

FOR A LITTLE
WHILE

NEW AND SELECTED STORIES

RICK
BASS

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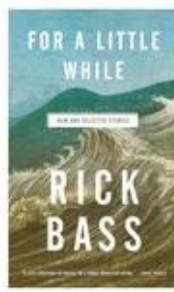
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LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY
NEW YORK BOSTON LONDON



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*For Mary Katherine and Lowry, incomparable beloveds; and for my agent,
David Evans, friend and support*

Selected Stories

Some dive into the sea
Some toil upon the stone

—Townes Van Zandt

Wild Horses

Karen was twenty-six. She had been engaged twice, married once. Her husband had run away with another woman after only six months. It still made her angry when she thought about it, which was not often.

The second man she had loved more, the most. He was the one she had been engaged to, but had not married. His name was Henry. He had drowned in the Mississippi the day before they were to be wed. They never even found the body. He had a marker in the cemetery, but it was a sham. All her life Karen had heard those stories about fiancés dying the day before the wedding, and then it had happened to her.

Henry and some of his friends, including his best friend, Sydney Bean, had been sitting up on the railroad trestle that ran so far and across that river, above the wide muddiness. Louisiana and trees on one side; Mississippi and trees, and some farms, on the other side. There had been a full moon and no wind, and they were sitting above the water, maybe a hundred feet above it, laughing, and drinking Psychos from the Daiquiri World over in Delta, Louisiana. The Psychos were rum and Coca-Cola and various fruit juices and blue food coloring. They came in Styrofoam cups the size of small trash cans, so large they had to be held with both hands. Sydney had had two of them; Henry, three.

