hard by the time I stepped into the stone house. Its floor was cement and the inside walls had been plastered and painted a light hospital green. Boxes were stacked on old chests of drawers, and against one wall was a bed, covered with more boxes. In the far back corner of the room sat an old rectangular chest with wooden bats, stained dark brown and covered with a thick coat of shellac. Harriet lifted the metal latch and together we pushed back the top. A moldy smell rose from the insides. I held my breath, admired the old print paper lining, the books, the open cigar boxes of stamps, and more cigar boxes full of newspaper clippings that were yellow and brittle with age. Harriet held up an old brown leatherbound textbook, *In-Home Care for Beginners*, and moved it aside.

"I like this the best." She lifted the book carefully, its cover hanging by black threads. *The Book of Knowledge*.

"Adelia's things." She passed the textbook to me, but I had already spotted a red leather booklet secured with a strap and brass metal lock, the markings of a diary.

"Harriet ... " I pointed.

"You can have it and whatever else you might want. I don't know why I kept all this stuff. I've been meaning to sort through and throw most of it out. "

Elman blared his horn.

Harriet patted the top of my shoulder, placed one hand on the small of my back and another on my shoulder and whisked me out the door toward Elman's truck as if she were sweeping. I turned and waved goodbye to her and jogged back down the drive to the double wide for my backpack, past the livingroom and the shelf where I'd returned Adelia's picture, past the breakfast counter, Harriet's dressing table and my temporary

room. I placed the diary inside my backpack between my wallet and a slim reporter's notebook, and would have looked for something to protect it—a plastic bag, a paper towel, a t-shirt— if Elman hadn't been outside honking impatiently.

As soon as we were out of Harriet's sight, Elman pulled a Bud Light out from under the front seat and popped it open, blowing the suds out his window.

"Want one?" he said.

I shook my head. "Nope. Thanks, anyway. Harriet said you'd stopped."

Elman looked hurt. He must have thought that cutting calories was enough. The half hour drive from their ranch across the Oklahoma-Kansas border to the farm took us past the lake, grazing lands and onto the highway, where he pointed to a trailer by the side of the road.

"Tax free cigarettes. It ain't fair," he said. "Sponging off the government and happy to live in their tents down by the river. They can have their river. Now, me and your Aunt Harriet, we'll take our air conditioning anytime."

My uncle and aunt talked bigotry as if they were hanging sheets on the line, and Elman was pressing to see if I was on their side or one of *them*.

"And so many of them are drunks," he said, unaware of the irony.

He peered at me sideways and didn't speak until we crossed the border, which I didn't mind since, at the speed he was driving, he needed to keep his mind on the road. By the time we hit the border, the landscape filled with fields of low wheat and maize. Along the edges nearest the highway, a ten-yard swath had been cut and the wheat rolled into man-high coils that looked like giant sliced sushi rolls. Some farmer with a morbid sense of humor had poked jeans and boots into the center of one.

“These ain’t no fire lanes,” said Elman. “It’s the government paying farmers for not growing a wheat crop on a percentage of the land. Damn shame. You got some families signing up for as many as they can get, using different names.”

“Sponging. Everywhere a person looks,” I mocked.

Elman jerked the steering wheel and veered left across the two oncoming lanes that were fortunately empty.

“Hold on, girly,” he said.

I gripped the overhead handle. He shot onto a rock road and barely missed a pothole, swerving so that I would have smacked my head on the window if it weren’t rolled down. Elman was taking me for a ride, all right, seeing if I was game for his wild, woolly west.

“We’re almost there. Hold on. Sharp bend up ahead.”

I put one hand on the dash and the other on the overhead handle as Elman squealed around a right turn and gunned it as we headed toward a sharp left. Surely, these were the doglegs my father had talked about in his stories. They were the invention of surveyors from the late nineteenth century who laid the countryside out into grids of sections and townships. But the earth is not linear, so they were forced to devise a strategy to compensate for its curvature. Every so often, they surveyed a sharp right angle into the road to realign the county boundaries to the meridians.

I couldn’t speak. I was too busy readjusting my own body to compensate for Elman’s driving. He jerked the steering wheel and pulled into a gravel parking lot, slammed the brakes, and skidded to an abrupt stop. I bounced forward, then back, hitting my head on the back window, wrenching my neck. The dust continued to rise as

I rubbed my neck and I tried to discern the name on the archway that spanned the entrance to a cemetery. "Does Harriet know you drive like this?"

"Why do you think she stayed home?" He was already out of the truck and leading the way through the gate and down the gravel path, lined on either side with various shapes and sizes of granite and marble headstones. He stopped in front of a four-tiered pink polished granite monument.

"This is your family plot," he said. "Maybe one day you'll be buried here."

"Doubtful."

"Now why would you go and say something mean like that?" He shook his head and pointed down the row. "That there's your great grandpa's."

Patrick O'Henry. 1840-1911. The largest piece of granite in the cemetery.

"Grandfather was quite a man," Elman said, bending down to shake the dust off a bouquet of yellow and blue plastic flowers someone had left in a small brass vessel on the side of the headstone. "He sure was a man who saw it unfold. I gotta sit down."

We walked to the end of the path and out a second gate toward a grassy area with a picnic bench. Elman chose to sit on a stump overlooking the road we'd driven.

"See that there contraption?" Elman pointed in the distance to a well of some kind that rose from a pool of black liquid. "That oil rig was my daddy's dream. They hit water too soon and it tainted the whole dang thing. Wanted to get him rich, but he had to plug it up. Damn shame."

I sat down on the edge of the picnic bench nearest Elman.

"This here's brume grass and foxtail you're sitting among and that there's the east end of your daddy's land, gas well and sludge included. Before that, it was your

grandfather's and great grandfather's. Once it belonged to the Osage. Now they got all that oil. Funny how things work out. Everybody's had a piece of this land. I suppose it's yours if you'll take it. Don't bother me a bit if you do. I got plenty to keep my hands full."

From the hillock we could see the better part of the one hundred and sixty acres from the road to a far off point where a rocky flint hillock rose.

"You see that windbreak?" asked Elman, pointing to the tops of a stand of trees up ahead. "That there's walnut. We should take em out. They're not carrying their load, and around here if things don't carry their load all hell breaks loose."

He looked at me as if he were trying to make a point.

"That grove takes up one quarter of an acre, worth about forty dollars now that the price of wheat's gone down. A person could get about thirty to forty five bushels per acre off this piece, more if that grove of trees were cut down and replanted with wheat. See what I'm saying? Got to use your resources to advance."

I found it difficult to argue with Elman, knowing he had experience and I had only stories. I'd heard about those trees from my father. I imagined him hidden in their foliage setting up his miniature machine shop full of junk he'd collected on the way to school and back. My father had been a dawdler. He would get lost in nooks and crannies along the river, which I imagined must be running in the recesses of where one stretch of green ended and the next began. He'd arrive late to school, he said, because he'd lose track of time, especially down there by the water. He'd be late coming home, until one day his parents told him old man Stetson, the local recluse, would kill him if he didn't get a move on. Ever since, he'd run home until he hit the buffalo grass at the edge

of the wheat field, and from there, he would drop and crawl until he reached the safety of his little boy fort under the walnut trees. That's what he told me.

Your great grandpa killed an Indian. "Did you know?" Elman said.

I did, but I wanted to hear the story from Elman. The more the story was told, the more it would change, and the more voices told it, the more layered and textured it would become, but no matter how many times told, who told it, or how it began and ended, death would always be its central thread. Elman started:

"Winter. Idaho. Nez Perce country, three bucks, a rifle, sliver of moon and a bear. Your great grandpa was hunting and trapping. He wanted him some elk. Killed three. One right behind the other. Dressed them and hung them, and had to figure how to get them out. But the bear come during the night, making noise, stealing the meat. Must defend the cache. Morning comes and it turns out to be a woman, not a bear, and she was alive enough to rise up and cut him. *Right in the ole seed bucket.* Then she fell back into the snow and died. Passed that pain on down to his offspring. I can see it in you." He peered out at me from the brim of his hat, and I didn't know if he was embellishing his storytelling or if he meant that this genetically rearranged seed had indeed been passed on to me. "Decided he'd better get a move on. Hot dawg. Too close. Indians all over the place."

Elman took a toothpick from his breast pocket and stretched his legs. We sat there staring. *A woman.* I hadn't heard that version.

He shook his head. "And then he came out here a Civil War veteran, the voice of Horace Greeley playing in his ear. 'Go west, young man!' And Patrick did. Damn. He'd heard about this rich bottomland and the bountiful rivers in these parts. Entered the

territory by moonlight sooner than legal even for a white man. He was supposed to wait until the treaty was ratified, October twenty nine the following year, when the Osage removed themselves entirely and the government opened the land officially. But he didn't wait. He entered Osage Territory paying no mind to the fact that he was trespassing. He paid the Indians five dollars to camp and filed a claim as soon as it was legal, before the land companies could get their hands on it. He swindled the swindlers. They say it was a sad sight watching those Osage walk south. Worse for them I expect, but there weren't no other way."

From beneath the brim of his white straw Stetson, I'm sure Elman saw a wave of perfect young wheat with only a stand of walnut keeping the land from reaching its potential. He couldn't see the blood riding on its crest. Elman turned his wrist and stretched his arm. He shook out his legs and checked his watch. "We'd better get along."

A tail of Kansas dust rose from Elman's Ford truck as we continued along the gravel road that ran past the ripening wheat toward the farm. Mine if I wanted it. Elman pointed out the land to the right of us, more wheat fields that stretched far and wide with a speck of a house on the horizon.

"That's the Denton spread," he said. "Been here as long as your family, except they stayed on." Elman's praise of the Denton clan sounded more like a criticism of my family's slow desertion.

"Yep, those Denton boys are *real* farmers," he said.

What's a *real* farmer? I wondered. I imagine the Denton boys as strapping lads in blue jeans and tucked in cowboy shirts. Sons of men and women who have farmed their whole lives, first, second, maybe even third generation. I hope it wasn't a swipe at my father who had left the farm when he was old enough to pursue a career. For some reason, the comment bothered me. What are the requirements of earning the "real" seal of approval? Did a real farmer wake up with the roosters and make Wonder Bread sandwiches? Did he have to move slow and steady and know how to stick a pocketknife in the soil to measure its moisture content to be a *real* farmer? Did he have to graduate from Cornell or skip college altogether and stay on the farm?

"Now if we were smart, we'd a had a few dozen head of cattle grazing that field by now. Those calves'd gain three pounds a day on that winter wheat. That's a pretty penny. Too late for that. Look out there."

I stretched across the dash and studied the field.

"She's about ready to harvest," said Elman. "You could go another month or so. Must have fifty bushels an acre from the looks of it. Not a bad crop. A damn

reasonable crop. I say we harvest that wheat and plant a little sorghum, give the land a rest. But that Janine, she don't like my ideas. You'll meet her. You'll see what I mean."

Aha. Janine bugged Elman, so no matter what else she did, something would keep her from getting Elman's stamp of approval. We passed untended apple trees, their limbs mottled with bright orange fungus and coiled around gray fence posts that had been hewn before I was born. Wild grape and berries grew over a small mobile home set back from the right side of the road. On the left sat a mud-caked blue Ford tractor. The roof of the farmhouse rose out of the wheat, and soon two lumps, dogs, rose from the dirt, barking. Everything rising. A woman wearing a white straw cowboy hat, short-sleeved plaid shirt and jeans came out of the house and stood on the porch with her hands on her hips. I guessed this was Janine, my distant step-cousin who had been renting the farm from my father and harvesting the wheat.

"That's her." Elman pushed up his hat. "That's Janine. You can smell attitude from here." He cleared his throat, sucked up the phlegm, and spit out the window.

"Serious attitude," he said while shifting to one buttock and digging out a crumpled white handkerchief from his back pocket. He punctuated the comment by blowing his nose loudly.

As we pulled into the circular dirt driveway and parked in front of the house, Janine gripped the dogs' collars as if they were something to be feared. Elman opened his door first, but Janine ignored him and inspected me as I sat in the truck with the door closed and the window rolled up.

"The dogs are okay," she shouted, holding back the smaller, meaner looking one. The bigger one was wagging his tail barking, waiting for me to get out. "They won't bite," she said. "They wouldn't hurt a flea." Janine, tall and wiry, let loose of the dogs

and lifted her hat, running her fingers through shoulder length dark brown hair, then set it back down.

“Janine,” said Elman. “This here’s Molly from California. Mine and Harriet’s niece. Thinks she may move out here once she gets a little whiff of things.”

I don’t know why Elman would be so blunt and misrepresent my intentions unless he wanted to irritate this woman with the attitude, as he called her, who wiped her palm on her jeans, then leaned forward and grasped my extended hand.

“Janine Goening.” Her palm was hard and rough, and my knuckles ached from her grip. “G -O-E-N-I-N-G.” She pronounced it gunning. “Harriet called before you got here. You’ll have to excuse the mess. I’m not used to people showing up out of nowhere.” She bent over sideways and pulled a blade of grass from the ground and bit the tip, then spit it out. “I fixed some sandwiches. We can sit down and talk while we eat.” She peered back at me, “You coming?” then looked down at the dogs; “I’ll hold them until you pass.”

The house was smaller than I imagined from my father’s stories. I looked up at the cream exterior to the second floor. Two dormer window with yellowed lace curtains. A flight of four steps led up the front porch, which had been painted gray and now peeled and blistered from neglect.

“Red. Comanche,” Janine shouted at the dogs. “Out,” she said, standing with her first finger pointing to a place in the dirt. She held her stance until the dogs trotted to their proper spots and lay down. I crossed the porch and passed through the front door, a tall, thick door with an old-fashioned clear glass knob. Janine’s boots on the hardwood followed me in. She hung up her hat on one of four pegs on the wooden rack that had been mounted on the wall behind the front door. She looked at herself in the diamond shaped mirror in the center of the rack and ran both hands once again through her

chestnut hair to take out the dent where the brim had pressed a circle around the crown of her head. She had an angular, jerky way of doing things.

The kitchen linoleum creaked under our weight as if we were disturbing its sleep. Narrow shelves and pantry cupboards circled the kitchen like a wagon train. A rectangular, steel-legged red formica table stood in the center of the room with four matching chairs. Sitting on the table was a plate of sandwiches on white bread that she must have prepared for us. All in all it was a functional room with an ambiguous style that blurred the boundaries between living indoors and working the surrounding fields.

“Come on back here.” Janine motioned for us to follow her out to the small back porch off the kitchen. Its swollen screen door, covered with layers of light yellow peeling paint, opened to the back yard. A chicken coop sat twenty yards away and beyond that a weathered barn.

She pointed out a basin attached to the outer wall, facing the yard.

“That old cement washbasin has been on this back porch since the house was built in the eighteen eighties,” said Janine. “It’s probably worth something.”

I imagined my father as a little boy filling the water jugs for the harvesting crew. I could see him everywhere. Running up the porch steps, playing under the house in the little boy machine shop, and making forts in the grass at the edge of the field. I stared at the chicken coop through the screen door and imagined him chasing chickens when he should have been collecting eggs.

“Hey there, Molly. Take that backpack off and sit down for awhile. I’ll show you the upstairs after.” Janine pointed to the plate piled with bologna and American cheese sandwiches. I grabbed one and lifted the top slice of bread.

“Pickles are in the refrigerator.”

“This is good.” I took a bite while I pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. It was after two o’clock and I was famished. I devoured the sandwich as voraciously as the farm had consumed me.

“So.” Janine locked her hands behind her head and tilted back her chair until she was balanced on its two back legs. “What’s your take on Kansas so far? Can’t imagine a California girl ever being satisfied in Kansas.

“Let her speak for herself,” said Elman.

She let the chair down and bit off a large corner of her sandwich. “I want to know where this girl’s coming from.”

He glanced up at me, “See what I mean,” and shook his head.

“It’s different.” I avoided looking at Elman. “Quieter out here, more spacious.” I didn’t tell them the steel blue air oppressed me.

“I’ve never seen the ocean,” Janine said as if she were proud of the fact. “Never even set foot on a beach. Only pictures.” She put down her sandwich and eyed me.

“You’ll have to come out and visit some time,” I said.

She shook her head. “I’m staying right here. No one’s budging me. California’s contagious from what I hear.”

“Sometimes we’re wrong about our assumptions,” I said. “I thought Kansas was flat. But there are hills, even a small one on this property,.”

“Tar blisters,” said Elman.

Janine pulled a pack of Camels out of her shirt pocket and tilted the pack toward me. I shook my head. She shifted in her seat and pulled out a lighter from her back pocket, lit her cigarette, inhaled and twisted her lips sideways so that when she exhaled the smoke traveled away from us.

"We all have our ways of keeping thoughts to ourselves," she said, reaching behind her to the old china cabinet. She grabbed a thick green glass ashtray. "So, Elman, I'm thinking of getting an early start this summer. Wheat prices on their way down. Don't think they're going to hold."

"You're right about that," said Elman. "You're going to have to light a fire under Walter to get those trees took out, though."

Janine stared at Elman and pressed her lips into an expression meant to quietly discipline unruliness.

"What trees?" I asked.

"Those walnut trees," said Elman. "Take em out and you'll raise next year's yield significantly."

"It's your damn place," said Janine, "don't let him tell you what to do."

"There's history in those trees, Uncle Elman," I said. "And they're beautiful old trees. I'm keeping them."

Elman sucked in the air between his teeth and dug a toothpick from his front shirt pocket. "Even trees get old," he said, pointing the toothpick at me before he stuck it in his mouth. "Cut em before they start rottin. At least you'll get somethin for the timber. I'll make you a desk."

I didn't need a desk. I got up from the table and began to clear the lunch plates because I was uncomfortable with the conversation. I did not want to get off on the wrong foot with my uncle or Janine by trying to control what people did around here, even if I did own it, and I worried that they would dismiss anything I said because I was an outsider. Elman shook his head and rubbed his fingers along the bridge of his bulb nose.

"A tree-hugger," he said. "I should of guessed."

We finished another cup of weak coffee.

Out the kitchen we traipsed, along the yellowed pastoral wallpaper and rag rugs scattered in no particular order over dark three-inch wide oak plank floors. The staircase that divided the ground floor led upstairs to five compact bedrooms, two on either side and one at the rear end. The old fashioned window in the end room looked out toward the barn. A striking red and brown rooster perched on top of the chicken coup. He ruffled into an arch, gathering strength, then raised his neck and opened his yellow beak into a perfect v and crowed toward the dark line of trees under the steel blue sky that trimmed what I imagined was the river. From somewhere in the distance a rooster crowed back.

Janine stood outside in the yard below the window. She'd put her hat back on, and held it in place as she gazed up at me. "Come on down. I want to show you the basement."

This was where she stored some of the products of her labor. The foundation rafters were strung with braids of garlic and red peppers. Baskets of onions, wine sap apples and potatoes lined one wall. She had stacked a long, neat pile of firewood along the wall opposite the furnace and narrow shelves held jars of beets, pickles, peaches and tomatoes. A long worktable against the wall contained drills and small silver shavings. Laundry lay piled in the far corner next to a small clothes rack, where several plain white bras and a couple of pairs of white, waist-high nylon underpants dried.

She was staring at the underwear and I detected a flush of embarrassment when she blurted, "You scared of tornadoes?"

“Everybody’s scared of tornadoes,” said Elman. He patted me on the back. “Don’t you worry little lady. There’n’t no twisters on this section of land. Janine just wants her little piece of your hide.”

I recalled how only last month the entire northwestern corner of Missouri had been declared a national disaster area after one of those mile-wide tornados that Californians can only imagine, and not very well, sucked up everything in its path.

“God’s truth,” said Elman. “No tornadoes hereabouts.”

Janine swept up the silver shavings with a small whiskbroom while Elman explained how the southern winds traveled from the Gulf of Mexico and collided with the cold wind from the Rockies. “The cold air coming down runs under the warm, creating the tornado belt,” he said. “But the low elevation of this bottomland yonder and that high ground by the river and those little tar bubbles that you like so much spur a regular crow hop when a twister gets to these here parts. Orographic deflection of the wind.”

“An orographic *defect*,” said Janine.

Elman whistled. “I’m thinking I’ve seen enough for one day. What d’ya say, Molly?”

“Don’t he get on your nerves?” said Janine. “I can give you a ride back later when I go to town.”

“She’s just tryin to butter you up, Molly,” said Elman.

“Don’t listen to that old geezer. He can go home and you and I can do some of that bonding. I can show you the river and the field on the other side. I can drive you back. I haven’t seen that country for awhile. That’s my people’s country.”

I didn’t know what people she was talking about.

“It’s almost four o’clock,” said Elman, “and I promised your aunt I’d get home. You wanta stay here a while longer that’s okay by me. There’s a bus stops out there at

the highway. Comes every even numbered hour on the hour. You could take that back down and your aunt and me could pick you up in Ponca City. You'd make it back in time before Harriet set the supper table."

"Maybe Janine wants to have dinner with us?" I could tell the minute I opened my mouth that Elman didn't like the idea. Janine didn't seem so bad to me. Rough, but that came with the territory. She was interesting, and I liked her "attitude" as Elman called it. Besides, I was here to see the farm, and I only had four days left before I had to return to California, three if I subtracted travel. I decided to stay and let her drive me back. Harriet, at least, might be glad to see her.

I walked Elman back to his truck and stood by the driver's window. He looked at me head to toe. "You sure are short," he said. Then he looked in my eyes and held my gaze as if he had something serious to say. "Call your aunt," he said. "Tell her I'm on my way and you'll be home in time for supper. And don't you let that *woman*," he pointed to Janine who remained on the porch, "give you a rough time."

I touched the sleeve of his forearm. "And don't you drive so reckless." I rubbed the sore spot on the back of my head, "I've got a bump."

"Okay, knothed," he said, and looked away, raised his palm as if he were dismissing me, then drove off.

I watched the long brown cloud of my uncle's dust rise once more as the truck headed down the road past the walnut grove and dipped out of sight below the line of the field. Janine walked out ahead of me as I recapitulated the theory of sharp turns and curvatures.

She told me it wasn't any surprise. "The first surveyors in Oklahoma started laying things out from the Indian Meridian, about eleven miles west and south of here,"

she said. "They named a latitudinal the Indian Base line and started establishing square mile sections all through the Territory. When you start from something white men name Indian, you can count on them screwing it up."

I followed her toward the river, musing over the idea of an Indian Meridian. She stopped at the chicken coop and pointed up at the rooster perched on the top rail over my head. He was working himself into a crow.

"I call him Red Too. After Red the dog."

"Hi, Red."

"Red Too," she said. "Like Red *also*."

Red Too opened his wings and strutted a few steps closer. Then he dropped from the fence rail and landed plop onto my head. His claws grabbed each side of my scalp tangling my hair up with his feathers and claws. As his handsome tail whipped me in the eyes, he pecked at the back of my skull.

"Stop screaming," Janine said. She stood in front of me and tugged at the bird. "You'll just get him more upset."

When a claw dug into my eyelid, I yelled again. The dogs ran up and started barking at the three of us. The rooster lost focus and Janine yanked him off of my head, spun one hundred and eight degrees and threw him at Red and Comanche, who chased him, thank god, instead of me, around one corner of the coup, forcing him to fly back up the fence to the railing while I ran several yards backward, I stumbled and fell. Janine thought this was funny and started laughing.

"You have to watch out for Red Too. He likes to dive bomb strangers." She crossed her legs and laughed some more, a deep belly laugh. "To be honest, Molly, ha, ha, I don't think you're cut out for this." She bent over and held her sides, her legs twisted around each other like a pretzel as if she were trying not to wet her pants. Red

Too strutted along the seven-foot fence rail watching us sideways out of his left eye. Janine scooped up a handful of dirt and threw it. "Sonovabitch. Don't you dare." The rooster retreated, but the dirt, caught by the breeze, turned back and blew into my face. Red Too fluttered to the ground on the inside of the coop and preened. Janine held out a hand, which I took. She lifted me up off the ground with such force that I lost my footing and nearly fell again. I finished wiping the corner of my eye with the cuff of my denim blouse, and felt her standing over me, running her fingers along my scalp checking the wounds. She smelled like laundry soap and sweat.

"A couple of small punctures, one tiny bald spot where he tore out your hair." She ruffed my hair and stood back, perusing my face with a grin. "Your forehead's a little scratched up. Make sure we put some Betadine on it when we get back to the house." She patted me on the head. I felt for the small punctures on the top of my scalp. Then she gazed off to some place behind me, someplace I dared not look because I suspected she had planned this Red Too attack and feared she was concocting another. Maybe Elman was right. But I hated to think that a man who claimed Indians were drunks while he drove and drank a warm forbidden beer, was right about anything. The brim of Janine's cowboy hat in the late afternoon sun cast a shadow over her face that stopped at her smile.

I tried to match her long stride as she cut across the farmyard. She didn't slow until we hit the edge of the field that ran right up to the edge of the river's bank. The smell of fresh river water mixed with the sun-baked aroma of native brush. She continued along a foot trail that led around the bend where the water had undermined the bank and exposed the roots of an old cottonwood. Janine pointed out the indigenous pecans that shaded the river's edge. We rounded the bend and slid down the bank. She picked out a shallow place and stepped into the river without removing her boots, and I

followed feeling the cold water seep into my tennis shoes. The slow current on both sides of us formed slow ripples. Small, smooth rocks clucked as one tumbled rhythmically into another like horse hooves on cobblestones. We stepped onto a sandbar, white and clean and inviting in the afternoon shadows.

“There used to be trails all through here, all the way into Missouri and Arizona. Even though this place has been worked, I can still find arrowheads when I got time to look. This is where the Osage traveled to hunt buffalo every year. Twelve hundred miles round trip.” She pointed to a swath of worn dirt as wide as a buckboard that ran from the river up the opposite shallow bank to the far field.

“That there running through the middle of the ground is what they called the Second Buffalo Trail. Then it was a wagon trail. I’m surprised they didn’t turn it into a highway. No matter how hard we’ve tried we just can’t keep it tilled and planted. It’s always been that way. Even your daddy worked on it. But the wheat won’t take and the monsoons tamp it back down to polished dirt. That’s where I’m from.”

I didn’t follow her.

“Osage,” said Janine.

Janine didn’t look Indian. Her brown hair was wavy, her brown eyes wide and deep set, and her skin fair, except for tanned forearms and the neck above her collar. Her nose looked like mine, small and straight. When she took out her pack of Camel’s and glared at me, I wondered if she knew what I was thinking, and right now I was thinking that she wished I would leave and never return.

“You and I are family,” I said.

“We’re not blood. You’re not the side I care about. My great grandpa was full blood, and when he married my great grandmother, also Osage, they had three kids before she died and Adelia came along. Three including my grandpa, who married an

English. That makes my mother a half-blood. She married my father, a German who'd come down from Nebraska. So I'm one-fourth Osage, which isn't enough for me, but I'll take it." She threw a pebble into the river. "Adelia married my great grandfather John Rain after my true great-grandmother died. She, Adelia, raised the three kids. So we may be relations by marriage, but we're not blood."

After the rooster assault and now her unequivocal rejection, Janine was beginning to irritate me. She displayed her rancor like forked lightning, toward Elman, toward me, dead relatives and likely anyone else who openly crossed her path. The anger resided in her taut shoulders, the sharp expression of her hands that sliced the air like scissors, and the nervous tick in her right cheek. This distant stepcousin, the better half of a cigarette clenched between her teeth, snapped a twig, threw one half into the water and stuck the other in the ground between her feet.

"Did you know her?" I asked.

"Who?"

"Adelia."

"She died before I was born." She stared straight ahead and took a deep drag. "I hardly knew granny and grandpa. And my parents died in a car wreck outside of Oklahoma City. What kin I got, cousins and such, are spread like gooseberries all over the place."

She had stubbed out the cigarette in the dirt, and now was unpeeling the paper around the butt with such concentrated energy that you would have thought she were examining an infinitely deep slice of life. She sprinkled the remaining tobacco shreds on the ground.

"I couldn't find her grave," I said. "The rest of the family was there—Great grandfather, the entire family. Then Elman started talking about cutting trees."

“She wanted to be buried next to my great grandpa,” said Janine. “You think your relatives are going to let an Indian be buried in their pioneer bone yard?” She squinted from the low sun. Gold flecks sparkled up in her eyes and deep crescent lines framed the corners of her mouth like parentheses. She flicked the white paper bead—the remains of her Camel—into the river.

“Why are you here, Molly?” She looked directly into my eyes, the tick in her right cheek beating.

It sounded strange to hear her say my name. “My father grew up here. He died last spring and left the place to me. Elman must have told you that. I want to see what I’ve inherited. I want to find out if I could be happy on a farm in Kansas.”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

“I have four kids. And right now we’re living with my mother.”

Janine uncoiled slowly and rose from the ground. “You are really something,” she said. “How can some fair-weather flake who’s never got not one day’s worth of common sense set foot out here and expect to live by herself with four kids. Crap, how would you keep up your manicures? Am I right?”

I held out my fingers and studied the dirt under my jagged, uneven nails. If poor nails were criteria, there was hope.

“I’ve just divorced my husband. My first one died.”

She brushed her hands off on her jeans. “Look around. There’s a hundred and fifty acres of wheat to plant and cut twice a year and you don’t even know the top end of a shovel much less a tractor from a thresher. Pulling up and just moving out here is impulsive, don’t you think?”

I felt those weights at the corners of my mouth.

Then she laughed. “Haw. That rooster. And aren’t you a little scared of living in a place called Tornado?”

“Elman said there weren’t any tornadoes here. My father used to say the same thing.” Then I lied. “I believe them. And it’s really beside the point.”

“A pornographic *defect*.” She purposely distorted the phrase again. “You and me’ll never get along. Just let me know what you’re thinking before you show up out of nowhere again. We can’t trust anyone when it comes to the land, especially a white who claims she’s a relative.”

“Who’s we?”

“The entire Indian Nation, all of us.”

“Janine,” (I didn’t know what I was going to say even when I heard words spill out my mouth ahead of my mind. Crude words, and their release felt good), “you sound a bit too militant for someone who doesn’t even look Indian.”

She grabbed my collar and pushed me to the ground, shook my shoulders, shrieked then flailed her arms in my face. I was stunned and I couldn’t think. The next thing I knew she was straddling my chest and her torso was a massively dark gush of anger pounding my shoulders into the dirt. But she had already taught me something. I dug my fingers into the soft, warm ground and threw a handful of sand in her face.

“You fucking bitch.” She covered her eyes and lightened her grip on me so that I could scramble out from under her. I ran. I ran as fast as I could across the river and up the bank to the edge of the wheat. When I reached the perimeter of the yard, I kept running, past the chicken coop, toward the back porch, and when the dogs charged me I shouted their names, “Red. Comanche. Out!” with such command that they stopped in their tracks and lay down. I ran and kept running into the field, my legs swishing against the wheat until I was a good distance from the house, figuring that it would be harder for

her to catch me in here rather than on the road. I continued until my chest hurt and my legs grew numb and my feet began to trip over the loose clods. I could not see her anywhere behind me. I listened for the sound of a truck. Nothing. I looked back over the wheat, their young shafts reminding me of hundreds of tiny skeletons, like the ones my kids had placed on my birthday cake. I wanted my children right now, I needed their complaints to ground me, to affirm that something I was doing made sense because running through my father's wheat field, away from the legacy he had bequeathed me, made me feel cowardly. But that didn't stop me. I power walked as quickly as I could past the Denton's spread, then past the beat up mobile home I'd seen on the way in, the tornado taco, as Elman called it. "Them tornadoes take to trailers like a Mexican takes to hot chili peppers," he'd said. I stepped out onto the road's shoulder and forced my legs across the gravel covered bottomland, limestone, slate colored shale and sandstone which dipped and rose in massive formations, thickening to the north and west. Like a chant I walked across the southern alluvial section of this thin and pervious ground with the past breaking the surface as easily as those smooth river rocks had disturbed the river's tranquility.

I still could not see the highway. As I passed the cemetery, a sudden change of light caught my attention. The cemetery lamp had just gone out, the light of its filament dimming into a spooky orange glint before it was entirely extinguished.

I arrived at the first of two sharp right angles in the road, and recognized them as the sharp turns in the road that my father had mentioned in his stories. They were symbolized the shortcomings of western thought, or novelty, depending on how you looked at it. They were places where the sharp edges of progress and the earth's roundness could not cohere, where early surveyors had to cut sharp angles to compensate for the earth's curvature while they pushed aside the Indians and laid out the Midwest's

geometric farms. I glanced back once more, saw nothing, and broke into a run, rounding the second curve and taking the final straightaway to the intersection of the highway as if something I could not see followed close behind.

Just as I stepped around the pothole that Elman had barely missed when we drove in, I saw the bus approach from the north. I would forever love the sound of crunching gravel and the smell of diesel. I waited anxiously for the driver to open the door and hurried up the three steps as if Red Too were pecking my heels.

The driver studied me, then leaned sideways to pull the turnstile and shut the door behind me.

"Two dollars," he said, pointing to the metal fare slot.

I held out a five.

He held up his hand. "I don't touch money." He reopened the bus door.

I groped the deep corners of my backpack to gather the loose change that collected over time and felt nothing but sand and dirt and a rogue paper clip. Except for a little old lady in a bright red felt hat who sat in the back of the bus, I was the only passenger. She smiled, showing off her small, straight, white teeth and red lipstick that matched her hat.

"I have correct change, dear," the lady in the red hat said. "Buster, let her on and we'll settle up later."

I gave Buster a look that pleaded with him to do as she said.

"Buster, you hear me now, dear. Let's get me back home. Hurry up now. I have supper to make."

I thought of Harriet who was also likely getting supper organized as Buster released the brake and jerked the bus forward.

“You’re bleeding,” he said, touching his forehead.

I rubbed my forehead with the tail of my denim shirt, and then examined the blood.

“You in some kind of trouble?”

“Attacked by a rooster.” I pointed to the horizon. “He jumped off the fence and started pecking. I have the holes to prove it.”

“You don’t look like you’re from around here.”

“My farm’s down there,” I said. “The O’Henry farm.”

“Never heard of it,” he said.

Walking toward the back of the bus toward the nice lady in the red hat, peering through the bus windows as we traveled away from the farm, I expected to see Janine. I took the seat in front of the lady and handed her my five, but she waved it away.

“It’s the least I can do for a stranger,” she said.

“My family is from here.”

“Oh, is that so, dear?”

“The O’Henrys. Have you heard of us?”

“Don’t take offense, dear. Folks around here at least know enough to steer clear of mean old cocks,” she said, smiling. “Take this and clean that pretty face up a bit.”

She held up a handkerchief that reminded me of the ones my grandmother O’Henry used to send me every Christmas when I was young. Thin white cotton edged in handmade lace and embroidered with pink initials and a flower basket in one corner.

“This is too delicate. I can’t,” and handed it back to her.

“I understand dear.”

“Maybe you know a Janine Goening?”

“Oh yes. The Goening farm. On that road you come up from. My husband knows her from the feed store. Knew her father and grandfather before her. She’s a good hand.”

“It’s my farm, really,” I said. “She’s been running it for awhile. I’m just out for a visit to see if I want to keep it or put it on the market.”

“Well,” said the woman, putting out her hand as if she wanted a handshake.

“What did you decide?”

Out the back window, the rope of highway seemed to unroll from the bus without end.

“If you asked me that before the rooster, I might have said sell. And if someone else didn’t want me to walk away from it so much, I probably wouldn’t return.” I tapped the top of her delicate hand, spotted brown with age and rising into ranges of life pumping veins. I felt as if we had firmed up a deal blessed by the coincidence of our meeting. “I don’t know the first thing about a farm. Nothing really.”

“Well at least you’ve learned enough to keep away from nasty old chanticleer.” She winked. “Anything that can’t look a woman straight in the eye can’t be trusted as far as she can throw him.”

I strained to see the farm as we moved down the highway, and even though I couldn’t, I knew it was there and wasn’t going anywhere. I imagined Janine sitting on the blue tractor as if she owned the place, driving it around as if she were in the middle of a line dance. I imagined her driving it toward the road to chase me down. I imagined the way she looked like she belonged and I didn’t and I ran my fingers along my scratched eyelid and through my hair picking the tiny blood clots. My jeans were dirt streaked and grass stained. I felt terrible. I looked terrible. I smelled bad. Dusk, my

worst time of day, only accentuated my fatigue. The shift of light reached a spot deep within me where truth turns back while fear untended rolls in like the Pacific fog. I was worried about the kids.

The bus driver pulled into a gas station. Every kind of antler lined the station's walls, even above the office doorway, the double garage doors, and the entrance to the bathrooms— deer, elk and antelope. Even rabbit.

Mom, it's a harebrain who goes to Kansas. I would have to call them this evening. I felt around my backpack for my notepad to make a list of things I needed to say, but I grabbed Adelia's diary, instead. Brown showed through the worn red leather cover. The binding was so fragile. The inscription on the inside cover page had been scrawled in black ink: *To our dearest daughter Adelia on her 19th birthday, August 1, 1893. From Your Loving Parents.* I leafed through the pages. My young grand aunt wrote in a time when penmanship indicated character. Her cursive was strained and precise, her capital A had flourish. I began to read.

August 1, 1893. Hot.

I took Luke down to the pecan trees at the river to cool off. Mama warned me as I walked away to keep an eye out for those James boys and Indians. If I wasn't careful I'd wind up abducted like Anna Morgan, she said. I told Mama that Anna Morgan went crazy because she probably liked her Indian husband. The boys around these parts are no better than savages anyway. That is not why I accepted Mama's knife. You just never know when you are going to find something that needs cutting loose. Mama's knife is a slim buck with a brass end that fits snugly in a woman's palm. Papa gave it to her when he asked her to marry him. He told her back then that no one who lived in the wilderness should be without one. He had learned

that lesson when he first arrived in Kansas, years before he met Mama when the land was Osage hunting ground. Papa and two friends left their horses on the far side of the river so the Indians would not steal them, and in the moonlight snuck the rest of the way into the Osage camp on foot. They walked directly into the camp to where the southern half of our farm is today. I can see their trail from where I am sitting at the riverbank across from the old sycamore root, watching Luke poke sticks into the sand. Papa wanted their permission to camp until the government officially opened the territory. He wanted to go in before the land companies went in and ruined his chances. He paid them six dollars and they camped for a month or more until they thought it was time to file their claims. They went to the river and found their horses. They were crossing the swollen river. One of papa's partners had placed a tie down on his mare's muzzle to keep her from throwing back her head. The mare stepped into a hole and the tie down kept her head underwater. The current swept man and horse down into the tangle of weeds in front of Papa's eyes. Papa swears if he had not traded his knife to one of the Osage, he might have saved his friend.

The river runs low from sparse July rain, lower than last year. I sit on the sandy bank, watch Luke play by the river and write. Papa worries that it is a sign of the drought. With all of the new settlers, he worries the day will come when the land will be sucked dry. As the hot sun sifts its way through my skirts, heating the palm of my hand, I decide to use the sand to give Luke a spelling l...

Something had caused Adelia to leave an erratic trail of ink that ran from that last letter to the edge of the page. I was curious about what had interrupted her writing and her story, a story I was generally familiar with: My great grandfather had set foot in Osage Territory sooner than he was supposed to—a sixty-niner, a moonshiner who snuck into Indian lands by the light of the moon. A local historian, whose family had lived in the area for generations, depicted him in her local history project as the first white man to spend the night in Tornado. She described his arrival and premature claim an abomination to the federal government's legal process and to the character of the area's law-biding citizenry. Twenty four years later, in that same place where Patrick O'Henry had precipitously entered Osage territory, something had forced a jagged scrawl across Adelia's page.

A wildflower had been pressed between the next two pages. The small dried yellow blossom that retained its lemon bright pigment. An edge was broken and the tiny missing piece had wedged itself into the diary's binding. The flower's light green leaves and stem were flat and crisp with age, and except for the chip in the petal, the flower was a fully preserved brittle artifact of that time.

She resumed her writing on the following page, explaining that she had looked up from her diary and seen a man drinking from a vein of water that sprang from the riverbank between two cottonwood roots. She'd made a note about the spring. *I must remember to tell Papa about that place. That man, how he looked at me.*

Indian. Skin dark as a pecan. I pulled Luke up off the sand and dashed up the riverbank as if the devil himself were chasing me. My skirts fell in

the water and hung up on the roots and I was driven to curse, forgive me Lord. I shoved Luke up the bank ahead. A hank of my hair decorates one dried out twig, perhaps my punishment for leaving it free. On at least one dried out twig hangs a thin hank of my blonde hair.

I puzzled over whether Adelia had run because she'd seen a strange man or because the man was Indian. Either way, that meeting at the river marked Adelia's first encounter with her future lover, John Rain.

I stared at the bus ceiling, imagining my grand aunt's long blonde hair hung up on the brush. I was still hung up on Stevie Ray's, and that curtain it formed around our lovemaking. I should have run home, like my great aunt had. That was my first mistake. I'd turned to him. I was easy, and now here I was on a southbound bus in the epicenter of the contiguous United States, my Grand Aunt Adelia's diary open on my lap, fantasizing about the man with the blackest hair I'd ever brushed, not brown like Janine's, not even dark brown, but black, black as the hair of Adelia's abduction ka'tsina, John Rain, who had startled her at the river, done his best to ignore her, and sent her scrambling up the opposite riverbank into brush, etching the first of many spur trails that would send her toward her destiny.

I twisted the bracelets on my left wrist. After my night with Stevie Ray, I had bought another turquoise bracelet. Now that I had a little Indian in me I was entitled, I told myself. His DNA flowed through my blood stream and fiddled with my heart, as I now fiddled with the bracelets, trying to center their turquoise stones on my wrist.

Out the window a russet light streaked above the setting sun, backlighting spires of metal pipe that protruded from a massive oil refinery. I couldn't recall passing these

plumes of orange cadmium that shot into the night on my way here. They seemed terribly out of place and disorienting. I yanked the overhead bus cord.

"Excuse me," I yelled, interrupting Buster as he spit tobacco into a dixie cup.

"What's wrong dear?" The kind old woman in the red hat leaned forward in her seat.

"We're going the wrong way."

She patted me on the shoulder. I pulled the cord again.

"This ain't no tour bus, lady," shouted Buster. He twisted and shot a look, clearly irritated.

"We were going south when I got on this bus." I walked toward the front.

"This is the northbound interstate loop to Kansas City, m'am. My regular route. You should have gotten off back at the R and L before the u-turn. Can't stop now. Sit back down, m'am."

I perched on the edge of the seat. My fears engulfed me as I imagined being expelled from this bus in a strange town, alone, a credit card and a few dollars. I would be shot out of the gut of this bus into unfamiliar territory. Not even Harriet and Elman would guess where I was.

"It's okay, Molly dear," said Ruth, the red-hatted woman. We were on a first name basis.

She had been a teacher in Arkansas City. She had retired and had too much free time. "You can catch the southbound from Kansas City." Her brow wrinkled into a roadmap of concern.

"It'll be midnight before I get back," I said. "My aunt and uncle. I feel bad keeping them up. They're probably panicky."

"I see."

"This is the first time I've met them."

"They must be worried sick, dear."

I bolted down the aisle to Buster, holding on to the metal frame of each seat until I reached the one behind him.

"I'm traveling in the wrong direction," I said.

Buster gave me a sidelong look. "Ain't nothing I can do about that, m'am." He rubbed his palm along his oily forehead. "Except advise you to hang on for the ride. Like I say, this ain't no tour bus. You need to take a seat for your own safety."

"Oh bullshit. How long before the next stop?"

"Don't cuss in my bus, m'am. Half hour or thereabouts."

"How long before there's a bus going back."

"Don't know that." He took the radio from its clip on the dash and started talking to a woman named Lorraine. "Got a woman just discovered she's going the wrong way." He snorted. "No. She's not drunk. Just a little lost, is all." He looked me over from head to toe. "Not from these parts. Got in the middle of some kind of cock fight, though." He snorted some more. "Well, anyways, Lorraine, when's the next bus back to...where you heading?"

"Ponca City," I said.

"Ponca City."

My throat felt tight.

"Okay then." He locked the radio onto its clip. "You might as well relax. The last southbound from Kansas City ran out an hour ago." He looked at me, then slid back his side window and spit. "You're from California, I bet you anything?"

"I own a farm back there in Tornado. I really do."

"That so?" he said.

"In fact, I have a lot of history here." I felt ridiculous trying to prove myself to Buster. "My great grandfather and my grandfather were in one of your land runs."

Buster grunted. "We ain't in Oklahoma m'am," he said, half burying his face in the Dixie cup. "This is Kansas here." He wiped the brown juice from his chin with the heel of his palm.

"That is so disgusting."

A little muscle on his right cheek flinched. "Well then you can just go back to your seat and sit down. Ain't none of your business. Go on now." He braked, throwing me forward so I had to grab the metal pole. "Go on now."

He watched me in his rear view mirror and applied the brake lightly a couple of more times to let me know whose bus it was. Ruth stood and guided me with hand signals back into my seat.

"Looks like a conspiracy," he said looking at his side view mirror. "Which side are you on, anyways, Ruth?"

"Buster, you just cut your horsing around and show our guest some hospitality," said Ruth.

"What about you, lady, which side are you? Probably a lefty. Probably one of them hippies." Buster glanced at me in his rear view mirror and grinned. Even from my seat I could see how he kept his lips stiff to make sure the tobacco stayed in place. When I didn't answer, he felt compelled to fill in the silence. "Fifteen minutes," he said. "That is if you want off at Emporia. There ain't much out there."

"Try Lawrence, dear," said Ruth, patting me on the arm again and tipping her head as encouragement to take her advice. "It's a university town."

"How far to Lawrence?" I asked.

"A ways," he said.

“That’s fine,” I said. Ruth leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes, and, as I studied the network of lines that ran through her sweet face, it occurred to me that my bad luck was probably the high point of her day. I wondered if someday I would walk out of my house and catch a roundtrip to nowhere as a way of unburdening myself of too much spare time. Ruth’s eyes were soft, even closed, and her light lashes reminded me of the tops of dry wheat, lids fluttering. With her eyes still closed, she reached up and pulled the bus cord.

“My stop,” she said, rising from the seat to a height of no more than five feet. She kissed the top of my head. “I knew you were headed toward the university when you first stepped on this bus,” she said. Her voice climbed as high and brittle as old yellowed paper. “You just have that look. Not even the rooster scratches and dirt can hide that look.”

I wiped my cheeks with my sleeves.

“Something about your jaw line and the set of your eyes, dear. I feel like we’re old friends.” She opened a red net shopping bag she held secure in the crook of her arm and pulled out a small brown paper bag. “Nourishment for the soul.” She pressed the bag into my hand and walked down the aisle like a seasoned rider, swaying side to side as she grabbed the back of each seat.

“Emporia,” shouted Buster.

Ruth turned around and looked at me. “They’ll take good care of you in Lawrence. Buster,” she pointed her finger at him, “you be nice.” Buster rose and hovered as she stepped down into the stairwell, gripping the handrail, her small gray head disappearing below the steel divider. Buster watched her until she was solidly on ground. When she turned and waved, he waved back and returned to the driver’s seat. I

looked out the window, and as I watched her red hat disappear into the night, I felt sad to see one more person who had noticed me fall into the past.

At the next stop, a place called Admire, I got off the bus and called Harriet and Elman.

"You got one minute, m'am," shouted Buster.

"Where are we?"

"North of Emporia. Half hour or so from Lawrence and an hour or so from Kansas City. You got one minute and it's tickin, m'am" I watched Buster pull his bunch of keys from its retractable leash, unlock the dark bus station door and go inside to use the bathroom I wondered if he would allow me to do the same. Harriet answered the phone, sounding strained and immediately relieved to hear my voice. I told her what had happened and asked her to call my kids and tell them I was all right and that I would call them in the morning.

"Wrap it up," said Buster as he passed me on his way back to the bus. "Some people are on a schedule here."

I said goodbye and told Harriet I would be back at her place sometime tomorrow, as soon as I could get a southbound bus.

When we reached the outskirts of Lawrence, Buster pulled off the interstate and continued driving into town. He pulled up in front of an old hotel on what appeared to be the main street.

"End of the line for you. I don't ordinarily drive my customers to their doorstep, but Ruth likes you. Hurry it up. That hotel's one of the oldest buildings in town. I

know the manager. Just tell her hello from Buster.” He took a business card from his shirt pocket and held out to me. “I do tours. For a price.”

I took the card, looked at his face one last time and walked down the steps onto the sidewalk and up to the front door of the Royal Hotel. My stomach felt empty. I rang the bell and stared at the old-fashioned frosted glass door, waiting for someone to emerge as the bus hummed behind me. A flood of gratitude washed over me when the wheezing, crunching sound signaled Buster had taken off. An elderly woman opened the door. Buster tooted the horn and the woman peaked around the doorsill and waved after him.

“Can I help you?” She smiled wanly.

“I need a room for the night.”

She led me into the hotel lobby, past a small old-fashioned dining room with the same kind of frosted doors. I smelled alcohol, which grew stronger as we rode the small elevator up to the second floor. She handed me a key, her hand trembling, and pointed me down the hall.

“Bathroom’s in the hallway. Towels are in your room, but if you need anything else, you just ring downstairs. My name’s Lorraine.” She smiled that same wan smile. “Have a good night.”

Each room was named after a famous Western hero. Mine was Annie Oakley. The room was cool, the fireplace unlit. Braided rugs covered dark, hard pine plank flooring, and fresh creamy wallpaper of white and purple morning glories covered the walls. An antique kerosene lamp decorated the antique oak dresser, and old black and white portraits hung on each wall. The room phone would not allow me to call long distance. I didn’t want to bother the inn keeper, so I took off my shoes and hung my jeans and blouse on the hook, pulled back the white chenille bedspread that matched the

white lace doilies on each round bedside table. I lay down on the soft sheets. The bed springs groaned. Their pitch changed when I reached under the fringed lamp to turn on the light. An orchestra of old springs accompanied my reach into my backpack for Adelia's diary. I held it to my chest and waited for the bed to settle. That's when a voice rose, not my voice, not Aunt Harriet's, not my oldest daughter's voice or my mother's or any voice I knew. Not Ruth's voice. Not Lorraine's voice, as far as I knew. It was an imagined voice, a sound without words in a familiar tone I couldn't peg to anyone. I did nothing to stop this voice because it didn't frighten me. Instead, I waited as I would for perfume to mix with the skin. I opened Adelia's diary to the place I had drifted off to daydream about Stevie Ray: *On at least one dried out twig hangs a thin hank of my blonde hair ...*

The morning felt like a soft mental blanket stretched along the latitude between here and California, buffering me. After a good night's sleep, yesterday's screw ups—the rooster, the scuffle, the bus ride in the wrong direction—felt less traumatic, as if these snags had settled back within the maternal coverlet of my good, warm unfolding plan.

I would catch a southbound bus back to Ponca City to spend two more days with Elman and Harriet before catching my plane to California and getting back to work by Monday morning. After the fight with Janine, I decided to cancel a second visit to the farm and begin eviction proceedings instead, but my first priority this morning was to call my children. I was especially worried about the boys. Darwin was depressed, and Henry had an anxiety attack after I told him I was taking a plane to Kansas.

When I went down to the lobby to find a long distance telephone, the innkeeper greeted me with a tense smile and a red, glassy stare. Not even her black Victorian button up dress and starched, white linen collar could hide the fact that the woman had a drinking problem. She smelled like Listerine, and when I asked to use the phone and she pointed to the alcove around the corner from the elevator, her hands were steady as a steamroller compared to last night's tremors when she showed me to my room. I felt sorry for her as I pulled out the heavy wooden armchair, sat down in its plush velvet green upholstery and called my mother and the kids collect. Mother hesitated while the operator asked her if she would accept the charge, and for a few moments I thought she would refuse.

"I know it's you, for gods sake," Mother said. "Why are you calling right when I'm trying to get your children ready for school?"

I glanced at my watch. It was eight o'clock their time, which meant that school had already started for Charlotte and Darwin. I added that to the list I had jotted down on the hotel note pad.

"Well, maybe it's good you called," she said. "You have to do something about Henry. He hasn't said a word since you left. He needs to see a specialist."

She knew Henry worked with a specialist. She knew he didn't speak.

"Don't pressure him," I said. I had drawn a wide spiral on my note pad, Henry's favorite doodle. He could sit and draw for hours. After I told him I was taking a plane to Kansas to visit the farm, he had drawn a lemon yellow plane with feather wings and a duckbill. Half way between the yellow plane and the ground, a woman in a parachute floated toward a dog or a horse standing in tall red grass. Henry had covered the image with a spiral of purple raindrops. I asked him who the woman was. He pointed at me, his green eyes large, pupils dilated. That's when I knew my six year-old was afraid. Those eyes got wide as tunnels. I tried to hold him, but he pushed away and ran to the spot he'd claimed in his tent on living room rug and glued himself to the television. That night he slept curled against my body. Anyone would worry about a kid like this, but Mother's brand of worry made everybody anxious.

"Please put Darwin on the phone," I said, intending to remind him that he needed to get to school on time and that he was the big brother of the family.

"Darwin, I love you, honey."

He grunted. "Just tell me this," he said. "Why do you even want to be in Kansas?"

"I don't want to be in Kansas."

"Then why are you?"

"It's business. Like bagging groceries." Darwin had worked as a bagger for the grocery store for last summer to save money for a new surfboard. "I inherited your Grandpa's farm. That's all."

"Charlotte thinks you're crazy," he said.

"She's sixteen."

"Well, I'm not moving to Kansas."

"We are not moving to Kansas," I said.

"I don't believe you."

"Would you believe me if I said I'm doing this for us?"

"No. Here's grandma."

"Molly," said Mother. "You should not have called at this hour? You're getting everyone upset. Where are you?"

"Lawrence," I said. "Put Darwin back on the phone. Please."

"Lawrence's, you mean," she said. "Who is Lawrence?"

Her possessives and obsessives were mixed up as usual. "Lawrence is a town. I got on the wrong bus. I'm in a hotel in Lawrence, Kansas."

"For god's sake. Don't you have to get back to work?" She made a tisking noise. "Someday, Molly Ann, you are going to be sorry..."

I looked at my list. "I don't have a phone in my room, but I want you to have the hotel number." I read it off. "Do you want to know about the farm?"

"Not really. If you want to know the truth."

"Do you want to know how Elman and Harriet are doing?"

"How are they?"

"Fine ... " I began to tell her how Harriet had given me Aunt Adelia's diary—

"I could've told you that. You didn't have to travel all the way to Kansas to figure that out."

"Mom," I stared at the sharp, jagged arrows I was now scribbling on my notepad. I told her I was heading back to Elman and Harriet's this afternoon, and I asked her if she knew anything about my step-cousin Janine Goening. "She's been living on the farm as if she owns the place. She positioned me directly under a rooster so it would attack me and when I called her on her crap she beat me up. I had to run all the way across the farm to the highway and catch a bus."

My mother did not respond.

"Mom?"

"Well, Molly," she said. "You've made your own bed. And your father never mentioned a person by that name."

I scanned my list, mentally crossed off talking to Charlotte and Rose and decided not to ask Mother about the cat or if I had received any phone calls. I told her I was catching a bus back down to Oklahoma and would call tomorrow evening from Uncle Elman and Aunt Harriet's.

"I might not be home when you call," Mother said. "I have a date. I'm meeting a gentleman for dinner."

I suddenly regretted that I had not said anything when I learned a month ago that she had invested two thousand dollars to join a dating service. I hadn't discussed it with her because, one, it seemed to make her happy and, two, she would not listen to me.

"Do I know him?"

"You don't know him. Molly, this call is costing me a fortune."

"You're going out with a stranger?"

"He's not a total stranger? I read his file. He plays a lot of golf."

"Who's watching the kids?"

"Mitch," she said. "Of course."

"Mother. How could you?"

My children didn't feel good around their ex-stepfather, and he had not spoken to me since I told him about Stevie Ray. When Mitch needed to get a message to me, he called my mother, who still insisted that he was a good catch and that I had made a huge mistake, possibly the biggest of many mistakes, when I left him. When I confided to her about the last minute birthday card Mitch had left me on the eve of my birthday before he drove off on a business trip, she scolded me for trying to interfere with his work. When I found fault with the one hundred dollar bill he had stuffed inside the card with a written promise to go backpacking, she commented that she hoped we at least were bringing pillows. I never have told her about Stevie Ray or that I used the hundred dollar bill to pay for our motel room.

"Molly," Mother said, "none of your *mother* attitude. You're the one gallivanting around the country."

"Gallivanting. Look who's talking. Don't you think it's a little soon after Dad to date?"

"When you're my age, you don't have time to waste."

She sounded oddly like a more practical version of Stevie Ray.

"In fact," she continued, "neither do you. Now, this phone call is costing me a fortune. Come home. Your children need you. I have to go."

"I love you, Mom," I said.

"Okay, dear."

Okay, then. Breakfast and a strong cup of black coffee would restore me. Even the long-fingered lane of sycamores reminded me of Mother as I followed it through town looking for a place to eat and wound up at the end of Main Street with no café in sight, just a two-story office building and a lot of dull green sky. That's when I saw her. A short stocky woman with cropped black hair. She walked up the building's basement stairs and saw me standing on the sidewalk, staring blankly at her. She smiled.

"You look lost," she said, shifting a stack of loose papers and manila envelopes to the other arm.

"I'm looking for a place to eat."

"Go back up Main Street." She pointed behind me with the same hand that held a white flyer with a familiar portrait. "The Brick House Café is three blocks on the right hand side of the street. Great French toast."

I craned my neck for a better view of the flyer and felt my stomach flop when I recognized Him.

She looked at the flyer. "You know Stevie Ray?"

"He spoke at an event back home," I said.

"He does that."

"I'm a reporter," I said, holding out my hand. "My name is Molly O'Henry and I'm from California."

Her hand brushed against my palm. "Jane. You covered his benefit?"

I shook my head and stretched the truth. "I tried."

"He's speaking at the community center on Tuesday," she said, standing there looking as if she, too, had climbed into the wrong bus in the middle of nowhere. "You're a writer?"

"A reporter. That's not why I'm here. I'm supposed to be in Oklahoma. I got on the wrong bus. Somewhere around the border."

She looked amused. "Magazine?"

"Newspaper."

"*The Los Angeles Times*?"

"*The Daily Sentinel*."

"Oh," she lowered her head. "Follow me and meet the staff. We like journalists around here."

I followed Jane down the basement steps into a small, low-ceilinged, claustrophobic room. A poster hung on the opposite wall picturing a man who was holding up his fist defiantly. The slogan "Join the Struggle" was printed beneath his name, Marion Daniels. I recognized his face. Jane led me down the hallway past several empty rooms, one lined with cots, another with two desks and a telephone, and the third a cramped bathroom with a sink and toilet. During the tour, she summarized. Marion was Chippewa and Lakota. He had been tried and convicted for raping a local woman and killing the policeman who was on the scene. Jane swore that he had not committed either of the offenses and that the authorities were withholding evidence that could prove his innocence.

"There's no way Marion could have done this," she said. "He was trying to help the woman. But those cops have such a good ole boy mentality, they made it an opportunity to pin a murder case on Marion and take him out of commission." Jane perused the office. "Looks like the staff is out to breakfast," she said, handing me a card with *Jane Yellowbird legal intern* in the center and a small feather printed in the bottom righthand corner.

I ripped out a page from my notebook and wrote my name on it, then gave it to her.

"I'm staying at The Royal Hotel until this afternoon when I plan to take a bus back to Ponca City."

"Too bad you're going to miss Stevie Ray. You could stick around and do a story for your paper back home. Maybe that's why you're here."

"I have to get back to California." I didn't tell her that my paper wasn't interested in running a story about Marion and that we took our national news off the wire service.

Jane scowled.

My stomach ached and I felt lightheaded. "I need to eat."

She led me out of the dinghy office and back up to ground level. The street was empty and the air was greener than before I had followed Jane underground.

"Tornado warning," Jane said. "It happens a lot this time of year. I'll walk you up to the Brick House Café. After that, go back to your hotel and turn on the television. Keep your eye on that tornado signal in the bottom. Stay inside. Don't worry." She shook her head and, with a look that belied Stevie Ray's integrity, said, "That Black Dog sure gets around."

I would be a liar if I did not admit how quickly Stevie Ray had muddied my focus. My priorities turned immediately upside down when I realized I'd wound up in the same town that he would be in three days from now. He was a dangerous mental detour, a dead-end, but even so, for the first time since I had given up on him, I was feeling excited and began imagining our next conversation:

Me: *We need to talk, I say.*

Him: *Silence.*

Me: *We're adults here and we've been to bed and all.*

Him: *Silence.*

Me: *In fact, we've made love. No. Had sex.*

Him: *More silence.*

Me: *So talk to me.*

Him: *About what?*

Me: *Us. Why didn't you call me back, moron?*

Him: *Silence, then, I can't just talk about 'us' on command, Molly.*

I think: *He used my name, so I must mean something to him.*

I say: *Let's get together. Over coffee. I'll buy you a cup. We need to talk.*

Him: *I'll make the pot.*

Me: *When?*

Him: *I'll be right over.*

I left a message for Jane telling her I was staying in the Annie Oakley room and gave her my local and home telephone numbers. I told her that I appreciated her company at breakfast and would stay in touch, then I pulled out my journal and drew a circle inside of which I wrote *Stevie Ray ... Tuesday ... 7 pm ... Community Center ... Oh well ... Asshole.* I got up and grabbed one of white bath towels on the dresser, intending to head down the hall to the shared bathroom for a long, hot shower before I got back on the bus when someone knocked. I screamed.

"It's me, Jane."

I opened the door. She stood in the hall holding an old leather briefcase and wearing a pair of khaki shorts, a white Hawaiian t-shirt with a red plumeria stripe across

the chest, and Birkenstocks. Jane not only worked in the office, she lived there. She slept in a cot in one of the basement rooms and cleaned up by sponge bath.

“Sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to startle you. I tried calling your room but your line was busy. Haven’t taken a shower in a month.”

I handed her my towel and apologized for the used washcloth as I led her down the hall to the shared bathroom, feeling flattered that she felt comfortable enough to come over unannounced. At breakfast this morning she had told me she was full-blood Cherokee from the southern band, one of three authentic bands of remaining Cherokee, The other two bands lived in Oklahoma. These days it seemed like everyone who wanted to be Indian was Cherokee, according to Jane, and she resented it, blaming the mixed blood on the war (I did not ask her which war) when the men had gone off to fight, leaving the women home at the mercy of whichever white men stayed behind or traveled through. I thought it sounded far too simplistic, but I didn’t tell her that and I was glad I hadn’t because I liked that she had showed up again. I pointed to the bathroom and told her to take her time.

“What about the tornado?” I asked. There aren’t any televisions in these rooms.

“It fizzled,” she said, closing the bathroom door.

I walked down the hallway, tried the knob, but the door was locked and I didn’t have my key. I headed back down the hall and knocked on the bathroom to see if Jane had it. The shower was running, then it stopped and she poked her head out of the door. She did not have the key, so I told her I was going down to the front desk and would be right back, worried that my mother was calling and something was wrong with the kids. The elevator seemed to take forever to get to my floor. Its panels seemed a permanent ceiling to floor slit. When they opened, there he was, looking as startled as I felt, the

bottom dropping out of my stomach harder and faster than if it had fallen down the elevator shaft.

He grinned and looked down at his boots, the same boots he had worn the night we'd been together, black with a square toe and metal rings at the sides.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought you weren't coming until Tuesday."

"I was going to leave a note on your door." Stevie Ray held up a piece of hotel notepaper. "I tried to call but you don't have a phone in your room."

I snatched the note as the elevator door started to close. He shoved his boot between the panels. I ran my fingers through my hair, which felt as if it was sticking to my head. I had not changed my jeans and blouse in three days.

"You look great," he said, reaching out a hand and pulling me into the elevator. I gave him a small, quick hug, but he held onto me. I was not conscious of when my stiffness softened or of the elevator door bouncing lightly against his boot until Jane shouted from down the hallway.

"Hey. Could you bring me up one of those small complimentary bars of soap?" She walked down the hallway toward us dripping wet, wrapped in the too-small towel that exposed her stocky legs and barely covered her pubic hair.

I gave her a thumbs up, feeling Stevie Ray place his arm firmly around my waist as the elevator panels closed.

Jane and Stevie Ray sprawled on the double bed as if the three of us had known each other all our lives. A stack of flyers advertising Stevie Ray's event were in one pile on the bed, Jane's briefcase and old clothes in another.

She struck a match on a Royal Hotel matchbox that she must have grabbed on her way through the front lobby and held the flame beneath a bundle of sage. “Molly, do you have something to put this in.”

A fluted ribbon of smoke rose from the sage. Its dusty scent reminded me my first husband. It reminded me of my Catholic youth, when the priest would walk down the aisle swinging his incense lantern and I would become increasingly nauseated. But the sage soothed me. I handed Jane a plain drinking glass. She placed the fat bundle into the glass, lit end up, then patted the bed, beckoning me to sit down. Stevie Ray began to pray in the same language he’d spoken when we made love. I bowed my head, thinking how being with these two was like riding on the back of a Harley Davidson.

Smoke had filled the room by the time the innkeeper knocked on the door. I pushed open the old fashioned window sash and tried to fan some of the smoke before opening the door.

“I have to inform you, m’am, that you are breaking the rules,” she said, running her palms along her large starched black bodice. “Your visitors will have to go,” she said.

I heard Stevie Ray say in the background, “She’s taking that pioneer costume seriously.”

“We don’t allow transients in this hotel,” she said.

Jane had already taken out her business card and a pen by the time she got to the doorway, demanding to know the innkeeper’s name. “Who is your manager? I am a lawyer and you are breaking federal law by harassing people based on ethnicity. If you don’t leave right now, I am going to slap a lawsuit on this hotel that will take it to the nearest commercial real estate broker. You hear me? What is your name? What is it?”

The innkeeper appeared stunned, and when she puffed up, I excused myself and stepped outside into the hall and closed the door. I started to apologize to the innkeeper, calling her Lorraine, and telling her that I had just met those two and that they had showed up unannounced, but I changed my mind and told her instead that I was a reporter, hoping to get some material on a particular situation. Then I told her I was researching a story on Marion Daniels. She had never heard of him.

“So, you’re a reporter and she’s a lawyer?”

“Actually, they’re sources for my story, and the only way they would agree to an interview was in the privacy of my room. The smoke is a cultural tradition.”

“You must think I was born yesterday.”

I asked her to wait so I could show her some identification. I knocked on the door, and when Stevie Ray opened it, I asked him to get my backpack from under the bed. He brought it to me and I pulled out my wallet. I handed Lorraine my California Highway Patrol press pass. Her face lit up. Her demeanor changed immediately. She wanted to show me a story she had written about ghosts.

“A young woman died here during a fire more than one hundred years ago,” she said. “Arson. She haunts the place. Maybe you could read it and suggest where to publish it.”

I told her I would be honored to read her story, and we agreed that I would come down to the lobby when I finished here.

“Now those Indians in there, they’re not drunk are they?” Her eyes narrowed. “We can’t have that in this hotel.”

“They are not drunk,” I said, looking at her hands and glassy eyes.

“Well, you be careful,” she said, pointing her chin toward Jane and Stevie Ray. “I’ll be in the kitchen and if I’m not there the cook will know where to find me. Check

out is two o'clock. Make sure you turn in the key. Maybe I should leave the story at the front desk."

When I was a child, prejudice did not exist in my world. In the subdivision where I grew up there were no Native Americans. There were not any African-Americans. Just white people. White people who believed in God and Jesus and went to church on Sunday. The hills we played in were not sacred, but slated for more housing. American Indians were a vanished people whom I studied in fifth grade. In the sixties when the American Indian Movement organized the standoff against the National Guard on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, I was pregnant with Charlotte. Christopher, then my boyfriend, was talking about going to Oregon to go live in a commune. I watched the entire standoff on television. It wasn't real. The fear of leaving California and having a child out of wedlock was real. My parents would be ashamed and they would miss me. So, Christopher and I decided to elope. My parents hit the roof when we came home and told them. When my mother asked me why I hadn't told them, I said telling them in advance would only create an irreconcilable standoff between us, just like those Indians and federal troops over in Pine Ridge. My father smiled. He had grown up around Indians. In fact, I think he missed living in a place where they were not around. His Uncle John was an Osage cattle rancher, and, unlike Janine and I, he got along with his step-cousin. They used to play Scout and Chief. My father was scout every time, but he accepted his role and followed his cousin around, trying to imitate his cousin's "slightly pigeon-toed stride."

When I finished talking to the innkeeper and went back inside the room, Stevie Ray and Jane looked hostile.

"This place is haunted," I said.

“The whole world in haunted,” said Stevie Ray.

““What did you tell her?” asked Jane.

“That I’m a reporter on assignment to write a story. She didn’t believe me until I showed her my press pass.”

“About what?” said Jane.

“I told her Marion Daniels. You’re my sources.”

“You said it,” said Stevie Ray, “you have to do it.” He winked at me.

“I have to get back to my children,” I said flatly.

“I’ve heard that before,” he said.

“My boss is expecting me back to work by Monday morning.”

Jane scratched her eyebrow. She looked at her watch. “Marion’s due to call. I want to get back to the office.” She put both hands on my shoulder and called me sister.

My stomach began to cramp. I handed Stevie Ray Adelia’s diary and told him he was welcome to read it. He pushed his glasses onto the bridge of his nose and pulled out some clippings that had been stored in the back of the diary. I hadn’t looked at them, yet. I excused myself to use the bathroom and take a shower, hoping he would still be here when I got back. As soon as I closed the door and headed toward the bathroom, I envisioned his waist-long ponytail and bare chest and vowed that I would not have sex with him. I said my oath out loud as I sat on the toilet and stared at the wallpaper. “I swear I will not have sex with Stevie Ray.” I repeated it in the shower.

When I returned, he was lying on the bed stripped down to his black jockey shorts. Two of the yellowed articles lay on the white bedspread, and he was reading a third.

He started reading aloud:

“The Indian, what shall we do with him? There are three solutions to the problem. There are those who say “Kill off the Indian, the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” The second answer is “Give the Indian the ballot and a quarter section of land, and then say to him, you must take care of yourself as other men have to.” The third answer is “Protect the Indians’ rights under the treaties, help them against the greed of land sharks and the vices of our civilization until they can be educated in our literature and industrial arts, our ideas of government and our system of holding land and doing business.

New York Times, August 22, 1893’.”

I sat on the edge of the bed noticing how Stevie Ray’s seriousness heightened his good looks.

“She numbered the answers,” he said. “one, two, three, and then she wrote ‘four’ with a question mark.” He looked at me. “Do you know what ‘four’ is?”

I shook my head.

He picked up one of the other articles and began to read it:

“The Indian youth today who are educated at government expense, return to their reservations to find nothing to do. If they have been taught a trade, they have no tools and no material to work with and they have lost the influence with their tribe.” He carefully placed the article on the bed. “Have you read these?” he asked.

“I’m planning to,” I said.

“Check this out. *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, an account of a Senatorial committee on an excursion through Indian Territory:

"Indian proprietorship of the lands is a leading specimen of land monopoly because 44,000,000 acres of land are held by 79,000 Indians. In other areas where the land has been deeded in severalty, it is asserted that the Indians have been found to be hiring white men to work on their farms, and that the Indians live comfortably on the produce of their labor is the source of much surprise not unmingled with horror'."

I yawned. I couldn't help it. I was tired and his voice relaxed me.

Stevie Ray jumped up and faced me. "If you're going to hang out with me, you need to understand this."

I took his outburst as a convoluted pronouncement that we actually had a relationship. I stared at the scars above his pectorals, two on each side. I wanted to lick them. I placed my hands on his waist. "I am not having sex with you," I said.

"Then why are you still here?"

"This is my room."

He sat next to me on the bed and gently tucked my hair behind my ear. He wanted to know why I was here, if not to see him. I laughed and started from the beginning. I told him how I had inherited my father's farm south of here near the Kansas-Oklahoma border, that it was mine if I wanted it, but I had to decide soon. I told him about Janine Goening and the rooster and how I'd run away from her and caught the bus thinking it was heading south to Ponca City and how I had wound up here in Lawrence, Kansas, instead. I told him how I had left my husband after we had made love in the motel room, and how my children and I had moved in with my mother. When I finished, I felt like I should probably slap him. I looked up at him, willing myself to hold up my hand and move it across the air between my palm and his cheek. He was right there above me, within arm's reach, but my palm was as slow and unwieldy

as the elevator door. He grabbed my wrist and grinned. I glanced at his shorts. He chuckled.

“I got a tepee in there,” he said.

Don’t invest more than you’re willing to lose, I told myself. But my feelings for him were overpowering me. He stood up and pulled the white elastic band from his ponytail and sat back down on the bed between my knees, his back to me. I snuggled up to his bare back, feeling the sun of his skin soak through my jeans. I combed his hair with my fingers, nearly touching the bedspread to reach the ends. I divided his hair in two and began a braid while he started rubbing the inside of my calf.

“We have to talk,” I said.

He stopped. “I’m all ears.” He slapped his thigh. “Down, chubby boy.”

“We’re adults here and we’ve been to bed.”

He let out a low whistle.

“Why didn’t you call me back?” I asked.

“I already told you.” He sounded peevish. “I tried, but you don’t have a phone in here. You have that note.”

That wasn’t what I mean. “I mean, why didn’t you call me after we made love in that motel. You said you would.”

“You believe everything you hear?”

“I believed you. We connected.”

“In that time and place.”

“Then you used me.”

“Something came up. I had to leave town sooner than I thought. I didn’t have a phone. And what did you expect sleeping with a man you’d just met?”

“A pay phone and a quarter are that complicated?”

"It's hard to explain. I thought of you," he said. "Not a day went by that I didn't think of you." He slapped his thigh. "That tent just don't want to come down."

He took my hand and kissed my fingers, then pressed my palm to his chest. I inhaled the smell of his skin. It was a familiar, pleasant smell. He guided my hands down to the solid, warm bulge in his underwear. Then I surprised myself by getting up, grabbing his pants and shirt from the bed.

"You really do have to go. I opened the door and held out his clothes. "Sorry." And I was.

He rose slowly, then took his pants and shirt, and as he walked toward the door, I checked out his thin legs that were smooth and slightly bowed. When he crossed the threshold I closed the door and latched the brass chain, feeling a meteor of pain shoot through in my chest to my arms and fingers as if he had ripped away from me again.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Molly."

I imagined him standing outside the door slipping into his jeans and waiting for me to change my mind. I kept my resolve, but when I saw his boots and socks sticking out from under the bed, I laughed and opened the door and held them out.

"Stevie Ray?" I called.

The hallway was empty. I went to the window, looked down once to the hotel entrance to make sure the sidewalk was clear, held the boots over the sill and let go. I heard two thuds and a couple of rebounds, then pulled down the window shade, gathered the articles and Adelia's diary and placed them on the bedside table. I lay down beside the indentation he had left on the edge of the bed. The smell of his hair on the pillowcase was luscious and I pushed my hand inside my underwear to a glistening

fullness, a full-fledged, slippery Venus mound. And as I stroked myself, I breathed a sigh and a lightness came over me that stretched and flattened like the plains of my imagined Midwest.

This is Henry speaking. Grandma Rose kicked Gerome outside. Two days after Mom left he started peeing on the bathroom floor and Grandma was afraid he would move his business to the livingroom rug. Anyone who lets him in gets in trouble. I drew a picture of Gerome standing on his back legs pawing and meowing at the sliding glass door. He was trying to get us to let him in. My teacher thought it was another picture of my teddy bear trying to get on my bed. I'm going to be in second grade pretty soon. I'm trying not to think of my bear. Then she told me that my mom loved me very much and even though it seems like she's been gone forever she'll be home soon as soon as she takes care of business. She better hurry. Grandma bought Rose a Punker Barbie and Charlie's talking about dying her hair again. Cotton candy. Same color as Barbie's. Charlie's been a bitch. At least she tells Grandma to stop yelling when she talks loud to me like that will make me hear better. I can hear just fine. She's the one. She won't wear her hearing aid. When Darwin said she should let her hair grow out gray, she said it makes her look old. She is old. What's wrong with that. It gets confusing around here. The Barbie keeps Rose busy so she don't talk as much about Kansas because Kansas freaks Grandma out. THAT PLACE Grandma calls it. Darwin is bummed out because he doesn't have anyone to take him surfing even though Grandma promises everyday. She's afraid a shark'll attack him and she can't swim so she can't save him. I miss my mom so much.

8

When I turned down Stevie Ray, I retrieved a little of what I had lost to him, as if the severed lines I'd cast from my heart to his had somehow repaired themselves. It felt good because I had done something to empower myself, rather than give my power away to someone who didn't really care whether or not he saw me again. Distance also helped. The more the dull Kansas landscape passed by the window of my southbound bus, the more relieved I felt. I'd freed myself of him, and there was no turning back. I looked up. The highway sign said we were thirty miles from Ponca City, and the R and L stop was five miles this side, so I dug out the diary and continued to read where I had left off last night.

On hot days like this, the old timers can smell dead buffalo even though they were all killed before I was born. I swear I smelled it today. I was out of breath when I reached Papa and Robert and told them I'd seen a stranger down by the river. Papa scanned the sky working the breeze for signs of weather. Just then a horse whinnied from the edge of the field by the old buffalo trail. There was a buckboard overflowing with Indian children a hundred yards behind. There was that man I had caught drinking by the river. I learned his name is John Rain. At first he stayed his distance, and then he was pointing for me to look behind. Papa had dropped to the ground and Robert was bending over him.

Adelia's wrote hastily, as if she were pressed for time.

On some nights, early spring and fall when the air is most clear, we see its lights across the prairie. This is where they are taking the children. Some nights we make out drumming and singing from the families camped nearby. The Indian School. That is where they were taking them. A dozen thirsty, dusty children. One little girl took to me. Her name is Little Talking Leaf. She let me comb her hair and Mama fears she gave me lice. They traveled more than one hundred miles from the Kiowa-Comanche villages and the Wichita Agency. They had to come up this way since the Chikaskia crossing was no good.

I knew approximately where Witchita was, but I'd never heard of the Chikaskia River. For that matter, I hadn't known the Kiowa and Comanche had lived in those parts—Oklahoma I assumed, probably Indian Territory just south of the Mason Dixon Line. Adelia described the children as the "sorriest" looking bunch of hollow-eyed orphans she had ever seen as they journeyed toward the boarding school. I was struck that my relatives invited the travelers to freshen up and water the livestock. Maybe they needed John's manpower to help carry Patrick to the house. Or maybe this was a more hospitable time when people relied on each other for mutual survival. I let go of that romantic idea when I read about Lester Goodnight:

Papa lost his vision until Mama put him to bed, and numbness traveled through his arms and settled in his tongue before it traveled out his right

foot. I was afraid he would die. Mama rubbed kerosene on his feet to keep it gone. He slurred his words and then headache. Mama used compresses to take out the heat and if that did not work she was prepared to cut one of the chickens in half and put it up to his head but Papa started seeing again. Mama said he was weak and anyone could see she had the panics so I fixed her a toddy.

Robert, Joseph, and Patrick Jr. and the neighbor boy Lester Goodnight kicked their boots against the post, wanting to be fed. Lester wanted to know what all those Indian "brats" were doing strewn under the willow as if we had the entire Indian problem in our yard. He is sweet on sister Hazel and me, Hazel more since he knows I do not like him. Papa came downstairs. He looks ten years older.

I thought Mama would split at the seams when John Rain took Papa's seat at the table. Lester shouted with a mouthful of biscuit he was not going to sit at the same table as a heathen. "Well, then, Lester," Papa says. "You better get up and leave." Lester kept it up and asked John Rain if it was true that Indians had as many squaws as a buck could handle. Papa told Lester to shut up. Lester puffed like a rooster and left.

Papa blamed it on the opening. Everyone's blood is up. Swarms of people hoping to start new when the Cherokee Strip opens as if fate set like a whip on their shoulders. If Papa succeeds in homesteading a quarter section, it means two years of sodbusting. Meanwhile, we have this farm to run. These newcomers are coming clear from the Erie Canal and Boston. No common sense, Papa says. But the government plans

on using these greenhorns to build the place into the grain empire of the world. Papa says it is the only way.

The driver who came along with John Rain asked me and Hazel about our futures. He took to Hazel, too, something about the way she looks bold at men, as if she could kick them in the teeth if she did not like them so much. I guess men like that. Finding a husband and running her own farm, she says looking the man straight in his blue eyes. Enroll in the nursing school or teacher's school up in Emporia, I answered. Hazel said with those high ideas I would be dancing in a hog trough on her wedding day. John Rain did not look up from his food thank you Jesus. The driver said they are looking for a field matron at the Indian school. Mama nodded. That could be a job for me. I could help civilize them Indians, she said.

Hazel handed John Rain an apple, smiled, and asked him if he could peel it in one strip. The girl is obsessed. One peel and he could be the one. I watched and felt relief when it broke off. Back porch to cut the pies. John Rain comes up behind me and puts his hand softly on my low back and reaches behind his vest, pulling out that buck knife he pared the apple skin with and I think for a second he plans to abduct me. But he only offered me the knife to cut the pie.

Hazel reminds me to think of three boys we know, one for each corner of her piece of pie. I hold John's knife, the grooves of bone shaft secure in my grip, steam still rising from the pie holes, when Papa's chair scraped mean enough to collapse my ears. "Girl, where did you get that knife?" he shouts. I worried he would faint again. I tell him John Rain.

Papa demands to know where HE got it. It is a long story, John Rain says. Papa says he has time.

Things were happening fast for Adelia in a series of synchronistic events that makes one think a greater force was at work shaping destiny. As I read Adelia's journal, I learned that John Rain was along to assist in recruiting the children. He scouted the way through the string of reservations south of the farm, and his presence was supposed to help the driver, an agent of the federal government, convince the Indian people to hand over their children. These children who had stopped by the farm were not orphans, as Adelia initially assumed. These children had been taken from their families and were en route to a federally operated Indian boarding school on the other side of the Kansas-Oklahoma border where they would be indoctrinated into white ways. If the parents refused to cooperate, which they often did, the agent threatened to suspend their government rations or throw them in jail.

August 2, 1893

I look out into the dusk imagining John leading the children toward the school. I wait for the first star so I can put his name on it.

"Touch," I said aloud, thinking back to where Adelia writes of John Rain and the moment he placed his palm on the small of her back. Touch like this usurps thought. It ignites passion and our actions become driven by the need for more. Touch. A gentle, sensuous touch so intoxicating we refuse considering its consequences, so powerful we blindly trust the other's capacity for reciprocity. And even when the beloved fails in this, we deny his failing because the feeling of that first touch has already drawn us from

a place inside and engaged us so exquisitely with the world that we are not ready to surrender hope. Our desperation for companionship, love, sex, or some sliver of adventure which breaks the surface and has such power to wreak havoc on placid life. Knowing this adds to the exhilaration. In hindsight, I cannot remember Stevie Ray's first touch; his first words were an inquisition, his first kiss as if he were inserting a meat thermometer. I could not imagine life with Stevie Ray beyond wondering when I might see him again. Probably never, since I had no idea of his whereabouts and he hadn't tried to reach me. I should be grateful since knowing would likely have driven me to reconnect with him as it drove Adelia to follow John Rain.

John Rain is one of the Heart Stay People of the Little Osage band who were the original inhabitants of this land like the Kaw and Pawnee. His people lived right here, until the last Buffalo Hunt twenty four years ago, the same year Papa arrived, probably drank from that spring down by the river. John Rain remembers hunting trails when he was a boy. They crisscross all over, pieces here and there stitched by farms and wagon roads. Said his father took him up here to hunt prairie chicken and quail even after his people moved south across the thirty-seventh. Somewhere between the Arkansas and Ninnescah, he seen his father's spirit and gave me chills and wants to go back and pick up the trail to see how far it takes him once he delivers the children because he does not trust the driver. He calls it the old Black Dog trail.

"Oh my god."

Buster braked and my backpack slid to the floor.

“What’s wrong back there?” he shouted.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I shouted. How could I explain in short order that I had just read about the old buffalo trail that ran somewhere near this highway with the same name as my ex lover. A person can’t explain those kinds of coincidences; they’re based on feeling and perception and trying to explain synchronicity is futile. Either the power of the colliding events lose their power or I would sound ridiculous and lose mine. Especially to Buster.

“You all right is all I need to know,” he said.

“Yes.” Ahead of us, running perpendicular to the highway, an archway spanned the side of a small road, more like a lane. I walked to the front of the bus, staring out the window as we got closer. Large flat squares were attached to the arch, each one bearing a large, faded red letter: C H I L O C C O I N D I A N S C H O O L .

Another “Oh my god.”

“You better stop that,” said Buster. “I don’t like outbursts I can’t understand when I’m driving.”

I moved to the front seat and stared out the window, trying to make out the details. As we passed by the entrance, Buster slowed the bus. *He’s reading my mind*, I thought. He pulled over to the shoulder, put the gears in idle. The bus lurched, then stopped. I wondered if he was going to turn around and drive us through the archway.

“Be right back.” He opened the door and stepped out. “Stay put.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the arch, and heard Buster’s piss onto the highway’s shoulder.

Buster refused to detour through the Indian School, so I stepped off the bus and walked back along the shoulder of the highway toward the school. It was early in the day, the air quiet and still, the sun low on the hazy prairie horizon. A skirt of prairie spread before me, blonde where the contour of the ground rose slightly and the distance of roots from water, of blade to sunlight, left its markings. I guessed that a creek ran on the far side of the line of trees and brush that hemmed the prairie's periphery. Perhaps it ran from the Arkansas River.

The metal gates to the school were wide open. Overhead, an archway of large rectangular red and white letters spanned the entrance. The letters spelled *Chilocco Indian School*, the same school my great aunt had written about. Limestone pillars supported the arch. The lane—long, so long I couldn't see the end of it—ran before me like a ribbon, dipping and rising with the land. Low, dense grass grew to the edges of the lane and softened its light, almost white surface. On either side of the road, deciduous trees—I don't know what kind—stood like two rows of square dancers. I heard a pair of meadowlarks and saw them flit from limb to ground and up to limb again. The treetops on either side of the lane grew toward each other, forming a portal of open space at the end of the road. To my right, near the highway, a simple granite monument had been erected. Weeds sprouted at its base. I walked over to inspect it. Engraved in the stone was a dedication to the one hundred thousand settlers who participated in the Cherokee Strip Run in 1893. Ah, I thought, my great grandfather was one of them, and here I stand at the entrance to the Indian School that kept the children at the periphery of this historical event.

I began to walk down the ribbon road toward that portal. I must have walked down that road for the better part of half an hour before I reached a bridge spanning a lily pond. I kept walking, past an old tractor parked outside a weathered barn. A red truck driven by a Native American man with seven more men piled into the truck bed rode around the oval road that looped a large lawn, the hub of seven one and two story buildings constructed of the same limestone as the pillars to the property's entrance. As the truck passed, the driver honked the horn, the men stared at me while a half dozen pigeons flew out from the eaves of the nearest building. The sound of pigeons cooing grew louder as I climbed the short flight of steps leading to the building's cathedral-sized door. I tried the latch and felt the swollen door scrape as I pushed it open. A warm, sour odor permeated the room. Bird dropping covered everything, the floors, the stairs, all the way up to the second floor. Several inches of the droppings lay between me and the staircase. I tiptoed across the hallway through the mess and started up the coated steps. The second story landing opened to a small, ornate theater with several tiers of cushioned seats. In its day, this must have been the school's crown jewel. But these days, it was falling to ruin. The floor sagged, and even here, bird poop covered everything. I held my breath against the curdled air and walked toward the light of a large classroom where brittle yellow Venetian blinds rustled in the draft of an open window. Here the floor was clean. I leaned out the window and inhaled as much fresh air as my lungs could hold, then gazed across the vacant schoolyard. I sat on the floor, my back pressed against the hospital green schoolroom wall and tried to make sense of the graffiti on the blackboard. Something jabbed me in the shoulder blade. I reached around to my pack and pulled out Adelia's diary. I scanned the first pages, looking for references to the Chilocco Indian School and the buckboard full of kids. The energy of

the century-old pages mixed with the lingering energy of the room's history, the past rejoining the present. I took up Adelia's story where I'd left off last night at the hotel:

Papa poured John Rain more coffee to keep him talking. He wanted to know about that antler-handled knife. I can feel the memory of its ribbed edges in my palm as I write. It was the year of the last buffalo hunt, and my father and two of his partners showed up in Osage camp, uninvited and rubbing off their bad odor on everything they touched. Papa said they left their horses at the river and went in on foot fearing the Indians would steal them otherwise. When they got to camp Papa offered his knife to one of the Indian men as a gesture of respect. The knife had medicine, John Rain said. It had traveled across the ocean, Papa said. It turns out my father gave his knife to John's father. Praise the lord and take away my goosebumps. Papa refilled the coffee cups. One for me.

I wonder what Adelia would have thought if she'd known her father's shrewdness would award him the dubious distinction of being the first white man to spend the night in what would become Tornado sooner than he was supposed to. I wondered if she realized that he'd swindled both the Osage before they relocated to Oklahoma and the land company from the neighboring town, a split-hair before they had a chance to legally file their claims for his same quarter section. In doing so, his blaze-mark jumped the deadline by weeks and ruined the land-company's plans to claim the spot as an official town site.

I had read of Patrick's exploit, but I had never heard the story of the knife that he had brought over from Ireland, nor how it wound up in the hands of his

daughter's destined husband. Adelia wrote that John Rain's father had led Patrick and his two sidekicks back to the river, swollen from late summer and autumn rain. John Rain's father led his two partners toward the outer boundary of Osage territory. He turned back toward camp well before the river. Then, he heard the shouts, John Rain said, but by the time he reached the river, it was too late:

My father's partner had gone down. He had forgotten to free his mare from her tie down, and when she crossed the river, she could not lift her head above the river and panicked. The current took her down. Mare and rider were already lost by the time John's father appeared with the antler-handled knife that might have saved both. They recovered him down river where he had wedged in the strainers between an old tree stump and his poor, drowned mare.

I traced my ancestral moving and settling and cravings and tried to make sense of what I was born. I turned back to the place in the journal where Adelia's pen had scratched an accidental line down the page. This was the point of her deviation, when she had first been startled by John Rain and stopped writing. Curiously, I became more connected to her from that accidental scratch across the page.

The musty odor of mothballs mixed with images of a buckboard full of thirsty children stopping for water on the way to the Indian School. I felt nauseated. My being here on this floor, reading this century old diary created an surprise intersection of generations. These were details my father never talked about in his stories. I imagined John Rain in the kitchen and felt the chemistry between him and Adelia. Adelia—I'd barely known she existed as part of my Midwestern legacy, a hard legacy of physical

labor which I can't fathom surviving. It was a place of transplanted culture shaped by the demands of nature. Adelia, so far, was the best part of me.

... I thought Papa would collapse again when he realized he was the white man in John Rain's story. It was Papa who had given the knife to John Rain's father. I looked around for that butchered chicken Mama had threatened to put to his head. Thank You Jesus! he did not faint again. They wanted to arrive at the school before nightfall and I was sorry to see them go. Especially him. He sat there in the driving seat next to the agent. Looked straight ahead as if he had already forgotten me and our meeting had passed into another time and place. He is certainly made of this indifferent land. My heart sank like a rock and I dragged myself around the kitchen to clean up after everyone. But little brother Luke changed all of that. He had run along the wagon as it headed to the Indian School. Before long I heard him on the porch. He flew through the front door blabbering about some strangers coming up the road. Then, a woman and two grown men rode up. Pretty soon they were standing on the porch. The woman insisted she was Papa's wife!

After all that, Luke remembered the feather John Rain had made him promise to give me. A bluebird's delicate bright-blue tail feather.

My hand is sore from writing.

I stretched. Small bones and cartilage in my back and neck popped. I rotated my head and let it hang, stretching the muscles that ran down my spine. I could see the tension in Adelia's handwriting, the over elation, shock, and exhaustion. Her tight handwriting had become sloppy and loose, filling the pages with four words to a line. It

became small and secretive where she wrote how her mother and father fought and cried all night. The woman claiming to be Patrick's wife insisted that he had deserted her and the boys in Pennsylvania when he had headed out west. She complicated everyone's life, Adelia wrote. The woman claimed Adelia's father had promised to send word when he settled, but he never did and when he hadn't she began placing ads in several newspapers, including the *Arkansas City Star*. The ad requested that anyone knowing the whereabouts of Patrick O'Henry contact her. Adelia refused to write the woman's name, but she wrote down her story, how she believed Patrick dead. She maintained that desperate hope that it was time, distance, and events had prevented communication, refusing to believe the possibility he had lost interest. This was, after all, part of settling the West. This woman, Patrick's first wife, was as much a gift as anathema for Adelia, since she was the catalyst for Adelia's decision to leave her home. She needed an excuse to find John Rain again, and the already full house had become unbearably over-crowded with three more adults and the shame of bigamy.

... The woman insisted Papa live up to his responsibility and give them shelter. So she must be telling the truth because Papa decided that her two boys get the barn and she would sleep in my bedroom. I am grateful Lester was not around. Word will travel soon enough without his ugly mouth. I am leaving. I am taking the agent at his word. He told us he would find me a field matron position at the Indian School. The money will go to Mama and I can save for nurse's school. It is time I learned a trade since my faith in men in these parts has sunk lower than our August river. Mama said the sunset was a lucky omen for traveling. She said a lot more.

The blinds rattled and pigeon wings flapped thickly from the rafters. Why they had not shit in this room remains a sequel. First one, then the entire flock flew from the building toward the low sun. With afternoon came long shadows and the oppressiveness that accompanies twilight. I knew, standing here, that I must hurry to the highway catch the bus and make the transfer to Ponca City. Still, I had to pick my way cautiously down the stairwell to avoid slipping. I held my breath until I was outside.

Once at the bridge, I stopped to look at the creek. Some of the water was diverted into a small duck pond. In the distance, I could see a two-story building of limestone with its multiple small windows that seemed to be watching me. "Home 2" the sign on the building said.

I was halfway down the tree-lined land in what felt like an endless little road when I spotted Buster's gray tour bus coming toward me from the opposite direction. I tried and failed not to smile as he came near, and when I stepped into the bus, his lower lip was so stuffed with chew it looked like someone had smacked it. I held up the diary in front of his face as if to prove the value of what seemed to him a flaky California woman's impulsivity: "My great aunt worked here."

He looked at the ceiling: "I'm still waitin for the sky to fall."

I pointed outside the window: "She...worked... here."

"And you almost missed your bus out of here, again." He hacked low in his throat and sent a louey flying out the window.

When we drove into the R and L gas station and convenience store with its taxidermy exterior, Buster was still complaining that I had made him late for supper and the wife and kids would lay into him. By the time we pulled into the Greyhound station in Ponca City, he had told me the names of all his kids, how old they were, who played

what sport, and how his wife had become one of the most well-known doll-makers in Wichita. He had explained to me the difference between varieties of porcelain in excruciating detail, some of which I wrote down. When he swung open the bus door, I detected something like attachment in the way he leaned forward, similar to the way he had hovered over the charming lady in the red hat. He glanced outside and back at me, like he was not quite sure I was all right enough to let go of.

“I give you a hard time. Don’t let it get to you.”

I hung onto the metal pole, wanting to disembark, but sensing he had more to say, like my father’s stories, and I didn’t want to bushwhack him.

“There’s something you might be interested in,” he said.

I smiled, hoping he wouldn’t smile back and reveal his tobacco-flaked bad teeth. I avoided staring at his greasy balding head. I gripped the pole more firmly.

“I know why they call that school *Chilocco*,” he said.

I gripped the pole more firmly, deciding to listen and remember rather than look for by notebook and risk interrupting his flow.

“A white man who worked for the United States Indian Service at the turn of the century,” Buster said. “He came up with the name. But he got it wrong. The Indians spelling was c e r a k k o.” He spelled the word aloud. “Another spelling was c i l a k k o, with a apostrophes at the beginning over the ‘a.’ Know what it means?”

I shook my head.

“Horse. Yep. But that ain’t all. Some of your university types think it’s a mix up, that the white man combined two Indian spellings for “cave people.” Any way a person looks at it, *Chilocco* ain’t an English word and no such word exists in Indian.”

The name was an anomaly, then, a freak translation from one language to another that created its own meaning, a word taken from the country's indigenous culture by a subjugating culture which didn't care enough to get it right or got it wrong on purpose.

He paused a moment before spitting out the window. I braced myself. Buster had just displayed an emotional attachment to me, and now I suspected that he was about to surprise me again. It surprised me that he would be knowledgeable about the etymology of a name, especially the name of a closed down, pigeon infested Indian School.

"I used to work there," he said. "In the maintenance yard before the feds shut down funding and the tribes were forced to sell."

Buster dropped me off at the Greyhound bus station in Ponca City, where I waited for Elman and Harriet to pick me up. He winked at me as he shut the bus doors. I was the only person in the station and found a seat inside where I could study Amelia's journal, obsessed with the fact that my present travels and my great aunt's journey of a century earlier had intersected and, furthermore, curious how my great aunt carried out her resolve to leave home and began her first job away from home, and meanwhile set out to see John Rain.

... Papa drove me down here early this morning while the alabaster moon set low on the pale blue sky. He did not say much about ___ and her two sons, only repeating the uprooting and settling back down of the West often separates people. I wonder what he told Mama. She looks strained and her Irish temper come back to life. No doubt the two women will make life hell for Papa. Hell. I tried to console Mama before I left. But she went into a fit, she called Papa names and claimed we were now bastards and because of his sins, he'd condemned her to hell. She said God was sending all of us to purgatory since our baptisms, Holy Communion and confessions (with the exception of young Luke) were void in the eyes of the church. She said my penance is to teach the white woman's way to a rosary of lazy savages. As I stepped out the threshold of her kitchen she took my arm and warned me not to get involved with John Rain. "You'll never make a white man out of an Indian," she said. I promise I will never try.

It's August fourth when Adelia arrives at the boarding school. I found myself wondering how much she would divulge about her newfound feelings for John in a time characterized by withholding. I wondered to what degree east coast Victorianism had saturated the rural Midwest. Not much, I guessed. This was a culture of pragmatism. And now Adelia had taken a risk and placed herself in a frigid environment of tempered emotions. I guessed that Adelia's resolve was firmed by the appearance of her father's first wife and was spurred by her desire to find John Rain, the only man in a landscape of men who seemed to attract her. Adelia notes in her journal that the famous Cherokee Strip Run is less than two weeks away. I knew both Patrick and Robert had both participated in that land run from my father's stories. Robert, a young man at the time, would eventually marry, inherit this place and father six children, my father being the eldest.

As the monument at Chilocco's entrance stated, one hundred thousand settlers rushed onto the Outlet on that famous day, September sixteenth, eighteen ninety-three. Since there were forty thousand available claims, most failed. Some died. My grand and great grandfathers succeeded, my dad boasted, largely because they lived nearby and knew the best spots in the Outlet.

Adelia writes that she expected her brother and father to show up at the Indian school soon "because they need an excuse to sneak in and poke around the Cherokee Strip which surrounds the school on three sides." I cringed to think how this event in American folklore found its way to the big screen and left out two key historical factors—the government stole the land from the Indians, then stole their children.

August 5

On my walk along the path up Chilocco Creek, I see afar white tents, their tops blackened from smoke. Indians have set up their camps in the prairie outskirts to be near their children while they wait out the long school year. But some of the children will not go home. The school farms them out as domestics and field hands to nearby white families, whoever pays most. This morning a buckboard full of boomers came into the school looking for water and crumbs of food. A unit of soldiers from the Calvary walked through on their way to patrol the Cherokee Strip. They stopped me for directions as I was crossing the yard to the refectory. One smelled so bad of whiskey I lost my appetite.

The buildings are cut of the very earth around us. Pale yellow limestone blocks from the quarry close by. The boys cut them as part of their training for the civilized world. They live in the Home 3 building and us girls in Home 2. The children have to speak English even though they don't know a lick of it. This is a new world to them. The Superintendent warned me that if I hear them speaking Indian to report it. I am glad to get away from the chaos at the farm with Papa's long lost ___ and sons. One thing for sure, it was not Mama who reported Papa's whereabouts. Perhaps Papa has an enemy.

If Patrick did have enemies, they certainly had the advantage at this turn of events. His first wife's placement of an ad in the nearby newspaper and her unannounced appearance with grown sons in tow must have created quite the

scandal around Tornado. The process of migrating from the East and re-settling in the West, causing husbands and wives to lose touch with one another, could not be so common as to avoid scandal once the truth caught up. Patrick's first wife must have stewed over the meaning of his disappearance for some time, since Patrick had already remarried—without divorcing—and fathered eleven children by his new wife, most of whom were nearly grown. His punishment for bigamy was likely hell on earth: two wives living under the same roof.

August 6.

Reverie at 5:30. The children get up, dress and report outside in their military uniforms and heavy dresses to march before breakfast. I could barely make them out. Shadows. Rows and rows. Short and tall shadows. Many as small as Luke. We eat. Boys on one side and girls on the other. Girls wash dishes and mop. The bad ones polish the floors. Classes from 10 to noon. Cold lunch. Fieldwork and training for the older boys, sewing, more cooking, and hoeing the fields for the older girls. Out there in the heat of the day, in their pretty cotton dresses working the rows. I have never seen so many women working a field and it makes me think this is how it must look in the country's southern parts. Dinner, chores. Bedtime 9:30.

Superintendent's office. Awaiting my assignment when rough looking man dragged in two little girls by their arms. They couldn't be no more than six. The man caught them running south for Pawnee country. Runaways, he said, and the school owes him ten dollars bounty for returning them. He looks like one who makes a living at it. Rough cut.

The girls had scrapes on their poor arms and fresh scratches. Their braids were a tangle with twigs. Their faces and necks caked with dust and where there innocent tears have dried are rivulets. He left dark bruises on thin, brown arms. "Let go of them," I ordered him. I do not know what got into me. It prides me to know I will make a stand, even against a brute like him. I think he would have hit me if his hands had not been full of little girls. He demanded to know who I was. The new field matron, I answered. I left off assistant to make myself sound as if I carried weight around here. He shoved them into the corner and told me he only wished the girls were older so he could really teach them a lesson.

Adelia's anger and heart pangs transferred to me. I hoped Mother was soothing the children in my absence.

This is Henry. Yesterday when I got home from school I drew a board game and called it *Finding Mom*. I drew a straight line across with a shark fin on one side for Grandma Rose's house and a pig on the other side for Grandpa's farm. It works like *Shoots and Ladders*. If you mess up, you slide right back or die. If you have a good toss you climb a mountain. If you have a bad toss you land in shark-infested water. Next, to get to Mom you have to swim across the lake, but if you land in the lake, you drown. Then you slide down the mountain and cross the desert. If you mess up in the desert, you get bit by a rattlesnake and die from the venom. If you pass the snake you have to climb another bigger mountain and fight a Grizzly Bear. If you mess up, he eats you. If you land on a good spot, you slide down the mountain and cross a prairie and if

you mess up there, a buffalo herd stampedes you to death. The last stop is the farm and if you get that far, you get to see Her. Darwin thought my shark fin was a wave. Charlotte thought the snake was a turf. Rose gets it. She guessed the coil was a rattler and the buffalo head nickel was a stampede. I didn't have any markers to play, so Rose cut off two bottom buttons from my shirt. She says they will be good luck. We took turns throwing our buttons on the number box. She really wanted to win. She got mad when her button landed on the line between 5 and 6, and since it was closer to the 5 that meant she landed in the lake and I flicked her button into the lake. She said it landed nearer the 6 and I let her have her way. She got as far as the desert and I was already climbing mountain number two when Grandma Rose made us come eat dinner. Stew and dumplings. She made us eat the celery before we could be excused. We finished Finding Mom after dinner before bedtime. I tried to get my button to land on the low numbers so Rose could pass me. She just seemed like this was the most important thing. When she got past the buffalo to the farm, she collapsed her head on my drawing and kissed it. Then she started crying because it was just a game and Mom's not really there.

... The S_____ came in and demanded to know what was going on. He looked straight at the bounty man, addressed him by his first name, Blue. I expected S_____ to scold him and start citing from the Bible. He is a Quaker, afterall. Instead, he thanked the man and asked him to wait outside for his money. The girls had shoes, hard lace up ones, and their feet were covered in blisters. I wondered if this was part of a plan to keep their sore feet from running too far and fast. The man called Blue cursed about barbarians and said he should have let them die. S_____ closed the door after him. Those boots shook the floor. I wet my handkerchief on my tongue so I could wipe some of the dirt and my dry mouth hardly provided me the moisture those faces needed. Then the S_____ told me I was out of line. He said the girls deserved punishment. They could get into harm's way when they go AWOL. There are so many runaways here. When they are caught, they are punished in a lock up room in the basement. Not these young ones, I pray. He said it requires extreme measures to keep these Indians from reverting to the blanket. The little ones sat on the floor against the wall, huddled against each other with blank expressions. S_____ dismissed me and sent me to my supervising teacher in the classroom building. I had the skitters when I entered the classroom, but at least I forgot about the girls' plight for a few minutes. It smelled like wet kalsomine. A woman with her back to me was painting the wall. I guessed right that this was Miss Edith Sneath. When she turned I saw she was about Mama's age

and still handsome for her age. She was painting the room light peach. Her brown hair, rich in color as pecan, was trimmed with silver at the edge like a soft halo. She wore it pinned up so her white high collar blouse framed her face prettily.

She spooked and threw up both hands when I said “hello.” The paint splattered on the chalkboard. She swept a strand of hair off her face with the back of her free hand. I introduced myself quick to settle her down. She asked me if I had toured the school ground, and when I said ‘I seen parts,’ she told me if I am going to teach I need to practice proper grammar all the time. No backwardness. I had to set an example. She was educated in Massachusetts and taught at an Indian School back there before coming here. You can tell she’s educated right off. She likes it out here, likes it wherever she’s sent, she told me. She told me to meet her outside by the clothesline in one hour. Today was blue Monday which meant laundry day. Blue for bluing. Blue for Monday. Blue for the bounty man. The older children would be finished in the laundry room and she had a pile of clothes to hang. She sent me back to my room to rest awhile since I looked ashen.

A description of my room: The mattress is thinner than my own and stained dark in the middle about where it comes out of us. I doubt that I will sleep any better on this bed than my home bed. I have a writing desk, dresser, and closet, a braided oval rug on the floor that one of the girl students made in sewing class. My view from the desk overlooks the duck pond. The weeping willow shades a little patch of green where I saw mallards earlier. It is lovely. The sight of busy men

and boys on the far side of the pond near the barn makes me think I will spot John Rain sometime. I can see part of the oval schoolyard if I walk down the hall. My walls are dingy and cast something fearful over me. I will ask Miss Edith if I can use her left over paint to freshen them.

From where she wrote, Adelia could look out her window to the spot I stood that very day. She mentioned the same barn and oval greens which I had just seen. And her words filled me with images of teepees on warm prairie nights and sad, wide awake faces listening for the voices of their parents and hearing far off drums and cricket songs, instead.

August 7

I met the Lone Wolf boys. The younger one called me "teacher." I said hello to them both but only the younger returned my greeting. "William," said Miss Sneath, "Respond." But William said nothing. He ran his hand across his cropped hair as if it had just been cut. They are Kiowa boys. Their uncle is a troublemaker, Miss Sneath said. I caught William staring at me. Miss Edith said it was my blue eyes and blonde hair. Abraham, the younger one, spoke English well enough when he explained for the both of them that they had finished in the laundry room and were on their way to the quarry. They wanted to be assigned another job because William's back hurt. Miss Edith told them to go to the guardhouse and ask Mr. Black. They looked at each other and did not budge. She led them to her classroom to practice their handwriting and left me hang her laundry.

I have not seen or heard anything of John Rain. I have not asked of his whereabouts. My curiosity would be gossip in no time, so I am keeping my mouth shut. The sun sets behind Home 3 at the end of first week. I am not missing Mama and the rest like I ought.

I felt the softness of my Aunt Harriet's arms and the folds of her back, a softness that embarrassed me. She held me a few uncomfortable seconds after I was ready for her to let go. Then I asked her in the middle of the bus station, "Did you know Adelia worked at the Indian School?"

Her face twisted into a scowl. "I'm so sick of hearing about Indians," she said, "the next time I hear about Indians I'm going to puke." For the first time I noticed a large crusty mole on the inside of her left ear. As if that weren't bad enough, it sprouted a dark hair.

Elman sat hovered over me. "I suppose she figured it weren't nothing to brag home about," he said.

When we returned to the ranch and walked into the doublewide, I returned to the picture of Adelia on the bookshelf, in the exact place it had been the first time I saw it. I thought of Stevie Ray sitting on the bed between my legs while I braided his hair. Elman came up behind me. "Didn't me to startle you, little lady," he said. Harriet held out a plate of cheddar cheese and triscuits.

"About that Indian School. I saw them working in the field," he said. He reached into his shirt pocket and took out his toothpick. "Weren't no visitor center at

that school. Not like it was some national park or something.” He pointed it at me.

“We take people as they come in these parts. You take old Leroy who owns the gas station. I call him Chief. Him and me wouldn’t be the same without saying hello to each other down at the donut shop most mornings, and every so often we meet each other down by the lake and fish for crappy. I ain’t prejudice like you’re thinking. No more than the next man.”

Harriet surveyed me head to foot. Her expression told me I needed to take a cheese and triscuit, and clean up. I popped the hors d’oeuvre in my mouth and headed toward the guest room, chewing. I dug out my toiletries and found my emergency bath salts and the candle I had thought to bring when Harriet shouted, “Molly dear, you got a phone call just before you came in.”

The kids. I’d forgotten to call them.

“A man,” she said. “He didn’t leave a number.”

I opened my suitcase, rummaged through and found myself examining my best underpants. Harriet and Elman didn’t register surprise when I emerged from my bath and told them I had a change of plan. Californians are prone to erratic behaviors—they live on the edge of the continent, Elman said, as restless and impulsive as the ground they inhabit. But if you examined my family tree, restlessness was in our blood way before any one reached California. It had to have been to get them there. That quest for a fresh start spurred my great grandfather’s exodus from Ireland. It spurred his journey from Canada down into Massachusetts. It wasn’t restlessness so much as it was curiosity that drove him across the country to California, where he decided there wasn’t enough water, then Idaho, and finally, down into Kansas. Wanderlust, that’s all it was. That constant,

yearning upsurge for a life fully lived. She pointed at the phone on the kitchen wall. "Call you children before you leave. Don't worry about the charge," she said. "And say hello to your mother from Elman and me."

Mother answered the phone. She said Rose had talked her into baking pecan pies. She was baffled and wanted to know when I'd ever made pecan pies, and furthermore, why would I bother since a person could buy one in the grocery store that was superior to anything she could bake. I'd never baked pecan pie, I assured her. I'd never bought pecan pies. I don't eat them, either.

Mother was worried about Henry. "He only wants to watch television and draw and Darwin sulks and mutters under his breath. Charlotte is the only one I can talk to, but she hasn't raised a finger to help with chores and left the bathroom a mess, just a mess, after she hennaed her hair. She left red splatters all over the wall that won't come off." Deep sigh on the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't help," she said. "What time does your flight arrive?"

"I'm not coming home for a couple of more days." Then I lied, "My editor assigned me a story. Harriet and Elman say hello."

"What story?"

"I'm tired," I told her. "Do you want to talk to Harriet?"

"Why would I want to talk to them?" she asked.

Harriet was in the other room doing the dishes, but I yelled anyway in case she could hear, "Mom gives you and Elman her love." I would have to place the unpleasant task of assuaging the degrees and varieties of anger from my mother and children on

hold. For now, I was intent on returning to Lawrence, and once my thoughts headed in that direction, my body eagerly followed, and not even parental guilt could hold me back. I called my editor and told him I planned to write a story on Marion Daniels. He repeated the same line that he'd delivered in the newsroom: a story about an incarcerated Indian was not salient to a town whose population was less than one fourth of one percent Native American. I pointed out that the town had a strong liberal population and that the story might boost circulation. He said that it was the only paper in town and didn't need a boost. The story was stale, he said. He gave me the number of Stanley White, an editor with *Mother Jones*. They went to Berkeley School of Journalism together. He wished me luck, and granted me an extra two days off without pay.

Stanley White knew about Daniels and read off a litany of his activities. Daniels was a member of the American Indian Movement, straight out of Vietnam; in the seventies the country had reached another pinnacle of racism and Daniels was a leader in Native American activism; he had been on the FBI's list of suspicious persons for the five years before he was charged with the rape of a sixteen year old Indian girl and the murder of one dead sheriff; the surviving sheriff testified that Daniels had been in the process of raping the girl when the officer and his partner intercepted. White went on to say that the girl lived on Indian land on the outskirts of Pawhuska, Oklahoma; she had been walking home in the dark to her grandparents' house from an after-school care program for children where she volunteered. But, said White, Daniels maintains to this day he is not guilty. According to Daniels, he and a male friend whose name he has never disclosed had been parked nearby when the two Anglo sheriffs had driven up to the girl and asked if she needed a lift. Daniels had watched her refuse the ride, assuming she

distrusted the local authorities, which did not have jurisdiction to be on the reservation. The sheriff stop their car and both got out, and that's when Marion and his unidentified friend emerged from their on the other side of the intersecting road.

“Daniels claimed he tried to intercept the rape,” said White, “and the next thing he knew one of the sheriffs had been stabbed. Here’s the interesting part. The girl remembered bits and pieces—two Indians, not one, two sheriffs, unclear about the rape and the stabbing, but she was judged unreliable due to emotional trauma. The FBI had wanted to pin something on Marion for years. They arrested him in North Dakota just this side of Canada, and took him to trial. They won a conviction and the Feds closed the files. According to Marion’s attorneys and advocates, the prosecution had bribed one witness and thrown out pertinent evidence. Despite several media exposes, including one by PBS, he remains incarcerated in Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary in Kansas. Lucky he didn’t get the death penalty.”

Stanley White knew a lot. I was impressed.

“Look,” he said. “It’s the same wilted story that had already been covered by the media, including us, for more than decade. I’m only going to take the story on three conditions: if new evidence surfaces, if Daniels confides that he committed the murder, or if he names his buddy who, by the victim’s account, does exist.”

I agreed to the terms. This was not only an opportunity to break into a national magazine, but I now would have a legitimate, professional excuse for returning to Lawrence to see Stevie Ray on my way to Leavenworth. My adrenalin peaked as I called Leavenworth and asked to speak to the warden. The receptionist connected me to

the assistant warden, who surprised me saying the warden was out of town and I could come into the prison the next day, Monday, at eleven in the morning. Blue Monday.

I picked at a small piece of blue lint, the same color as the upholstery of my white Camry sedan rental car and flicked it off of my jeans onto the floor. My right buttock hurt from the easy chair's loose spring which protruded and almost broke through the naughahyde upholstery. I shifted to the edge and stared at the scuffed linoleum floor while Jane finished talking on the telephone to Marion from her office. It was late afternoon and I had shifted into a more professional personae. I felt strong. I had purpose. I took a reporter's notebook out of my backpack and dug around the corners for a pen just as heavy footsteps clomped down the stairwell. A chill ran up my neck and scalp so powerful that I shook. I ran my fingers through my hair, tucked my strays behind my ears and reached into my jeans pocket for a lipstick, tracing the contours of my mouth without a mirror and sliding it back into my pocket just as Stevie Ray walked in.

"You're back," he said. He was taller than I remembered, his hair longer, his voice huskier. He held his arms out from his sides, registering surprise.

"Did you get my message?" he asked.

"You didn't leave a number."

"But I called. Who was that nice lady? Said she's your aunt."

"Why did you call?"

He looked annoyed. "Because I said I would." Then he smiled, and I was glad I had an assignment or my confidence would have vanished when he asked, "Is that why you're here?"

Jane leaned her head out of her office door. "You're back."

"Are you talking to me or her?" he asked, pointing his chin at me.

"Her has a name," she said.

I dove right in and told them about my plans to interview Marion Daniels tomorrow morning, and before they could say anything else I told them I had talked to the editor at *Mother Jones* who knew the case but was only interested if Marion confessed or named his sidekick.

"Or if new evidence surfaces," I added. "Otherwise, according to the magazine, it's just another played out story."

Stevie Ray and Jane looked at each other.

"Ironical," said Stevie Ray.

"That should be your story," said Jane. "A left wing liberal publication doesn't want to cover a man incarcerated for the most egregious social injustice because it's an old story. It's old because he's still there. Idiots."

"I'm going in tomorrow," I said.

Then they did it again. Their eyes fastened to each other like Elman's and Harriet's when they shared something deeply significant.

"He's not going to point the finger at anyone," said Stevie Ray. He grabbed my hand, pulled me up from the easy chair and led me gently by the elbow toward the stairs.

"Don't forget the sweat, you two," said Jane. "I'll meet you out there. Take care of her."

I left the Camry in the parking lot and let Stevie Ray drive me in his brown GMC that had seen better days. He shoved in a Stevie Ray Vaughn cassette and we drove without speaking to the post office.

"I'll be right back," he said, turning and slapping the hood. He returned carrying a small square package wrapped in plain brown paper. He turned it over a couple of times, tugging the white string and examining the shiny brown packaging tape. He looked at me, mumbled something and laughed.

"I'm hoping it's a new mouthpiece for my flute." He grabbed my elbow, pulled me over next to him and put the package on the other side of me. I stared at it while he started up the truck and tried to shift from first to second. I put a leg on either side of the gearshift and then he snugged his hand, like it belonged, around the inside of my thigh. "I want to show you something," he announced. He pulled away from the curb.

I stared out the truck windshield as he shifted into third, and when he returned his hand to the inside of my thigh, it felt like home.

I'd been raised to think Kansas was flat. I thought it was flat despite my father's story: when he was a boy, he rode miles to school on horseback everyday, up the hills and down, he'd said. I caught him in a lie. I gloated. I knew Kansas was as flat as the one-dimensional rectangle on the map. I imagined it as Judy Garland's endlessly boring flatscape pulling east like taffy from the Rockies with a horizon zippered to the sky and nothing to stop a dust storm from pitting a person's eyeballs. But Kansas wasn't flat. Not entirely. My farm, after all, had its very own hill at the river bend. I had seen hillocks in the distance, precursors to the Flint Hills, which ran on a southwestern to northeastern tilt and were so overlooked that even the cartographers omitted them from my Rand McNally Atlas. The Flints were so rocky and steep that the sod-busting pioneers left them alone, just like the history books.

As Stevie Ray and I drove through the rural outskirts of Lawrence, *up the hills and around*, it dawned on me that there is always more going on the inside than the eye can ever perceive from the outside. For one thing, Stevie Ray knew an impressive amount about the landscape. For starters, the Flint Hills, he told me, named for their flint-bearing limestone that alternated with the softer shale, formed part of a fractured basin lined with hard shale that catches the rain running off the slopes and seeping

through crevasses where it mixes with the subterranean Ogallala aquifer. We were at its eastern edge, he said. North to south, the ground from South Dakota to Texas sat on beds of sand and gravel washed down from the Rockies and saturated with millions of years of rainfall from the .1 inch in Texas to six inches a year back down in the southern Kansas area of my father's farm. Second, because of modern agricultural technology, this ancient aquifer was nearly depleted.

"You English really know how to fuck things up," said Stevie Ray.

"I'm hugely Irish," I reminded him.

He glanced over and raised his eyebrow. I guessed he didn't see the significance.

"Look out there," he said. "This land still has its dark, loamy bluestem, Indian grass and switch grass bound by steep outcroppings that would bust even your great granddaddy's plow."

It was part of the Konza prairie, he said, one section of an immense ecosystem that once extended from Illinois, northwest to the Dakotas and south to Texas. In only a few places, the grasses still grew eight feet tall, taller than a man on horseback. I wanted to go there with him. I wanted to make love to him surrounded by curtains of grass

"And if you're not careful," he said, "you might step into one of those sand wallows and never be seen again. You better stick close." He tightened his grip on my thigh.

I learned a lot about Stevie Ray on our impromptu road trip. I'm not sure if he learned anything about me. He had spent some of his youth with a foster family on a ranch not far south of here after he got kicked out of a boarding school in Gallup for sniffing gas. He'd spent a few nights in jail for public drunkenness, lost one brother in Vietnam, a sister to cancer and another brother to cirrhosis, which marked the beginning of the end of Stevie Ray's drug and alcohol use. I was glad to hear that and decided to

leave off telling him about my first husband's suicide. Stevie Ray said, "They stood in the way of me and the Creator." He'd married an Anglo from Iowa and had five children. *Five children.* She divorced him because he was always on the road and didn't know how to be a father. He cheated on her. He admitted it, so I figured he was honest and tried not to dwell on the possibility that he more than likely still had an issue with fidelity. He said the court awarded her the house and allotment that he had inherited from his Osage mother and that the ex-wife had sold it and moved with the kids to Hana, Maui, where she felt they would blend in.

"She was beautiful," he said.

A jealous pang shot through my gut for the second time that day.

Kansas was just over two hundred miles from north to south, so it didn't take long to get from one place to another, he explained. But time spent with him was swift regardless. Our two hours in the GMC flew, and the further north we drove, more blue-black the shale sky became. Dry lightening and thunder built and finally spilled into a spring squall that was so heavy we couldn't see through the windshield wipers. The rain created a cozy space, quiet on the inside, amniotic everywhere else. I refrained from touching him when he leaned over my lap to fiddle with the cassette wiring under the dashboard. I didn't even look at him. There was no need, the feeling was so strong. I could have felt him on the other side of a wall. I rolled down the window looked out at the road, and the road had become muddy and potholed and surrounded by lush, wild vegetation. The rain stopped, and we drove awhile longer until Stevie Ray pulled up in front of a locked metal gate of two-inch pipe.

He got out of the truck, loosely shut his door, and walked toward the gate. I watched him take a key out of his pocket and unlock the gate. He pushed the gate until it swung away with the weight of its own gravity. Then he hopped back in and drove

through, telling me to shut the gate and lock it, which I did, feeling his eyes in the rear view mirror as I swung the gate back in place and locked it. The ground was soggy, the road muddy and the air recharged from the mingling of saturated leaves and ripe rain clouds. I inhaled as much of it as I could, catching the scent of wild roses.

Stevie Ray said something I couldn't hear. He lowered himself and leaned toward my side of the truck and repeated:

"If you really pay attention, you can smell the buffalo turds."

I laughed, climbed back into the edge of the cab and hung my legs out the door and kicked my sneakers to loosen the mud while he rolled a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked."

"Special occasions," he said, putting the cigarette behind his ear and pushing a new cassette into the radio. "A farmer friend grows it. No pesticides. Trades for favors and the like." He put his arm around me and moved me close.

"Want me to roll you one?"

I bit my lip and nodded, wondering what kind of favors.

When he finished rolling one for me, he put the truck in gear and gunned it through the muddied ruts on the high side of the road, jostling me up and down and sideways in a road dance that made sense of my life.

"This is the only way to make it through the mud," he said.

We continued for a couple of more miles, dense foliage slapping the sides of the truck. Then he began to name the trees, "Box elder, cottonwood, hackberry, juniper, dogwood," before he turned onto a two track road that was even narrower and more deeply rutted. A few hundred yards further, we pulled into a small clearing where a white trailer sat beneath a heritage oak.

"Home sweet hogan," he said, shutting off the engine. As he pulled back the emergency brake to its tightest notch, my stomach flipped-flopped. I followed him up a plastic crate step into the camper. I wanted to make love to him, but I was scared. The inside smelled like sage.

"Look around," he said. "Make yourself at home. The bathroom's in the back. Or you can go in the woods. I give my women choices."

I didn't like that.

"I'm kidding," he said. "But if you'd rather pee outside, be my guest."

Twin beds lay on one side of the camper near the kitchen. Dishes had been washed and stacked in the drain board and coffee cups hung on hooks below the cupboards. He was neat and organized. The double bunk in the front of the trailer was filled with stacks of folded clothes. Posters of famous Indians were tacked on the wall along with an autographed poster of Stevie Ray Vaughn playing live in Seattle. I scanned the walls. Political slogans, spiritual slogans, dream catchers hanging from the aluminum window sills and, above the beds, pen and ink sketches, beadwork, a shelf of tapes and CDs. No phone. No plastic plants or pictures of Jesus on the walls.

"How about some coffee and a sandwich?" he asked.

I had to think to when I'd last eaten. Harriet's cheese and triscuits. I was still vibrating from the drive and nervous about being in his kitchen, livingroom, and bedroom all at once. Stevie Ray started to unwrap his brown wrapped package.

"What is it?" I asked.

He stared at me, weighing something.

"You need to eat," he said. "The coffee and filters are above the stove. Bottled water, cheese and bread in the refrigerator."

I found the coffee and filters, the five-gallon plastic water container and took out the package of Velveeta cheese and a loaf of cheap wheat bread from the mini-refrigerator. The sound of an approaching car ruined my sense of our aloneness and my sense of discomfort returned. Someone honked and passed.

"They're here," Stevie Ray said.

I was disappointed. I was getting used to him. I didn't want any interruptions, but I decided to sound enthusiastic. "Who?" I asked.

"The Spider Twins."

I stared at the red, one-cup filter I had filled with Folgers and the pot of hot water I'd just heated to boiling on the gas burner.

"They have to build a fire," he said. "We'll go on over after the coffee."

I poured the water slowly over the grinds, letting it soak in before I topped it off and filled another cup. Stevie Ray was devouring one of my sandwiches.

"I can't believe you eat Velveeta." I said.

"American Indian cheese," he said. "Got to be indigenous to afford it."

He laughed and kept eating.

The dirt road in front of his trailer forked and we walked along the left spur. I grabbed his shirt sleeve for security, he took my hand, and we went on like that, talking about nothing important, laughing and lightly bumping into one another until we reached a meadow punctuated by an old black Impala which, I gathered, belonged to the Spider Twins. From there we followed a slim deer path bordered with chest high grass to another clearing. In its center was a small domed lodge framed with slim, bowed, wooden poles covered with patches of buckskin. I recognized it as a sweat lodge. About ten yards in front of the lodge was a fire pit rimmed with smooth river rock. Two

men, whom I assumed were the twins, tended the fire. Stevie Ray let go of my hand, making me think he didn't want his friends to know we were lovers. They greeted him with hugs and handshakes and lots of brother this and that.

"This is my friend, Molly O'Henry. She's from California." I was relieved he didn't refer to me as a writer, but "friend" sounded impersonal. "These are the Spider Twins, Jimmie Johns and John Luna."

They looked at me, then at him and grinned. I offered my hand to Jimmy. He shook it lightly.

"So you're going to write about us?" said John.

I looked at Stevie Ray. He shrugged.

"He's been talking about you," said Jimmie.

"Best to ignore them," said Stevie Ray. "They imagine things."

"Vincent Van Gogh is my real name," said John. "Would you like to see my ear?" He gestured to Jimmie. "This is my apprentice Pablo Picasso."

I held out my hand to John. "I'm happy to meet you."

"Likewise," he said, turning to Stevie Ray. "She's a *nice* white woman. Hey, Jimmie needs to talk to you."

Stevie Ray and Jimmie walked back the deer path to the edge of the meadow, leaving me staring at the fire circle and wondering how I was going to hold up my end of the conversation with Pablo Picasso.

"What kind of Indian are you?"

"Navajo." John Luna, alias Pablo, explained how he had recently been working under contract as a fabricator of large metal sculptures in Farmington before he decided to take a break and check out Lawrence. He told me that Jimmie, who was Hopi and Navajo, carved kachina dolls out of cottonwood roots which he sold for several thousand

dollars apiece at arts and crafts fairs throughout the western states. His latest endeavor was a series of nudes.

"Be careful," John said, motioning toward Jimmie. "All women are potential models. He's probably asking your man permission as we speak."

I laughed. *My man*. I didn't bother to explain that he was hardly my man. But I liked the sound of it, like I had some control over him. John had a tattoo of a black widow on his upper arm. I assumed this explained his nickname and wondered if Jimmie had one, too.

"Something you want to ask me?" John said.

I was staring at the tattoo, about to ask the meaning of a spider, when a car headed down the road toward us. Things were getting crowded. I felt anxious, even when I recognized Jane behind the wheel. She walked up and hugged me, then introduced me to Curtis Bedoka, a tall man who volunteered that he was Quapaw. I told him I was from California, which apparently interested him because he started to tell me about a time when he had lived in Los Angeles and played backup for a studio musician. Jane began looking around as if someone were missing. I told her that Stevie Ray and Jimmie had headed back toward his camper. She held out two white bed sheets, told me to take one and kept the other for herself.

"Come with me," she said.

I followed her into a clump of brush where we undressed. I did as Jane did and wrapped the sheet around my body and tucked the end into its top edge at my chest. She picked a small pink wildflower and held it up to her nose. There was an edge to her that even the pink couldn't soften.

"Coneflower," she said. "Cures the common cold." She gave it to me and pointed out prairie larkspur, used to curb lice, and ragweed, for cramps and childbirth. I placed

the flower carefully between my cleavage and the sheet, and followed her further into the grass. She bent down and moved the grasses gently, pointing out the shallow nest of a meadowlark.

"Listen," she said. "You can hear it. There is so much out here. C'mon."

I followed her up an incline to where the view opened into acres of grasses below, which appeared to be as tall as we were. She pointed out the denser vegetation where the Kansas River ran through. She raised her hands and stretched.

"This place is like me," she said. "It has never been young. If we kept walking up there," she pointed to the top of the hill, "we would have a view of the entire prairie." She looked at me. "Up there we could see the pools between the mounds. Today, the largest plot of unplowed tallgrass prairie is only two hundred acres. We can't even find any samples in Illinois, our 'Prairie State.' That's the white man for you. This aquifer beneath us is water trapped during the ice age. Listen."

She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "Do you hear it?"

I wasn't sure what I was supposed to be listening for.

"The water. It stretches north to South Dakota and south to Texas one hundred and seventy four thousand square miles. Rainfall isn't sufficient to replenish it, and in some places, the Ogallala has already dropped forty feet in fifteen years from agricultural use. If it were to dry out, which at the present rate is inevitable, it would take six thousand years to replenish. The farmers are working at it as we speak. That's your system for you. Probably your relatives. If you were Native, you would hear it."

I imagined Jane and Stevie Ray holding conversations into the small hours of the night discussing wallows and aquifers and stupid white men. An evening hawk fluttered above some form of prey hidden in the grass, hopefully not the meadowlark's nest. Its silhouette blended with the earth tones of dusk's tapestry. Out of nowhere, I felt another

surge of jealousy for the second time that day, just as tiny lights flickered in the wild grass like thousands of fairies. Everything glittered. This place was magic, I thought, and I believed it to be magic, an Indian fairyland, no kidding, those lights suspended mystically in midair—unlike anything I'd seen before.

"Fireflies," Jane said, staring up at the indigo clouds moving past the smear of stars and waxing moon.

She looked at me, then spread her arms and fell straight back into the grass. The fireflies scattered, settled back down and hovered above her like small lanterns.

"Whites and Indians are not meant to mate," she said. "It's unnatural. Like two different species of birds."

I was speechless. I had no issue with two different species of birds mating, if they so desired. Since they did not, wasn't it more logical to assume they simply had no desire. If she were referring to Stevie Ray and me I could assume one of two things. She meant what she said or she was jealous, too. It would take something much more powerful than Jane's disapproval to stop Stevie Ray and me.

Curtis threw an armful of logs on the campfire. Embers jumped four feet into the air. Veins of dry lightning flashed vertically, horizontally, diagonally, as he closed the lodge's small opening and tethered it shut with the five of us inside. I was afraid. Stevie Ray leaned forward and dipped a ladle into a plastic bucket of water and poured it onto the fired rocks in the center of the lodge. The heat surged. I felt Jane's hand on my shoulder and hoped they would let me out if I couldn't take it.

"We could all camp out," Stevie Ray said.

Silently, I objected. I wanted to be alone with him. We had finished the sweat, dressed and stood around the remains of the fire, roasting quail the men had caught in

box traps. Stevie Ray leaned over the fire and sliced off a piece of the breast, stuck it on the point of his hunting knife and offered it to me. "Or I'll move all the laundry and you can sleep on the big bed inside, Molly. I'll take the small one."

Jimmie and John snickered. I felt alarmed. The sound of him speaking my name stunned me—at once so intimate and formal. When we'd finished eating, the six of us headed toward the trailer. I felt Jane watching Stevie Ray and me move around one another as if she were feasting on our sexual energy. We went inside and while Stevie Ray turned on the wall furnace and the three men crowded around the table, Jane picked up the camera I'd left on the shelf. She began adjusting the aperture and viewing us through the lens, snapping shots in the middle of a conversation, freezing our fluid moments.

"Let's play cards," she said, the camera still at her eye.

"How about a game of chess?" said John.

"Didn't know you played chess," said Stevie Ray, leaning back on the lower bed mouthing his flute. He practiced a small riff, beginning with the bottom hole and working to the top and back.

"Hey brother, I don't," said John. "But those roasted birds make me feel like I could do anything. How about you Curtis?"

"Nope," said Curtis, who had picked up his guitar and picked a few cords, leaning against the sink. "Gordon Lightfoot is my hero. You, Molly?"

All I could think of was Bob Dylan. I sat on the edge of the bench cushion, my dangling arm so close to Stevie Ray I could feel the warmth of his legs.

"She's hit a shy streak," said Stevie Ray. He nudged me.

Click.

"I can play checkers," I said. "I played a lot of checkers as a kid."

"So, king me," said John, grinning.

Stevie Ray chuckled. "Pablo's in love with you."

Click.

Curtis began to sing an old Bob Marley song about prophets and atomic bombs.

I don't know what time it was when Jane and Curtis went home. The twins slept outside on cots by the fire pit. Stevie Ray and I slept in his camper. I claimed the big bed and jumped onto it, sitting cross-legged, watching Stevie Ray rinse the cups and fill the coffee pot for tomorrow morning. He pulled off his tee shirt, smelled it and tossed it at the bathroom door where it landed in a pile. His Sun Dance scars and his smooth, dark skin were familiar. I wanted him near me. He pulled two woven blankets out of a drawer beneath the bed. He fluffed one out and laid it across me, pulling my crossed legs out from beneath me and pushing my chest down to the pillow. Something in the flatness of his eyes frightened me, but his voice, it smoothed me out like a carpenter's plane.

"Blanket of sunbeams," he said.

He took the other, spread it over me and running his hand the full length of my body, rested his palm on my chest. "Blanket of rainbows."

I placed my hands on the back of his neck and worked my way beneath his hair. He bent closer and everything became mercurial. His breath quickened and his hand etched slow paths that sunk beneath my skin. He climbed onto the bunk while I pulled out the covers to let him in beside me. He lay on me. "I have something I got to do here," he said, reaching down between us to unbutton his jeans. "Something, babe, I just got to do."

We rocked that trailer most of the night, what remained of it. We created our own duet of swinging cups, swishing beads and dream catchers, slamming cupboard doors and a clattering of everything that hung free. It was even better this time. I knew him this time, well enough to help him get me off—not just the second time, but our third, fourth, and fifth. Between lovemaking I lay awake and tried to find ways to make myself sleep. I concentrated on my breath and would progress into a near dream, but some discomfort—the thin mattress—or some distraction—his light snoring—would bring me back. The more I tried to sleep and not disturb his, the harder it became and the more negative my thinking. Afterall, here I was in the Kansas prairie without a phone and with a man I knew very little about. If something happened back home, no one would know where to find me. By morning I was a wreck. Stevie Ray sat at the table dressed in unbuttoned jeans, no shoes, no shirt, hair uncombed down his back, and still brown, still beautiful. The sound of a pencil scratching paper. He was sketching. He slid over from the table seat, kneeled, and wrapped his arm around my head and pushed his free hand beneath the blankets. When his hands massaged my breasts my body opened into a warm pool.

“Hello, beautiful.” He fingered my clitoris and asked me if I wanted coffee.

I closed my eyes and tried to decide which I wanted more—him or caffeine. I felt as if I could have stayed forever in that trailer somewhere in the remains of Kansas bluestem prairie making love to Stevie Ray. I fell asleep imagining the two of us having a baby out here in the semi-wilderness. When I woke up, he’d gone. I climbed out of the bed just as the Spider Twins knocked on the door for coffee. I opened the door and John held out a feather.

“Eagle,” he said, and stepped inside. Jimmie followed.

“It doesn’t look like eagle,” I said. “It’s so small.”

"Look at this," he said, pointing out a place near the tip where the tendrils had frayed. "You have hard times ahead."

"It's pigeon," said Jimmie. "Don't let him fool you. Pigeon. And it looks like the bird was in a battle over some woman. Check out the scars on that little feather."

"I picked it," said John. "Indian roses. Not like the white man's version."

Jimmie found Stevie Ray's flute and placed his fingers. "We're just kidding you. Romeo found it on the ground on his way out and told us to give it to you. He said to let you sleep awhile because you're a bookworm and you were up all night reading."

The spider twins looked at each other and chuckled. Jimmie added, "He drove back to Lawrence to pick up your rental car. He'll be back so you can get on to your interview with Marion."

That was considerate, I thought, wondering what time it was.

"This is a sad song I am going to play for you," John said. "Curtis wrote it for Marion. You know how the English love to walk in the heat. We skins are too smart for that. But Marion, he fell in love with the face of the sun." He struggled with a high note, and then found his pitch Jimmy blew the flute like he'd been playing it all his life.

"I'm falling in love with the face of the sun ... "

I felt a mixture of diffidence and sadness for Marion, but mostly I felt grateful that Jimmie and John were giving me so much attention. I felt full inside, like it had something to do with being Stevie Ray's woman, like he was my man.

I had a question for them. Jimmie cleared his throat and John stood up and turned on gas under the teakettle.

"What is it a man most wants from a woman?"

"Say that again?" said Jimmie.

I repeated the question.

"Sex, drugs, rock 'n roll," said John. "Good home cooking and a pile of clean, folded laundry."

"Seriously."

"It depends," said Jimmie, "what day it is."

"Yeh," said John. "It's almost nine o'clock. Where's my sausage and eggs, woman."

Nine o'clock. I had to be at the prison by eleven.

John started humming, then sang: *I got a woman, once upon a time, swift as she could be. She wouldn't cook me dinner, wouldn't wash my socks, wouldn't even slap my head. Cold as the northeast wind, which she wanted to be, just what a man most wants his woman to be.*"

"Cold?" I asked.

"What she wants to be."

"Where's this woman?" said Jimmie.

"Making French fries with a rich monsieur from Paris," said John.

"That's a clever answer," I said.

"Pablo Picasso's got a crush on thee," said Jimmie.

I took the boiling water from the stove, placed the red coffee mini-filter on John's mug and filled it with hot water, thinking back to Adelia's mother's comment when she left to find John Rain at the Indian School. "You aren't going to make a white man outta him."

The spider twins comforted me. And I needed comfort. I'd stayed up all night, bug-eyed so that I had to read between lovemaking. I was stirred up. My legs had been restless, and adrenalin rushed and soured into dull panic in the wee hours when I worried over my children. I had slipped out of bed, trying not to wake Stevie Ray, and sat at the table to quiet myself with Adelia's diary. Her story bled into my morning when I crawled back into bed with Stevie Ray. It bled into making love and finally falling asleep. It bled into my time with the Spider Twins, and into this remnant of Kansas prairie, a landscape not unlike the one Adelia experienced at the Indian School.

She had been at the school three days and had not seen John Rain. When he did show up, she forgot everything including the traumatic, surprise arrival of her father's first wife. Even the rigid environment of the school offered her a fantasy world of possibility.

August 8.

I have been given instructions on the rules regarding table manners and they are stricter than any at home, even when Mama was fixing supper for company. The children are to tear their bread neatly into four pieces. If the menu says meatloaf they are not to make a meatloaf sandwich. When they eat their soup they may not touch the sides of the bowl with their spoon because of the noise it makes. As a result, many leave precious pools of scarce stew in the bottom of their bowls, despite their growling stomachs. How will they ever make these children want to

accept the white way when it is so rigid? Sewing lessons are just as bad. The girls are forbidden to wet their thread or break it with their teeth and must sit up perfectly straight with their arms not touching for two hours straight.

Adelia noted that the routine at the school was “harsh and unbending,” but that she was grateful that it “kept her mind occupied and her hands busy” so she had less time to dwell on John. She listed the children’s chores, how the youngest began their kitchen duties while it was still dark, and concluded her list by writing that the routine must be a “shocking contrast for all of them who are used to rising with the natural first light of the morning star, or to the homey smells and sounds of their own mothers preparing the day’s meals—but the school relies on the children’s labor to keep the place running.” Adelia learned of John Rain’s presence on the school ground that afternoon when two sisters, the Little Feather girls, had to serve the terms of their punishment for attempting to run away by scrubbing the floors in Edith Sneath’s classroom. It was Adelia’s sixth day at the school. Sneath ordered one of the students to go find John Rain. I can imagine the shock that ran through Adelia’s body—the pleasure-pained shock of finally hearing his name. Sneath needed John Rain in order to settle down the two Little Feather girls, who had tried to escape the school after one boy, a Pawnee like the girls, told them that an Osage man who worked for the school had died. The boy told the girls that the dead man’s relatives had sent out a mourning party to take a Pawnee scalp, which would further the dead man’s journey into the spirit world. The boy played a joke on the girls by telling them that the mourning party was out to get the girls’ father. The girls

believed him, and had run away to warn their father. Sneath was certain they would try again, and if they succeeded, she worried that the girls would not only be in danger of being punished but also be prey to the neighboring Kaw County racism. Adelia recounted how the Osage and Pawnee remained rivals into the realm of spirit, a hatred more deeply rooted than their combined hatred toward the white man. When Sneath sent for John Rain, I can imagine my great aunt's excitement. She sat there in a straight back chair modeling a proper white woman's posture, her two feet on the floor, her hands folded on her lap, the down on her neck rising like dandelion fluff, and her mind full of John Rain fantasies, finding it impossible to concentrate on anything but the horse hooves of his approach that made her heart race so wildly she barely discerned his boots in the hallway.

John Rain nodded at her but she couldn't tell from his expression if he was glad to see her. A swallowtail flew in through the window, exacerbating the Little Feather girls' panic: a bird inside was a sign confirming that a relative was fated to die. John Rain got down on one knee and put a hand on each of the girls' shoulder until they calmed down and began to breath with some regularity. But as soon as he left the room, they became quickly agitated, as did Adelia.

That night, August 9, 1893:

I lay on my bed in pitch black while the frogs bellow from the pond.

Robert and Patrick Jr. would love those frogs. I can see legs jumping in Mama's frying pan. A child crying down the hall makes it difficult to sleep. That and the excitement of seeing him. I have been tossing and turning all night. I have no idea where he stays when he is here and that

is best since I would be no better than sister Hazel, trying to place myself in his path every chance I get.

The head matron, a large German woman named Almafrieda, occupied the room on the far end of the next hallway. She oversaw the older girls and made sure they remained separate from the younger ones.

... The crying. Almafrieda warned the girls. Absolute silence once they go to bed. They could not whisper, since they would be speaking Kiowa or Kaw or Pawnee or Comanche or Oto, etc. I do not know what the rules are about crying or if there is a difference between crying in Pawnee and English.

After listening to the sounds of homesickness until she couldn't listen any more, Adelia wrote "Lord, make me a channel of thy peace, that where there is doubt, I may bring faith that where there is despair I may bring hope that where there are shadows I may bring light that where there is sadness I may bring joy, that I may seek rather to comfort than to be comforted." She tiptoed down the hall, entered the girl's dormitory, and followed the crying to the bed of Little Talking Leaf, the girl child she had befriended on the day John Rain came by for water. The child did not recognize Adelia at first and stiffened when Adelia touched her quivering arm. Adelia put a finger to her own lips and placed a cloth doll on the little girl's chest. The crying stopped. She wondered how many lay awake, trying to see in the dark what had arrested the little girl's sobs. Adelia went back to her room and tried to sleep, and when her troubled mind would not settle, she returned to the little girl's dorm and found her sound asleep with that rag doll pressed to her small chest.

At breakfast Little Talking Leaf smiled at Adelia. That evening when she went to her room, Adelia describes “something darkening the string of light beneath her door.” When Adelia opened her door, Little Talking Leaf stood in the hallway clutching the rag doll. She had brought a friend. School policy forbid the children to enter the matrons’ rooms since friendliness would soften the atmosphere of authority. But Adelia brought them into her room and had them sit quietly on her bed as she went to her dresser. She opened the top bureau drawer and took out her remaining rag doll, then got down on her knees facing Little Talking Leaf, ran a hand down her hair and tapped her nose. She turned to the girl’s friend and held out the doll. She gathered them and much like Harriet pushed me toward out her own doorway on my first visit to the farm, Adelia ushered the two girls out of her room and into the hall. They walked down the hall comparing their prizes. Adelia wrote in large letters, underlined:

I vow from this day to buy fabric, yarn, and thread.

Adelia’s elation was temporary. The next morning Little Talking Leaf stood at the head of the classroom. Behind her was a list of English names that Edith Sneath had written on the chalkboard. The little girl watched Sneath hold out a yardstick and walk to the chalkboard. She pointed to Talking Leaf and then to the name “Dolores Perkins.” With her chalk, she drew a straight, white line through its center. Next to the little girl’s number, Adelia wrote her new name.

Stevie Ray was late. By the time he showed up with my car, I had only one hour before my interview at Leavenworth. I was rushed, too rushed to respond to his hands on my breasts. I glimpsed of his profile as the landscape blurred past outside the car window. He seemed sullen and distant. He didn’t seem to want to talk and I didn’t have much to say. I had to clear my head and figure out how I was going to organize

my interview. I ran my hand through my hair, pulling it back from my face, exposing what I have been told is an appealing bone structure. I considered asking him if his aversion to commitment had more to do with culture or gender. Then I made my own vow, one of silence. Right now thinking of our relationship was causing me more pain than pleasure. I thought of telling him right then and there that these would be our last two days together because I had to get my life together back home. But it was already too late to be making promises I couldn't keep. I was too far gone into that stage of sexual craving that had kicked my snoozing life awake and forced a rise from my invisible lump of a life. I didn't need to ask if he had an aversion to intimacy or if commitment was a dirty word, I mean, why go there, and what was the point of asking if any of this had something to do with being Indian or being a man? He was Indian, and everything about him had something to do with being Indian. My time would be better spent focusing on the job ahead. Maybe I could get him to respect my intellect.

I wanted a cup of coffee and made a sudden right hand turn off the highway into a quick stop and got out without bothering to see if he was watching me. There were only a handful of cars on the highway—so different from California highways—and no cars at the pumps or in the parking spaces in front of the store. I caught my reflection in the swinging door and it looked good without all the details filled in. Even better, I could see Stevie Ray watching me. I straightened up and walked with purpose. Even that small space between us helped me feel more myself. I scratched the scab where Red Too had attacked me and tried to recall how many days had passed since Janine and I had gotten into that fight. I picked off dried pieces with my fingernails as I walked through the aisle toward the coffee machine. While I poured black coffee into Styrofoam cups, I thought how absurd I must have looked with Red the rooster perched on my head and pecking my scalp, his tail feathers in my face. The clerk thought I was

smiling at her. She grinned back. "You have a good day," she said, handing me the change.

Stevie Ray was bent over something, probably rolling a cigarette. He jumped when I tapped on the window and held out the coffee. "Feel like driving?" I asked. I needed to get my questions for Marion together. I had butterflies. Stevie Ray scooted over into the driver's seat and I climbed in on the passenger side and placed our coffees in the car's beverage holder. I took out my notepad and tried to concentrate on the interview, letting the caffeine lift me to a place where I could think clearly about something other than what Stevie Ray found attractive in me.

Stevie Ray hung on the steering wheel. He sipped his coffee.

"Molly," he said. "When you go inside, give Marion a hug. He hasn't felt a woman in years."

There he was mere hours from the most intense lovemaking in my history, already giving me away.

We walked up the flight of steps leading to the entrance. Once inside, it was a few steps to the prison waiting room, where three men worked on a light bulb. One man was at the top of a ladder, another half way up, the third at the bottom holding up a saw. "Try this," he said. It appeared as if the light bulb had broken in its socket and the man at the top was struggling with a wrench to unloosen a screw. The middle man held a pair of pliers in his hand.

"Can I help you?" said the clerk from behind his counter. He was a plain looking man dressed in a uniform and wearing thick horn rimmed glasses. We walked over to his window and I gave him my name. He checked a list and scanned it, then,

finding mine, he placed a small check beside it. Stevie Ray reached across the counter so that his hand was behind the window grate. I turned away. I suppose I felt uncomfortable that he was violating the clerk's invisible boundary. Stevie Ray had told me earlier he was listed as a relative. The clerk pushed a ledger to our side of the small counter. I signed it first, then Stevie Ray, who returned the ledger to the clerk before I could read his signature. The three electricians continued to work on the ceiling light as Stevie Ray and I, too nervous to sit, stood by the long barred window looking out to the oval lawn and gun turret. He reminded me of my promise to give Marion a hug. "It's been a long time since he's felt a woman," he said.

Soon, guard entered the waiting room and escorted us through thick steel doors and down a grim narrow hallway to the visitor's room. I recognized Marion from the posters. He had put on weight around his face and middle. His black hair that was been long in the poster was cut short and he'd grown a thin mustache. Across the spacious visiting room sat another woman, in her thirties, I guessed, beside a man I presumed to be her husband. I went up to Marion and shook his hand, looked directly into his eyes and thought out how to get our interview off to a smooth start. First, we sat down in a row of metal chairs placed ten feet or so from the door we'd just come through. We sat in this order—Stevie Ray, Marion, and me.

I unzipped my backpack and groped for my tape recorder.

"Do you mind?" I asked, holding up the recorder.

Marion shook his head.

Two guards stood against the wall on either side of the door and watched us without expression. They appeared unconcerned that a reporter was here to take Marion's story. I turned on the recorder. "Molly O'Henry on May 18, 1998, at Leavenworth Federal Penetentiary, Kansas, about to interview Marion Daniels, now

serving a life sentence for the rape of a young Osage woman and the murder of an officer on the Osage Reservation.” I played it back. My hands were shaking and Marion saw that, so I cut to the chase and reviewed the facts of the case, the prosecutor’s version first, followed by his. Then I told Marion the conditions of my contract.

“The magazine won’t run the story unless you admit to the charges or give us the name of the man who, by the victim’s account, was with you that day.”

Marion turned to Stevie Ray and shook his head. “When are they going to give that angle up,” he said. “Not this dog soldier. No way.”

I repeated to Marion that the editor wasn’t interested in his story unless he admitted guilt for the rape of the girl or named the accomplice who’d stabbed and killed the sheriff.

“I’ll die in here before I do that, Molly.”

Marion seemed earnest, and sitting there he didn’t look like the kind of man who would kill anyone. But what did I know about human nature. Whatever the circumstances of that day, the fact of one dead sheriff remained.

“What about the girl? Do you know why they wouldn’t let her testify? Supposedly they deemed her unstable.”

Marion became upset. “Of course they did. She knows what happened and the damn sheriff threatened to kill her and her grandparents if she testified. That’s how it goes in Indian Country. It’s a reign of terror and only one winner when the deck is stacked on their side. But you got to fight for what’s right. We did the right thing that day?”

“We?” I asked. “You said ‘we’, Marion. Who was with you?”

He stared at the floor. "I meant the girl. We did the right thing, the only thing any decent human would do." He looked up at me. "I heard she relocated to San Francisco. She's a junkie living in the Mission District."

I made a note to check her out when I got back to California. My mind went blank. There was something I needed to ask him but what it was hadn't surfaced. I felt like I was jumping all over the place and missing the meaningful question that would cohere with the ones I had just posed and make sense out of what felt like chaos. I was failing. I turned to my notebook and scanned my list of questions, knowing I was failing the attempt impress Stevie Ray with my intelligence. "Is it true, Marion, that the American Indian is still at war with the United States government?"

He nodded and shot a look at the guards. "Yes, Molly, he said. "The American Indian is still at war with the United States government. The government continues to steal our land and take away our hunting and fishing rights, practices genocide on our elders and women and children, continues to relocate us for coal, uranium, gold, water. We will continue to struggle for our rights until the government recognizes our rights under sovereign nations."

"How can you possibly win that war?"

"I would rather fight and die than die without defending our people." He pointed to my notebook. "That's off the record."

I wrote "off the record" beside his quote and before I had a chance to ask him why he changed the subject.

"They put me in solitary for fasting. I came down with an infection in my ear, and they refused me medical attention. Now I'm deaf in one ear." He tapped his left ear. Then he grabbed his sides. "Fatter." He smiled. Stevie Ray laughed. "Maybe I

was better off in solitary. But I got a line on an underground Suzanne Somers bulge master and I'm going to start working out."

I wrote down his joke. "Is there anything new in this case that might be of interest? Any new evidence? Anything that might help me sell the story to the editors. They don't want the story unless I can come up with a new angle."

Marion leaned forward over his folded hands. "I'm thinking of running for President."

Stevie Ray laughed.

"Marion, how would you explain the fan mail you receive from woman all over the country who claim to be in love with you and would do anything for you and offer themselves to you without ever having met you? How would you explain that phenomenon of women loving incarcerated men, especially famous ones such as yourself."

"Have you been talking to Jane," he asked.

"I have," I said. "She sends her love."

Stevie Ray laughed again.

"Jane," said Marion. "Howard, you need to talk to that woman."

I thought I saw Stevie Ray elbow Marion. "Who's Howard?" I asked.

Marion straightened up and shook his head.

"He calls me Howard," said Stevie Ray. "We go way back."

I told Marion about the Spider Twins and Curtis and how I had met them at the sweat last night with Jane. I described the fireflies and told him how I thought the field was magic because I had never seen fireflies before. He laughed, and I forgot about the interview and told him about the hot rocks, the lightning outside the tent flap, the fire

tender, and the succulent roast quail that Stevie Ray—Howard—had handed me on the point of his hunting knife.

Our hour was up. The guards walked over to us indicating we had to wrap up. I asked him one more question.

“Did you do it?” I asked.

He looked at me, his eyes steady. “No. I did not rape that woman.”

“Did you kill the officer?”

“No. I did not kill the officer.”

“Then who did?”

He thought a second. “Maybe the other cop. Did you think about that?”

Marion winked.

I glanced over at Stevie Ray to see how he responded to the suggestion that the surviving sheriff had stabbed his own partner, but Stevie Ray was staring at the scuffed linoleum floor. I turned off my tape recorder and shoved it into my pack. I stood and I gave Marion the hug Stevie Ray had requested. The guard hovered behind my back and, as he escorted me out of that grim place, I thought of another question. What did he imagine doing when he got out? But it was too late. The steel door had already closed, separating his world from mine.

No, Marion had said. “I did not kill the officer.” But who did, I’d asked. He planted that comment about the other sheriff and winked, and now recalling that wink, my legs became suddenly weak when I heard myself think, “Howard Black Dog, the accomplice.”

I did know something I hadn’t known when I walked in. His name. I waited until we were in the car out of sight of the gun turret, well beyond the expansive lawn

that made the prison resemble the entrance to a country club. I turned to Stevie Ray and called him "Howard." Stevie Ray's eyes searched for signs that I knew. He said "shit" when I called him Howard a second time, and then offered to drive. I had a story.

"A knife story," I said. "I'll tell mine, then you tell yours."

As we drove from Leavenworth, I told him the story of Adelia and John Rain and the knife that had passed from her father to his. But by the end of my story, Stevie Ray Howard was concentrating on the road, a back road I chose to believe he took to extend our time with each other and give him an opportunity to talk about the land instead of why he hadn't told me his real name. It seemed like months, not days, since I had first run into Jane and learned that Stevie Ray was about to arrive in the town I had ended up in by a freak twist of fate. It felt as if we were meant to be.

"When I finish up here, I have to go to Los Angeles," said Stevie Ray Howard, slicing our thick silence in two so that I felt even more estranged from him. "They're putting on a musical about Crazy Horse and paying me to be a consultant. I have a summer school assignment teaching music to kids in Tuba City. How about you try to come out to the rez and stay a few days? The Navajo. I know a few folks out there having a gathering at the end of summer."

The invitation was exciting, but I remember the pow-wow he'd invited me to on our first date.

"You stood me up," I said. "I think it's better that we take it a day at a time. That seems to work better for us. Popping into each other's lives. It's sort of a nice surprise."

Of course I was lying. But at least I was convincing. I was mad. And afraid, afraid to make plans with him. The more I planned on seeing him again, the less likely he'd show up.

“Do you have a last name that I don’t know?” is all I asked.

He didn’t answer. We didn’t talk the rest of the drive back to Lawrence, but I was comfortable in my own pensive world. When we arrived in town, we spent the rest of the afternoon browsing through the antiquarian bookstore, drinking expresso at the cafe, window shopping along the boutiques on Main Street. We slipped slowly back into our mantle of attraction, like two tectonic plates grinding slowly and inevitably into each other, anticipating the day’s end when we would go back to his camper and make love again.

I spent the following day, our last day, at the university library with my head buried in the archives looking for information on the boarding school where Adelia had worked and any documentation of the Native children as they watched from the school boundary while one hundred thousand white settlers overtook land that used to be theirs. They must have felt something was happening, something bad. The presence of Calvary on school grounds alone would have been threatening.

The archivist in special collections took an interest in me when I told him I was looking for primary source material on the Indian boarding school just south of Tornado. He brought out a folder full of correspondence. Several of the letters had been handwritten. The writing was similar to my great aunt’s—exact and full of fancy cursive swirls from a time when handwriting implied intelligence and gentrification.

“The letters were written by the students,” said the archivist, a serious man with a gentle face. He pulled one letter from the folder. “There were massive runaways,” he said.

So said Adelia. “So many runaways,” she’d written mere days after her arrival at school.

The letter was dated 1920, seventeen years after my great aunt had worked there. It was addressed to the school superintendent and had been written in painstaking script. From the syntax, I could see that the author spoke limited English. He was writing to inform the superintendent of the boarding school that he was in the Kaw County jail awaiting trial for the murder of a white man who had been stabbed outside of a bar. He wrote that he had attended the school from 1892 to 1893. My stomach flared. I scanned the page to the signature at the bottom: *Yours truly, Abraham Lone Wolf*. My stomach flared. Abraham wrote to ask the superintendent to look up his records and write a letter of accommodation to the warden. He had been a good student and had worked hard in the carpenter shop. Yes, he was, I thought. I felt as if I knew him. He had thought long and hard of his situation and was sure of his innocence. He told the superintendent that he would wish him to be present at his trial.

Abraham's wife, pleading for the superintendent to put in a good word for her husband, had written another letter. A third was typed on official letterhead from the superintendent of the Indian School to Kaw County jail informing the warden that Abraham Lone Wolf had been a student at his school. He had a fine record during the short period of time he attended and had been sorry to see him leave. He regretted the young man's predicament and believed him to be innocent. A fourth letter, also typed, had been addressed to Abraham's wife from the same superintendent, dated two weeks later and informing her of his regret that Abraham had been found guilty. He assuaged her grief by telling her that he believed it to be a case of local prejudice.

Another letter, that same year, from the superintendent described a situation at the school in which a young girl had been given permission to leave the school grounds with a man she claimed was her uncle. The girl was found in a sorry state nine months later, hemorrhaging in her bed. In her trunk they found her infant girl dead from

strangulation. The girl had been so petrified of facing her teacher, a woman by the name of Emma Sneath, who had warned many times that a girl who has a baby out of wedlock burns in hell, that she committed infanticide. The superintendent had tracked down the girl's "uncle" to Anadarko Indian School. The superintendent requested the Anadarko School administration secure monthly reparation from the father of the dead infant in the amount of six dollars since they needed to send the girl away and she had no family.

At the bottom of the stack was a yellowed newspaper clipping with the headline: "Chief Joseph to Visit Indian School." September 1, 1893. Joseph, the famous Nez Perce leader, had been confined to a small patch of reservation in Indian Territory and often visited the children at the nearby boarding schools, the article stated. On this event of record, he attended a pageant and was observed hailing the attention of a young teacher. Chief Joseph was reported to be "enamored with the young woman's handsome looks and blonde hair." He called the young woman over and requested a lock of her hair. The woman responded that he surely could have a lock if she could have a lock of his in exchange.

I left the library without knowing which direction to turn. I wanted to call Aunt Harriet and tell her that I had solved the mystery of Adelia's photographs. But I had also unearthed a far more serious mystery and had to decide what to do with that. When I returned to the office, Jane pressed me for every detail. I decided not to tell her that I'd learned Stevie Ray's name, nor my suspicion that he was Marion's accomplice. Jane, unlike myself, had never met Marion. Even though she talked to him on the telephone nearly every day, she had never seen him in person. She leaned forward in her chair, her chin cupped in both large hands and listened eagerly to every detail

resembling her vulture self on the night of the sweat in Stevie Ray's trailer. I told her that he had said he did not rape the girl, nor kill the sheriff and that I believed him. I told him how he refused once again to name an accomplice, and even though it was predictable, she relished every word and wanted me to repeat everything again. It was as if my proximity to Marion was now rubbing off on her and she was craving more.

"Did he say anything about the letters he's been receiving?" she asked. "Tons of them. All those woman."

"No, but I did tell him you sent your love."

"Oh great. There's something about being a martyr that turns women on. Compassion transforms to lust. Women just fall for him. It's crazy."

Jane's voice rose and as it rose she flailed her arms. I'd never seen her so animated. "What did he say when you told him," she asked.

"He smiled," I said.

"Those women, they promise their bodies, marriage, babies as soon as he gets out of jail," she said. "Did he mention me?" She'd put her chin back in her hands, leaning forward again.

"Yes, he did," I said. "'Jane,'" he said. 'We have to do something about Jane.'"

She studied me for a few seconds before turning her swivel chair to face the wall. We remained silent and I suspected she was crying. I couldn't help it. She was irritating me so I told her the painful truth. Marion did not feel the same about her. He wasn't in love with her and she was wasting her time thinking otherwise. She had to get a grip, and I suppose it was mean to be so blunt, but she reminded me of that part of myself I wanted to crush.

I didn't see Stevie Ray until that night. I wanted to tell him what I'd uncovered in the archives, but he was already back stage preparing for his presentation. The university hall was as full as the Grange hall had been in Santa Cruz six months ago where we'd met. The crowd here was not much different than the crowd back home—a mix of students and activists, native and non. The evening opened with a drum ceremony, followed by John Luna's speech about Native American political prisoners. He spotted me in the crowd and grinned. Then the president of the student body went on stage and introduced Stevie Ray.

I watched the women in the audience. Most of them university age, rapt and wide-eyed as they listened to Stevie Ray Howard speak about the government displacement of hundreds of Navajo and Hopi from their ancestral land. He called Curtis Bedoka onto the stage and played flute while Curtis sang his song dedicated to Marion, the same song the Spider Twins had sung to me back in the trailer.

Afterwards, the audience milled around, some hanging on the margins waiting to talk to Stevie Ray. I went to the bathroom, brushed my hair, put on lipstick. When I came out, I ran into the archivist who'd helped me at the library. He was dressed more casually, without his tie and jacket, a handsome middle-aged man, distinguished gray hair and dark eyes. I appreciated the way he looked straight into my eyes, trying to hold my attention. He wanted to know how my research had gone and what my interest was in the boarding school. I told him about Adelia and my father's farm, about the Osage who lived there first, and the myth about tornados and the river bend.

"Have you heard about that myth?" I asked. "My family says it was told to the first settlers by the Osage before they were removed south to Oklahoma."

"I can tell you this," he said. "Myths have power in that place and they can shatter things. Your need to belong, to find a connection between that myth and who you are is real. But it's wise to exert caution, out of respect. And for your own safety. Be careful who you ask and who you tell. Someone might share the myth because they have a vendetta to exercise." He spoke calmly and matter-of-factly, keeping his hands in his trouser pockets. "You don't know and that's the danger."

Stevie Ray touched my elbow. I tried to introduce the two, but had forgotten the archivist's name.

"Bill Norris,"

"Sorry. This is Stevie Ray Black Dog," I said.

"I enjoyed what you had to say Mr. Black Dog," he said.

Stevie Ray thanked Bill in a hostile tone of voice, then hooked my arm and pulled me away.

I shook his hand loose and walked back to Bill, who looked concerned over our small flare up.

"Very nice meeting you, Bill" I said. "I got a lot out of the research you provided me. There were several links to my own, less formal research. It feels very serendipitous. Tragic and intoxicating at once. I'll remember what you said about the myth. I appreciate that, too."

"Yes," he said, glancing at Stevie Ray.

I shook the archivist's hand and wished him a good evening.

As soon as we turned and walked away, Stevie Ray wanted to know who he was? His brow was wrinkled and his head was down. He appeared to have a jealous side I hadn't seen before.

"Head of the special collections historical archives. He helped me out today with some research. Are you jealous?"

He looked back at my new friend and studied my face, then pursed his lips. "I want to show you something."

I turned and waved a final goodbye to the archivist, smiling to assure him that I was all right, and let Stevie Ray take my hand and lead me across the room and out the main hallway. I'm not sure why I let him. Perhaps I like the surly side. Mostly, I liked how it felt to be possessed.

The pickup was caked with mud from yesterday's drive into the country. As we drove down from the university clumps of dried mud continued to fall off the undercarriage and thump when they hit the wheel well until we reached an older section of town. Stevie Ray continued until we drove up to a cluster of stone buildings fronted by archway similar to the one that spanned Chilocco. He pulled into the parking lot in front of a large limestone building, got out of the truck, held out a hand and helped me out his side. Then he picked me up and draped me over his shoulder and walked over to a picnic bench under an old oak tree.

"This is Haskell Institute. It used to be a boarding school. Now it's a university. My alma mater."

I looked at the silhouette of the school, its buildings nearly as white as the half moon, and wondered if he was telling the truth. He already had his pants unzipped and his hands pushed up my skirt.

"Here?" I asked.

He looked around the parking lot while gathering my legs around his waist, pulling me in close, and pushing aside my underwear. Next was a sudden loud shout of

pleasure, Stevie Ray's, that a passerby, if there were one, could have mistaken for intense pain. And then I was coming.

That night we sat outside on the steps of his trailer gazing up at the stars. I told him about the time I had put his name on one. For a long while he sat quietly leaning behind me, his arms wrapped snugly around my chest.

"You know," he said. "If we all stopped fighting and loved each other, we would live forever."

I remained quiet, comfortable, wanting to be nowhere else but where I was, my body heavy and my back feeling the warmth of his broad chest.

"I can tell you a story now." He tightened his hold around my shoulders. "You know the one about the girl who married a star?" he asked. "She wanted a husband and went out and looked up into the sky. She knew the brightest stars were handsome young men. She pointed to the most brilliant and wished aloud that she could marry it. That night she fell asleep and traveled up into the sky to this star and found him to be an old gray-haired man sitting by the fire. He took her in and made her his wife, forbidding her to leave. She was miserable. There came a knock on the floor. He forbid her to answer it. But this was a curious girl.

"When the old man fell asleep, she went over to a special rock and moved it. Under it was a hole in the sky that opened up to earth. She got busy weaving a rope out of soap root. When she finished she lowered herself through the hole to earth. But her rope was too short and she hung there dangling above the ground until a turkey buzzard came by and asked her if she needed a lift. She said she did and he instructed her to grab hold of his neck when it was time. He flew high into the air, then swooped down to her and told her to hop on, which she did. He flew her down to earth and let her off, asking

her if she knew her way home. She did. He told her that she would find a dead buffalo that she could eat and that would give her strength and she must never talk of the stars again. Ever since then, the people have been afraid to talk about the stars for fear that they might die or that if they wished upon one, the wish would come true."

"Is that Ute?" I asked.

"Wichita," he stood and held out his hand. I took it, and let him pull me up from the step and into the trailer. I followed him to bed and the horrible thought hit me--he had a girlfriend who was Wichita. I sat on the bed hugging my knees, trying to get up the nerve to ask him.

"Are you seeing anyone besides me? Romantically, that is?"

He grabbed his shirt from the end of the bed.

"I'll be right back," he said and headed out of camper. The trailer shuddered as he went down the steps. Then it became so quiet I could hear my ears hum. His return footsteps made my heart beat pound in my head. The trailer door creaked when he opened it and clicked when he shut it. He sat back down next to me, cross-legged, held out his hand and presented me with a bouquet of wild flowers. I took a deep, involuntary breath, the sort with the hitch between inhale and exhale, and waited to hear what I already knew.

Yes, he'd had a girlfriend.

Past tense.

She lived in Los Angeles.

Ouch. He was going there this summer. "Are you still seeing her?"

He shook his head. I put my head in his lap. He cradled me between his long legs, stroked my hair and asked me what was the matter. But I didn't know what was the

matter. I wanted to know when I would see him again and I wanted some assurance that he wouldn't vanish from my world again.

"I'll find you," he said, while moving my head off of his lap and arranging me flat on our bed. Then he lay on top of me, squeezing his legs between mine until he parted my thighs.

"I have no power over you," he said. He kissed my neck. The familiar smell of his hair and skin settled over me.

I thought, the hell you don't.

The following morning he drove with me to the Oklahoma City airport, offering to drop me off at departures and check in the rental car so we could have extra time to just be together. He kissed me before I got out of the car, handed me my luggage and kissed me again. Then he bent down and tied my shoe and kissed me once more. He walked me to the automatic door and swatted me on the butt, grabbed my elbow and pulled me back to him. He kissed me again, and gave me a look that perplexed me, as if he were apologizing for something that hadn't yet occurred.

Mom sounded different on the telephone. Toby could tell I was afraid so he made up a plan. For her homecoming surprise we dressed up in costumes and sat in the living room watching *Toto Goes to New York City* and waiting as if nothing had happened. I was the Scarecrow and the weeds from Grandma's backyard that we stuck in my shirt itched. Darwin painted freckles on my face. They itched too. Grandma Rose dressed Rose up in her white satin blouse and jewelry and made a wand out of her yardstick. She was Glenda the good witch. Gerome played Toto and we didn't have to do anything with him, but Toby made a sign with the words "Bark, Bark" that we put around his neck and Grandma Rose let him inside for a little while. Then she disappeared into her bedroom since she was the dead bad witch and wasn't around anymore anyway. It was Grandma Rose's decision to make the wizard God, since she didn't like the ending of the movie anyway and someone around here needed to be in charge. Dar was supposed to be the Tin Man, but you couldn't tell because Grandma Rose wouldn't let him hold her kindling ax and the aluminum foil wouldn't stay on his arms and legs. Charlie thought the whole idea was immature, so she just sat there in her black t-shirt and pants and dyed black hair looking like the wicked you-know-what.

The patchwork diminished into the geometric landscape as my plane approached the western foot of the Rockies, followed by the vermilion streaks of the Colorado Plateau. Soon the Sierra Nevada would rise and peak and collapse into the Central Valley. I would glimpse the Pacific Ocean, the coast where I'd been born and raised so far from my frontier legacy.

It is easier for someone like myself who has been born and raised on the edge of the country rather than its interior to criticize. It's easier because I don't completely own that history, only those parts that suit me. The part I wanted to reconcile could not be reconciled, not by me, not by my family, not by the entire country. But it was at least a beginning, I thought, to acknowledge the egregious wrongs to the Native people, the oppressive manner in which my people allowed the government to mandate education of the American Indian children with no regard for their culture other than to destroy it. It's old news; so old I sound trite in my own mind trying to resolve it; but I had never felt as much a part of the removal and oppression of Indians as I did after reading Adelia's diary, realizing my forefathers rode the first and second waves of Indian removal, and then being in the location where it took place as I learned my family's history and how it fit into the greater history of the West. Like my great grandfather told Adelia on the day he drove her to the boarding school: It was payback time.

I think Patrick had known at some psychic level that the time would come when the festering in his genes would be passed on to his offspring, and would on some arcane genetic level require healing. He'd known when he killed that Nez Perce woman (he called her squaw) in the middle of the moonless night, mistaking her quiet stealth for a

bear that he'd have dues to pay. He knew when he ventured into Osage territory sooner than was legal and cut his blaze mark, feeling a crippling ghost stab in his balls where that Nez Perce woman had laid her knife before she died, that she'd delivered a wound that would never heal—not entirely. Not in his lifetime.

I imagine him driving Adelia to the Indian School under a herringbone sky, and trying to tell her as much of this as his spiritually limited vocabulary could articulate despite the fact that she was beside herself with loathing toward his secret first wife and what it implicated about him. Her words hung in my mind: “My father then and there, for all God’s creatures to hear, proclaimed that John Rain showing up like he did was a sign from God that a time of reckoning had come.”

My ancient aunt could not stop dreaming of John Rain, but I don’t believe she wrote down her dream to have it read one hundred years later. Her penmanship was tight and neat and carefully blotted as she describes how John Rain walks up to her in camp and whispers so softly that she feels her nipples brush the inside of her blouse. A painful pleasantness emanates from “everything that makes [her] woman.” She drips like a honeysuckle, aches for the bee to collect her sweet nectar. She would be shamed at the thought of someone stumbling over words that she believed were private thoughts. I’m the one burdened with what to tell or how much and in what way. Or perhaps she was aware of the risk, and she wrote in spite of this, hoping her thoughts and dreams would not die with her. I read until I grew sleepy. Her voice continued to resonate.

It is August 11, 1893 when Adelia dreams of a “ hunting party camped in crisp white tents somewhere on the Outlet past the railroad tracks near the river, those tracks running ahead of me so as I can never catch up and lose my breath trying. They headed south on the second buffalo trail, along the border toward the mountains, and I kept

running waiting for something, weather, to turn me back. There was no stopping me. I wanted to stay with him. I found his neck and nestled into it like a child, unable to move, refusing to move, feeling his heart shudder from the thrill of us."

... In the school hallway, walking like I had things to do is when he popped out of the woodwork and pulled me to the storage closet. He latched the door. I licked his hand. We had to stand to carry on. His voice a blanket I understood to knead my flesh into his. You could hear the spikes from the inside out, I reached perfection I never knew outside of dream.

Something in the grass below, not the willow this time. Across the black pond noises above the frogs' ruckus and jar flies' whirl. Hoping it is him. Chills. I will pull my curtains. I will try this night by counting breaths and writing.

Aug 12.

The sound of buckboards full of children. The Caddo and Wichita tribes. I heard them talking about it. Their fathers fought this time. Jail, no rations. The S__ says best way. Kill the Indian. Save the man. My man. I want my sweetness, I am a bee buzzing and remembering the perfection of my dream closet.

I spent the morning helping Miss Sneath teach the older students so she could catch up with the new arrivals. I am earning my three hundred dollars a month. She wrote more English names on the board under the ones already lined out. A line through Dolores Perkins.

Washington, Jefferson, Jane Addams. I have matched the name to the seating chart until all fifteen students were written down and with each name, forgive me Lord, I cursed this school and Miss Edith Sneath.

I must teach the girls how to make a military bed, even though I was never taught this necessary chore, nor know of anyone who was until I came here. Florence Goodman showed me first how to make corners like envelopes. None of them speak English. They giggled Indian when I bumped my shin on the corner of one girl's trunk. Silent stares. I talked loudly as if that would help. Bumped myself on the bed frame again, more giggles. Florence Goodman, a tub and a towel, ordered me to stand aside. I have learned she is Shoshone, late twenties, seems not to like me. Poured steaming water, like brain fog. Florence pulled the smallest girl for a proper wash, grabbed her, threw in a few Indian words, removed clothes, scrubbed the face, neck, ears and those parts below that would shame any girl.

Children homesick. The distance makes them easier to train says S___. And they do not know where home is when they feel like running away.

August 13.

The S___ accused me of playing favorites with the children. I explained to him how sad Dorothy Perkins (my dear Little Talking Leaf) had been. S___ favoritism is against school regulations. His wife seen, no saw me with John Rain. Once in the classroom, once outside the

cafeteria. Thank you holy Jesus she had not seen him in my dreams. The Superintendent told me his experiment to set aside five hundred acres for married Indian couples to practice agriculture and the white social ways. He is recruiting the finest Indians, thinking of matching up William Lone Wolf with Julie Robideau, he wanted my reaction. He scares me.

I was told to look under their mattresses for stolen food. Jennie Edmonds stood in the doorway and told me how she had refused to bless the meal because the food was so poor. One of the older girls came in, she wore a necklace of every color glass bead. She brought it from home and hid it until now. Jennie said how lovely it was. The girl tucked it in too late. Florence hawk eye ordered the girl to give it over. J.E. told Florence a little compassion would not hurt. Florence threw down the sheets she tore off of the bad beds. Her neck above her high collar turned purple as cabbage. "Your compassion makes things worse," says Florence. "The children see pity in your eyes. You can go home because this is an adventure for you. There is no going home for me."

You cannot make a white man out of an Indian. Mama warned me. The white men in this place are arrogant and cruel. I wave my arms and can hear them move in the deathly still air. I gathered the courage to ask Florence if she knew of the superintendent's experiment. I believe this was the first she had heard of it. She kept working and would not answer until I pressed her.

The Pawnee girls were in class with very sore eyes. Trachoma, they may be sent back to their families. More soldiers on the campus.

We are not to fraternize. Some play with the children on the grass. Others sit in the trees by the creek and share their whiskey with the Indians. Something is wrong with Julie Robideau. She will not talk to me. Ran out in the middle of The Indian Princess (by J.N. Barker). "White man, thou shalt not die; or I will die with thee! My father, dost thou love thy daughter? listen to her voice; look upon her tears; they ask for mercy to the captive. Is thy child dear to thee, my father? Thy child will die with the white man." Julie burst into tears. The pageant is two weeks away. The school expects a special visitor. I could play La Belle Sauvage, I could paint my face with boot wax.

"Something is wrong with Julie ..." First a tickle, then a thick warmth down the inside of her thigh. It spread from her womb down her legs, soaking her nightshirt, then the mattress. The pain forced her awake She lifted the covers and slipped her bare feet onto the plank floor, quietly so as not to wake the others. Not even Adelia. She stole across the room and down the hallway. She held her hand up to the moonlight. Warm and thick and dark. She ran downstairs. I followed her. Her gown tore on the clasp as she climbed out the window. The ground still warm as she ran toward the creek. Cupping her palm, she splashed the river water and washed the blood downstream toward another world. Black shadows crossed the warm night smells of hickory. Pebbles riffled words downriver. She gathered her frock around her waist and squatted in the sand, passing her first blood. If she were home, they would honor her. She hovered on the surface of the stream, slow water and rustling leaves, a sudden stirring in the brush as she let the current bathe her. An arm under her breasts took her breath. A hand around

her mouth stifled her dreams. The smell of whiskey laminated her mind and body on the stratification of sand and mud and rock and water. They had come for her. She felt nothing. Run, Julie. She opened her mouth and tasted salt and gunpowder. Scream. I reached into the space passed down from generations, across oceans and races, to the blade that cursed our seed and blazed our destiny. Then, "Would you like something to drink?" I had woken up. The red clouds illuminated the airplane's silver wing turning everything salmon. The flight attendant held out two small foil packets of roasted peanuts.

Mom looked different. But she burst out laughing when she saw us. She laughed different. Charlie tried to put a downer on our fun when she told us that the Wizard of Oz hated Indians. Her history teacher told her so. Grandma came in and told her no one cares about Indians anyways and then she burned the bottoms of the oatmeal chocolate chip cookies. We saved Dorothy for mom because Dorothy learned there's no place like home. We hoped Mom thought so, too, because we did not want to go to Kansas. Rose and me helped her put on Grandma's red satin slippers that she let us borrow. She laughed some more and I stopped being mad at her for coming back later than she promised. She liked our surprise and sat in the tent with me and Rose and Darwin to watch the rest of *Toto Lost in New York City*. She even smelled different. Like she had gone someplace without us.

Charlie had dyed her red hair black and dazzled it with blue streaks, which wouldn't bother me if she weren't so sullen. Her face had a hollowness I thought might be a loss of baby fat, but she had actually picked up a little weight in her hips. She was uncharacteristically quiet.

"What's the matter?" I asked her.

"Nothing," she said, shaking her head.

I felt relieved when she tried to ruin her siblings' fun with sarcasm—it was more like her. When the occasion was right, which might be never, I would tell them about their aunt Adelia.

I clapped my hands and asked for their attention. "Hey, hey," I said. "How about tomorrow we'll go for a long walk."

They looked cute sitting around in their costumes.

"After I get home from work tomorrow," I said. I knew just where to go. When I was young and lived in my parents house at the top of this cul-de-sac, and before my father grew sick, he and I used to take walks in the field beyond the high end of our lot. We always had our best conversations there, deeper than normal thoughts pulled up from the monotonous beat of our footsteps. Once while I walked beside my father in the field, he confided his worry that he was too old to learn new things, even if learning them meant providing his family with a better living. I was shocked and afraid to see him be so human. I needed him not to be equal to me, but better, invincible. Up ahead a flock of ducklings waddled across the path in front us, following their parent, a lame old guy.

My dad looked at me, eyes watering, and exclaimed, Molly, if that old gander can do it, so can I. I still wonder how he concluded that old duck was male—I guessed all ducks were fellows by some standards.

My father believed in metaphor. He believed that our surroundings were manifestations of deeper truths. There were no accidents, according to my father. I wondered about those Kansas fields and the right angle surveyors had cut in the road to compensate for the earth's curvature, an earth whose quintessential roundness could not be contained by linear thinking.

My next thought was Stevie Ray and how I had tried to make him love me, how he'd volunteered to drop off my rental car to compensate for nearly making me miss my plane. I hadn't been keeping track of time. I had been thinking of other things, the way his taut skin felt as if it would split like a plump garlic sausage. At first I was oblivious to the truck that passed us when Stevie Ray had to slow down. Then I saw its dark gray shadow in my peripheral vision, the driver leaning toward us. But I forgot about the truck as soon as it passed. I had more pressing business that was filling the inside of my mouth until my jaw began to ache. But I see it now, that truck, a shiny red truck and that man leering down at me.

"Mom, you look terrible. What's wrong?" said Charlotte.

"Nothing," I said. "I was thinking of Grandpa. Tomorrow I'm going to take us all on a walk."

"Promises, promises," she said.

I woke at dawn and saw the morning star out the plate glass window, perhaps the very star that Adelia put John Rain's name on. I lay in bed staring at the incomparable brightness, trying to measure its distance from the horizon with my thumb and first finger. If I stayed at Mother's much longer, I could learn to tell time by it. I put my Stevie Ray Richard's name on that star. Let him be mine awhile longer, I prayed. I wouldn't have to wait a century to teach my daughters this neat little ritual.

When the telephone rang, I'd fallen back to sleep. Mother answered. She came into the room and held out the receiver with that look on her face, as if a telephone call was not simply a telephone call, but an opportunity to say I told you so. Maybe she knew I'd lay in her guest bedroom and prayed about a man. A brown man. I reached for the telephone. I heard Charlie in my mother's bedroom blowing her hair dry; I heard Darwin showering, and Rose chattering to Henry at the kitchen counter about how to make a proper peanut butter and jam sandwich. I waved my mother out of the room. The woman on the line was confusing me. She worked for the car rental agency and wanted to verify my credit card number and the time I'd returned the vehicle to the agency. She quizzed me on the model and color, but I was only certain about the color, mauve. My mind raced to the truck driver. He had called me in for giving head while driving. I wasn't insured to let Stevie Ray drive my rental car, especially while I, the insured, was going down on him. I wouldn't be surprised if giving head in a moving vehicle was a felony in Oklahoma. Maybe I'd end up in Leavenworth, across from Marion. We could plan the rest of our days figuring out how to escape.

"M'am," the woman said. "M'am. You never checked in the car. A white Camry sedan, correct?"

“Yes,” I told her.

“The authorities found it abandoned in North Dakota. A half-mile this side of the Canadian border.”

Then call waiting.

“Mrs. O’Henry.” The voice was deep and authoritative. “This is Assistant Warden James Mutzner from Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary.”

I started to tell him that my interview probably wouldn’t run. No new angles. An old story.

“Mrs. O’Henry, have you heard anything from Marion Daniels since you visited the prison on Monday.” This was Wednesday.

It was a prank. My Uncle Elman was disguising his voice. No one escaped from a federal penitentiary. The voice on the phone had a twang. Stevie Ray playing a practical joke. But it wasn’t funny. “Who is this,” I demanded.

“Assistant Warden James Mutzner, Mrs. O’Henry.” He addressed me as Mrs. for the third time. “Have you heard anything from Marion Daniels in the past twenty four hours?”

“Why?” I asked.

“M’am. This is Assistant Warden James Mutzner. This is an official call, m’am.”

“How do I know that?”

A moment of silence. “He’s missing, Mrs. O’Henry, and you and Howard Black Dog were the last civilians to see him. If you can’t cooperate over the phone, we’ll have to send a federal officer to bring you in for questioning.”

I had not spoken to Marion and asked him why he was asking. He told me Marion was missing.

"Is he dead?"

"No, m'am."

"How did he escape?" I asked.

"I didn't say he escaped, m'am. Do you know where Mr. Black Dog can be located?"

I sounded suspicious, even to myself. I remembered the woman from the rental agency on the other line and excused myself to finish up with her.

"Ask them to call back, m'am," said the assistant warden.

If I had been that car rental lady listening to me tell her I had an urgent call, I'd think for sure my end of the line smelled fishy. I had a story now. It wasn't the story I could write. Not honestly. It wasn't even a story I wanted to write anymore. The Marion Daniels story would be an evasive one. I was too close to write it without glossing over the holes with lies of omission. I wanted to tell a story that rolled off the heart and filled the cracks like putty smoothing over a disintegrating, beautiful weather beaten windowsill.

"That's two times in one month. You're not thinking of moving there," Mother said. "For chrissakes, when are you going to grow up?"

"*Try* to be positive," I said.

"I don't want to hear this, Molly. What about this Indian chap?" she said.

"You're not going to keep chasing him around the countryside, are you?"

I didn't know if she was talking about Marion or if she'd somehow learned about Stevie Ray. She was walking toward her desk where she kept her checkbook. I noticed a framed photograph which I hadn't noticed before. At first I thought it was a picture of my father, one I'd never seen. The resemblance was uncanny.

"Who is this?"

A glow came over her face—some stored up, unused youthfulness.

"Chuck," she said.

"He looks like Dad."

"He's quite different from your father. He absolutely abhors golf. Canoes, instead. We're planning a fly fishing trip to southern Colorado. The San Juan River. " Her face was absolutely, disgustingly animated, her eyebrows arched. She was smiling. I followed her back into the kitchen. "I don't have anything to wear."

I suggested a buying a new hat and waders.

She pushed the hair out of my eyes, hair that you could have called bangs six months ago.

"I don't understand how you can see anything. And you have such a beautiful high forehead. All that hair makes you look old."

I couldn't think straight. For the next couple of days I tried to bury myself in work at the newspaper. By Friday afternoon I was exhausted. By Saturday morning, I was depressed. I could hardly get out of bed. There were too many signs: Kansas

license plates, buffalo nickels, buffalo stamps, love songs on every station, tornadoes in the middle of Modesto. I dropped Darwin and his surfing buddy off at Steamer's Lane and took the twins downtown. We ordered hot chocolates and watched people. Even with my twins and the constant stream of shoppers and tourists, I was distracted, recreating old scenes and playing old tapes. Stevie Ray was living in my head.

A pair of red tennis shoes crept into the right corner of my vision. Henry grabbed my arm and pointed. Rose looked up from her hot chocolate, a white mustache where the whipped cream had rubbed off onto her upper lip. It was the witch, the screamer. She had sat down at the table next to us and taken out a journal. I looked quickly away, reached across the table and turned Rose by the chin until she was looking at me. "Stop staring," I mouthed. The woman began talking. The energy of her twisted body and contorted mouth seemed directed toward the three of us even though she mumbled her words and her tousled black hair hung over her eyes making it difficult to see who she was looking at. I prepared myself for one of her sudden and violent gestures. Henry pinched my arm.

She went on muttering, the energy in her voice rising. She opened her journal to the front page and carefully picked up a pressed purple and yellow pansy. She held it out to Henry, but he wouldn't let go of me, so I took the dried flower from her. Then she got up, knocking over the salt and pepper. The knife and spoon clattered to the floor as she squeezed between the table and chairs into the café's aisle. I wanted to help her, but knowing better, I clasped my hands. She walked hunched up out the door, one foot in front of the other. She picked up her bike, which she had leaned against the outside of

the building. And as she walked away, something heavy lifted from me. It must have lifted from Henry, too, because I felt him relax his grip.

“Who wath that, Mommy?” said Rose.

I drank the last half-inch of my chocolate, waiting for the dark remains at the bottom of the cup to slide toward my mouth. “Just a woman that Henry and I met awhile ago.” I looked at Henry. “I tried to help her cross the street, but she misunderstood and spit at us.” Henry poked my arm. I corrected myself. “Actually, she spit at Henry.”

I handed Rose the pressed viola. Henry’s eyes widened and he shook his head.

I pulled out a small tablet from my backpack and began to make a list. “Does barley and sausage soup sound good for dinner? Would grandma like that?”

“Yeth,” said Rose. “Write that down.”

“And floating island for desert. I haven’t made floating island since you two were toddlers.”

“Oh yeth,” said Rose.

We shopped, picked up Darwin and his friend, and headed back to my mother’s. While we’d been out, I’d received a phone call from Darwin’s teacher telling me he was failing English. Mother, who was tossing salad at the kitchen counter, said, “That’s what happens when you’re too busy to raise your own kids.”

“One small trip,” I said. But I knew as well as she did that this hadn’t been a small trip. She also knew that something inside of me had changed; a restlessness had surfaced. I needed a plan and purpose and a home, and all of this threatened my mother and my children.

We sat around the kitchen table eating and talking about our day. Rose had her own version of the incident with the black-haired woman: she had red shoes and a bike, and she'd sat down to tell us that everything was going to be all right. (Where did she get that?) To prove it, Rose said, she gave us a dried flower. Rose held out the viola in the flat of her hand as if she was feeding a horse. Henry shook his head some more.

Charlotte helped herself to seconds, finished the last square of corn bread, and served desert. The boys wiped their hands on their pants and I finished the last of the salad. Darwin, looking suddenly serious, asked, "Why did you go to Kansas?" *Kansas*. Like my mother, he could not say the word without smearing it.

I pulled out a postcard I had stored in my backpack. I bought it at the historical museum. I stared at the black and white photograph—all that dust, all those settlers, a man on horseback, another driving a buckboard, another on foot, all of them feeling the whip at their backs desperately driving them toward a new life. I had filled the postcard out and addressed it. Then I read the outline, and never sent it to them. I pointed it out to them: "This picture was taken from a platform at the Indian School at noon sharp on September 16, 1893, just as the cavalry fired the first shots that launched the country's last land run." That was almost exactly one century ago.

"So," said Darwin.

"So, your great, great aunt used to work at that Indian school and your great, great grandfather and great grandfather were in that land run."

"We're not Indian are we?" said Charlotte.

"No," I said

"Thank god," she said. "I can just see you running with that."

“Excuse me,” I said. “She married an Indian man and no one’s saying where she’s buried. I’m curious. Aren’t you?”

Darwin and Charlotte looked at each other as if they shared a condemnation of my outlandishness. Rose asked where she was buried. I told her I didn’t know—she wasn’t buried with the rest of the family. Then Rose got up and left the room

“Rosie, don’t you want to hear mommy’s story?”

She didn’t answer. I told them how I’d found the photograph of Adelia posing with two Indian boys.

“A lock of black hair had been taped to the back. Harriet would only give that picture to the person who knew the story that went with it,” I said.

“Did you get it?” asked Charlotte.

“I didn’t find out the story.”

I told them how I’d found Adelia’s journal and her writings about working at the Indian school.

“She was in love with a man who worked at the school. She left home to be with him. His name was John Rain. He’s your great, great uncle.”

Charlotte wanted to know more, but I told her this was one love story that still hung in the balance between words on pages I hadn’t yet read.

“Can I read it?” she asked.

I was pleased that she was interested. “Of course. Why don’t you clear the plates and get Darwin and Henry to help you with the dishes so your grandmother can relax.”

I walked over to the sliding glass doors and stepped outside. I could smell the bay and imagined staring at the same stars from a particular bend of the river where no tornado has ever set down, listening to water riffle over river rocks, to children laughing and soft flute music on the longest day of the year.

The telephone rang. It was the editor from *Mother Jones*. He'd just heard that Marion Daniels had escaped from prison. Charlotte and Darwin stared at me while I discussed returning to Kansas over the telephone.

"We're not going to Kansas," Darwin shouted, just as White offered me an advance and an all expense-paid trip.

It was an uneventful drive from Oklahoma City and I was out there thinking about my last interview with Marion and whether I could piece together a story that didn't implicate Stevie Ray or play into my suspicions that Stevie Ray, my rental car, and Marion's escape were connected. I sensed I was too close to the story to write it well.

It wasn't until I hit the Kansas-Oklahoma border that I realized I'd missed the turnoff to the farm. I wanted to find out if Janine had received my eviction notice. I'd advised her to find a new place to live by the end of the month, preferably someplace north, suitable for hogs, anyplace, the further away the better. I would have to find another tenant, and, in the meantime, pay the property taxes until I decided whether to keep the farm or sell it.

Up ahead was a gaping hole in the walnut grove. An abandoned bulldozer rested under the shade of one tree. One tree nearest the edge of the road had been taken down, its newly cut trunk wept fresh sap. Its limbs rose from the ground like Medusas. I

parked the car in the short grass at the edge of the road, and started to run. These were my trees and someone had cut one down. I suspected Elman. A crushed Pepsi can lie on the bulldozer's floorboard. As I approached I realized for the first time the immensity of these trees. They must have been a century old. Their diameters were as wide as an old Sierra Nevada Sugar Pine. The remaining trees were individual globes, full and rounded. Their canopies began to form some twenty feet above the ground, where each spread its mature limbs full of feathered green leaves, met the branches of its compadre trees and formed a large sheltering roof, protecting those who sought refuge from the elements—heat, sunshine, wind, and rain. A person could experience life at a microcosmic level within this grove, beneath these trees. I imagined my father as a boy, finding a womb-like solace under these leviathans that protected him from the distraction of outside social forces. Although it was early in the season for the nuts, I could see several dead brown nut pods clinging to limbs. I walked up to one old girl. The ground the base of the trunk rose slightly under the old roots. The bark was even and unmarred all the way to the first branch, which was so high even a tomboy would have a hard time figuring out a way to climb it. There were an even dozen, including the two that had been cut. Where the chain saw had done its work, rich sawdust was scattered like confetti about the cut stumps. I walked over and ran my palm along the wet stump. I listened and heard birds in the foliage above, the hum of a bee nearer the ground.

Janine or Elman must have been responsible. Who else who else could have done such a thing. I wondered whom she planned to haul off the timber and the expression on her face when she found out I had returned.

I walked swiftly across the field to the river, pissed off. I sat down on the ledge of the bank and removed my tennis shoes, deciding to get wet. I stuffed my socks into each shoe and tied the laces, draping them over my neck, so that one shoe hung from each shoulder. I pulled off my khakis and folded them into a bundle that I would hold above my head. I stood on the bank's thinnest edge waiting for it to give way to my weight and lower me to the water. If I lost my footing or stepped in a hole, I could swim, I told myself.

The water was thigh high and cold where the river undermined the bank and made a forty-five degree turn downstream. I held my bundled khakis above my head as I waded toward the sandbar ahead that poked up from the riverbed and fanned nicely into the opposite shore. I stepped cautiously on slippery stones, their round, slimy heads breaking the river's surface in chorus. The river was slow and friendly, and as I reached the other side my anger had subsided so where I could at least feel some clarity of mind. It was a lovely spot. It was a safe spot. I had not recalled many safe spots in my life, only safe moments—in my mother's home that night I fell asleep between my twins, in Stevie Ray's bed beneath his blanket of sunbeams and rainbows. I wanted more than moments. I wanted my own safe place, a place of warm air and fireflies in prairie grass.

I sat facing the sun at the base of the sole flint hillock that rose into a lover's leap while my feet and legs dried off. I could see where my footprints had broken the face of the opposite bank and where the silt clods continued to dissolve into the current, which cut beneath the riverbank rinsing and polishing the exposed roots of a cottonwood. Something white as eggshells shown between the roots. Several pebbles clucked as they tumbled into the water, the sound of each cluck unlike any other, timeless and primal.

I followed the old buffalo trail across the river. Then I climbed the hill above the river bend. At the top I had three hundred and sixty degree view of the entire quarter section. The farm appeared to me to be something peaceful and warm out of the past, the signs of humanity contributing to the scene. The southern field looked neglected and monotonous, even though the wheat was knee high and growing as it was supposed to with the exception of the singular swath of dirt that three generations had tried and failed to cultivate. There was no sign of Janine anywhere, so I scrambled down the hill the way I'd come and crossed the river.

Even the dogs were gone, and Janine's truck was not in the driveway. I hoped she had moved out. The kitchen looked lived in, but days from being cleaned. Dishes were in the sink and traces of food had dried on the plates. The odor of rotting garbage filled the room and I found the source under the sink. I searched the counter tops looking for evidence that Janine had received my notice. I switched on a light. The electricity had not been turned off. I picked up the phone and got a dial tone, so I called Mother to check on the children and let her know I'd arrived safely.

" You sound awful. Maybe you should come home. Have you been drinking?"

"I'm calling to let you know I made it safe and sound. Except someone started cutting down the walnut grove.

" Am I supposed to feel sorry for a grove of trees? I don't."

“Mom, “ I said. “I don’t know if I’m going to stay here at the farm or at Harriet and Elman’s or a hotel, so if anyone calls tell them you don’t know where I am and take a message. Unless a man named Stevie Ray calls. Has he?”

“Who’s Stevie Ray?”

“A friend of mine.”

“Not that activist Charlotte was telling me about. I hope you’re not jet setting around the country because of some man.”

"I'll call you later."

"Molly O'Henry ... "

I hung up the telephone and went into the yard. Red Too was on his roost atop the fence rail. I remained out of target range, walking just close enough to make us feel each other’s presence. It smelled good out here. Hot and dry and earthy. My father hated chickens. I’d asked him for a pet chick once when I was little. Ugh, he said. I hate chickens. Lice. I wondered if these chicks chasing each other around the dirt and through the bird-sized, hen house doorways had lice. Did it matter? You could get lice anywhere. Charlie came home with lice when she was in third grade. We all got them. What a nightmare. All those sheets and towels and treating their scalp and raking through their hair with a fine tooth comb. But those chicks looked harmless enough from here. In fact, I wished my children could see them.

The sideboards of the coop needed painting; wood was showing through and it looked like something had been chewing the foundation. I turned a slow, full circle. The barn roof was collapsing on one end. But yes, it smelled good. The sky wasn’t nearly as blue as Santa Cruz on a clear day, but the air felt amniotic. Even so, I couldn’t

stay here, not tonight. Not until I knew for certain that Janine was gone. I decided to drive up to Lawrence and get a room at the Royal Hotel. I would be closer to the prison and I could check in on Jane.

I checked into the hotel in time for dinner and, since I'd be eating alone, I brought my work to the dining room to keep myself company. If anyone was in the dining room, I wanted them to know that I was alone for a reason, not because I was lonely. The dining room was inviting, even more so because the only person in it was the waiter, a young man dressed in a black tux who looked more like he belonged in New York City or Los Angeles. He led me to my table and handed me a large leather-bound menu, smiled and said, "Good to see you, again." I didn't recognize him from my first stay in the hotel, but appreciated his friendliness nonetheless. He picked up my white cloth napkin from the table. With a deft wave of his hand, the napkin opened and he spread it over my lap.

The dark wall paneling provided a richness that offset the traditional white lace curtains draped down the entrance's double etched glass doors. The square tables were covered with white tablecloths, set with china and heavy silverware. The waiter returned with a white towel draped over one arm and a silver coffee urn in the other. He waited for me to nod, then tilted the urn and poured.

The coffee was good and rich, nothing like Elman and Harriet's thinned out Folger's. The waiter set the urn on the table and straightened to take my order. My stomach growled and I grabbed myself to stop it. He smiled and suggested the chicken and apricots served with creamy polenta and grilled eggplant. It would be my first

mouth watering bite of food since the breakfast of scrambled eggs and sausage that I'd eaten on the plane. Chicken and polenta it was. He winked and headed for the kitchen, leaving me with Adelia's red journal. It lay beneath my slim reporter's notebook, the two forming a double helix of entwining stories. There seemed to be several uncanny parallels between her life and mine. I sipped my coffee and began to piece together Marion's story. I didn't believe he killed the cop. I suspected the obscure sidekick had, the one Marion refused to name or even acknowledge. I reviewed the scene: it was dusk, almost dark, when the victim walked from her after-school job toward her grandparents' home in the interior of the reservation. Marion had been parked at the side of the road beside a windbreak, suggesting he had been hiding, perhaps from the very cops who showed up.

I opened my notebook and jotted a note: "What was Marion doing parked at the side of the road?" Something was going on. Smoking a joint, waiting for his connection, drinking, hiding. We know he was there for a reason, but he had never said. I should have asked him! I went over the scene chronologically. Two white sheriff's deputies had driven up beside the girl. Why hadn't they seen Marion's vehicle? According to the surviving deputy, they wanted to know if the girl needed help. According to Marion, they drove off and circled back around, failing to notice Marion parked nearby. The officers stopped the car, got out, and surrounded the girl on the passenger side of the car, shielded by the squad car on one side and a windbreak of trees on the other. By Marion's account, one deputy grabbed her from behind, pinning back her arms and holding her tight by her hair while the other ripped off her pants, stuck his muddy black boot in the crotch and yanked her down to her knees, whereupon he forced his penis into

her mouth. Marion, parked on the shoulder of the road some distance from the girl, had been watching up to that point. Were they hiding from the sheriff deputies for some undisclosed reason? Marion got out his truck and ran toward the scene. But he wasn't alone. His friend, who he won't name, won't ever name and will not be asked to name unless he's captured again, ran out of the truck first and descended on the sheriff with his knife. I could imagine Stevie Ray. The cop holding the girl's arm would have seen the men first and possibly split, afraid for his own life, without enough time to pull out his gun. *Why didn't he shoot?* I couldn't get a clear picture. It seemed more logical that Marion and accomplice attacked the cops, killed one and incapacitated the other enough to free themselves to leave the scene with the girl and deliver her to her grandparents.

My dinner arrived and the waiter set it before me, warning me that the plate was hot. Warm steam rose from the meal. The orange shades of apricot and carrot, the yellows of polenta and squash, and braised chicken glazed with a rich, translucent sauce looked like they belonged on the cover of *Gourmet* magazine. The food looked so appetizing, but even the creamy texture of the couldn't take my mind off of the case.

The feds arrested Marion south of the Canadian border in Fargo on suspicion of raping a minor and murdering a police officer. They held him without bail. In a lineup, the officer who'd fled the scene identified Marion as the perpetrator. The officer denied there were two men. Maybe there was no accomplice, or perhaps he exploited Marion's silence. It was his word against Marion's.

The officer said that he and his partner had been following a truck they suspected had been stolen. Followed it into the reservation, lost it, and subsequently saw a rape in progress. Swore that the grandparents charged him and his deceased partner were a

couple of drunken Indians. Said it wasn't true he'd run from the scene and left his partner to bleed to death.

The girl would not talk to anyone after the incident except to her grandparents. She told her grandparents of an eagle that swooped down and carried her by the hair to the hilltop where she saw her parents for the first time since they'd been killed in a car accident when she was three. Her grandparents couldn't positively identify Marion as the man who returned their granddaughter. They initially reported another man in the truck, but retracted that in a subsequent testimony. The girl was now a woman and lived someplace in San Francisco. I sat with the point of my pen poised on my notebook, imagining the scene of the incident when the waiter startled me by laying the evening paper on the table beside my cold plate of food. He reached for the silver coffee urn and refilled my cup.

I thought of Henry, who experienced a similar trauma of losing a parent at the age of three. I wondered if a vision of his father might help restore his power of speech. He needed a real home. I could move to the farm. He might like a couple of baby chicks. Rose would love having one of those rabbits with long floppy ears, or one of those pygmy goats. Nothing could replace Darwin's surfing. It would take another cup of coffee to figure out how to make him and Charlotte happy.

The waiter stood over me asking if I was finished just as I read the evening headlines. *Manhunt for escaped Indian continues.* I'd spilled hot coffee and he was quick to mop up the tablecloth and hand me a fresh napkin for my blouse. I brushed his hand aside and read the headline out loud.

"He didn't do it," I said, as the waiter continued to dab my place setting with a towelette, a concerned expression on his brow.

I was just about to launch into a flash summary of the case, but the silhouette of a familiar person appeared through the antique white-laced double doors that separated the restaurant from the lobby.

"Hey," said Jane, striding in as if she owned the place. I stood and we hugged.

"What'd you do?" She looked at my plate. "Order dinner and not eat it?" The waiter nodded and asked her if she wanted a menu. She didn't answer and he began to turn away.

"Harold," Jane said to the waiter. "The coffee." She pointed to a place on the table in front of her. He backed up without looking at us and set the silver urn down on the table.

"He used to date my daughter," Jane said.

"I didn't know you had a daughter," I said.

"You never asked. She's twenty-one. A student at Haskell U. Going to be a lawyer." She tossed her short hair away from her face, taking a deep breath and readjusting herself in the chair.

"Why didn't you save yourself some money," she said, "and sleep at the office. There's plenty of room."

"I'm covered," I said. "All expenses paid."

"Then you can buy me dinner." She laughed.

"This time I've got a room with a shower and a phone."

I tapped the headlines with my pen, aware that Jane was purposely not looking.

"This is not a good place," she said, rolling her eyes toward a woman who had walked in shortly after Jane, and sat at a table across the room.

There were a couple of things I desperately wanted to know. Had she heard from Stevie Ray? Did she know where Marion was?

"Are you in love with Marion?" I said. I don't know why I asked. They'd never met in person, and she had only spoken to him through the prison phone.

She stared into her coffee cup as if she were reading tea leaves. "Yes," she said, enunciating the "s" as if she were pronouncing a vow. "I am in love with Marion."

Our capacity to love a man we cannot see is boundless, and it's difficult to explain why we would want a man who is inaccessible. Loving someone we can't see, or in Jane's case, someone whom she's never even touched has to be more about loving a fantasy than the man. I should know. While we're spending our precious time pursuing and obsessing, we don't have to pay attention to ourselves. We suffer sadness and deep depression and do the sickest things to bust that skin of passivity and move on the obsession; but, on the other hand, at a subconscious level part of our attraction is knowing we will not have to deal with our own issues of commitment and intimacy. Marion was a double whammy. Initially incarcerated, now on the run and forced into hiding. And emotionally ... well, who knows what they said to each other in their daily phone conversations. Who knows to what degree Jane got off on the romance of her circumstance? Knowing Marion was secure inside the prison walls, she had few interruptions to her fantasies. With Marion's escape, she must suddenly possess a greater intensity of delusion that she will be with him. I could see the turmoil in her—

furrowed brow and a hollowness of the cheekbones. Before his escape, Marion's love letters and messages of support from women who had only heard of him had spurred her jealousy. That's what Marion and Stevie Ray had chuckled over. She was one of them. Now, he had vanished, and it tormented her to think of some other woman fulfilling her dream role of being the first to make love to him after all those lonely years. I glanced over at the lady who had walked into the dining room. She was studying the menu. I wondered if she knew the contents of Marion and Jane's telephone conversations.

I missed my kids. While Jane used my shower, I went downstairs and called Mother. Darwin answered on the first ring. I asked him if he liked tractors.

"How would I know? I am not going to Kansas," he answered. Just like that, clear and angry.

Charlotte was shouting in the background. She grabbed the phone and began ranting that her grandmother had accused her of stealing her good pearls.

"Did you?" I asked.

"No," she said. "I was just trying them on." She began crying.

"Where ... the hell ... are you ... when I need you?" she sobbed between syllables. "Grandma's going to make us stay with Mitch *again* so she can go out with her new man friend."

I took a deep breath and tried to figure out what to do next. I sighed. "Do you want to come out here?"

"No way."

"Just for a couple of days."

"What about school?"

“You could miss a couple of days. “

She stopped crying. “How can you afford that?”

“I can afford it.” I thought of my Southwestern Visa. I had just paid it off last week. I waited. She didn’t say anything. “You could meet your great aunt and uncle.”

“What’s so great about them? I can’t go to stupid Kansas to meet my hokey relatives just because you can’t get your act together. I swear you’re worse than grandma. She thinks she can just make us do whatever she wants and never take us anywhere and then take us over to that fucking Mitch’s house and watch him get stinking drunk. You are so fucked up. I’m just going to leave. I’m going to pack up and split and you’re going to be sorry.”

“You are fucking going to pack your bag and stop your bitching and get on a god damn plane tomorrow morning, girl. You hear me. Put your grandmother on the phone. Now.”

Mother was more that happy to drive the kids to the airport the next morning. For the first time she approved of my plan. She was relieved I was sending for the kids. I couldn’t blame her. Charlotte alone was enough to drive her mad. She had told Mother that she wanted to pierce her nose, and Mother felt a small trip to Midwest would be an appropriate deterrent. She even offered to pay for the tickets, but I declined, reminding her this was an all-expense paid trip. Nevermind, it didn’t include airfare for four kids. The idea of children on the horizon made Harriet and Elman crazy for joy. They volunteered to pick them up at the airport, which would give me enough time to interview the prison warden (who sounded just as eager to question me).

Between now and then I had to plan out my questions and, as important, I had to plan out my answers. I would be difficult to cooperate without lying? Saying nothing would be a lie of omission. Withholding information. We’re dealing with

Leavenworth, so we're dealing with a federal offense. Stevie Ray was Marion's accomplice. He helped Marion escape. But I didn't want to tell him this. They were just suspicions. I didn't want to tell him about my relationship with Stevie Ray. The episode with the rental car.

The day was overcast with hospital green haze. I drove the interstate from Lawrence to Leavenworth. I tuned in the radio for updates on the manhunt for Marion, but reports of a tornado warning superceded all other breaking news. Jane wasn't able to answer any of my questions because she thought the woman who had walked into the dining room was FBI and following her.

I recognized the white turret across from the penitentiary entrance and prepared to find the same diagonal slot that Stevie Ray had parked in when we visited Marion a month ago. I sat in my car, fairly certain that my every move was being watched. Meanwhile, I tried to open myself to whatever memories I had already forgotten of this place. I got out of my car and spanned the circumference of the prison. In all it covered more than fifteen hundred acres—nearly ten times the acreage of the farm—roughly twenty of them inside forty foot walls—forty feet high and forty feet deep.

The grounds in front of the prison were arranged in neat rectangles of lawn bearing old deciduous trees, and divided by streets that offered diagonal parking at their curbs. A long flight of stairs protruded from the front entrance like a great white tongue leading to a rotunda area that protruded from the main building. Above the building's entrance a stunning, malapropos silver dome, rose into the sky, reflecting the morning's sunlight. The dome had been erected in 1926; about the same time the prison changed

its inmate apparel from black and white stripes to dark blue cotton. The building's long white stone exterior interspaced with tall, narrow windows appeared absolutely inaccessible.

As I walked up the stairs of the prison, I thought of Stevie Ray. I missed him. So little time had passed since I'd met him, and so much had transpired. I was in constant flux. My family life, love life, intellectual life, my very fabric seemed to be at risk with each new day. Here I was for the second time walking up the flight of stairs to a federal penitentiary that only days before held a man convicted of murder, and I had liked that man. I loved his friend. I stood on the outside scanning one more time the exterior of a building that appeared impenetrable, exuding an historic elegance.

The same receptionist signed me, giving no indication that he recognized me. I was used to that. I looked up at the ceiling light fixture that the three men had been working on the last time I was here. It appeared to be working. A guard opened the first of several doors to the prison's inner chambers and escorted me down a different hallway to the warden's office.

The warden seemed initially distracted and straightened a pile of papers before standing and leaning over his desk to shake my hand. I took out my notepad and flipped it to my page of questions, feeling him interrogate my every gesture and facial expression with his eyes.

My voice caught when I began to speak. I cleared my throat and tried again. "It's generous of you to let me interview you, sir. Could I begin by asking if anyone has ever escaped from this penitentiary before now?"

“In the early days William Pierce led seventeen prisoners in a massive breakout from the old prison and into the free world. That was 1898. They were all caught. It took a while longer to catch Pierce. But they got him, too. Those were the easy days, before the new penitentiary was built.”

“How could anyone possibly break out of here?” I said.

He rubbed his face with his hands and looked at me. “I was hoping you might have some insight into that, Ms. O’Henry.

An instant hot flash overcame me. He must have known that I was more than a journalist in this case; or perhaps he knew that I was emotionally invested in this story. That little hug I’d given Marion at Stevie Ray’s request certainly indicated a lapse in objectivity. I hoped it wouldn’t come up in our conversation.

I decided to be candid with him. “I’ve thought about that a lot,” I said. “The laundry room. Is it possible he hid in one of the laundry bins and somehow got transferred onto one of your trucks out of here?”

He smiled in a way that was intentionally patronizing. “We have a full service plant, m’am. We do our own laundry here. In fact, our laundry was the first building used to hold our inmates back in ’03. Now it handles all the clothing items for the seventeen hundred-plus men. Marion was assigned to food prep.”

“Maybe he went out with the garbage,” I quipped.

“We don’t take that as a joke, Ms. O’Henry. If you know something, you need to divulge it or you’re going to miss your plane trip back home. In fact, if you know something you could wind up in prison on conspiracy charges.”

“Sorry. I was being serious,” I lied. “Is it possible he went out with the garbage?”

The warden wouldn’t answer.

“May I ask you a question?” I said.

He nodded.

“Do you have any clues about where Marion might be. I’m on assignment, and anything you can tell me would be appreciated. If there’s anything you want to tell me off the record, I can guarantee my confidence as well.” Before he could answer, I asked my next question, trying to exert some control over the interview.

“Is it possible that any of your trustees or employees conspired to help him escape and if so can you provide names at this time?”

The warden believed that several inmates from the minimum security Federal Prison Camp adjacent to penitentiary might have helped him escape, but he declined naming them.

“They serve work details that take them all over the grounds—fort, reservation, cemetery. It was the only way he could have escaped,” he’d said. He leaned forward. “He has friends in here. Moreover, we suspect Richard Black Dog has something to do with this. He’s been visiting periodically for years.”

My scalp tingled hearing my own suspicions confirmed. “What gives him that privilege?” I asked.

“He’s Daniels’ cousin and on the list of approved visitors.”

I cleared my throat. Stevie Ray hadn’t told me he and Marion were related.

“Why do you suspect him?”

“Because he’s disappeared.” The warden licked his full lips. “Everyone’s a suspect, m’am. And off the record, you’re a suspect, too. You and Mr. Black Dog were, after all, the last civilians to see Marion Daniels. And you did come here and leave here together. Depending on how we choose to look at it, your association implicates you as well.”

“He was a source,” I said. No way was I going to admit our love affair. “It was convenient that we drove here together. Especially for him.”

I had lied before, but never to a warden and never in a federal penitentiary where concealing anything was a criminal offense and even innuendo could cause trouble. The magnitude of my situation did not escape me; in fact, as I sat in the warden’s office I tried to manipulate my facial expression into a poker face. I was also acutely aware of the opportunity to avenge myself for Stevie Ray’s litany of romantic shortcomings—indifference, ambivalence, and abandonment being the first three that came to mind. On the other hand, I had been gripped by an involuntary resolve to protect him, a desire to grow a canopy of quiet resistance between him and the warden’s questioning. I had stepped up to another edge.

“Isn’t it possible that the sheriffs had accosted the young woman, as Marion asserts, and that he had come to her rescue?”

“The case is shut on that issue,” said the Warden. “Unlikely.”

“Is it at all possible that the surviving sheriff stabbed his partner to eliminate a witness?”

The warden raised his eyebrows. “Who’ve you been talking to? Is that what Marion told you?”

“Just asking.”

“What else did Marion say?”

I suddenly became afraid that my line of interviewing would lead to further suspicions about Stevie Ray—suspicions I, myself, had. I focused my questioning on the logistics of the manhunt, how many agents were looking for him and where they thought he might be. The warden was not forthcoming. He didn’t offer anything more than what I’d already heard and read in the media.

“It would really help me,” I ventured, “if you could give me some fresh information that others don’t have, if you could privilege me with your thinking on this situation.”

“You want a scoop,” he said.

“Some insight,” I said.

He tapped his fingers lightly on the desk. “You know, we don’t regularly let the media into our penitentiary. You were initially admitted on a fluke. I was gone and you happened to reach our assistant warden. He had every right to let you in, but I would have turned down your request flat. We can’t afford to be generous to the media. Look what’s happened since you’ve been here. I’m talking to you today because I think you know something.”

“That’s not fair,” I said.

“You’re on video making physical contact with Marion.”

“The hug,” I said.

He nodded. "You know what happens to an inmate when he touches an outside visitor? We pat him down good. They strip search, probe every orifice with a flashlight and that's just the beginning."

Why would Stevie Ray ask me to give Marion a hug if he'd known Marion would be searched? Another piece of information I withheld from the warden.

"You know what we found on him?" said the warden.

I had no idea.

"Think about it," he said.

I pressed my palms against my eyes and tried to recall what I'd been wearing that day. My khakis and a blouse. A light jacket I'd worn on the plane. My backpack.

"I have no idea," I said. "Honestly." Telling the truth was a nice relief. "A knife."

"Plenty of those in prison," he said. "It's not worth the risk to bring one in from the outside. We found nothing on him. But after his escape, we discovered a needle down the urinal drain."

I was shocked by the idea. "A hypodermic?"

"Not a hypodermic. A sewing needle. Specifically, a marine needle, the heavy duty variety used for whipping sails," said the warden. "We think Richard Black Dog laid a plant on you to aid Marion's escape. Anything you notice about him that was irregular? You drove here in the same vehicle. Did he say or do anything that in retrospect might seem suspicious or lead us to where he might be?"

I thought of the rental car and how it showed up stolen and abandoned shy of the Canadian border. Oh. Stevie Ray's uncharacteristic attentiveness when he dropped me

off at the airport making me at some radar level think he was engaged in some scheme, the circumstances and magnitude of which I thought had something to do with other women .

“What is it?” asked the warden.

I was at the critical juncture.

I consciously refused to confide to the warden my suspicions that Stevie Ray was not only Marion’s unknown accomplice in a situation that resulted in the death of a sheriff but that he was somehow involved with Marion’s escape.

“Stevie Ray’s an activist,” I said. “I know that. But he didn’t say anything that stood out.”

“Did you see him tampering with your bag while you drove here? Did you leave him alone with your gear, your tape recorder or purse. Did you have physical contact with him?”

I recalled the image of him sitting on the passenger side of my rental car when I went inside to get us coffee. The day was already warm and I’d left my jacket in the back seat. He’d seemed startled when I stood at his window holding out the Styrofoam cup full of hot black coffee with three packets of sugar. He’d been bent over something, and I had been thinking how I hated Styrofoam. I assumed he’d been rolling a cigarette. I had asked him if he wanted to drive. Shortly after that he asked me if I wouldn’t mind giving Marion a hug before we left the penitentiary. “He hasn’t felt a woman in years,” Stevie Ray had said. But I didn’t tell the warden any of this.

“No,” I said.

I had crossed over.

“What did you call him?” asked the warden.

I didn’t know what the warden meant.

“You said ‘Stevie Ray’. Who’s Stevie Ray?”

I’d divulged his other name. Moreover, I hadn’t been forthcoming about it.

“That’s his stage name,” I said. “That’s the name he uses for speaking engagements. I did not know his name was Howard until he registered as a visitor. My guess is that he’s a fan of Stevie Ray Vaughn and used his name as a pseudonym for his public life. So his private life could remain more private.”

“You didn’t ask him why?” said the warden. “What kind of a reporter are you not to ask why?”

I glanced at his yellow notepad where he’d written down Stevie Ray.

“You say you attended one of his speaking engagements?” he said.

“I didn’t say that, but yes I did.”

Judging from the expression on the warden’s face, I was being insubordinate.

“Where was that?”

“Santa Cruz,” I said.

“Santa Cruz? They sail out there in that bay, don’t they? You followed him to Kansas? Is that it? Kind of like Dorothy.”

“Dorothy didn’t follow anyone, the way I remember the story,” I said. “No. I have family in Kansas, and I was considering a story on Marion. Stevie Ray was speaking up at the university. Coincidence we were in the same place at the same time. Initially, my pitch didn’t pan out. The media didn’t want a story on Marion unless he confessed or named the accomplice that the court has never acknowledged.”

“Did he?”

“No. Do you think there was one?”

The warden pursed his lips. “Do you?”

“It’s possible,” I said. “I’d like to get into the files and do some more checking, but they’re sealed. Perhaps you could help me.”

The warden cleared his throat which I interpreted as “not likely.”

“You have family here?” he said.

“They’re dead, actually.”

“You said you were visiting relatives.”

“Oklahoma. I have an aunt and uncle.”

“Where do they live?”

“In the country. Outside of Ponca City.”

“Indian country?” he said.

“I guess so. They’re ranchers. Retired.”

I hoped we wouldn’t ask me any questions that would make me have to divulge the whereabouts of my father’s Kansas farm.

The warden looked at his watch and frowned. “I have a meeting. I’m already late. The guard here will escort you to the lobby.” Then he called back to me. “Ms. O’Henry. If you hear anything, you let us know.” He handed me his card. “And could you send me a copy of your story before you print it?”

“Yes sir,” I said, and followed the guard into the hall.

I decided against driving through Lawrence on my way back to my aunt and uncle’s because I suspected that the warden had sent someone to follow me. I wanted to

leave that yuck behind me and be with my kids. The smell of the oil refinery gave me a headache as I traveled back down Highway 77 trying to figure out the significance of a sailing needle in the cell urinal. I felt extremely uneasy about my interview with the warden and tried to convince myself that my lies of omission were journalistic exercises in source confidentiality. I was, after all, a reporter from California, where the shield law protected us from divulging sources. My rationale was so farfetched I felt like puking.

Driving through Ponca City, I tried to imagine how the land must have looked when Oklahoma was Indian Territory. Ponca City was situated on former hunting grounds, then Cherokee grazing lands until September 16, 1893, when the entire Cherokee Outlet was opened for homesteading in a run in which my great-grandfather and grandfather participated. Within two decades, oil had been discovered in Osage County, and overnight the Osage became the richest people per capita in the country, luring all kinds of folks from other states who otherwise wouldn't have considered moving to this rough, desolate land. One particularly infamous crook, William Hale, worked himself up from a cattle rustler to a banker who preyed off the Osage new-found wealth. In the early 1920's, he masterminded the murder of numerous full-blood Osage and, more often than not, wound up controlling their head rights. The Osage Tribal council finally appealed to Washington, launching a three-year FBI investigation that wound up with the conviction and life imprisonment of Hale.

I kept driving until I hit the pastureland of Osage County. Soon I was driving up the dirt lane to Elman and Harriet's ranch, the former home of my late great aunt and uncle, Adelia and Harry. Elman opened the front door of the doublewide before I raised

my fist to knock. He hovered over me like a staff, almost hugging me. "Yer still short," he said. "C'mon in. Kids are in the livingroom watchin' TV."

Harriet apologized for planting them in front of the TV. She explained it was the only way to stop the twins' crying.

"Really, dear," she said. "No child from California would be in their right mind if they were happy to see relatives they'd never seen way out here without their mama close by."

I felt a twinge of guilt and then resentment at Harriet's insinuation that I had abandoned my children. But I decided to take her literally and express my anger and fear as love, and I had lots of it to dole out. Hugs for each of them. Rose and Henry were sitting two feet in front of the television with bowls of popcorn nestled between their crossed legs. They were barefoot.

"He don't talk much, that boy," said Elman.

"There's a lot going on inside," I said.

When Rose realized I was there, she scrambled up from the floor and rushed over to hug me. I picked her up and sat on the arm of the overstuffed easy chair beside Charlotte, who chose to stare straight ahead, the pulsing cheeks of flesh at her jaw working overtime. I put my free arm around her. She shrugged me off. Rose, whose arms clung to my neck, quickly resumed her tubal trance.

"And you, sir Darwin?"

He was sitting in a dark leather armchair fiddling with a puzzle consisting of two metal rings and a u-shaped bar that looked like the kind of curios sold at a western museum. "I'm fine," he said.

An agonized, constricted noise exploded from Charlotte. She buried her face in her hands and her shoulders started shaking. I put Rose down and tightened my arms around my oldest daughter. Rose announced that Charlotte had her period (after Harriet left the livingroom).

One by one they fell asleep, Henry first, then Rose, then Darwin, and finally Charlotte. She thrashed about, taking the sheets and blankets and kicking out at my legs. I thought of my dream about Julie Robideau and a wave of gratitude washed over me that my daughter was safe beside me. We hadn't slept in the same bed since she was a little girl too afraid of the dark to sleep alone. I said her name softly and she came out of her nightmare, "mama, mama," sounding like a high wind moaning through old oak limbs. She curled in to me, burrowing her head into my chest. I told her it was only a dream. She got up and walked to the bathroom, her crown of matted black hair was messed, her white t-shirt just covered her white panties, hips and thighs had filled out, her slim legs were browned. Suddenly, I was quite scared.

I gazed out the open window and saw childlike forms in the moonlit clouds and a bear face in the tree trunk outside. When Charlotte returned to bed, I asked her if she wanted me to read to her from Adelia's diary until she went back to sleep. I summarized to the point where I'd left off and began a new page so we would experience Adelia's unfolding life together.

"August 14, 1893—Seed Lesson," I read aloud. Charlotte nestled her head in the nook of my armpit as I continued to read to her. Charlotte listened. We fell asleep that way.

August 14

Seed lesson—Miss Sneath asked William Lone Wolf to tell the class how nature distributed seeds. William shook his head. She scolded him and told him to sit up straight, feet together, hands folded on his desk. Her glare would shell the pea green air. Julie Robideau knew the answer. But Miss Sneath wanted William to answer the question. “What do you do when I ask you a question?” The children were silent. William, she said. William shrugged his shoulders, disappearing into himself. Julie raised her hand, but Miss Sneath ignored her. “Why do you have so much trouble answering my questions?” He wouldn’t speak because the boys’ matron made him eat soap last night for speaking Kiowa. Julie Robideau raised her hand. “We prepare the soil How do we end up with beautiful plants like the sunflowers you see at the edge of the garden?” Socratic method, she calls it. William raised his hand, I held my breath. “The seeds float on the breath of the wind,” he said. We all tried not to grin. Class dismissed. Except William. Julie followed me down the hall. She plans to go to Haskell up in Lawrence next fall. Sharp snap of a whip followed by another, and another.

Miss Sneath took us outside to finish the seed lesson. The boys from the Caddo and Wichita villages were lined up for a turn in the barber’s chair. I seen them as we walked the children. Saw. I saw one long braid snipped off and tossed into a growing mound of dark hair. Their buckskin and medicine bags mounted up in another pile. Next they

will dress in the wool uniforms and lace up shoes of civilized people. I never seen such shoes. Saw.

Walked to the creek before returning for supper to gather wildflowers and saw the tops of the teepees where families have camped to be near their children. Heavy smoke hangs in the air and had settled over everything.

We passed some Indian men eating crackers in the road on our way back to the school. Two cavalry men offered to share their meal with Julie Robideau and me, they sat in the shade by the creek drinking from their canteens. They are preparing the strip for next month's land run.

Abraham wanted to ask to see their rifles. When I complained about the smoke they said it was orders to burn the tall grass to prevent thieving homesteaders from hiding. I doubted they would care to learn of a small Indian girl suffering coughing fits from the smoke. The larger of the two men would not take his eyes off Julie. The wooly sun through my starched clothes has made my skin prick, I am developing heat rash and wish so much that J____R____ would turn up.

August 15.

Today I went to town on errands and what began as a pleasant trip ended up almost the worst day of my life, worse than that _____ showing up and saying she was Papa's first wife. It was as if the devil planned the day. James Wheeler drove me the six miles along the Walnut River into Arkansas City to pick up supplies. That's the good part. Asked him about his family—a wife who was Osage and five children—

Kaw and Osage. The boarding school does not admit Kaws, they live too close which doesn't bother James since he has seen the way they treat the children first hand. He and his family live on their ranch in Kaw County and are prosperous by Indian standards. His wife and kids work their dairy and he is paid a fair wage as a hand at the school when he isn't working his wheat. John says he is a good hand. James told me a strange thing that makes me wonder if we aren't more alike than different except our stories have changed over the centuries by the telling. He said the first Kaw in these parts had tails that the spirit cut off and made into women. If I had the choice I'd rather be made of a man's rib than his tail, although, forgive me, God, my sensibilities object to both. It is more likely that man came out of woman with their business inside out. And because of that they were born with fear and that is where the fighting began. My Lord. Crowds of homesteaders and soldiers kicking clouds of dust. I doubt the streets of Arkansas City have ever been so thick with dust, thick as blood, and people trying to clear their minds with whiskey and the like. Used mama's kerchief and glad for her knife I store in my pocket. A young mother wandered the street with a babe. The water seller would not give her nor her baby water even parched like that. James filled her canteen and the water seller threw him the evil eye. "That baby ain't goin to make it another sunset," says the evil eye. It sure looked in poor shape. I offered to bring her and the child back, but she worried she would lose her chance in the Run. I told her the Cavalry plans to use the school as a starting line. Mary Lee Ash is her name. James helped her into the wagon and we drove to the stable for shade.

People camped on all sides. Soldiers in tents, men standing in hot sun in long lines to sign up for the Run. Two dollars and fifty cents an acre and you have two years to prove up a half section. James being Indian cannot enter. Sent a telegram to Boston for Jennie Edmonds. The Western Union was so backed up I had to wait a hour. Near tore my hair out. A commotion at the bar across the street. A crowd of men, bad sign. The evil eye looked at me nasty, then talked to the sheriff and pointed to James who had driven up in front of the Western Union to wait on me. Two deputies climbed into the wagon but we had a witness, Mary Lee. God's reward for our good will, I thought. But God could not keep up with those angry men and they did not want to hear a word from a desperate woman with a sick babe. They took James in. Going to turn my clothes inside out and spit on them to turn my luck.

August 16.

We helped Mary Lee bury her infant in the cemetery next to the Indian children. She remains determined to enter the Run. James Wheeler's wife came up to the school in a panic. She pleaded with the S___ to write a letter in his behalf to the Kaw County Sheriff. Two Arapaho boys, night sentries, ran away with two Pawnee girls. They had been planning their escape. The girls snuck food out of the cafeteria in their bloomers. They chose a clear sky and full moon. They were caught on the prairie. The S___ told them they could come back with him and face their lashings or stay out there and find their way back. Either way, if they did not return, they would be hunted down. They chose to stay.

The S__ wasn't about to make it easy. He ordered the four of them to strip down to nothing and pile their clothes in the wagon. He gave each a blanket and left. They have not shown up and I would not expect them to. S__ told the children about the failed escape at dinner. He had a feast of all the sad faces.

August 17.

The Sheriff came out to ask about James Wheeler and question all of us, especially Mary Lee Ash. But she has vanished overnight dashing my hope for James' release. I suspect someone has paid her not to testify in his behalf. Jennie Edmonds received a telegram that her family disowned her. Their reason for disinheriting her is her "willful desire" to pursue this life of poverty teaching savages in the middle of the nowhere. She refused to say blessing again over the poor food. I saw her smiling at John Rain when he came in for coffee this evening. I asked her about that, she said a woman can be unfaithful to a man but she should never cross her women friends since when the going gets bad the men will only worsen it. I am in charge of the school play for fall. "The Indian Princess" starring Julie Robideau as Pocahontas.

August 18.

I saw John Rain. He will be going out to Osage to visit his family. He will be gone two weeks. I will see him in my dreams. He asked me if I would like a ride out to the prairie. I cast rules to the wind. I am determined to live as I see fit when the chance presents itself. And

there is nothing wrong with feeling like this, although Mama would surely tell me otherwise. Two people on horseback seal their love forever. I counted the seeds in my wild grapes down by the creek. 10 for J.

still August 18

A halo circled the moon, rain by tomorrow. I told John but he seemed to care less about traveling in bad weather. I pressed into his back for good reason besides the best reason for holding him fast or falling off the rump. I have inhaled the smell of him forever, or at least until he returns. He leaves tomorrow. I cannot bear the feeling.

August 19.

William spotted me a dead squirrel in the yard. He saw a light rising from it and thinks it's a spirit. He spoke up to Miss Sneath and I feared for his life: "You know so much, I want you to explain what a spirit is," he said. Miss Sneath must have used up her spinster rage with whipping him. She explained calmly it was merely light rising from decayed matter. There are no such things as spirits. Spirits are figments of the imagination, she said. She instructed William not to speak of nature that way again.

August 20.

William did not come to class. I fear he has run away. The two Arapaho boys and the Pawnee girls were returned for bounty. The boys are spending time below and the girls are confined to their rooms and the

field. They take their meals at their bed. More soldiers. We are not to speak to them. Some want to play with the children on the grass. Others sit in the trees by the creek where they share their drink with the Indians passing by. The S___ is running around trying to control the chaos with no effect that I can see. Something is wrong with Julie Robideaux. She will not talk to me and only eats strawberries from the wild.

August 21.

William is still truant. I asked Abraham, but he did not know. If he has run away, they will post a bounty and he likely will be caught and put in that horrid cell where they are punishing the Arapaho boys. Or worse. The school's print shop already made up the warrant and sent the older boys out to post it. Five dollar bounty. I drove out with Miss Edith and some of the girls to collect more wild grapes from the vine. Miss Edith repeated there were no such thing as spirits, like she was soothing her bad conscience for dashing William's curiosity. I think of how Joseph dreamt of the sun and moon and eleven constellations, prophesied famine and wonder why if he could tell the future there can't be spirits. She slapped the horses' rumps and yelled "Haw" with such fever I believed our conversation on the subject was finished.

I am hearing sounds outside my window again. A scratching tree which seems to be alive, it spooks me. There is something out there, though, on the other side of the pond beneath the willow. I seen it moving and am going to excuse myself from you, diary, to look harder.

August 22.

It was William! I swear to holy Jesus it was William looking up at me. I called out from my window. I called for him to stay until I come down. I ran outside, but he had gone. I ran over to the boys' dormitory and knocked on the matron's door. Mr. C answered. I told him just what I saw. William standing under that tree looking up at me. Mr. C. looked at me like I had lost my mind. It was impossible, he said. They found him already dead. They found him by the creek less than an hour ago. He saw William himself. They believe alcohol poisoning is to blame. The soldiers gave it to him. William is dead! My poor beautiful William. Dead. Then what did I see standing beneath the willow tree, sad and beautiful, looking up to me.

"His spirit," whispered Charlotte. "She saw his spirit."

Aug.23.

They say William has gone to the happy hunting ground. He lay on the table in the infirmary. Abraham is lost without him. They have sent someone to tell his family and are preparing to bury him. The tragedy has worsened Julie. She walks like a phantom, barefoot, as if sleep

walking. She keeps looking in the distance as if some far off thing is calling her and she seems cut off from the here and now. Florence saw her in that state, too. She wrapped a blanket round her and spoke Indian to her. A cloud has descended upon her. I know something bad has happened. She refuses the doctor. It took both of us to guide her up the stairs to the bed. Her skin is blotchy and her lids heavy as a kettle's. Florence told me not to stare at her. I smoothed the stray hairs and wiped her forehead with a cool rag.

August 24.

William is dead. Julie sick. I wish John Rain were here. Violet Johnson our cook knows how I miss him. She seen how I am when he comes to the kitchen for coffee. She made something for Julie out of Star of Bethlehem. She told me she could make a love potion for me. John Rain is married, she said. Married. I can barely put my pen to it. Two boys and a wife back at the agency. Events turned quick as a jackrabbit out here. My tears dampen the page.

Charlotte stretched her sleepy arm out and ran her fingertips along the warped page where Adelia's tears had dried a century ago. "I feel them," she said, and sighed. "Poor Julie."

I pet my daughter's head, grateful she was near, wondering how to draw out her innermost thoughts.

"Go on Mama," she said. "Read some more ..."

... August 25.

We buried William among the others. The children have been crying all day. The wind came up as if a warning and swept through the graveyard. I hear the Indians drumming and singing from their teepees. I expect they'll stop when the S__ sends someone out. Papa and Robert came by the school on their way to Arkansas City. Papa was shocked at my paleness and how thin I have become. I told him it was temporary. He has to fill out papers for the land run less than three weeks away and then off to the Outlet to check out a favorite spot. They know their way around better than the soldiers. I could not bring myself to ask about the cursed woman. But I could see clear enough Mama is not mending his buttons no more. He tried to persuade me to come home. But Julie needs me. Abraham has blackened his face and Little Dolores Perkins Talking Leaf is dying from sadness. I wait in despair for John to tell me his side of things.

August 26.

The smoke has made the children sick. Six million acres of tall grass up in smoke. The air is suffocating, our lungs smolder. Cinders drop like snow everywhere. Streaks on my dresses. I put my palms out and gather the ashes and wipe them on my forehead and cheeks to mourn William. The buildings have coats of brittle ash, black dust sneaks into every crack. On Blue Monday the wash water turns black. I hear Dolores. She is so bad she hardly cries any more, just whimpers like a pup and we can't get her to eat. I pray our famous guest can help her. Chief Joseph of the nearby Nez Perce reservation. He plans to attend the play. Julie is still not up to her role. She is not up to anything. Her only expression is the pucker on her face when she drinks Violet's recipe of Star of Bethlehem and chaparral for anxiety. Every time I pass a soldier I look straight into his eyes to see if he capable of committing such a deed. I suspect each one of them. The S__ has placed the blame on Julie for leaving the building when she should have remained inside. Jennie Edmonds thinks it is him. The S___! He makes all the girl's shudder as if some giant shadow has come into the room and hovers too close to their shoulders. Jennie filed a report. She has been reassigned to the federal school in Keams Canyon the edge of the world. Like she said, men make things worse every chance they get.

Harriet was in the kitchen rubbing flour on her rolling pin, making dough for a strawberry rhubarb pie. I poured myself a cup of coffee and perused the front section of their morning newspaper. Harriet asked me to pass her a dishtowel and then she asked me how I liked my crust, thick or thin, and if I liked the edges uniform or artistic. She asked me a list of questions until she finally felt we'd spent enough time talking about nothing so she could start in with the harder stuff.

"What are you sighing about this early in the morning, Molly?" she asked, pressing the rolling pin into the center of the ball of pie dough, then shoving back a stray gray hair with her forearm.

"People," I said. "We just don't seem to have evolved."

"What are you talkin about, now?"

"Listen to this. This morning's letter to the editor: 'I am so sick and tired of all this whining by the local Indian population. If it is not one thing it is another, and now their complaints are centering on gambling of all things. Haven't we given them enough breaks? Who else can rake in money just sitting around and watching the grass grow? Or should I say 'weeds'? Who else can make a business of bingo? Tax free cigarettes, mineral rights, and scholarships to the most expensive colleges in the country when my own kids have to take out loans. I suggest they quit their whining while they're ahead. Leman Sheets, Tonkawa.'"

"Don't go on reading that paper if you're going to take it so serious. All them murderers and rapists and thieves. That's all them reporters care about." She turned the pie dough and laid it out on the breadboard.

I reminded her that I was one of "them reporters," but that didn't stop her from verbalizing her train of thought.

"If I need to know somethin', your uncle'll tell me. Somethings he don't. Now how are those darling children of yours this morning?"

"Charlotte had trouble sleeping. Something's bothering her. It's her age."

"Feisty, like your mother."

"Harriet. Where is Elman?"

"Out with the horses. One of the mares just foaled. Why do you ask, honey? Is there something I can tell you?"

"The walnut grove. I'm wondering if he or Janine had something to do with taking one out."

She shook her head "Them trees is so old they've probably started dying anyways. Cut them now and earn a profit for the timber instead of waiting until the wood rots."

"Why didn't he consult me?" I asked.

"We been making the decisions on that land for thirty years," she said, rolling out the dough and looking at me at the same time. "While your daddy was out there in California raising you."

"Someone bulldozed two trees and worked on a third."

"Your Uncle Elman isn't going to like that," she said, shaking her head. "Not a bit." I couldn't imagine that Harriet wouldn't know whether Elman had taken it upon himself to carry through on our discussion. They two of them seemed like the sort of couple who knew each other's business. I was heading for the coffee pot to pour another cup when Elman walked in.

"What's this I hear about me not liking something?" he said.

"Molly went in and evicted Janine," said Harriet. "She's saying someone cut down one of those old walnut. I wasn't you, Elman. Was it?"

He stared at his wife. "Those trees are gonna die someday anyway," then he turned to me and said, "This way you can plant it."

"Did you tell someone to cut them? Without telling me?"

He stared at me, lips pushed down at the corners. He tipped his hat, waiting for me to go on.

"A farm needs some shade, some kind of wind break," I said. "You said so yourself, Elman."

He stuck a toothpick in his mouth and hitched his fingers into his belt loops, shifted to one hip. "You got a point there, missy. I'll grant you that. Them's old trees, though. Could pitch a coupla extra dollars."

I didn't swallow that. Elman didn't care as much about a few more dollars as he did exerting his authority. Knowing someone was about to encroach on his domain after decades of an unofficial hands-off policy must have stirred him up. He couldn't resist the temptation to exercise control.

"That's good dear," Harriet said, trying to assuage conflict as she laid the dough into the bottom of the pyrex dish. "Maybe you can move into that old farm house and we can see more of you."

I picked the toasted white bread from out of the toaster and slathered Alcoa margarine over it.

"Thank you, dear," she said, scraping the fruit from a pyrex bowl into the pie dish and watching me. "By the way, a young man called for you. Didn't leave a name. Sounded like that same fellow as last time. Said he was at a pay phone and he'd call another time."

I withdrew the toast from my mouth in mid-bite. "Did he say when?"

"No dear."

Charlotte remained subdued most of the morning and didn't mouth off until I unveiled my plans to tour the farm. When she told Harriet that she didn't care for the tuna fish sandwiches she was packing for our lunch, Elman expressed the same disappointment as he did at the airport when he saw me for the first time.

"You sure they're all related?" he asked.

"I think we should know," said Charlotte.

They were an assortment—Charlotte, her red hair now black with blue streaks. Her smile and the dimple on her chin resembled Adelia's (which even Harriet commented upon), Darwin with his straight black hair, olive skinned. And then the twins who could easily be poster kids for a Smorgasbord. Henry stood in the middle of

the kitchen wearing Elman's white cowboy hat and boots, holding on two a pad of paper with pictures of people he had drawn.

"Who's that you've drawn, Henry?" asked Harriet.

"My mother," he said, smiling.

"Oh, I see she's wearing high heels." Harriet pointed to the red shoes he'd drawn.

"You could be an artist when you grow up."

But Elman seemed to have other plans for Henry's future.

"He's going to be a geologist," Elman said. "Go to work for one of the big guys. You don't have to talk much being out there on the land and all. He's a bright kid. I can see that. He just don't talk much."

"Mommy, mommy," said Rose. "Don't forget to athsk." Rose had developed a morbid interest in Adelia's burial site. Harriet ran her hands along the sides of Rose's head smoothing the stray curls away from her face.

"So, kids, are you lookin' forward to seein' your granpa's farm?" she said.

"Oh my gawd," said Charlotte. "It's a conspiracy."

"I like Kansas. I like Oklahoma, too," said Rose.

"How do you know? You never lived here before," said Darwin.

"I saw it."

"Stop saying that."

"Charlotte," said Harriet. "How about you?"

"You mean how does it feel to visit a place my relatives swindled from the Indians? It makes me want to pierce my tongue."

Harriet put her hands to her mouth.

“Wow,” said Darwin. “That’s bad.”

“What did you say?” said Elman, who showed no expression on his face.

“Wow,” repeated Darwin.

“I thought you said ‘ow’ for a second there and I was ready to go get my iodine.”

I ordered Charlotte to her room. “Now.”

“I don’t have a room,” she said.

While Harriet assigned the children various chores before we headed out to the farm, Elman asked me to come out to the patio and try his special lemonade, made with real lemons, lots of sugar and a touch of Tabasco.

Between sips, he asked me what my intentions were regarding the farm. I didn’t have an answer yet, but because I was angry about his potential involvement with the grove and I wanted to push his buttons since he was having so much fun pushing mine, I told him I was considering giving it back to the Osage Nation.

Elman pushed away his lemonade and leaned back in his chair. He clasped his hands behind his neck and secured my attention by looking straight into my eyes.

“Now, why would you want to do that?” he said. “They wound up getting a good deal out of it. Managed to keep their land, but kind of blew it. You know what they say. Give ‘em five ponies, they buy five Cadillacs. They had that transit fee. Cattle moving up from Texas had to pay a grazing fee. That Johnson grass was good eating. Best pasture in the country.” Elman turned his head and gazed over the picket fence toward the horse pasture. “Now why would any right minded person what to do a fool

thing like that. Giving back something you don't have to and worked hard to keep all these years."

He leveled his chair and poked his first finger at one of the fast melting ice cubes.

I couldn't articulate an answer, but decided that if a person keeps doing things that irritate Elman, she's pretty much on the right track. The Osage striking oil a half century after the government forcibly relocated them had nothing to do with deeding it back today. It would be a small act of reparation. The least a person could do to atone for the wrongs of the past. The tribe's subsequent fortune in Oklahoma after they were forced to move from Kansas did not erase the immorality of the original act. A greater reparation was needed than one measly quarter section of cultivated prairie land could provide. And Elman conveniently forgot to consider how all kinds of white people exploited the Osage fortune for their own good.

"I don't understand why you have to cast your great grandpa in a bad light," said Elman. "He was a sharp man, merely capitalized on a law already in place. Everybody back then did. He just beat those damn politicians and bankers and middlemen to the punch."

"Maybe this is an opportunity to set an example to my children," I said. "Kids have an unspoiled sense of fairness, and their undaunted sense of justice isn't compromised by practical considerations or historical complexities."

"Now, don't go using all those big words at me," he said. "It's a fool underneath."

I told Elman, "It has to stop somewhere, and I think my great-grandpa knew that spot on the family roots would keep rotting away until someone cleaned it out."

“You callin us rotten? By Jezus, little lady ... ”

“I’m not calling anyone ‘rotten’ ... ”

“I think you’ve overstepped the line, here. You know what we call your type in these parts? Damn Indian Giver.”

“Someone who gives something away and wants it back,” I said.

“Someone who’s given something and then pisses it away,” he said. “And don’t you be sighing like that. You got nothing to sigh about.”

“It was just an idea, Elman,” I said. “Kind of like cutting the walnut grove.”

Elman stood up and pushed back his chair, picked up his white cowboy hat with the thin brown stain around the crown, and pointed it at me.

“That was a good idea,” he said. “But that don’t mean I acted on it, which I did not.” He jiggled his hat snug on his head, then walked across the lawn toward the back gate, leaving his lemonade glass for Harriet or me to take inside.

Halfway across the lawn, he turned and announced, “I’m going now. Your aunt needs me to pick up a few things at the store. Don’t you neglect bringin those young uns by for supper, anyway.” He took off his hat and slapped it on his thigh, reformed the crown and set it back on his head. “I got to show that oldest boy of yourn how to drive a tractor now that the Woman-with-the-Attitude is moving outta there. Darwin, ain’t that your boy’s name?” He retraced two steps toward me. “Now why’d you go and name a kid that, anyways? You some kind of devil-worshipper?”

“We like the name. It was different and stood for something.”

“A name like that makes a kid stick out. Makes you wonder about his parents.”

As far as I was concerned, Elman could wonder about my religious leanings all he wanted.

“We used to call him Scooter,” I said.

“Scooter.”

“Ever since he turned seven months old and was learning to crawl. He invented a way of crawling across the floor on his stomach by pushing with his right foot and keeping his left leg in the air like a rudder. It was the funniest thing we ever saw. Mom thought he had a problem, but it was just his way. So we made a joke of it.”

“We?”

“My first husband, Darwin’s father.”

Elman came another step forward “What happened to him?”

“He hung himself.”

He rubbed his chin. I wondered how he fit that into his idea of things—Those damn California men don’t know how to handle their heroin.

“Right in front of the twins,” I continued. “They were three at the time. They saw him do it. Henry, my youngest boy, hasn’t spoken since.

Elman shook his head and clucked. “Damn shame.” He took off his hat and pointed it at me. “I still want that boy to learn how to drive a tractor. If you’re gonna live here, you got to learn how to be here. That okay by you or are you gonna give him over to them Indians too?”

I guess it was Elman’s way of telling me he was glad we were staying.

It was Darwin who convinced Elman to lend us his truck. Even so, Henry didn't want to go to the farm with us. He stood there holding Elman's hand and shaking his head slowly.

"He wants me to take him fishin for crappy," said Elman. "If that's okay with his mama."

"Sorry, Elman," I said. "I want all of them to see the farm. Family history."

Henry took his hand out of Elman's and socked him on the leg.

"Hey there buckaroo, take it easy on this old cowboy," said Elman.

I adjusted the seat forward so that Henry could ride behind it. Darwin rode shotgun and Charlotte sat next to me holding Rose. They all waved out the window until we got to the end of the dirt drive and headed north. I took a different road to show them more of the countryside. Rose peered intently out the windshield as the river widened into a lake. It was another safe moment driving with my kids in this warm, open countryside.

Rose bounced on Charlotte. "Let's go see her."

"What are you talking about?" said Darwin.

"Elithabeth."

"Rose, honey, Aunt Adelia is dead."

Rose pointed ahead. "She'th buried over there."

"That's a lake," said Darwin.

"A reservoir," said Charlotte.

"Rose," I said. "No one knows where Adelia is buried."

"She'th back there," said Rose. "In the middle of the lake."

That's when I put on brakes and pulled over to the side of the road.

"Oh my gawd," said Charlotte. "You're both losing it."

Darwin looked at me sideways, lifting his eyebrows like he does when, in his opinion, someone is on to something.

"Well," he said. "Aren't you going to check it out?"

"How could someone be buried in the middle of the lake?" said Charlotte.

"It's not a lake," said Darwin. "It's a reservoir."

Charlotte looked blank. Darwin turned to face her. "You have a river in the middle of a valley, with river banks and grass and dirt for miles on either side. Remember, we just saw that sign that said Entering Osage Reservation."

"So what?"

"They flooded the valley for a reservoir. All this water didn't used to be here."

"She'th buried under the tree," said Rose.

"There's no tree out there, Rosie," said Charlotte. "There's nothing out there."

"There's one in the middle of the lake," Rose said. "By the river. A pecan tree."

Herefords grazed at the edge of the fence, knee high in grass, poking their heads under the lowest string of barbed wire, stretching for the weeds at the edge of pavement.

I scanned the lake. Rose sounded far too sure of herself.

"I'm freaked," said Darwin. He shivered involuntarily. "Start driving."

I continued along the lake until we reached a fork in the road and veered away from shore. Within another mile, we merged onto a wider, better-maintained road and soon we were at the entrance to the highway that traveled north to my father's farm.

This would be my children's first time seeing the farm where their grandfather had been born and raised. We would pass the cemetery where their great grandparents were buried, then the walnut grove where their grandfather used to play. The farmhouse would rise from the wheat, and it would look more weathered and too small to shelter two wives and all of those kids. I would point out the window where their greatest aunt Adelia put her future husband's name on a star. And then the rooster and chickens.

Janine's truck was parked ahead on the side of the road fifty yards from the walnut grove. The void where one tree had been taken out appeared to have enlarged.

"What's wrong?" said Darwin.

I parked on the shoulder by a section of old fence.

"I'm not sure," I said, "I'm going to park here and see what's up with that truck. I think I know who it belongs to. Then we'll walk through the field to the house and have lunch at the river."

"Great," Charlotte sneared.

I opened my door, put Charlotte in charge of the twins and Darwin in charge of bringing the lunch Harriet had made. The unmistakable sound of a chain saw filled the air. I told the kids to stay put and started to run. When I reached the walnut grove, two trees on the outside edge facing the farm had already been cut. The timber from the first downed walnut had been taken away. I tried to shout Janine's name above the chain saw, but her back was to me and she couldn't hear. When she realized I was there, she straightened and shut off the saw. Her biceps bulged from her rolled up t-shirt sleeves, and the veins in her lower arms popped out of her skin as she swung the saw to the ground. She squinted from the sun and looked more hostile than ever as she took out her

earplugs and stuffed them in her back pocket. I closed my eyes, realizing an eviction notice hadn't settled anything. She cleared her throat and sucked up phlegm, then spit over her shoulder into the dirt. She took her red handkerchief out of her back pocket, blew her nose, and stuffed it back in as I silently planned to call the sheriff and have her forcibly removed.

I took a deep breath. "Leave these trees alone."

"You think you could've called first," she said, slapping her cap back on her head. "What're you do here anyway. You moving here?" She put down the chain saw and took a step toward me.

"You've been evicted," I said. I looked at the scarred tree she'd been trying to take down and the other two that she'd already cut and felt sick. She walked up to me and put a hand on each of my shoulders, gave me a hard shake, then stopped as if she had second thoughts. She looked at her fingernails and began to pick the thick line of dirt that had lodged inside of them.

"You need to leave," I said. "And you're going to have to pay for the trees."

She walked deeper into the shade of the canopy to where she had stored a cooler and bent down, thrusting her hand into ice and pulling out a Pepsi. She flicked off several chips of ice and tapped the top as if it were a cold beer, then pulled back the zip top, took a long swig and threw the remains—container and all—at me just as the children appeared. The can hit me square on my collarbone, startling me and leaving Pepsi splattered over my shirt and face. Charlotte screamed, then rushed past me and started to attack Janine, flailing her arms and trying to claw her face. Darwin and I pulled her away.

“You bitch,” Charlotte shouted.

Janine raised her foot and was about to kick Charlotte with her heavy boot, but Darwin managed to grab hold of the leg. He lost his balance and fell. Janine retreated to pick up her chain saw and for a second I thought she was going to attack us.

“I’m calling the sheriff,” I said.

“You do that,” she said.

She swung the saw onto her shoulder and carried the small red cooler with her free hand. “You just do that,” she repeated, “and see what happens.” I was relieved to watch the back of her stride, long strides, toward her truck. Henry used all of his strength to pull Darwin up and I brushed Charlotte’s blue streaks out of her eyes. Her face was red and she was breathing hard.

“C’mon,” I said. “Let’s take a walk and cool down. I don’t think she’ll bother us.”

“What if she has a gun in the car,” asked Darwin.

“She doesn’t have a gun,” I lied. “She’s breaking the law being here, and she knows it. She won’t bother us.”

Rose wanted to go back to Elman and Harriet’s.

“If we leave now, she will have won,” Charlotte said.

The five of us walked briskly across the field to the dirt trail that dropped down to the riverbank, keeping our eyes peeled for a sign of Janine. When we got to the river, the water near the edge of the sandbar riffled over pebbles producing that pleasant cluck, like horses’ hooves, one tumbling lightly into the other causing an infinitesimal shift in the pattern of water to come. I was beginning to feel a barely perceptible change was

coming over my children and myself. We were enjoying ourselves. Rose sat on the bank beside Henry, who was checking his new Crayola box that Harriet had given him. Charlotte had waded across the river in her shoes and pants and stood with her hands on her hips watching Darwin. Darwin had discovered the hole in the bank behind the cottonwood roots where I'd seen those embedded flashes of white the last time I'd been here.

I walked to the edge of the bank just as he pulled out a piece of jawbone with several large teeth. With renewed interest Darwin buried his head further into the recesses of the root hollow. His broad shoulders were shaking from digging. Backing out, he was holding a white skull the size of a large anvil.

He held out the skull, his fingers hooked through the eye sockets. "Look at this." The twins gathered close to the edge above him. "Bring that ugly thing over here," Charlotte demanded. Darwin waded across the river holding the skull above his head. He placed it at her feet.

"I want to hold it," said Rose.

Darwin returned and lifted his little sister onto his shoulders and carried her across. I carried Henry, clinging to me and holding his legs out stiffly on either side of my hips to avoid touching the water. We huddled around the skull and decided it was a cow's head, about twenty inches long with one remaining horn. Its bone had been bleached white and two large teeth on either side served as its pedestal. Henry touched tip of the creature's long upper jaw, making the skull rock. Charlotte picked it up and held it against her face as a mask.

"Moo," she said.

Darwin laughed.

“How about lunch?” I asked.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Charlotte. “That bitch spoiled my appetite for the next month.”

“It’s lunchtime. You need to eat.”

“I want to explore the barn,” said Darwin.

Holding the skull, Darwin led the way back across the river. I picked up Henry and prepared to wade. Charlotte, who clung to me with one hand while holding Rose in her other arm, followed me into the river. Halfway across the river, Charlotte slipped on the rock bottom and would’ve plunged into the river if she hadn’t grabbed my arm and recovered her balance, nearly knocking Henry and me over. We climbed the bank and emerged at a spot where the wheat field grew to the edge of the small cliff. From there, we saw Janine careen out of the yard in her pickup.

“Now what are we going to do?” said Charlotte.

“Go inside,” I said. “I want to see if she’s moved her things.”

I led children up the front porch, down the hallway and into the kitchen. All of the beds from the upstairs were gone, along with most of the furniture. She’d left a lumpy sofa in the livingroom, along with the red kitchen table and matching chairs. Newspapers were scattered on the floors along with empty cardboard boxes. When I suggested that we spend the night, Charlotte objected until I volunteered to take the floor with the kids and give her the couch. I promised to drive into town for marshmallows and Hershey bars and tell ghosts stories when we went to bed. Our own sleepover, I said with as much cheer as I could muster. Actually, the idea sounded like a family

adventure to me and for the sake of unity we needed to invent some of those, but mostly, I wanted to make sure Janine didn't return.

Henry decided to set up his Crayola box on the kitchen table. He checked the tips and began scribbling with black crayon on a piece of newspaper. He held it up to the light.

"This feels spooky," said Charlotte. "What if she comes back"?

"I'll call the sheriff," I said. "She was supposed to be out of here by now."

"Well she obviously isn't," said Charlotte.

"Obviously," said Darwin.

Henry was oblivious, content to draw. With a quarter I'd given him, he began to rub off the black waxy surface in diagonal streaks, creating a yellow moonbeam effect. He removed more black from the center of the page until he'd exposed five obelisk figures in a yellow bowl on top of a blue tabletop.

"The lake," squealed Rose. She pointed at the banana—a boat—and named each of the five figures after us.

Henry lifted the paper and shook the black wax shavings onto the floor.

Rose pointed to a line of brown that divided the paper vertically.

"Her grave," she said.

Charlotte walked into the livingroom.

"I'd like to see that place, Rose." I put my hand on her head.

"We were there already," she said.

Charlotte shouted from the livingroom, "This place smells."

Rose focused on Henry's drawing. He was missing one person, she said. My eyes fixed on Darwin's mouth, which looked oddly puffed and swollen.

"What happened to your lip?"

"Nothing."

He reminded me of Buster. "Do you have chewing tobacco in your mouth?" I didn't wait for an answer. "Go outside and spit that out. Then rinse your teeth. That stuff will give you cancer."

He turned and walked out of the kitchen, returning quickly. "Where's the bathroom?"

"On the back porch," I pointed out the kitchen door. "You walked right by it. Or there's one upstairs."

I stared at the palm-sized bulge in Darwin's back jean pocket and ordered him to come back. I held out my hand. "Give it over."

He pulled out a disc-shaped container the same size as a tobacco tin, and tossed the little round tub behind his back, caught it in his other hand and flipped back the lid, sending it spiraling to the floor.

"Want some," he said, offering me a coiled, pink ribbon of gum.

We took a vote and decided to spend the night at the farm just in case Janine decided to come back. I don't know what was worse, the cold emptiness of the house or my confused and cluttered mind. The kids slept upstairs in the single beds that Janine had left behind. I slept downstairs on the lumpy couch. We'd left our luggage back at

Harriet and Elman's so we had to sleep in our clothes. I didn't know what to do about this house. I didn't know how to write my story, or for that matter what to do about my job back in California. I couldn't get any of it straight. I dreamt of words. I dreamt of school teachers scolding me. I dreamt of prison guards telling me to go home. Mostly, I didn't dream at all because I couldn't sleep.

The yard looked different after a bad night. The dilapidated gray barn—its framing exposed where a section of roof was missing shingles—had lost its aesthetic appeal. Its quaintness was overwhelmed by the adjacent heap of rubbish and rotting mattresses that were partially covered by a blanket of thick berry bush. In front of the barn, an old sofa sat among miscellaneous varieties of tractor parts. A greenhorn like me couldn't discern whether they were functional, defunct, or artifact. At the moment, I didn't give a shit! Unmatched metal bed frames leaned against one exterior wall beside stacks of wooden pallets and piles of holey black plastic sheeting. I hadn't noticed any of this until now. When I turned to look at the back porch, I zeroed in on the white paint which bubbled up from the wood. In some places, it had cracked and peeled away from the porch siding in long curls, exposing paint layers from earlier decades and patches of original wood that had weathered gray as the barn. Years of dry rot and wet winters. Critters knawed at the bottom edges of the foundation.

This trip to *terra incognita* was unraveling me. The simple garden border of iris on the side of the house had gone to crisp weeds; as swiftly as a hypodermic, the parched image drew my doubts to the surface. I was face to face with yard work—acres and years of it. I grabbed a shovel from the barn, but the ground beneath me was mulish, refusing the blade with my full weight upon it. I got down on my knees and tried pulling the damn weeds. First one, then two broke off above the ground, and when the third clump refused to budge, my determination changed to rage. I threw the shovel against the house, then sidestepped when it ricocheted toward me, handle first. Red Too crowed

from the chicken coop as if he were mocking me. *I'm selling this god damn place*, I crowed back at him, knowing full well that I could not sell this place because a stipulation in the will forbid it.

Nothing seemed to hold for long. Nothing seemed to come when I beckoned. Not weeds. Not men. I was making an earnest attempt to openly explore the farm as a possible home for my children, but my children resisted and this land resisted. I'd tried a more subtle approach with Stevie Ray. No shovels; more like a scratch-off which you buy at Quik Stops. I took a risk and hoped for the best as I rubbed off his cavalier surface and exposed a truer nature. Stevie Ray resisted, too. He didn't want me—not completely. Within the space between our first encounter and his first disappearance, my feelings for him had turned to dashed expectations and he'd become another in a bucket of failed romances.

There was no escape and no excuse. The outskirts of Tornado—a blink on the interstate—cut me off from my daily routines: no soothing cappuccinos from the corner café, no shopping, and no bumming cigarettes to fill the empty spaces, no blaming my jerk of an editor for my lack of accomplishments, and no venting on Mitch for the rest of my misery.

I picked up the shovel and slung it across the yard, then noticed the twins standing behind the screen door like two pant legs. They had never seen their mother throw a shovel in a fit of rage. In all of their six years, they have never watched me pull weeds. They have never seen me garden. And I am not beautiful when I garden. For me, gardening is an act of aggression. Changing the landscape inch by inch with yards and yards—in this case acres and acres—to go, well, my skin does not color up, does not

take on that healthy glow as it does with others. My hair does not fall gently onto my forehead in damp wisps that I push away with the back of my gloved hand. I get pissed when I garden and my twins now know this.

Rose ran into the yard, pulled out the garden hose and told Henry to turn on the faucet. She directed the water onto the unyielding weeds that seemed to have grown a foot since it became my responsibility to control them. I thought of Little Talking Leaf and how she'd been in this very same yard before she'd traveled on to the school and died.

"I love you," I said, slapping my dirty palms on my jeans. Then I tousled their hair.

The generations of farmers before me had put their heads together and decided that the gift of the green thumb stopped here. I was to be the karmic farm joke. My Irish ancestors could turn one hundred and sixty acres of hard sod into a field of grain as a matter of routine, but I became hysterical attempting to pull one patch of weeds. Bushels of repressed fear surfaced along with guilt blazed on the family's DNA. An idea came to me.

"I'm going inside," I said.

I grabbed the bucket of white paint and the drop cloth from the back porch sink. The words in Adelia's diary were living in my head. The ghosts of the children who had visited here that day she and John Rain met still lingered. That was the source of my rage. I imagined them watching thousands of white people rush onto land that used to be theirs. And imagined my greatest uncle's ancestors, who sustained themselves on this spot of land before it was stolen from them. I recalled the injustice to James Wheeler

and Charlotte's insight that the sheriff had raped Mrs. Wheeler the night her husband escaped. The only way to change things was to do something different.

"I'll give it back," I whispered to the wall. I brushed a thick glob of white latex over the yellowed wallpaper.

Downtown Pawhuska resembled a depressed Central California farming town that was too sluggish to have been raped by big box malls and Home Depot. Small, dusty shops lined both sides of the main street and the sidewalks were hot and empty except for a crusty old cowboy who sat on a bench in the shade of a storefront smoking a cigar. I wondered where all the Indians were. I pulled into a parking space beside an old cream-colored, four-door Chrysler, glad for Elman's truck. We might pass for local, I thought, except for Charlotte's black and blue hair.

The old cowpoke smiled at the kids and me as we walked into the five and dime. The linoleum floors squeaked as we walked the aisles crammed with house wares and clothes and the likes of crocheted potholders I hadn't seen since I was a child. Men's thin white cotton handkerchiefs displayed in small rectangular boxes had veneers of dust on their plastic tops. Darwin wanted me to buy him one of the handmade Indian style print shirts with ribbons sewn into the front yoke. Charlotte ogled a pair of blue beaded earrings displayed on the front counter of the store above shelves of moccasins and Native American crafts. Rose picked up one of the Indian dolls and smoothed its hair. It was a boy doll dressed in buckskin leggings. A yellow buckskin sash with a down pointing beaded arrow was tied around his waist. The doll wore a necklace of multi-colored beads and a rawhide headband secured his braids. While Rose rocked the doll to make its eyes open and close, Henry pulled out a six-inch American flag and began waving like a sparkler. I took out my credit card and waited for the elderly woman with

short, curled gray hair to rise from her chair behind the counter where she was crocheting a blanket. She didn't take credit cards, she said apologetically, and was reluctant to take an out-of-state check until I told her that my aunt and uncle lived on a ranch nearby and I owned a farm just north of the Mason-Dixon line. She wanted to know Harriet and Elman's last name so she could look it up in her Osage directory of ranchers. I told her they weren't Osage, but my Great Uncle. Sure enough, he was listed in the directory, and she became strangely guarded when I asked her for directions to the tribal office. It was only at that point that she noticed Charlotte's blue hair, as if she were suddenly suspicious of a white woman from California and her four kids nosing around Osage territory.

The tribal office was a one-story stucco building whose one redeeming feature was the impressive Osage seal that had been mounted above the entrance doors. The receptionist was aloof until I told her my purpose. She closed her manila file folder and pushed it aside, placed her pen in a birch bark cylinder full of more pens. She got up as if her large body ached and led all of us down a hallway to an open doorway.

"Richard, these folks are here to see you about their land," she said, appearing to have better things to do than play hostess to my entourage of kids.

Richard Peters sat behind a solid oak desk. He straightened his turquoise bolo and leaned back in his swivel chair, hands locked behind his head. I pushed up my sleeve, revealing the turquoise bracelet that I had bought after my first date with Stevie Ray, and hoped he would notice. But he was more intent on my troupe of children—Charlotte with her blue hair and matching beaded earrings, Darwin in his ribbon shirt,

Rose rocking her Indian doll, and Henry waving his mini American flag. I stepped toward the desk and stuck out my hand. His palm was rough and his handshake limp. I introduced myself, then my children in order of age— Charlotte, Darwin, Henry, and Rose.

“My mother would like to donate her farm to you,” said Charlotte. “We don’t like it here and she thinks if she gives it back, she’ll stop having such terrible luck.”

“Shut up,” said Darwin.

I cringed, knowing it was my fault that my children weren’t acting right. I looked at the black metal nameplate on his desk. *Richard Peters. Osage Nation Policy Analyst*, deciding whether to scold them and risk turning up the chaos or ignore them.

“It’s fifty miles from Tornado to Pawhuska,” I said.

He nodded his head.

“We have a farm there,” I said.

“*You* have a farm there,” said Charlotte.

“I have family not too far from Tornado,” said Peters. He glanced at Charlotte, then me. “Is what your daughter said true? You want to deed back the land to the our Nation?”

Nation, I thought, *not tribe, you idiot*. “Kids, remember that,” I said. “Nation, not tribe.”

“Oh my god.” Charlotte shook her head and looked at the wall.

“You want to give back the land?” said Peters. “Am I correct?”

“The sooner the better,” said Charlotte, “before she changes her mind and does something insane like move here.” She looked at Richard Peters intently, saying, “She’ll do that, you know.”

Peter lowered his head. I imagined he was already thinking what a screwed up bunch we were. He reached across his desk for a smooth river rock that weighted down a stack of papers. He shifted it to his other hand.

“Charlotte,” I said. “Stop right now. Don’t pull this number on me.”

“Can I go to the bathroom?” she asked.

Richard pointed to the door. “Out the hall and to the left.”

When the sound of her footsteps was no longer audible, Richard Peters gestured to the only other chair in the room.

Please,” he said. “Sit down.”

As soon as I leaned back into the chair, a chocolate brown naughehyde easy chair, my body registered fatigue. Rose climbed into my lap and curled into my chest. Henry sat on one arm and Darwin stood behind us, his chin resting on the top of my head.

Peters leaned across his desk and addressed Rose. “Well, what do the rest of you think about all of this?”

Rose leaned toward Mr. Peters and whispered, “We’re not thuppothed to talk about it.”

He played along. “Why not?”

“It could put a vendetta on uth.”

“She’s weird,” said Darwin.

Peters looked surprised. He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head.

“What about you, Mrs. O’Henry. Why are you here?”

Henry fidgeted with my shirtsleeve while I tried to gather my thoughts. I skipped the battle between me and weeds, the overwhelming sense of responsibility I felt when looking out at a quarter section of standing wheat, the paralysis that overcame me at my attempts to improve the interior of a century-old home that had never been improved save indoor plumbing. I decided not to tell Richard Peters any of this. Instead, I told him how my great grandfather went into Osage territory in Kansas a few weeks before it was legal, before the Osage had fully relocated to Oklahoma. I told him how my great grandfather had ignored the official date that the government set for settlement and how, in spite of that, he’d taken out a claim at the survey office—basically took the land illegally—how he rode into the territory and placed his blaze mark; how this became the family homestead for the following four generations. I told him how he wasn’t a racist, just a dirt-poor opportunist who managed to beat out the city fathers of an already established city who had been planning to make our farm site the site for their new city. I told him how the Indians told the nearby settlers that tornados miraculously never traveled through this piece of land, how my father called it an orographic deflection of the wind and reiterated how, to this day, there had never in recorded history been a tornado sighting on that land, and I didn’t want to hang around and bring one on.

Richard Peters’ nostrils flared as he stifled a yawn. “Excuse me, Mrs. O’Henry,” he said.

I told him to call me Molly.

He stood. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Yes, please. Black with sugar." That's how Stevie Ray drank it the night we got together, and that's how I had been drinking it ever since. Black with sugar. Like Indians drink it. I hoped Peters would pick up on that.

"Do your kids want a soda?"

"I'd like a root beer," said Rose.

Henry shook my arm.

"No," I said. "Thank you. We're going to lunch after this."

Peters filled two brown coffee mugs and handed me one, looking directly into my eyes.

"You're not one of those people who was an Osage in her past life, are you?"

I laughed. "No." I smelled the coffee before I took a sip. It was stale and sweet.

"You want to deed it back?"

"I'm considering it," I said.

He scrutinized my face. Just then Charlotte walked in. I tried to ignore her.

"It's a lot of work," I said. "I don't have any skills."

He looked at the kids. "Why don't you sell it?"

"I can't."

He waited for me to explain.

"I inherited the farm from my father and the will clearly states that I cannot sell it."

"But you can give it away?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

“Is that what you want to do?”

The kids were staring at me.

“For gosh sakes, mama, tell him yes,” said Charlotte.

“I think so,” I said. “Yes.”

“We want to make sure you understand what you are offering. We’d most likely put the property in trust, and the land would be owned in common by the Osage Nation.”

Richard Peters looked at Rose. “You don’t like Kansas, Rose?”

“I like it,” said Rose.

“She likes everything,” said Darwin.

“That’s not why she’s doing it,” said Rose.

Peters leaned over his desk and again. “Why do you think your mother is doing this?”

“We’re from California,” said Rose. “And she can’t take the stretch.”

“California,” said Peters.

“We did live by the beach until she divorced our stepfather,” said Darwin.

“Now we don’t live anywhere.”

“We live with our Grandma,” said Rose.

“We’re basically homeless,” said Charlotte.

“We’re not homeless,” I said.

Peters tapped the head of a pen on his desk. “Don’t you folks need a place of your own?”

“Not here,” said Darwin. “That’s for sure. No surf for one thing.”

That place in my stomach tightened like it does when I'm working too hard to make something fit. It kept tightening until I wasn't breathing. My discomfort became so thick I could see him slice it with his calm, even stare. I was dizzy and broke into a sweat. I felt like I was going to pass out. Peters picked up the rock.

"Hold this," he said.

The rock felt cool in my palm. Its weight grounded me.

"That's from the Illinois River. We use them for sweats," he said. "Have you ever been to a sweat in California?"

"No," I said. "Not in California." I knew he was talking me down. I felt grateful. Then I remembered I'd been to one at the University a long time ago. When my first husband was alive. "I went to one the night before I interviewed Marion Daniels. A little over a month ago. Somewhere outside of Lawrence."

Peters cocked his head. "You know him?"

"I interviewed him."

"You're a journalist?"

"I'm a journalist."

"And you think you can reconcile the past by giving back the land?"

"My part."

"If everyone thought like you ... " He didn't finish his sentence.

"You're laughing at me."

"I'm not laughing at you." He looked at the children. "Your kids are neat. Even the rebellious one."

"Oh who could that be?" said Darwin.

“What does Rose mean *a vendetta*?” he asked.

Rose sat up and started to play with Richard Peters’ nameplate. “She means that we’re not supposed to talk about the river bend or ask about the Osage tornado myth.”

“Who told you so?”

“A man in a library.”

“Was he Indian?”

“I don’t think so. An archivist.”

“How does he know?”

“He said an Osage medicine man told him.”

“What does that mean?”

I ventured an interpretation. “If we try to find out information that doesn’t belong to us, we could wind up severely jinxed.”

“I seriously question that.”

“You think I’m crazy.”

“No. I think you don’t understand. If we think you’re crazy, we won’t take your offer. We need to judge you to be of sound mind before we could accept land. We need to make certain there are no environmental problems that we would have to pay for at a later time.”

“My mother equates Native Americans with burros. My father to his dying day thought it was okay to take the land because Indians were nomads and didn’t use it. My aunt and uncle think Indians are freeloaders.”

Peters tapped his pen.

“Mom,” Darwin said, “I’m hungry. When are we going?”

I continued. "It was a land grab, a swindle, not as bad as most," I said, watching my oldest son amble out of the room.

"Not to justify your relatives, " said Peters, "but the entire western movement was an act of larceny against the Indian, and his stealing the land before the other settlers had a chance to steal it doesn't make an especially strong case against his actions, does it?"

"Well, I can only do my part. Even the local history books criticize my great grandfather. Furthermore, no one in my immediate family has lived on it in twenty years, just a step cousin, and it seems like my karma to give it back."

The telephone rang and he answered it. Peters apparently disconnected from our conversation and appeared oblivious to my presence. He swiveled around, his back to us and stared at the map on the wall. I studied the map. I traced the migrations of the Osage up to their 1869 relocation from Kansas to Oklahoma and their striking oil in the 1920's. I stared at the back of his hair and wondered if he braided it himself or if a woman had. His voice raised, then quieted. When he said goodbye, he swiveled back around, placed the phone back on the receiver, and shook his head.

"Did you catch any of that?" he asked.

"I was trying not to eavesdrop," I lied.

"I just had a conversation with a *very* unstable person."

I wondered if he was implying I was a *slightly* unstable person.

"A white woman who lives in Santa Fe. She just returned from a ceremony performed by someone who claims to be a mixed blood Osage-Cherokee shaman. I know of him. He causes a lot of problems for us. He's popular with certain groups.

He told her that she was living in darkness and she needed to have sex with him to lighten up.”

“Wow,” said Charlotte. She looked over at me, ready to say something that would embarrass me.

“Don’t even,” I said.

Henry stopped fidgeting. I pulled Rose into me and wondered why Darwin hadn’t come back.

“She’s upset,” Peters said. “This *shaman* ... ” (He smeared the word the same way my mother smeared *Kansas*) “ ... goes around charging people to hear his bull crap and he’s not even Indian as he claims. Says he lived on the Cherokee reservation, but anyone who knows anything around here knows the Cherokee don’t have reservations. They own the land fee simple. He’s no shaman. He’s a sham. A *Karmageddon*, if you will.”

“Do you think *I’m* crazy?”

“No. He’s crazy. Worse. He’s a hurting person while claiming to be one of us, which casts us in a bad light. When someone who misrepresents himself as one of us seriously messes with people’s minds, we could face serious legal repercussions.” He studied me and for a second I worried that he would include me in his analysis of white decrepitude. “No, you’re not crazy. Least as far as I can tell. You’re doing a generous thing. We would accept your gesture.”

A shift had taken place. The weight of burden lifted. I was changing my life by letting go. I felt a glimmer of future promise. I wished I had more to give away. Then

reality set in that my aunt and uncle would have a pissy fit and the kids would probably tell them while we were sitting at the table eating Elman's croppie.

"I don't know that anyone has given land that belonged to the Osage back to the Osage. I'm not even sure what kind of paperwork to get you started on. Are the taxes paid up?"

"They're due. I'm going to pay them when I get home."

"Do you have the parcel number with you? I can look it up."

"Yes."

"How many acres are we talking about?"

"A quarter section. One hundred and sixty acres." I dug out the parcel map. I had highlighted the parcel number with a yellow marker and read them off.

He nodded, "Uh hum," and typed the numbers into his computer. "That poor young woman got me going," he said. "Someone ought to teach that New Age fraud a lesson. Before you know it someone's going to report a child molested by this man, believe he was an Osage-Cherokee Medicine Man and blame it on us. Bad for the child, bad for us." He looked me in the eye. "You could write a story about that."

I made a mental note of his suggestion.

"Molly, it shows here that your taxes are paid."

"No," I said. "They're due. I plan to pay them as soon as I can."

Richard Peters turned his computer screen so that I could view the record. In the column beside the farm's parcel number, a zero balance due had been recorded. I was confused. Perhaps my father had set up an automatic transfer to cover the taxes after his

death; I knew it could be Elman, but Elman, he was too miserly to pay taxes on a property he didn't own. And no doubt I would have heard about it.

Richard walked over to the gray metal filing cabinet and opened the top drawer. He pulled out a form and handed it to me. "This will get us going. Just some preliminary information. Fill out the line where it asks the purpose of your visit by writing 'intends to deed land back'."

He held out his hand. I hadn't realized how tall he was and how comfortably round at the midriff. I let Rose off my lap and took his hand. He gave me his card. "I'll give you a call after I make a few inquiries," he said. "At some point, I'll get on up there and take a look at the property."

I took the card.

"You and your children have a safe journey home."

I wondered which home he was referring to.

The kids and I drove up to Elman and Harriet's ranch on the way back to the farm. I planned to return Elman's truck, share late lunch, and drive the kids and me to the farm to spend another night. Right about now, Elman would be lighting the coals.

I hoped the kids would not bring up our visit to the tribal office, but I wondered if Elman had paid the property taxes. He had told me more than once that he didn't "pay for nuthin on that farm, didn't get a dime or give a dime."

We drove the back road again. As we approached the reservoir all five of us kept our eyes open for a tree in the middle of the lake. Rose began to hum "You are my

sunshine.” Then I got an idea. We were, afterall, out in the country without another car in sight. I pulled over to the side of the road and put the truck in idle.

“Darwin,” I said. “You and Henry get out and climb in the back. Sit down and hold on to him. No riding on the side rail.”

They liked that idea. Charlotte set Rose between us and rolled down the window. She stuck her head out and yelled back at the boys. “Bet you can’t spit up wind,” she said.

By the time the ranch was in sight, I was hungry and knew the kids would be famished enough to eat fish without complaining. Elman was over by the tack house holding onto the end of a rope. Before I opened the truck door he yelled, “Molly, git those boys of yourn up here. I need some help.”

Darwin and Henry jumped out of the truck bed and ran toward Elman.

“What the hell is that,” said Charlotte, gawking at the mound that lay on the ground under the shade of an oak.

“That is the grossest thing I have ever seen,” she said, and got out of the truck and walked quickly toward it.

“I got a wild pig tied to the end of this rope and I could use some help.”

The pig’s throat had been slit. By all measure, it was dead. When I got near, I saw the small bullet hole in its head. It was a large sow. Her two back legs had been nailed to either side of a stick. Elman had tied a rope around the stick and looped it over the oak’s lowest limb. The other end of the rope was tied to the rear bumper of my rental car.

Elman told Darwin to get in the car and put it in gear, I worried the pig's weight would rip loose the bumper and I had not bought damage insurance. My son looked to me for approval. I figured what the heck, who was I to stand in the way of his first wenching a dead pig up a tree.

"Ease it forward," shouted Elman.

Darwin jerked the car forward then slammed on the brakes causing the pig's haunches to rise then flop back to the ground. I perused the surroundings and felt comforted that there was nothing he could run into out here but a wooden fence or the side of a barn. Charlotte was wide-eyed and looked as if she were straddling between awe and repulsion.

"Easy I say, easy boy," called Elman. "Put 'er in low." Elman steadied the pig while Darwin inched the car forward in little jerks. As the pig rose upside down into the air until it hung perfectly straight, I wondered if I'd have another bill to pay when the bumper tore loose. When the pig cleared a yard from the ground, Elman dragged a tin washbasin directly under its head to catch the remaining drips of blood. Then he ignited his acetylene torch and began burning the flesh, using a stick to scrape the singed bristles off its sides. I counted twelve teats.

"Stand back, you all," he said. "This smoke is nasty. Worse than fresh skunk."

A pair of tusks curled back from the pig's snout. The slit in her neck ran from ear to ear and looked like a raw, red canyon that dripped its vermilion into a tin catch basin. She's been killed with a .22, Elman would tell us later.

Black soot ran off the carcass, mixed with blood and dirt as Elman hosed her down.

“Darwin, you want a turn burning?”

Darwin shook his head. His olive skin looked pale. He didn't appear to take pleasure in the process. I was glad for that and even though I wanted to physically comfort him, I made myself stay at a distance.

“Darwin, are you okay?” I asked.

He didn't answer.

“Just watch me, then,” said Elman. “You never know when this might come in handy.” He picked up the torch and stick, and singed the pig's rump while talking to the boys.

“This is just about the same for any farm animal,” Elman said.

Suddenly, the sow fell from the rope with a thud. The sooty bucket of blood spilled, staining the dirt crimson.

Elman looked at us and grinned. “I guess I burned the rope,” he said. He picked up the rope, examined the burnt end, threw it up and over the oak limb and tied a new knot around the hanging stick. I could see nails he'd driven through each Achilles to secure the sow's hind legs to the stick.

Darwin got behind the wheel, again, put the truck in low and edged forward much more smoothly this time.

“You almost got it,” a voice shouted. Harriet was standing in the front yard with an armful of laundry, about to hang it on the clothesline that ran along the south side of the doublewide. I understood the timbre in her voice. Like her, I felt elation about the bond taking place between Elman and my oldest son. It was a feeling of its own, free of judgment. It overpowered my silent protests over the slaughtered, twice-hung sow, the

burned rope and the red-stained earth. My values collided and my easiness with violence revealed itself. Elman had nicked my surface, and I'm sure that what lay beneath surprised me more than him.

Elman talked Charlotte into helping him grabbing the end of the rope to keep the pig in the air while Darwin backed under the carcass. Elman lowered the animal onto a tarp that had been laid out in the back of the truck bed. He climbed into the truck and covered the pig with the canvas, got out and shut the tailgate.

"Who wants to come to town with me?" Elman asked. "Got to drop her off at a butcher in town."

All but Rose spoke up. I watched them climb into the truck, head out of the yard and down the dirt lane. Darwin and Charlotte were perched on opposite sides of the truck bed. Henry sat up front with Elman.

"Rose," said Harriet, "you want to help your auntie set the table?" Harriet held out the silverware and handed it to Rose. She put her arm around her and kissed her cheek. Rose turned into Harriet's apron and gave her a hug until Harriet lifted her up and planted another kiss on her cheek. Several forks and spoons clattered to the floor.

"I could use some sweetness like this close by," said Harriet. She smooched Rose's cheek and set her down. "Too bad you Californians are so hard to transplant."

My aunt and uncle were tactful with their disdain for Californians. They said the opposite of what they thought, and they could be surprisingly self-effacing. Elman, for example, explained his unspoken fear of a California exodus by claiming no Californian would ever be satisfied in the Midwest—there wasn't enough to do. Harriet called us

hard to transplant, her euphemism for spoiled. I suspect they were speaking for a general culture of settler offspring that doesn't want the finicky coastal clan and their fancy ideas to fire their way across the Rockies and Californicate the southern plains. They don't want my high-strung, flighty breed to mix with their down-to-earth genes.

The one quality that ran deeper than their midwestern aversion to Californians was their loyalty to family. I can tell you something of the effect of this outpouring of the heart toward a bewildered sojourner like me. It blinds self-righteousness. Elman and Harriet embraced my four children and me. Their love had a domino effect. It toppled my prideful walls: everyone from the gas station attendant to the butcher embraced my kids. That kind of attention is hard to turn down. It softens the cacophony of cultural clash and politics and judgments of ignorance. The attention bestowed by Elman and Harriet evoked deep waves of relief. It threatened to mold the rubble of my shattered life into a whole experience. We needed that now. And maybe, I thought, their prejudice was one neighbor's irritation with another, neither more powerful than its counterpart. Perhaps the Indian people here liked it better that way since they had no obligation to reciprocate except in those personal cases where two people got to know each other based on something shared—despair over the plummeting price of cattle, outrage at the scourge of an exotic weed, offense over the rising price of gas. I doubt it, but I thought it, and I watched that thought with a mix of awe and horror.

The sun was still high and warm over the western horizon by the time we sat down to the picnic bench and began our lunch.

“Watch the bones,” said Harriet.

“We have fish in California,” said Charlotte.

Elman cleared his voice made the announcement that he had a gift for the children. Henry seemed most excited, watching every forkful, every move, and every word that Elman said.

This here's Henry is how Uncle Elman would say it. He's from Texas originally, like I'm from California. He has something up his sleeve. When we took Betty (Charlotte named her Betty just to rub it in) to the butcher he told me how he shot an elk in Indian Country and how that night when he camped out he heard something and rolled over in his bedroll for his shotgun thinking it was a bear stealing his elk and he took a shot and found out it wasn't a bear. It was an Indian woman stealing his deer. Really, it was Uncle Elman robbing our greatest grandpa's story. Mom told us when we were passing the lake straining our eyeballs for that tree Rose talked about. I liked Uncle Elman's story. You just can't believe everything you hear. So at dinner when Uncle Elman told us he had a present I tried to warn Rose and Darwin and Charlie that he might be fibbing by making my eyes wide. Right after that Elman told another whopper about a whippersnapper tornado that cut through the field and carved a path shaped like an arrow. He said if we could find the tip we'd find arrowheads buried there. I tried to warn Darwin since he likes arrowheads and Charlie wouldn't care and Rose could find stuff on her own. But Darwin wouldn't look at me. Mom seemed nervous. She wants everything to go right. She didn't know what Elman's present was. I could tell looking at her face that she wasn't in on Elman's surprise. That's what she said, *I'm not in on his*

plot, when Darwin asked if she knew and at least you can believe her unless there's something bad she don't want us to know. Even then she tries to tell us, like how our real father killed himself. Some mothers would make up a story like he fell down the stairs and broke his neck instead of hung himself by the neck under the stairs where his babies could see. Mom said he was watching us to the end.

The children, Harriet and I followed Elman past the barn to the corral where he fed the horses. He opened the gate and grabbed the green halter and lead rope that was hanging on the post. The kids climbed the rail and sat with their heels hooked onto a lower slat. Elman shooed off a couple of mares before stopping at a brown and white spotted pony. In what seemed like one fluid motion, he put the halter over the pony's neck, slipped it up onto the pony's muzzle, reached over for the strap and buckled it. When he turned the pony and walked it toward us, he looked at the ground and pressed his black cowboy hat onto his head with his free hand.

"Henry," he called. "I want you to git down and come on over here. Just one of you. I don't want to scare the pony. C'mon pardner."

Henry jumped down from the fence and started running toward Elman and the pony.

"Slow down, pardner. Put your hands down so you don't scare him."

Henry put on the brakes, pressed his arms to his side, and walked toward the pony.

"Now you get over here by me and pet him on the neck like this." Elman pet the pony's neck in long smooth strokes. Henry did the same.

"He likes it when you scratch him behind the ear," said Elman. "I know you can't talk, son, but this little pony's going to understand everything you do, if you do the right thing. Now you take the rope and head him slow to the fence."

Elman took Henry's hand and placed it high on the rope under the pony's chin.

"You don't have to lead him so hard. Give him some rope and let him walk beside you."

Henry started walking but the pony wouldn't budge. He backed up and tried again. The pony shook his head and stood still.

"You got to ask him," said Elman. "Nice like."

Henry opened his mouth, and, of course, nothing came out. With his mouth still open, he leaned forward as if he were reaching for words that were out of his reach. Nothing. Then he closed his little mouth and looked over at me. I nodded. He could try again. He opened his mouth. I heard a small click in the back of his throat as he thrust his tongue to the roof of his mouth. That was all. He grimaced from the effort. Tears brimmed in his lower lids. He gave Elman the sorriest, most desperate look. This lesson in horsemanship was breaking my heart. It was bringing up all the pain we had endured before Henry's loss became compatible. My chest ached as I watched him trying to force a sound through those lips. Elman wasn't taking it too well either. His lower lip stuck out and he had to rub his big, rough hand over his mouth to keep his chin from quivering. Henry swallowed and opened his mouth again, staring into the pony's

eyes. I felt Rose and Charlotte pressing on either side of me. “Oh, Mama,” said Charlotte, “I can’t watch. Make him stop.”

Henry took a deep, ragged breath as Elman placed a hand on his shoulder. “I know you can’t speak son, and that’s okay,” said Elman. “Use your body. Look him in the eye and lean back ever so gentle-like, so he finds it easier to give to you than resist.” Elman patted Henry on the head. “Better not to say it out loud, buckaroo. The quieter you are, the better he’ll like you. Use your hand and your mind.” He pulled out his navy blue handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped Henry’s tears, then stuffed it in his back pocket.

“Now, you just watch your old uncle Elman.” He took the lead rope from Henry and stood quiet for a second staring at the dirt, then he pulled up the slack and made a nearly decipherable shift of weight backward. The pony took a step forward. “See what I mean.” He placed the rope back in Henry’s palm and pushed his hand to the knot. “Just the right nudge. That’s all you need.”

Henry faced the pony, then closed his eyes and lowered his head. He leaned back and tugged at the pony’s chin. The pony wouldn’t budge.

“Ease up, little buddy,” said Elman. “Remember how I showed you. It’s in your mind and your body follows. Start again.”

Henry slackened his grip on the rope. The tears had crested his lower lids. They rolled down his face and dropped to the dirt like dark wet snowflakes. He wiped his tears with his sleeve, leaving streaks across his perfect cheeks. On a face that both of us depended upon for making his desires known was an expression of determination unlike any I had ever seen. His little shoulders shook. He straightened, shook his head, and

pressed his lips together to stop himself from crying. Then he shifted his weight as Elman had demonstrated. I heard a quiet moaning, and his body became rigid with concentration. I prepared to step in. It would be better to interfere than to wait until my little boy became so frustrated that he gave up. Elman must have been reading my mind. He glanced sideways at me and lightly shook his head, Elman's horse language for "stay put." Henry stood stock still, his hand on the knot beneath the pony's halter, his arm so straight it made mine ache. He wrinkled his brow. I had never seen such a worried young man. He puckered his lips as if he were kissing the air. Then he leaned back ever so slightly, so nearly imperceptibly that only those who were tuned in to Elman's slowing down of motion could perceive the shift. "Move," Henry pleaded.

Move. That was the first word that Henry had spoken in three years. A beautiful word, etched in our minds like the first commandment. *Move.*

"That's it Henry," he said softly. "Now's he's with you." He took out his blue handkerchief and dabbed his eyes, then blew his nose loudly just as the pony took one step forward.

All Henry did during the entire drive back up to the farm was talk about the pony. Mostly, we listened, afraid we'd start bawling if we opened our mouths. He said more during that half hour ride from Elman and Harriet's ranch in Oklahoma to the Kansas farm than he had said in all of his six years. Even Charlotte was cheerful. She wanted to stop by the feed store before it closed and buy her little brother a book on pony care.

The store was about to close, but the owner stayed open long enough for me to buy a twenty-pound sack of chicken feed and a weedwacker while Henry enchanted the salesclerk with his story of Uncle Elman and the pony.

“You mean old Elman down by the lake?”

“Yep,” said Henry. “He’s my uncle. My very best uncle.”

“Your grand uncle,” Charlotte corrected.

The clerk gave Henry a free bag of horse biscuits. When we got back to the farmhouse, Charlotte fed the chickens without being asked and then complained of feeling ill from the black smoke of sawdust that had blown in her face. She shivered and allowed me to feel her forehead and steer her toward the stairs. There were two messages on the answering machine, which I decided to answer. The first caller was a young man who identified himself as Bob Somers from next farm over. He wanted to return the bailer. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard that last name. Elman had pointed out the Somers’ place the first time he and I drove out here. He’d called the boys *real* farmers: “Now those Somers boys are *real* farmers,” he’d said. I couldn’t help but wonder if young Bob Somers had learned there was a pretty high school girl from California on the premises. This seemed like the kind of place where everyone knew every little change that went on, no matter how inconspicuous it feels to an outsider. Then Richard Peters voice from the Osage Tribal Office informing me that he had discovered a block on the title. He asked me to call him as soon as I returned.

“Mom,” shouted Darwin. He had the weedwacker out of its box and stood in the kitchen holding it, poised to pull the cord and test it right there in the hallway. I put Richard Peters out of my mind and went outside with Darwin to read the directions. The

twins ran down the stairs behind us and out onto the porch carrying blankets. Henry stopped in front of me.

“When can I go see my pony again, Mommy? He needs me.”

Mommy from the mouth of the silent one. My eyes burned. “How do you know he needs you, Henry?”

“He told me. Pony’s have ESP.”

“Who told you?”

“Elman told me. When Mom?”

I looked at Henry’s face. It had been kissed by fortune. Elman turned out to be the inconceivable assigned to enchant the lives of my young ones. Elman worked a miracle on his grand nieces and nephews the magnitude of which I doubted he could work on his own children, not because of a lack of love, but because of an overriding duty to pass on everything he knew and feared.

“Soon,” I said.

Henry jumped the flight of porch stairs and ran toward his twin sister, who had taken the blanket and lined the floor of the fort they had made in a patch of buffalo grass. I felt a clear and sudden change of mind— *Stay*—just as Darwin ran from the road up the dirt driveway with a handful of mail. He stood at the bottom step and handed me a stack of mail.

“There’s a letter for you,” he said. He waited until I had sorted the letter addressed to me from the others that were addressed to Janine Goening and occupant before running back to the mailbox where he’d left the weedwacker. I went inside and began to open it while I played back three phone calls on the answering machine that

Janine had left plugged in. A young man had called to tell Janine she could borrow their bailer. The next message was Janine saying, “Just in case you pick up this message, I will be returning on Friday.” The last was Richard Peters telling me he’d found an impediment on the title to the property and to call him in the morning.

I turned the letter over, wondering who knew I was here. It was a fat, legal sized letter and the return address bore the name of a legal firm. I opened the envelope, took out the bulky white packet and read the top page.

Dear Ms. O’Henry:

Our client has pressed a claim for Adverse Possession against the quarter section of land outlined in the enclosed document. She states she has inhabited the premises for fifteen years, during which time she has worked the agricultural interests, fenced certain areas and paid all property taxes on her own accord for the last eight years. Would you please instruct your attorney to call our office at his earliest convenience?

Sincerely,

Thomas Killady, esq.

The second sheet of paper featured a bold faced title **Claim for Adverse Possession** at the top center. I went to the last page. At the bottom was a signature with Janine Goening typed beneath and dated April 11, 1993—less than a week ago.

I walked down the porch steps toward the field and lay down between my twins on the blanket they had spread out in their small grass fort. Henry handed me his new book and I began to read aloud the things one must do to take care of a pony. We remained on our backs until the fireflies showed up and the whirr of the weedwacker stopped. In silence, we watched the tiny lights dart between the stems of wheat, glowing like fairies in our emerald home. Even the sky looked dimly green.

Charlotte had stretched out on the couch under a thin bedspread while the rest of us lay on mattresses we'd spread over the floor. Janine had the electricity turned off and the water, so that the toilets were beginning to fill up. I had to ask the children to bring a bucket of water from the river each time they needed to flush. Regardless, the moonlight shone sufficiently through the dining room windows so that we could clearly discern each other's forms. Rose got up from the nook of my arm and stood in front of her sister, asking in her sweet, direct way if she would share the couch. Charlotte reached over and, while still prone, lifted her up and set her back down between herself and the sofa back.

"If you look out that dining room window directly below the moon," Charlotte said, "that's where the Indian school is." She looked at me for validation and began to recall what I'd read to her from the diary the other night. "In the old days, when the moon was just a sliver you could see its light across the prairie. Our grandest aunt Adelia worked there by choice because she was in love with a man who also worked there. But the Native children were taken from their families, stolen by the whites, just like the whites stole their land. They were forbidden to speak their own language and got the crap beat out of them if they did."

"How?" said Darwin.

"Beaten. Whipped. Forced to eat soap. Not that lavender scented soap and such, but lye soap. It makes your mouth numb. They were treated like slaves and when they ran away, they were punished with solitary confinement in a small cell under

the school building. One young man named William Lonewolf, he believed in spirits ... ”

As I lay between Henry and Darwin, the void in my spirit was soothed by a flood of warmth as I listened to Charlotte relay Adelia’s story to her brothers and sister. It was a sad story, and one that deserved telling. I felt calm. We were safe together in this room. Charlotte continued to recount the day that William Lonewolf had seen a spirit rising from a dead animal. “He had asked his teacher to explain the phenomenon, and she told him it was just light rising off decayed matter. He asked, ‘teacher you know why seeds travel in the wind and plant themselves and grow into flowers and trees, you know so much, can you tell me what makes a spirit?’ But his teacher scolded him. She told him there were no such things as spirits and forbid him to talk about the subject again. ”

Charlotte sat up and made the sign of the cross. “Father, son, Holy Ghost,” she said.

“After that, William Lone Wolf stopped going to class and everyone thought he’d run away. One night our grandest aunt, who was only two years older than yours truly, saw him standing beneath her window. She ran out of her room and down the stairs and outside to the spot beside the pond where she’d seen him standing beneath the willow tree. When she got there he had vanished.

“She ran to the boys’ dorm and told the matron—an Indian man—that she’d seen William and he hadn’t run away, and not to punish him in that horrid little chamber.” Charlotte watched her siblings’ faces, waiting until she was sure they understood the importance of circumstance and could appreciate its climax.

“The matron looked at her as if she were crazy. He told her, “I’m sorry to tell you Miss O’Henry, but William had been found dead. We are waiting for the coroner before we inform his parents.”

Charlotte paused. She scanned her brothers’ and sister’s faces, searching for signs that they registered the tragedy. Their waiting eyes were upon her.

“If it wasn’t William,” Charlotte said, “what did she see?”

“His spirit?” whispered Darwin.

Just then, the front door opened slowly. A warm breeze flowed into the room, followed by Janine, bathed in moonlight.

Rose screamed.

“Oh my god,” said Charlotte. She threw her arms around her little sister.

Darwin shouted, “Holy shit, and stood up.

Henry tripped over his blanket trying to reach me. “Mommy,” he screamed.

“Get out,” I shrieked.

Janine backed out without saying a word, leaving the door open so that we saw her walk down the porch and climb into her truck. She circled the yard and drove out the same way she’d come in, silently, with her headlights off.

I thought of picking up the kids and driving back to Elman and Harriet’s. But we felt safer inside the house than out. I didn’t want her to come back, and despite the scare, I hoped our presence would inhibit further visits. We were far too keyed up to sleep. I asked them if they wanted to read more from the diary. They responded with a clutch of nodding heads. “We need a light,” said Darwin. He followed me to the edge of the porch and placed the cow skull he’d stored in the livingroom on top step. He

placed a candle on top and lit it. I heard the children laughing when he went inside as I fished through my rental car, looking up every few seconds to make sure Janine wasn't lurking somewhere nearby. There was a heavy flashlight behind the front seat. I grabbed it and retreated inside, feeling her presence.

I sat at the foot of the couch with Charlotte's feet planted in my lap. Rose held the flashlight, her little hand shaking, while Charlotte read. Henry crawled into the nook of my arm and Darwin lay on his side with his head on my lap, facing the door. I couldn't help seeing the connection between William Lone Wolf's seeds and us. Seeds we were, blown in by the wind to this farm in Tornado, Kansas. We'd know soon enough if we could flourish. Charlotte opened the diary and began to read where I had left off. Her voice was rich and low and full of a young willfulness. When she spoke, she brought Adelia closer.

September 10, 1893

Papa brought my storybooks. I will read them to Dorothy Perkins as long as she wishes. Her fever has not broke. She suffers deliriums. Others are coming down sick with consumption. Violet has broken the rules and sent one of the Indian stable hands for a medicine man. I am praying to you for her recovery. The children have become anxious seeing so many soldiers in the area. Their presence reminds them of the atrocities their families have already endured

Only six days before the Strip Run ...

I had to stop the story and tell the children about the Cherokee Strip Run. They'd never heard about this grand event in the history of the western frontier. I summarized how the ranchers and Native Americans in what is now northern Oklahoma—mere miles from this farm—had teamed up against the movement of settlers from the east looking for a new start. The government, committed to a national policy of agriculture that was designed to feed the Young and Burgeoning Country, grew impatient with the inability of the ranchers and Cherokee to keep intruders out of this great swath of land that locals, including Uncle Elman, still consider the most prime pasture in the world. The Cherokee Nation was offered many deals for the roughly six million acres of land that included nearly the entire northern section of what would become Oklahoma. The Nation was forced to accept the U.S. Government bid for eight million dollars.

“If you walked out that door and went to the river,” I said, “then climbed that hill above the river bend and looked out past the southern boundary of the farm, you could see where The Outlet begins.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Darwin. “Not with that chainsaw-toting woman out there.”

I continued my summary of how the government established a day, September sixteenth, eighteen hundred and ninety three, when white settlers from all over the country would line up—men and women from the east coast, men who'd been working on the Erie Canal who through down their picks and started out for a better life. They all lined up and wait for the Calvary to fire their shots at high noon, marking the start of a historic rush that would change Indian Territory forever. There were forty thousand claims available, and roughly one hundred thousand people turned out. Not every

participant would succeed. Most would fail. Most were ill-prepared, but determined nearly to the point of despair to improve their fate and prove up their own piece of land by building a home and farming. Imagine how the Native children worried to see so many soldiers and white people swarmed over land that used to be open and free.

Charlotte picked up Adelia's diary and began to read where she had left off. I loved the sound of my great aunt's words through Charlotte's voice.

Only six days before the Strip Run.

Our special guest visited the school. I think he knows the children are ill at ease and he is trying to ease their little minds. Chief Joseph, the most famous chief alive. The students got all their lines correct but no one clapped so I thought we failed. It was clear our heroine Matoaka was a hostage by the end and I was scared to death we made the S__ angry with us. Please Jesus, help me out of this one.

Chief Joseph of the once-mighty Nez Perce asked the students to point out their teacher. They pointed to me. Mercy. The reporter and photographer scribbled down words and set up their cameras. Chief Joseph approached me and I just about froze from his attention. He stopped less than two feet from me, I swear, and then asked for a lock of my hair.

There was John Rain, watching me. I have not spoke a word to him since finding out about his wife. Boldly, I said yes to the Chief and I think my anger fueled my demand:

Yes, I told him. He could have a lock of mine if I could have a lock of his!

(Mom! that's it. Charlotte sat up. The lock of hair on Adelia's photograph. Amazing. I read about it in the archives. It was her. We have to get it. That's the story. Call Aunt Harriet Then Charlotte remembered. We didn't have a phone. We'll see them tomorrow, I assured her. Keep reading, said Darwin. Get to the end, said Rose.)

... He spoke his own language to his men. I thought Mrs. Sneath would have a fit and when one of his men unsheathed a knife I thought S___ would order the guard to shoot. I had mother's knife in my pocket. Julie pulled out my hairpins and I made note to my memory on this second time I lost hair on account of an Indian man. I wrapped the Chief's black lock in my handkerchief and placed it in my skirt pocket. The reporters were scribbling down the episode and I heard the bulb of one photographer explode. I will hear from all of THEM no doubt for my impetuousness. Save me, Jesus, from the wrath of him who thinks he is

God. When John Rain held my elbow, I could not believe the words, "These are my boys." He pointed to two young ones standing on either side of him. Their dark eyes stared at me like deer before a hunter's bow. "They have just lost their mother." The photographer asked me to take a seat in the same chair he'd posed the Chief. He took a picture, me in the chair and John Rain's boys on either arm.

John asked if he could call on me midweek. S___ has cancelled classes for that day, Thursday and Friday because of the crowds. They are lining up for Saturday's event. I have never in my life seen so many people all in one place. It will no doubt go down in history as one of our great events. I wonder what history will say little of these children behind the barbed wire fence.

September 11

A jury of ignorant men found James Wheeler guilty and would have set a hanging date for Friday but some were eager to set up for the run on Saturday. The judge forbids S___'s testimony in behalf of James's character. They dismissed me swiftly when they learned I was in the Western Union office at the exact time of the stabbing. Town prejudice and one short, fat, balding lawyer is sealing James's fate. The lawyer could not find a witness to confirm James's alibi. Without a

witness he cannot make a case that James was tending horses and watching over the well-being of a babe who lay buried in the cemetery and its white mother who has up and disappeared. James sits in the jail awaiting trial.

September 12

The story of Chief Joseph's visit came out in the Arkansas City Tribune. The reporter called me a teacher and I figured I'd get heck for that. An article on James Wheeler's trial. Several witnesses testified in his behalf, including me, stating that he was in the livery tending horses and assisting a Caucasian woman and her sick baby when the murder occurred. Our superintendent was not among the witnesses. Jury found him guilty. The judge has set his hanging for Monday, September 18

September 13

K.W. (James' wife) paid me a visit today. I read her the newspaper article since she can't read. She looks near dead herself. But her beloved is still alive and she wants John to take her to town to see him.

Father and Robert stayed for supper before heading to the territory. I tried to convince them to stay since there are rumors the government will allow people to line up on the northeast boundary of the school due to the flood of people. School is out, the young children have free time on their

hands. They have been warned not to bother the soldiers, but the soldiers enjoy playing with the younger ones on the lawn. The older ones are wary. The photographer has set up his camp on a platform which our boys built. It sits directly beside the starting line, mere yards from where a soldier will stand at high noon and shoot his pistol, sending thousands running. Indians are forbidden to enter. The children sense something horrible is happening.

September 14

I read to Little Dorothy Talking Leaf Perkins through the night until Florence made me leave the room. She has not improved by morning. I must eat.

still September 14

A Kiowa medicine man, Big Red Buffalo, was sitting in the kitchen eating a hearty breakfast Violet had set before him. He is blind, he did not give a hoot, or perhaps had no idea of the turmoil he would cause, and led his three younger braves into the girls' dormitory. No one stopped him. The area is so full of smoke and chaos that I believe they went unnoticed. Big Red Buffalo sat on the bed's edge by poor Little Talking Leaf. I stood in room and watched him work his rattles and sing over her. He burned weeds until white smoke filled the air and I could

hardly breath. Then Florence. The braves stood against the door so she could not enter. She demanded to know who was in the room. She pushed and pushed, then left and I knew where she was going. S___ arrived minutes later with three calvary men.

Dorothy passed to the promised land this evening among the sacred smells of the Kiowa medicine man, who John says is friends to her Comanche people. To the end she clung to her rag doll and her eyes, glassy from fever, seemed to ask me to hold her. My heart aches. At the end she spoke her Mother Tongue. Miss Edith came in and suggested we cover her mouth so her last words are not those of a heathen destined for hell. If S___ has his way they will bury her body before the parents receive the sad news. My poor Little Talking Leaf is silent.

Like Adelia, I wondered how history would chronicle these children and whether we would learn anything from their suffering.

23

The morning after our second night at the farmhouse, my daughter stood in the kitchen with her back to me pouring mocha creamer into a thermos mug of coffee that Harriet had packed. I walked in the door arguing silently with myself, *what to do with*

this land? More important than who owns it and how one came to inherit it was figuring out how to take care of it. Part of the question was what remained for us in California. I imagined prairie grass and a return of buffalo, hot summers, and livestock—a couple of goats would be fun. None of my dreaming mattered if my step-cousin won her claim. There would be no question—back to California, my mother, the children’s school, their friends, and the ocean. Maybe Janine deserved this place. She had been its steward for the past umpteen, what, fourteen years.

“Mom?” My daughter turned from the counter and took a few steps closer. She was already as tall as me. I couldn’t remember when she had started drinking coffee. “I had a dream last night, Mama.” She wrapped her hands around the mug. She’d filed and painted her nails metallic green. “Grandpa came and told me I needed braces.”

She stretched her lips, baring two crooked incisors that crossed her large, white front teeth.

“Did he now? I’ve been thinking about your grandpa, too, Charlie,” I said. “How can we not? He grew up in this house.”

She glanced down at my pants cuffs and pointed, disapproving. “Your jeans are caked with dirt.”

“Your skirt’s too short.” I lifted the thermos that Harriet had fixed and refilled my cup, waiting for Charlotte to protest. “I think your Grandpa would like it if we lived here.”

“Can we?”

“Stay? You bet. Oh yes,” I gushed. “This place is so open.” Charlotte took a step back, recoiling from my enthusiasm. Her coffee splashed onto the dull green

marbled linoleum as I continued: "You can sit out here and not hear a single car. A tractor and hay wagon, maybe. I think you'd get used a rural life. I think you might even like it if you put your mind to it, involved yourself in school activities."

"Mom. I mean the braces. Can I get braces? You're the one who likes living in the sticks and makes these impulsive changes all the time. You're transferring the sticks to me."

I went out to the back porch to brush off my pants. I shouted through the screen door, trying to remain cheerful, "Of course you can. But I like your teeth. They're glamorous."

"You're my mom. You would say that." She followed me into the yard. "Mitch said he'd pay."

I stopped abruptly at the thought of Mitch telling my daughter he'd pay for her braces. My daughter bumped into my back. The miser didn't volunteer to pay for anything unless he was getting something out of it or buying someone off.

"Mom," Charlotte said. A chill ran down my neck at her serious tone of voice. I have something to tell you."

I swung around and faced her.

"Darwin and I went behind your back," she said. "We made Grandma Rose promise that if you decided to move here we could stay with her in California."

I returned to the kitchen and sat in my chair. I sipped my coffee. It was cold. I took another.

"We were afraid of what you were going to do. You always do these... things."

"Do you still feel that way?" I asked. "About staying with Grandma?"

“No. You’re giving it to back to the Indians.” She studied my face. “Right?”

“Not exactly.”

“Mama. This place is hell. I can’t deal with how boring it is. I will die from nothing to do.” Her forehead wrinkled and her eyes filled with tears. She wasn’t the only one. Her greatest aunt, born and raised in this house, chose not to remain here. But they had much different reasons. I looked around for a Kleenex, knowing there were none.

While Charlotte wiped her eyes and nose on her sleeve, Rose skipped into the room in her underpants and shirt. The chair’s metal tacks scraped the linoleum as she sat down.

“Darwin went exploring,” Rose announced. “Why is Charlie crying?”

“What do you mean exploring, honey?” I took milk that I had stored in the sink on a melting block of ice and poured it into a bowl of granola we’d bought at the grocery store the night before. “Say when, Rose.”

“When.”

“Where’d he go, Rosie?” I searched the cabinet drawers for one abandoned spoon. There weren’t any. “You’re going to have to drink it like soup, Rose. Try not to spill anything on your clothes. For every drop you have to make a wish.” I pulled out a banana and began slicing it onto her cereal. “Now where exactly did Darwin go exploring?”

“You’re obsessing. What can happen here?” Charlotte collected the remains of her tears with the tips of her fingers and wiped them on her skirt. “He went looking for

arrowheads. Uncle Elman told him there are tons of arrowheads on the other side of the river and he'd pay him five bucks each."

Then Henry appeared in the kitchen doorway. He had dressed himself in jeans and a long sleeved shirt that he'd buttoned wrong. Charlotte went over to him, knelt down and rearranged his shirt.

"Your bottom buttons are missing, Henry," she said.

"Rose cut them off for my board game back at Grandma's. She said they'd be good luck charms." Henry craned his neck over his big sister's shoulder to talk to me.

"Mom," he said, "when can we see the pony?"

I walked south as the sun rose to my left above this quiet plank of land. The farmhouse sat at the furthest western end of this quarter section, its back to twilight. The river carved the farmland down its middle like one big question mark. I held my palm level with my eyes. The ground appeared flat, but in fact it sloped gradually up toward the flint hillocks to the southwest, hills so rocky they had never been cultivated. That's the bulk of what I knew about this place.

I walked through blown out weeds, wheat grass, and bird songs, calling for my oldest son. When I didn't find him, I took the narrow path on the edge of the field parallel to the river and then cut back across the field toward the stand of walnut. The air was warm, cooking up something rich and fragrant and unknown to me, other than it was an earthy scent that stitched me to my surroundings. At the edge of the walnut canopy, temperature changed from full morning heat to shaded warmth. The base of one old tree

was mottled with light green lichen and its smoky bark ran in deep vertical ridges the entire length of its trunk. When I hugged it, my arms did not go half way around. The bark was silver further up the trunk. A small, yellowed leaf flitted to the ground. I turned my back against its solid trunk and slid down until reaching ground, my back fully supported and my legs hugging the downward angle of the earth. I had fought for these beautiful leviathans. Now they were part of me. They were characters in my father's stories, and now my story. I wondered how he might have figured out how to climb them, perhaps hammering a small ladder of stakes. I scanned the ground around me for artifacts of his little boy machine shop where he took apart the family cast offs. I could hear his voice as I brushed a new layer of dirt off the hem of my jeans, but I could not make out the words. His was a quiet voice, spoken in droll, slow and steady rhythms, a voice forged from this hard, steady, and silent place. And now I understood the derivation of its softness—these trees and flowing wheat fields. The river. All that breathed gently on this land.

Behind the orchard was the roadside where Darwin had weedwhacked the dingle-whatever grass. He had run the contraption down the entire property line so that the one-lane road behind me was visible. I don't know the names of the grasses, trees or flowers, birds or bugs or the proper nouns of the region's topographical features. Don't know what this not-knowing implies. My first husband told me once that to belong we must know the names of places we inhabit. We must pass those names on as a way of passing on what is essential and honorable in us. I only know that sitting on this patch of dirt, leaning against this father tree, felt to me more sustaining than sitting on the sand and watching the changing tides. I pinched the dirt between my fingers and examined the

brown soil and granules of sand. I let go and watched them drift toward ground. People do to each other what they do to the land—sow and cultivate, rape and plow, own and dominate. The Indians say *no one owns the land*. We're only stewards. But today that would require a past world or one far in the future, not a world where title to land is an ingredient of freedom.

Covered mounds of dry wheat—taller than a person—lay a few hundred yards in front of me much like I imagined it must have looked in my great-grandfather's time. He'd stolen this land if you read between the lines. *There weren't no other way*, he told my great aunt Adelia, his oldest daughter, as he drove her in the buckboard to the Indian School.

She was only nineteen when she left home and never returned. Her interest lay beyond milking cows, gathering pecans by the river, baking pies and breads. It lay beyond naming everything on either side of this river shaped like one big question mark. When she gazed out from her second story bedroom window, she studied her dreams. *I will put John Rain's name on the first star I see*, she had written. He became her geography, her entire cosmology. She memorized every inch of him, rather than the way this soil transitioned from dark brown dirt to light sand near the river. Not a word of the jade tint in this tornado sky. She only saw it in half empty shades of black and gray until she met John Rain. She wrote in September, 1893:

*A small wind of black smoke twisted across the schoolyard today lifting the dust
and tossing it into every nook and cranny ...
... a massive cloud of dust obscured the sun ...*

... sky filled with black dust that covers the rising sun and spreads miles along the horizon in both directions ... a sign to the ghost dancers of revenge on the white man for dishonoring their Great Spirit.

I can't tell from what my great aunt wrote whether the land ever laid its claim on her, but it was clear that one man inspired her trail across this landscape. If I were learning anything from her, it's that a person who wants to change the course of her life has to do something different.

There were economics considerations. The prohibitive cost of housing back in Santa Cruz would force me to live with my mother and I'd wind up emotionally frazzled. And how could I take Henry away from Elman and the pony? But then I could find the money to hire an attorney and keep what little we had out of Janine's hands so at least I would have a choice. How was I going to fulfill my contract to write a story on an escaped convict who was quite possibly hiding out with my lover. Or was he my ex-lover? And where the fuck was he! I opened my mouth and tried to scream. Nothing. My eyes burned and my mouth drew down; I fought a sharp pain in my throat.

I looked up at the mint sky and, in a rare and awkward moment, pleaded, "Give me strength!" A walnut pod fell into my lap. It landed with a neat, soft thud. Its brown casing was shriveled from clinging to its sprig past its season, through winter and spring. I looked up into the canopy of limbs and leaves. Hardly riveting, you say. But I laughed because at this moment a falling walnut felt perfect. I ran my thumb and forefinger along the shriveled brown lobes and fingered the small black moldy spots. My father's voice, words this time: *The land does claim us...* slow and droll...another

walnut pod dropped and hit me on the head, bounced softly to the ground beside me, and rolled toward my feet... *and we pay dearly for that.*

Across the field and beyond the river, I imagined the place where my great grandfather had notched his blaze mark one century and a half ago, sooner that he was supposed to, while the Osage packed up camp for the last time on the Yellow Flower Moon and headed south. I imagined years later his oldest daughter, my great aunt Adelia, at the edge of this field turning to John Rain, and then her father collapsing at the sight of his fair daughter falling in love with an Indian. And on that same day great grandfather's first wife showed up out of nowhere. I hoped that she would ask him why he'd left her in the first place and that I would find some reference in her journal. Adelia packed her things the next day and left to teach at the Indian boarding school. *There weren't no other way*, her father implored her when she pressed him to explain why he capitalized on the government's relocation of Osage from their ancestral land. Trying to stop the white man's version of progress was like stepping in front of a train, he'd replied. Great grandfather's seed spread like morning glory from here to the Indian School to John Rain's cattle ranch in Osage country, vines climbing the sky, winding through New England, the South from Annapolis to New Orleans and west to California. Tendrils, like me, looping back to the Midwest. Vignettes everywhere.

Darwin hadn't returned by the time I reached the house. But Jane had showed up dressed in khaki shorts, Birkenstocks and a loose red and white flowered Hawaiian shirt.

She was sitting on the porch with briefcase between her knees and a concerned look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I gave her a hug. “Melt down,” I said. “That’s all.”

She craned her neck at the high ceilings. “Old houses speak to me.” She took out a thick stack of papers that she had studied pertaining to Janine’s claim for adverse possession. She laid them on the kitchen table and asked for coffee.

“I don’t have any,” I said.

She grimaced. “Okay then, let’s get down to business. If you still want to deed back the land you have to disprove and nullify your cousin’s claim for adverse possession.” She studied me. “Big if.”

“Does she have rights to the farm?” I asked.

“She does not have rights to the farm, not yet, but she does have a right to claim adverse possession. Adverse possession is a fundamental principle of property rights. Once a person stays on the land and treats it as if it’s their own and in an open, exclusive and continuous manner, meaning they live on it, and in this case work it, and don’t share it, they have a right. And since neither you nor your father have touched foot on this farm until recently, she has a legitimate claim. It’s the fundamental core doctrine of property law and it’s all over the place. She’s been here taking care of the place in lieu of rent, even paying the taxes you say. Big mistake on your father’s part. No rental contracts that you know of, and no one’s tried to evict her all that time.”

I felt the pain in my throat return and if I didn’t ignore it, I would start crying again. “Can she win?”

“Some do. The latest one was last year when a man filed for possession of a quarter section, just like this. The property owners settled by giving him the house and ten acres. It’s an old law. But it’s still alive and practiced and you’re going to have to deal with it. You’ll have to bring a claim for quiet title actions for the whole fee simple title that she’s wanting. It would help if you could show she did not use the property for all of those years. In Kansas, possession must be left undisturbed for fifteen years before it is eligible to ripen into ownership. Maybe she went to jail for a couple of years. Moved into her boyfriend’s place for awhile.

“She doesn’t have a boyfriend. At least not that I can tell. She’s a loner.”

“I wonder why she moved her stuff. Even the neighbors around these parts probably think she owns this place.”

I thought back to the old woman with the red hat that I’d met on my accidental bus trip to Lawrence. She believed Janine Goening owned the farm.

“Once you settle, if you settle” said Jane, “do you still want to deed the land back to the Osage Nation?”

I balked. “Part of me does.”

“A noble deed of reparation,” said Jane, writing something on her yellow legal pad. “The least a paleface could do to atone for the theft you white people laid on us. It would be an act of restitution, a righteous return to the rightful owner something that’s been taken away.”

Charlotte appeared in the doorway. “We didn’t steal anything.”

Jane glared at my oldest daughter as if she were about to dish out a litany of reprimands, but before she said anything, I told her that my thinking had changed.

“Part of me wants to stay. Yesterday the place overwhelmed me. I swear it wanted to take me down,” I said. “I felt it. I couldn’t pull a weed from the ground. This morning, I feel attached.”

“Oh, spare us,” said Charlotte.

“While I was sitting out there, I heard my father’s voice. He used to play there as a boy. It was his voice I was remembering, and he spoke. A walnut dropped at the exact moment I asked for a sign. Then another.”

“Mom,” Charlotte pleaded, “don’t.”

Jane was quiet.

“I imagined my great aunt, as she’d described herself the day she met my great uncle,” I said. “She was at the edge of the field. It was a vision, not that I saw her, I didn’t, not like that. I saw her in my mind’s eye, clearly. I imagined her in the field with John Rain on the day her father collapsed and I know why he collapsed. He knew he was losing her to him. He knew a shift had already taken place.”

Jane stared at her hands.

“I’m confused,” I said.

“You sound clear to me,” she said. “Where are the walnuts?”

“That is so la la land,” said Charlotte. “We have to sell it. Then we can buy a house back home.”

I pulled the walnuts out of my front pocket and handed them to Jane. She held one in each palm as I explained how money from this place wouldn’t even give us a down payment on a place back home.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jane interrupted. She put the walnuts on the table and reached for the brown manila envelope. “I’ve read this,” she said, “and by the terms of your father’s will, you can’t sell it. In fact, according to this, you only have a year left to formally occupy it. It doesn’t say you can’t give it away, but you can’t sell it. Technically, you could deed it back to the Osage or anyone else once you settle with Goening. But if you don’t want it, you can’t sell it. If you don’t take control, it reverts to your mother to name an heir, possibly your children...”

“Not me,” said Charlotte.

“... or Janine. She is a relative. Theoretically, you could deed everything to the Osage. Or part. You could offer Goening ten acres with a five-year lease to farm the wheat to leverage out the adverse possession.

“You’re suggesting we keep the farmhouse?” I said.

“Don’t say ‘we’,” said Charlotte.

Jane counted the kids, “Charlotte, Rose and Henry, right? Where’s the fourth?”

“Darwin. He’s looking for arrowheads,” Charlotte said.

“How does he feel about this place?”

“He’s a surfer,” said Charlotte. “How do you think he feels?”

“You are one impudent little girl,” said Jane. “If you were mine, I’d ... ”

“Jane, nevermind.” I scanned the kitchen wall for a clock, but there wasn’t one.

“Darwin’s been gone too long.”

Henry appeared in the kitchen doorway holding a radio. “I bet he’s tornado watching.” He held up the radio. “Tornado warning.”

“Where did you get that?” I asked.

Henry pointed upstairs.

“We don’t have to worry,” Charlotte said. “Right, Mom? We’re safe. That’s what the Indians said. Right?” She looked at Jane defiantly.

“Right,” I said, hoping Janine had stored batteries and flashlights in the basement.

“Why?” said the three-child chorus.

“Because ... the hill deflects the tornado so that it jumps the river bend clear to the next state.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” said Charlotte. “Please.”

“Don’t be sarcastic,” I said.

“I’m not.”

Rose drank from the white straw of her small box of apple juice while Henry remained riveted in front of us holding the radio. They all stared at me, including Jane.

“Pop quiz,” I said. “What do you do in case of tornado?”

“Go to the river,” said Rose.

I shook my head. “Definitely not. Good guess.” I smiled and rubbed her cheek.

Henry raised his hand. “Go to the basement.”

“Exactly. Now, Henry, you be in charge of the radio.”

Henry nodded and shot out the kitchen. Rose scrambled from the table and followed him. Charlotte remained in the kitchen.

Jane asked her if she minded that we talk business awhile longer. “There are always tornado warnings around here this time of year,” she said. She looked at Charlotte. “You can stay,” she said, “but your mother and I need to discuss some things

while we have the time and it sure would be a blessing if you could keep your comments to a subtle hum.”

“Fine,” said Charlotte.

Jane turned to me and said, “She’s what I call full throated. She’d be an asset if she were on your side.”

Then she quickly got to business, asking if Janine Goening was American Indian.

“Part,” I said. I looked at the kitchen clock and worried that Darwin should have checked in.

“Morally, in some respects, this does belong to her,” said Jane.

Her comment shocked me. I ordered Charlotte to go outside and scan the premises for her brother. “Don’t go off the porch,” I said.

“She has been stewarding the land,” said Jane.

I shouted at Charlotte, “Go. “

“What’s wrong with you?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but clomped out the kitchen’s swinging door, down the hallway, her knee high boots shaking the house. When the front door slammed shut, I pushed the photograph of my great aunt Adelia and the two young boys across the table along with a yellowed newspaper article I had found in Adelia’s journal. It’s headline read *Kaw Reservoir Blocked by Rancher’s Protest*. The story was dated nineteen-forty. It reported Adelia and John Rain’s attempt to sue the Bureau of Reclamations and appeal to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to halt the damming of the river that ran through John’s allotment, which now belonged to Harriet and Elman.

“Why are you showing me this?” said Jane.

“I’ve been trying to find my great aunt’s grave since I first came out here. I think its thirty feet underwater.”

“How so?”

“She’s not buried with the rest of the family and there’s no record of her grave. No one will tell me where she’s buried, not Janine, not Harriet or Elman. They act like they don’t know.” I thought of my youngest daughter’s insistent that Adelia’s grave was at the base of the drowned tree stump. Just then, Red Too crowed. I looked out the kitchen window and could see him strut across the top of the chicken coop just as he had on the day he attacked me. I felt Jane’s hand on mine and pulled back.

“You can’t raise the dead,” she said, “and even if you could, why would you want to. They may take you with them. And you can’t give back a farm and quarter section of land, or even a ranch, and think you’re changing history.”

I drew my hand away, but she held it fast.

“But it may heal your soul,” she said. “To mend a wound requires a different level of action from what created it.”

“What about us?” I said. “Don’t we deserve a home?”

“Stop saying ‘we’,” said Charlotte, who stood in the kitchen doorway. She was trying to catch her breath.

“You’re supposed to be looking for your brother.”

“He’s not there,” she said. “And you said stay on the porch.”

“Then why are you so out of breath?”

“It looks creepy,” she said. “I hate this place.”

Jane picked up the photo of Adelia and glanced back and forth between it and Charlotte. "You look like her," she said. "Same eyes, same mouth, same strength of will. Same dimple on the chin, and you know what they say? Two dimples and you're born to love. One, and you're born to be loved. Lucky you."

Charlotte broke into a grin so wide I thought her lip might split. She was beautiful, especially her smile, especially her crooked eyeteeth.

We didn't know it was Elman's truck we heard driving up the road. When the sound grew louder, all of us gathered on the front porch and watched him rattle slowly up the road in his blue Ford truck with a large metal horse trailer in tow. He turned the corner into the driveway, circled the yard, then, by some genius that comes with experience, backed up and angled the trailer so that the rear was pointed to the barn. The engine clattered on past its shut off while Elman opened the cab door and stepped out and unfolded himself like a stiff sheet of cardboard. We could see the pony's spotted coat through the trailer's metal slats. It was a long, worn trailer that looked like it was better used hauling a half dozen horses than one pony. Elman scuffed bowlegged toward the back end of the trailer, gradually straightening and loosening his gait. Henry passed his radio to Rose and ran to greet him.

"Thought maybe you all'd like a pony for a day or two," he said. "Got my little pardner talking and I don't want to drop the ball."

Henry hugged Elman around his waist. Jane appeared puzzled and I didn't know how to explain.

“It’s a long story,” I explained. “I’ll introduce you.”

“Elman,” I said. “This is my friend Jane Yellow Hair. She’s down from Lawrence to help me with some legal matters.”

He looked Jane up and down as he spoke to me. “You still bent on giving this to place to the Injuns.”

“Elman’s married to my dad’s sister.” That was the best I could do to excuse his behavior. “They live at the ranch, the one in the newspaper clipping. where my great aunt and uncle used to live.”

“What’s he doing there?” said Jane. “That’s Osage land.”

“We lease little lady, from the tribe if it’s any of your business. Where’s that other woman with the attitude?”

“She moved out.” His anger would complicate things, so I didn’t tell him the details of Janine’s claim or her appearance last night. Elman swung open the trailer door and stepped up into the trailer with a grunt, straightened, and walk to the back where the pony stood tied.

“Do I have any volunteers?” he asked.

Henry’s arm shot up. “Me.”

“Okay little fella, come on up here.”

With a stiffness that I assumed came from a life of bailing hay, roping cattle, and falling off a horse now and then, Elman bent over and lifted Henry into the trailer.

“Walk slow now, pardner,” Elman said. “Keep your hands low and slow. Remember what I told you. No jerky business or you’ll scare the pony here.”

Elman kept his eye on Henry while he untied the pony's halter rope from a trailer hook. He poked the pony in its flank, repeating, "Get around there," until it swung its hindquarter obediently. I tried to explain to Jane as simply as I could that Elman had given the pony to the children just yesterday. He hadn't said anything about shipping it over here. Jane hadn't known Henry's problem, and when I told her that he hadn't said a word in three years, I could read the trauma of it in her face and my eyes began to burn. I told her how Henry had tried so hard and failed to make that pony take a step that he was driven to speak his first word--*move*. Jane put her arms around me and pulled me into her. Her empathy made me uncomfortable. It loosened a deep pain, the second such feeling that day, and I felt horribly self-conscious and victimized.

"Look," she said.

Elman handed the halter rope to Henry. "Okay now, pardner, just walk slow and with purpose. Got it." He patted Henry's shoulder. "You're going to need a hat if you're going to be a cowboy. Way to go."

Henry nodded, looking straight ahead in total concentration until he came to the edge of the trailer. He hesitated, and then looked up at Elman.

"Go on now. The pony trusts you. Just give him some rope. Don't want to make him mad. You wouldn't want someone jerking your rope now, would you? There you go. Let him step down on his own accord. Give him lots of rope. Make sure you step to his side and give him room. Don't want him stepping on your foot, now. I'd say you need a pair of boots to go with that hat, pardner."

Henry grinned when the pony stepped down and stopped beside him.

"Can I pet him?" Rose asked.

“Ask Elman,” I said.

She repeated the question to Elman, who deferred to Henry, but Henry had to think about relinquishing the pony before he answered. “Don’t scare him. Don’t jerk. Keep your hands low.”

He looked up at Elman, who winked, “Couldn’t’ve said it better.”

Rose walked up to the pony, holding the radio. “Can I move my hands now?” she lisped.

Again, Henry had to think about approving of his twin’s effort.

“Oh gawd, he’s a control freak,” said Charlotte.

I elbowed her. “They’ll work it out.”

Rose pet the pony’s neck and it bent down and nibbled at the radio.

“If kids are gonna have a horse,” said Elman,” they gotta spend time with it.”

“Does it have a name?” Jane asked.

“Does she have a name?” said Elman.

Jane put out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Elman. It’s a great thing you’ve done for these kids, especially that one.” She tilted her head toward Henry.

“Just common sense, m’am,” he said, taking her hand. “Something these Californians don’t have much of. Know what I mean.” He turned to me. “I thought I’d leave the naming up to the kids. They could name him after me if they like.” He took off his hat and swacked it on his knees. “The kids and me are gonna stall this little critter and then I gotta go back to your Aunt Harriet. She’s expecting me to pick up some ingredients. She wants to bake cookies for the children before they go back home. You’re not allergic to walnuts are you.”

"No, Elman," I said.

He shouted at Henry. "Hey, pardner, maybe we can talk your mama into letting you stay on. I could use a good hand. You, too, Rosie girl. Charlotte," he looked her up and down, "You lose that getup and you'd fit right in. A pretty gal like you'd rope one of these young bucks in no time."

He turned Henry by the shoulders and the three of them, Henry holding the pony's lead rope, headed toward the barn. The silver letters on the back of my uncle's tooled leather cowboy belt glinted. *Elman O'Henry* barely fit across his bony hips.

"Now don't you let him get out front of you. You run the show so he knows you're the boss." He stopped in the dirt yard and turned. "Rosie girl, you comin."

Rose handed me the radio and took Elman's free hand.

"That's fine, that's fine. Go on now pardner, step it up a bit. Walk like you got some purpose. Ponies like to know you're not wasting their time." He scanned the yard. "Where's that older boy of yours?" he shouted.

"Looking for arrowheads like you're paying him to do. Five dollars a head, I hear."

Elman looked up. "He better be keeping an eye on the sky. That's a fine tradition around here, a good line of work for city folks like you. A person's never too smart that keeps his eyes on the sky around these parts." He pulled a frayed toothpick out of his pocket and clamped down on the pointed end, rolled it around on his tongue.

"Hold up a second, son." Then to me, "Could be a turn wind in the making, little lady."

He pointed his toothpick to the sky. "You never know. It looks harmless enough, but it

can be a mean spirited sumbitch. Just in case, forget all that Injun crap. It'll just get you in trouble. Head for the cyclone cellar and say your prayers."

"O my gawd," said Charlotte. "Mama, what's he saying?"

"Elman." I walked toward him. Charlotte followed.

He stopped, turned and lifted his head so the light revealed the deeply weathered grooves of his face. His blue eyes met mine as if he'd been waiting for me to lay it on him.

"Hope you don't mind if I change the subject. But since you're here. About Aunt Adelia. I can't find her marker in the cemetery. But we've driven by the lake a couple of times and Rose came up with this wild idea that Adelia is buried there. By any chance is her grave at the bottom of the lake?"

He tipped his hat a couple of inches back, took his toothpick out and crossed his arms over his chest. He rubbed his chin and looked down at Rose, who was still holding his hand. "She sure is. Her and half the Injun population. We always used to tell her she'd never make a white man out of that John Rain of hers."

He placed his toothpick back in his mouth and sucked air between his teeth as if he were trying to dislodge a speck of food. "You know. Some people just don't know what to do with something when it's given to em."

Jane let out a low whistle.

Elman shook his head. "We decided it was best to let them lay were they were. Instead of disrupt the dead. We didn't say nothing and everyone from the sheriff to the WPA acted like they didn't know the difference. It's like I say, girlie," he looked me straight in the eye, "there weren't no other way."

Henry planted himself in the driveway until the dust of Elman's truck and trailer settled back down and the rattling faded. Then he jumped and ran back to me and I knew he'd come up with an idea that was exciting and urgent.

"I have to go back to the barn," he said. "The pony needs me."

"As long as you stay outside the gate. No going inside the gate when an adult is not around." I didn't want a broken arm, collarbone, whatever horses do to people, to complicate matters. "You can climb up on the gate and see over just fine. No going inside the stall by yourself."

"Can I sit on top with my legs in?"

"Absolutely not."

His eyes were wide, his body ready to bust out. "Hands?" He held up his palms.

"No jerky movements. Deal?"

"Deal." He split for the barn, kicking up his dusty mini-trail. As I watched him with as much joy as he had watched Elman, a hand slipped through my arm, settling in a snug loop.

"I just can't believe it," said Charlotte, wiping away a couple of tears with her polished fingertips. "He's normal."

Jane was irate. She spewed a list of attorneys who ached to take on cases regarding Native burial sites *pro bono*. A gust of wind kicked up in the middle of the yard, whipping Charlotte's skirt and blouse against her hips and breasts. Her womanhood unsettled me.

I led us along the chicken coop toward the river bend to try to find Darwin and meanwhile show Jane the layout of the land.

Rose shrieked. "He'th killing the chicken. He'th killing the chicken."

Red Too had pinned down a hen that gotten out of the coop. He was pecking the top of her head the same way he had pecked mine. I picked up a handful of dirt and threw it at him, like my step-cousin Janine had done. The dirt blew back in my face.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. "That was effective."

While Red Too pecked mercilessly, Rose started crying. Jane picked up a flat pebble the size of her fingernail, lodged it between her thumb and second finger, strode up to the chicken coop, aimed and flicked the stone, hitting the rooster smack on the side of his head. He scurried toward the house and eyed us sideways, his neck rocking on his fluffed torso.

"Men," she said. "Think they can hump a woman and do a head trip all at the same time."

"That's gross," said Charlotte.

"I was talking to your mother. She knows what I'm talking about. You're old enough to be warned, though."

I was about to soften the subject of men. My daughter had seen enough poor role models in her young life. Whatever she already feared didn't need that kind of vulgar augmenting. I was about to say 'there are a lot of good men in the world, a woman just needs to be strong enough with herself to find them,' but another gust of wind swirled across the yard throwing dust in our faces. In the distance a gray bisquick cloud was moving in from the southwest. We reached the river. Footprints that could

have been Darwin's led down the riverbank. The water, which had been clear the last time we had been her, had turned brown from silt. A small dust devil spun across from the opposite bank, throwing off water and large brown leaves. It danced across the packed white sand smack into Charlotte.

"Mom." Charlotte shrieked. "Shit. Mom." She stood caved in, drenched, head down, eyes shut, hands out, waiting for me. The sky was now a skillet of gray green clouds. Jane had crossed the river and began to scale the hill, grabbing rock outcroppings as she went. Halfway up, one of her Birkenstocks came off and tumbled several feet down. She ignored it and continued to climb while I brushed water and sand from Charlotte's face wondering what the hell she was doing. I considered following her in hopes of sighting Darwin, but Rose tugged at my pant leg and pointed up river. Then I saw it. A white spiral band dropped and extended itself like a ropey strand of egg white attached to sky and land. I picked up Rose under her arms and lay her down in the hollow of the undermined riverbank between thick tree roots. I pushed her up against the dirt as far back into the hollow as she would fit. I ordered Charlotte to climb in and lie up against her.

"I'm not going in there," she said.

"Do as I say."

"You said go to the cellar," she wailed.

"It's too late." My hair whipped my eyes, blurring my vision when I got down on my knees pressed Charlotte against her sister as far into the bank as I could. "Hold on to this." I placed Charlotte's hand on a root and molded her fingers around it. "Stay put. I'm going for Henry."

“Mom,” screamed Charlotte. “I’m scared.”

The sound of wind nearly drowned out her voice.

“I’m scared, Mom.” She started to cry.

“Take care of Rose. Don’t get up until I get back or Jane says so.”

Jane had reached the top of the hillock. She turned a full circle and sat down cross-legged, arms folded across her chest in a position of resolve. The wind whipped her Hawaiian shirt into a billowing flowered sail and her hair flew like a Medusas in all directions. She was a horrid sight. I yelled at her to come down. She looked at me once and waved me away, tilted her head toward the sky and began talking, but the wind’s roar was so loud I could not hear anything she said. I swear I saw the wind lift her off the ground and set her back just as she was. Charlotte saw it too.

“Jane,” I shrieked. She ignored me and continued to face the thin white spiral and chant as it twisted its way across the horizon like a jackrabbit. I ran to get Henry, but changed my mind halfway up the bank, and slid back down to pry my daughters loose from their hiding place. Rose’s grip around my neck was so tight that it choked me, and Charlotte held my wrist so tightly that I had to pry her hands loose.

“Jane,” Charlotte screamed. “Jane.” But Jane didn’t budge from her pose, chanting god only knows what. I ran with my girls, the blaring, horizontal wind pushing me sideways and forward, chicken feathers and gravel, sharp bits of straw and wheat, and papers, everything not tied down, flying. When we were halfway between the barn and the house, I put Rose down and pried Charlotte’s hand loose. I walked them to the basement door, opened it and ordered them into it. “When you get inside close the hatch, find the table and crawl underneath. Stay there until I come get you.” I gave them

a shove, my voice barely discernable from the wind's screech. "Go on." I waited for the door to shut, then ran back to the barn. The stall was wide open. The pony was gone.

I ran toward the house, leapt the porch steps, yelling, "Henry, Henry. Darwin." No answer. I ran inside and called again. Up the steps and down the hall. Outside, I scanned the farm's horizons searching for signs of my boys; I ran to the side of the house to check on the girls. I opened the basement hatch, and nearly fell down the cellar steps. There was Darwin. He was standing by the pony, holding its halter rope while Henry brushed the pony's mane. He looked at me accusingly, "Where were you?"

I couldn't catch my breath.

"I was up the river," he said. "I ran back to warn you. Where were you?"

I bent down to check out the girls. They had huddled under the table as I had told them to do. They looked like cornered rodents. They stared at me, expressionless and pale. The side of Charlotte's face was smeared with mud and her hair and clothes were wet.

"They wouldn't come out," said Darwin. I looked around the room and found a blanket on the shelf above the washing machine. I crawled under the table and placed it around them.

"You can come out now. Mom's here."

Charlotte shook her head. Her forehead was clammy. Then I heard the radio. An announcer was reporting the weather in rapid prose.

"I found Henry in the barn," said Darwin. "He was scared, but he wouldn't leave Stewart."

"I wasn't scared."

“How did the pony get down here?” I asked. “And who’s Steward?”

“Stewart,” said Henry.

I might have indulged my baby boy’s insistence when referring to the creature responsible for returning his voice, but my error—Stewart, not Steward—felt trivial compared to our circumstances. I tried to coax the girls out from under the table, when Steward lifted his tail and an earthy sounding trail of turds toppled to the cement floor in a neat yellow-brown steaming pile. Darwin let go of the rope and stepped toward the pony’s rump to examine the mess. The smell of manure filled the room. Darwin stared at me. The girls remained dead quiet.

“Oops,” said Henry. His face puffed up like he was about to cry when giggles escaped from him and spread through all of us. Pretty soon, the room was full of giddy laughter.

When I stepped out the cellar, the air sparkled just beyond my step, its moisture interplayed with small colored prisms that had not coalesced. This interplay of small colored prisms made Jane’s approach an auspicious clash of both weird and wonderful forces. Her hair was tangled with debris, and she hobbled, one shoe on, one off, until she walked through the glimmer and hugged me. I pulled a twig from her hair and gave it to her. She spread her fingers and let it fall. “Nearly swept up entirely,” she said.

“What were you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Up there?” I pointed to the hill. “For goddsakes, what were you thinking?”

She took a deep breath, bent over, and shook her head violently, flicking the debris from her short black hair. “Praying.” She threw back her short mop of thick hair

and stretched her palms toward the sky. “It could’ve been much worse. This was hardly a one on a scale of five. We call it miracle whip when it’s white like that. What a rush.”

“Did you see it touch down? Swear to god I’ve never seen...”

“Don’t talk about it. I didn’t see anything. My eyes were closed.” She turned a full circle, preoccupied with the murky sky, which felt eerie and unfinished. She looked at me. “Are the kids okay?”

“They’re in the cellar listening to the radio. I’m getting a shovel.” I turned toward the barn, but Jane put a hand on my arm. Everything seemed intense, as if each gesture and every word carried a profound unspoken truth. I pointed toward the basement.

“The kids?” she asked.

“Go see. I’ll be right there.” I turned and started jogging toward the back of the house, hoping the shovel I’d used to dig weeds had not been swept up by the wind. Something nestled in the ground stopped me. I bent closer, expecting a dead animal, but discovered Jane’s missing Birkenstock. I lifted the sandal out of the dirt, slapped it against my jeans and wondered what *that* meant.

The shovel was leaning against the porch where I’d left it. As I carried it across my shoulders with the shoe dangling from the handle, I imagined Jane in the basement, Charlotte pressing her for an explanation, Darwin relishing the danger, Rose asking for a turn to brush Steward, and Henry worrying about how to get his pony out of there. I knew for sure that there wasn’t one way. No one way to get a pony out of a basement,

not one way of doing anything. There were many ways. And I had options. But, like Jane said, problems can't be fixed using the same thinking that created them.

We sat on the floor of the cellar passing a jar of pickles and staring at Jane's Birkenstock as if it were a small child. In the flannel aftermath of near disaster, we felt comfortable saying nothing and listening to the radio announcer report weather while an occasional fork tine hit the glass. I looked at the bunch of us. Clockwise, Rose slept on my lap wrapped in her sister's jacket; Henry puckered from the pickle brine. Jane stared into the center of the circle, and Charlotte huddled in the gray wool blanket next to Darwin, who had his arm around her and rubbed her shoulders when she began to shiver. And there was Steward, tied to the water pipe in the corner of the cellar, rear end just out of what we judged was kicking distance.

I felt reluctant to break the silence, wanting to guard my feeling that this tornado had profoundly changed all of us. It might not be apparent to an outsider like Jane, or even the children, but even their gestures toward each other displayed an uncommon texture of concern.

Charlotte was the first to speak. "Why are we staring at a stupid shoe?"

I sighed and shifted Rose to my other arm. That was it, I thought, the beginning of our descent.

"This shoe may be smarter than any of us," said Jane, "or how did it get from that hill at the river bend to the middle of your yard?"

"It's not *my* yard," said Charlotte.

"You don't give up," said Jane. "Headstrong little woman."

"I'm not little in case you haven't noticed."

Jane ignored her and began to explain how the tornado's snout had lifted her shoe from the hill into its parent cloud and how the shoe dropped back to the ground once it cleared the vacuum. Physics, Jane was saying. I wanted to inject my philosophy on how the wind affected the course of our lives. I looked at my children and wondered whether today would quicken our decision to leave the farm or remain. I wondered if they could now understand the meaning of wind.

Charlotte watched me as if she were reading my mind. "You know what this means, of course," she said. "It means there was a tornado and you lied and said there weren't any in this place." The blanket fell from Charlotte's shoulders. "Are you just going to sit there," she said, "and not say anything?"

Jane fished around the empty pickle jar with the fork. "Don't look at me," she shrugged. "I never said it was true."

"Mom?"

I didn't want to preach. Preaching would only fuel her wrath. It wasn't a big tornado. A one on a scale of five. A miracle whip, Jane had said. The house wasn't damaged. Even the shovel withstood the wind. No one was hurt. Not even Steward, although I couldn't be sure about Red Too and his flock of hens. We were bonded, sitting there staring at a silly shoe and passing our communal pickle jar. It was a beginning. And it wasn't finished. Quite literally, the radio announcer was predicting the storm was not over—another tornado was possible. This place claimed us today, somewhat brutally and not by accident. Charlotte either feel it or she didn't. I couldn't make her. She either saw it or she didn't. Nothing I say would change that.

Darwin lifted the blanket back up around Charlotte's shoulders and patted her back. "Why did you leave Jane on that hill just sitting there?" she asked.

Jane hit her fork back and forth on the rim of the pickle jar. "She was busy dragging your smart ass to this cellar." She pointed the fork at Charlotte. "If I didn't want to be there on that hill, I would not have been."

Henry leaned back and reached into a box of wilting apples. He examined one and rubbed it on his shirtsleeve before getting up and taking it over to Steward, then held the apple to the pony's muzzle. When his square teeth bit into the fruit, two slobbery pieces fell to the ground. The part that didn't, he ate. When he reached for the remains, the tied off halter rope jerked his head. Henry picked up the pieces and held them in his flat palm, petting the Steward's mane and cooing.

"I was just asking," said Charlotte. She looked down at her lap. "On the other hand, maybe you saved us."

"I didn't save anybody," said Jane. "Your mother did and you should thank her for that instead of acting like a snotty, spoiled brat camouflaged in ... what do you call that style ... coastal punk?"

Charlotte buried her face in the blanket and when her shoulders began to shake I lay Rose aside and risked the shock of Charlotte shrugging off my touch. I put my arms around her. I felt her shoulders give and soft sobs broke loose just as the radio announcer reported that the storm had split and moved north and east toward Lawrence. I imagined Stevie Ray out there somewhere in his flimsy trailer oblivious of the tornado and unconcerned about me. I leaned back and just let those thoughts swim by like a school of fish. I wiped my oldest daughter's tears with the sleeve of my shirt just as

someone rattled the cellar hatch. Charlotte screamed and Rose jumped from her sleep; the pony started and buckled onto his front knees.

“Whoa,” said Jane, “whoa there, boy.” She stood and yanked Steward’s halter rope loose from the pipe.

“What’s wrong with Steward?” Rose raised herself groggily from the Charlotte’s jacket. The pony struggled to his feet. Henry pet his muzzle and Darwin unlatched the cellar door. Step-cousin Janine stood at the top of the stairs, backlit by the sunlight. She entered the cellar and walked down the flight of steps into our subterranean refuge.

She looked around. “Why are you here?”

“The tornado?” said Darwin.

“I thought you’d be gone by now,” she said.

“I thought you were evicted,” said Jane. She stuck out her hand. “We’ve multiplied instead. I’m Jane Yellow Hair, a friend from Lawrence.”

Janine raised her eyebrows.

“I’m of the Cherokee Nation,” said Jane. “Southern band.” She said something in Cherokee, which apparently Janine didn’t understand since she did not respond. Instead she turned from Jane and perused the room again, pausing on the empty pickle jar—her empty pickle jar—before zeroing in on Steward. “That would explain the pile of horse shit by the door.”

“He’s a pony,” said Henry. “His name is Steward.” He looked at me to see if I’d noticed that he’d pronounced the pony’s name with a “d.”

“You should’ve asked permission before bringing a horse onto the place.”

Then my oldest daughter did something that a person can never make happen. One of those things that only happens when you've stopped trying to make it happen. It happens like the fragrant burst of wisteria at dusk. The kind of response that marks a shift.

"It's *our* place," said Charlotte.

“Why are you here,” I asked Janine.

“I wanted to see if there was any damage. Why are you here?”

“You knew we were here,” I said. “You saw us last night.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I hoped she was lying. “Anyway, we came down here for shelter,” I said.

“Why didn’t you use the cyclone cellar?”

I’d thought this was the cyclone cellar.

“The dugout with the bale of hay on top.” She glared at me as if I were an idiot.

“There’s space for four, six if you squeeze. No room for a horse, that’s for sure. I’ve stored water and shotgun shells in case the neighbors panic. This cellar,” she waved her arm around the basement, “is a deathtrap. It would cave if a twister ripped through. The entire house would come down on you.”

“What about Steward?” asked Henry.

“The pony? What about him?” Janine said.

“Do you know how to get him out of here?” I asked.

“Not a clue,” said Janine. “I like riding things with keys. That red tractor out there doesn’t get cranky.”

Jane laughed.

“What if the tornado comes back?” asked Darwin. “What if another one, a bigger one like in grandpa’s story meets with the number one ...” He shuddered.

“Mama, tell them to stop talking about it,” said Charlotte. “Read the diary. Please. It’s in your pocket.” She pointed to my back pocket. Without thinking, I had grabbed it from the kitchen table when I’d gone looking for the boys.

I glanced at Jane and Janine. “Do you mind?” I asked. “It’ll settle them down.”

Jane nodded, then Janine shrugged. Her hostility seemed to melt away in Jane’s presence.

“Let’s take a vote,” I said. Charlotte and Rose wanted to read from the diary. Henry didn’t care as long as he could stay by the pony. Darwin, recovering from his fear, wanted to go check out the true cyclone cellar, but I’d lost track of him once already and nixed the idea.

“I’ll read,” said Charlotte. She went through the pages until she found the spot she had left off last night. “‘September fifteen, eighteen ninety-three.’ Ready? Adelia writes, ‘A small wind snaked the schoolyard today lifting the dust in curls of black smoke, spiraling across the yard.’” She looked up at me. “That is too freaky,” she said.

“Stop with the drama,” said Darwin. “Just read.”

“‘On such a day as this dear Little Talking Leaf died of consumption. I know, however, that it was homesickness drained her last words.

Her self consciousness toward Janine and Jane caused her to read in a higher voice than she had the night before.

“Next entry. ‘September sixteen. John and me are driving Little Talking Leaf’s body to her family. We are bringing his boys and on the way back he is going to show me his family’s ranch east of the Outlet. The winds have picked up from the south and the sky is an ugly black pall. As I stepped down from the S___’s office where I had

informed him and his sourpuss wife of my plans, the dust and smoke overpowered me just as I now know S____ overpowered Julie.”

Charlotte stopped reading to give Jane a knowing look. She went on, her voice recovering its richness. “She has told me. And she told me something surprising. Her sister is coming to buy her from the school. The agents took her from her family north of here when she was young, sent her on a train so she could not find her way home. But they did not take her sister who was fair and passed for white. Julie is almost finished here but the S____ will not let her realize her plans to go back east and he has made plan plans to hire her out as a domestic to a local farmer. What he doesn’t know would sear the hair on his behind. The farm belongs to Julie’s sister. She lives in the Outlet and has saved up money from cattle and even though they have to pay now for their claim, they have enough to bribe the S____ to give up his plans for her. Meanwhile, Papa and Robert pray the south winds lay still for their run. I hope the wind drives everyone but them away. Violet made John and I a sack of corn cakes and sandwiches. I wear her medicine bag to send the bad spirits back to their world. I wore it out of my blouse so the children could see as I walked through the dormitory for the last time.

“We left with the sun’s first light at our back heading toward the tiny patch they call the Kiowa and Comanche reservation. Looking back, gray smoke curled from the school stacks and I was glad to be leaving but sad to leave the children behind to their fate.

“Next entry,” announced Charlotte, without so much as looking up. “September eighteen. We have traveled two days before running into a Kiowa party who knew of

Little Talking Leaf. One man ran to the back of the wagon and lifted out the precious body. He held it and wailed so I thought it must be the father. The rest circled around them and soon it was too much for me. I broke down.”

“Next. September nineteen. When the people saw me one of the old men yelled. He was afraid that I was here to teach about Jesus or take his children. They wrapped Little Talking Leaf in blankets and John helped dig a grave under an elm. Mother and father cut their hair in mourning. Mother threw herself into the grave and wailed until another woman coaxed her out. I brought the rag doll but did not have the nerve to throw it in the grave so I held it out to the mother who refused to take it. The men shoveled dirt into the dear one’s grave and piled two feet of rock on top to make sure wolves and coyote did not eat her.

“I have lost track of the days. The Kiowa readied themselves and danced all day and into the night into such a trance to express their grief and find the spirits of their dead children that I thought I would swoon from their exhaustion. The people are dressed in buckskins and moccasins, the faces of the men painted every color and wearing eagle feathers in their scalp locks, the women's hair loose. The village stretches a mile, a pittance compared to the vast prairie they used to roam freely. Here the teepees have been painted with symbols. Inside dried plants and feathers hang like sausage and garlic ropes. Blankets have been made for beds. They passed a pipe and danced in front of the medicine man until falling onto the ground. I feel the ghosts around us and wonder if William is among them.

“Today a cloud blocked the sun. I am certain this is the morning after the run. The medicine man said it was a bad omen. To the northeast black dust covers the rising

sun and reaches miles along the horizon. It is a sign to these people that the white man's path is evil. Before he said something to me that John translated. Always respect the Indian's right to the land. I promised I would.

“I returned last night. The school is nearly empty, such a change from the chaos before I left. William is gone. Little Dorothy Talking Leaf is finally home. Violet reports that Julie left yesterday with a woman and her husband who have hired her to clean house and cook! I wonder if she knows what I know. I have missed a proper goodbye.

“I have decided upon the nursing program in Arkansas City. I have seen here all I can handle of the sadness. Tonight I will say his name John Rain on the first star I see. Tomorrow I leave Chilocco forever.”

I placed the sleeping Rose in Darwin's lap and stood up.

“What's wrong with you?” asked Jane.

“I need to move. My legs are cramped.”

“Ah, those gypsy feet,” she said. “And you call us nomads.”

Janine snickered. But her dislike for the bunch of us wavered slightly since meeting Jane, a full blood. Rose woke up talking about taking flowers to the lake, rowing out and decorating the tree stump where she'd claimed Adelia was buried. I took her back in my lap and rocked her.

Jane raised her eyebrows. “I think this is the right time to tell you my idea. It came to me while I was sitting on the hilltop.”

Charlotte raised her head to the ceiling and closed her eyes, “and levitating.” She glanced at Jane to assure herself that it wouldn’t tick her off if she continued. “Then she comes back with only one shoe on and Mama the other in the middle of the yard.”

Janine stared at the shoe. “You don’t always have to know what something means,” she said. “It happened. That’s all you need to know. You don’t have to know any more.”

“It means there are tornados here,” said Charlotte. “Elman said there weren’t. My mother said there wasn’t. The Indians said so.”

“Well I’m Indian and I’m here to say there are tornados here,” said Janine.

“But it could’ve been worse,” said Charlotte. “It picked up that shoe, blew some wheat and feathers around and all kinds of crap. I did think we were dead, especially when Mom stuffed us in that tree root.”

“It was a warning,” said Darwin.

Rose wanted to know if we could get a boat and go out to Adelia’s grave.

“No boats for me,” said Jane.

“You have to come,” I said. “You’re part of us.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Janine.

“Tell her,” said Jane. “They’re her relatives.”

“Remember when I asked you if you knew where Adelia had been buried?”

“That day by the river you called me a half breed by the river? That day?”

Jane shook her head.

“That day you egged on Red Too and tried to beat me up.”

"The day you showed up out of nowhere," said Janine, "and decided after fourteen years of me taking care of this place I'd have to move." Janine started to get on her feet.

"You obviously haven't been convinced of that."

"Excuse me," said Jane. "Whoa." She pressed Janine's shoulder until she sat back down. "What did you just say?"

Janine grew silent.

"Fourteen years," Jane said. "That's what you said. Fourteen years of taking care of this place. In Kansas a person has live on a place fifteen years to take control by adverse possession. If that's true, you don't have a case."

"Oops," said Charlotte.

Janine turned bitter. "She was going to let Elman and Harriet have it. Or do something crazy. Move here. Someone like her isn't going to move here and stay. Look at her. Look. She'll never make it. She's a spoiled bitch."

"Don't call my mother a bitch," said Charlotte.

"She is a bitch," Jane said. "We're all bitches"

"Speak for yourself," said Charlotte.

"... but not that much of a bitch or Molly wouldn't be willing to pay you all the back taxes you've already spent on this place and offer you a renewable lease to harvest the wheat."

Jane looked at me for confirmation as she negotiated the future of the farm. I had no idea how much back taxes amounted to on this place, but I went along with her and agreed.

“It’s the least I can do,” I said, “for all the work you’ve done. And we are related.”

“Not really,” she said.

I stretched my legs and shook them out.

“Legs again,” said Jane.

“Genetic. It runs in my family. It gets worse at the end of the day, insufferable at night. I nearly bought my own bed so I wouldn’t keep Mitch awake.”

“I have a remedy,” Jane said.

“I’ve tried everything. Nothing works.”

“The physical is a mere manifestation of the spiritual. You need to heal your heart and soul. You need some cattle.”

Janine snickered again. “Just make sure you get em with strong feet and easy calving. I can’t see someone like you pulling calves.” She turned to Jane. “You were going to tell me about my family. You were about to say something about my kin.”

Jane launched an explanation. “Her aunt and your grandfather and lots of his family, your family, are buried under the lake down at her aunt and uncle’s ranch. They left the graves undisturbed when they flooded the valley.”

On that tornado day in June, things turned for the better. I give the wind credit for that. Just as it had swept Adelia out of one world and into another and another, it spurred her to find what people like myself are seeking—that true home where we can begin again to pass down to our children the parts of us that we are most proud of. John Rain had a lot to do with Adelia’s success. Stevie Ray had helped make my present

contentment possible for me. He was what I had needed in that time and place, a catalyst for me to make a needed change. But in the end, it was that force that we cannot see and that is beyond our reach that moves us. In this case, the wind.

We decided to perform a ceremony for Adelia and name the drowned snag in the finger of the lake. Charlotte collected plastic flowers from the cemetery. We rented a rowboat from the bait-and-tackle store and borrowed Elman's truck again to haul it. We decided moonlight was the best time to row out to the lake, even though it would be a slim hangnail of a moon. Darwin and Rose filled old tin cans halfway with dirt and punched holes in the top rim with a can opener. Henry placed candles inside. Jane started saving half-gallon milk containers. She cut saplings and inserted them into the middle of each waxy milk container to make torches for each one of us.

The air was warm and still, the flat-water lake glistened with stars and the profiles of inky clouds. Charlotte shoved off and Darwin began to row. I reveled in the sounds of crickets and oars in oarlocks. Jane lit the first of the milk carton torches and passed it to Henry, who sat at the bow. Then she lit one for Rose and me. In this way we approached the snag where we determined that Great Aunt Adelia was buried. Charlotte floated her plastic bouquets on the lake while I gave my torch to Rose and opened Adelia's diary to a random page. I read aloud: *I must remember to tell papa about that place. That man, how he looked at me without surprise like he knew me even before looking up.* Jane leaned back over the railing, tipping the boat's rail precariously near the water. *On at least one dried out twig hangs a thin hank of my blonde hair.* She fell back the same way she'd fallen into the prairie grass and fireflies. Without warning.

Rose shrieked as the boat rocked and Jane disappeared into the water. By the time the starry rings around her entry had settled, she had not surfaced.

“Crazy,” said Charlotte.

“Thomething’s grabbed her.” Rose was riveted to my lap, clinging to her torches.

Jane came up in a burst. She shook her head and started to swim, kicking up a noisy, uneven froth. Darwin turned the boat so we could row beside her. Charlotte pulled off her boots and peeled off her shirt and skirt down to her underwear, placed one bare leg over the boat rail then the other, turned and lowered herself gracefully into the water. She swam quickly and smoothly to Jane, who stopped and looked around bewildered, not knowing where she was.

“It’s me, Charlotte. I’ll swim to shore with you.”

“Hurry.” She breathed rapidly and unevenly. “I feel them tickling my feet.” She put her head back in the water and swam toward shore.

“Rainy Lake,” said Henry, and he held out his hand, “One drop for every person.”

“Adelia would love that.” Just as much as she would love that we had decided to stay.

I held out my palm and felt the soft rain. It was a sign, and all signs are good.

Afterword

A year has passed since we said goodbye to California and made Kansas our home. Janine lives in the stone house on Elman and Harriet's ranch and manages the tilling, sewing and harvesting of my wheat. She talked Elman into buying a small herd of buffalo. She dug us an expanded cyclone cellar using a neighbor's backhoe. We bought two more horses—a nasty little pony for Rose and a paint-quarter horse for Darwin. Elman built the kids a round pen and says he's planning an arena, but we'll see about that. Henry is devoted to Elman, a quick study of cowboy this and that while his speech has continued to improve. Charlotte isn't interested in horses, but she's fallen in love with a young man in her English class. He is the only student in the high school with a nose stud and dyed black hair that he wears in what they call a *petit faux-hawk*. His father, who moved here to take a position as professor of American History at the University of Kansas, bought a place in Arkansas City and commutes three times a week. Lord knows why. Charlotte and her new beau are talking about college, and to appear to be a more well-rounded student, she's running for President of the senior class on a platform of liberalizing the school clubs, including the creation of a surf club for her brother. My mother moved with Jack to Estes Park, a sweet town that's fun to visit and only a day's drive away. They come over once a month and Mother promises to take Charlotte shopping to her heart's content if she would decide on college in Boulder. She has options. Elman comes out at least once a day to teach Darwin how to drive a stick and haul a horse trailer. Harriet sends food but refuses to drive with Elman, so we talk on the phone about at least once a day to report his departures and safe arrivals. Darwin

misses the coast more than anyone. I've promised him a surfing trip to Santa Cruz in fall for my forty-first birthday, and he's looking into attending the University of California at Santa Cruz when he graduates high school.

I'm good single. It's better to live one's life the fullest single than endure a mate whose indifference shrivels the woman's self, who makes her feel like an intellectual inferior, and overwhom a woman has no influence. A woman needs love and power in order to safely lose her self to a relationship. I had a friend in Jane, and still do, but after Marion disappeared she returned to Georgetown University to finish her law degree. We write and telephone, but it's not the same as having a friend in the flesh when you need her.

The more time that passes, the more I regard my suspicions of Marion and Stevie Ray Howard as just that—suspicions that I wanted to believe because they gave me something solid to hang onto. I turned in my article to *Mother Jones* without any mention of my personal involvement. I decided to investigate the story of the girl, now woman, who had been violated. On my next trip between Santa Cruz and Tornado, while I was trying to move us out here, I tracked down the girl and found her, like Marion had said, in San Francisco. She wanted to meet me at the Liberty Café, a small high end restaurant in Bernal Heights off Mission that features local organic produce. I knew her the minute I walked in. She wore her black hair cropped. She was big boned and pretty with a rough look from black jeans, leather jacket, and metal studs. Her arms had been tattooed with beautifully Native American motifs in the colors of turquoise, red coral, and bright green. The tattoo began at her wrist with a thunder pattern that wrapped around in her arm in a spiral and ended at her shoulder, where a large image of a Native woman in

buckskin began at her shoulder and draped down her back. A dozen birds in minute detail were tattooed along the thunderpattern spiral. She said they were designed to protect her from further harm and keep her on the right road. She has been in recovery for six years and while she's earning her degree in computer science at San Francisco State, she tends bar a few doors down the street. Slippery, but that is not my business.

She had never told her story to a reporter and only talked to me because, for one, she believed I was genuinely interested in helping Marion, and two, her grandmother had just died so she didn't have to worry about retaliation (her grandfather had died two years previously). It was the sheriffs who attacked her on that afternoon outside of Pawhuska. And two men, Indian men, had saved her. She doesn't remember anything about a stabbing, but remembers the two picking her off the ground and driving her to her grandparents. She remembers the late night visit by a man who warned her grandparents not to testify. She did not see him, but she can still hear his voice as if he were in the same room, and she knew it was the voice of her rapist. She advised me to check the files and find the evidence. There were lawyers in San Francisco who were aching to retry cases based on new DNA testing. They had swabbed her mouth. They had taken samples from her vagina. She was adamant that a DNA test could nail the bastard who'd raped her. She advised me to call the International Indian Treaty Council up the street from where we were eating and find out if they knew any lawyers who might want to handle the case. She was right. They found a brilliant young attorney, a woman fresh out of Hastings Law School and ready to do her part to make the world right, who is using the Freedom of Information Act to reopen the files. I turned in the story—actually her story, the story of a girl who pulled her life out of the abyss after it had been

thoroughly shattered. When and if new evidence materializes regarding the case or the whereabouts of Marion Daniels, *Mother Jones* has promised me the story.

I landed a job as a daily reporter for *The Arkansas City Tribune*, and I'm still writing stories that don't interest me, but in record time. Being a reporter for the local daily has connected me and my children to the heart of the community. I'm searching for ways to make money off of the farm. I talked Janine into sewing organic wheat and planting further away from the edge of the river bank. No pesticides. No genetically modified grain. I want the grouse and hedgerow back. Elman complains that we'll only yield sixteen bushels an acre instead of sixty. Everytime he complains, I plant another walnut tree. I found a California buyer willing to pay \$7 instead of \$3.25 a bushel and I think the organic market is due to bust wide open. Anyway, I've bought more chickens and got Darwin to help me open the coup so that they can wander the premises, range-free. We cleaned up the berry bush by the barn. The twins set up a lemonade stand by the road and sell the berries on the side. Henry befriended the nice lady in the feed store. Last winter he talked her into letting him put our walnuts up for sale by the counter. Red Too disappeared on the day of the tornado. I read an entry in the *Tribune's* sheriff's reports from someone had spotted a red rooster strutting across the interstate, but that's the last I heard of him.

Today, I walked to the river and found a man, younger than I by a good ten years, filling a large white plastic bucket with river water. His loose hair fell over his shoulder. I startled him when I said hello. He had surprised me as well. When I asked, he told me he was hauling water for a ceremony. I thought, wow, crossed the river and picked my

way up the flinty bluff, trying to retrace the route Jane had taken on that tornado day. I hiked up the side of that flint hill just as Jane had and looked out over the fields toward the Indian School. While I climbed the bluff, I decided two things. One, a tornado had barely missed our farm, but it had missed it just the same. Two, I had stopped caring whether Stevie Ray's interest in me was genuine or motivated by getting Marion out of prison.

I had brought Adelia's diary, preparing myself to try to see what she had seen when she looked out over the farmland. I imagined how she came up here that night and stared to the south in the direction John Rain had traveled and decided that her life would be with him. I had yearned for the same thing she yearned for when she gazed on the starlight above the prairie and made a wish that her lover was thinking of her with equal yearning. Her wish had come true. I didn't want to waste my prayer. When I got to the top of the hill, I would sit until the stars came out and wish for my children's prosperity and safety.

I sat down on the bluff and what I saw in south to the far field surprised the hell out of me. A large white teepee had been erected. Light gray smoke drifted from its blackened center. To the right, a man was building a fire and two others were rolling up the bottom and tying it in place so that a foot long space showed between the ground and the canvas—not enough for me to see inside. A half-dozen head of mixed-color cattle grazed in short grass that had already overtaken the wheat, and two of them stood on the old rutted buffalo trail, their noses up, smelling the air.

The wind had something to do with all of this. Including that phone call that came from Richard Peters one monsoon afternoon several weeks after the tornado. By

then the adverse possession had been lifted and my title to the farm was clear. Peters informed me that he had researched my land and concluded that, indeed, my great grandfather had obtained it by illegal means. According to the records from the Cowley County courthouse, his claim had been dated a full week before the date the federal government had set for officially opening the Osage territory to white settlement. He had spoken to some elders of the tribe, and they remembered stories from their old ones who walked this land and of one particular place, a river bend whose bank rose toward a high point where the earth and sky met. At this intersection, they prayed to the spirits. Peters said that, despite the lapse of time, the tribe felt legally justified filing a suit to reclaim this spot, and they were prepared to do just that. He told me if I had any second thoughts about deeding back the land to the Osage, contrary to my initial intention on that day we'd first met, perhaps a nudge from the tribe would help return my thinking toward their direction. The tribe would settle for the southern half, he said, including the bluff, the bend, and the river to its middle. Aware that my children needed a home, he added, I could keep the acreage on the other side of the river, including the house and outbuildings.

I walked down the south face of the hill that belonged to the Osage once again, and by the time I reached its nape, I had mustered up enough courage and curiosity to approach my new/old neighbors and introduce myself. But a voice behind me shouted, "Hey." The man I had spoken with at the river walked toward me, water spilling over the bucket's rim. He stopped several feet in front of me and put down his pail.

"You can't be here," he said. "This is private property."

I looked into his face and started to tell him who I was. I started to explain that I was his neighbor and that I used to own this property. But I didn't get very far—there was so much to say. I wanted to tell him I was the great-grand-daughter of the first white man to set foot in this territory, Osage Territory, the descendent of a man who snuck into the area by moon light sooner than he was supposed to. I would add that my great grand pa was a shrewd, destitute, young immigrant spud farmer who didn't have a lot of options and capitalized on Indian lands obtained by the United States government through coercion. I wanted to tell him I was the great grand daughter of one who made a successful run into the Cherokee Outlet while hundreds of Native American children stood hostage in an adjacent boarding school. My great aunt had worked there and loved those children. I wanted to tell him that, too. I wanted to tell him she married a full blood Osage and that I'd had an Indian lover. I wanted to tell him that I was the one who deeded this land back to the Osage, clear up to that sacred hilltop and down to the river bend. Instead, I apologized for trespassing, then turned and headed back across the river toward home.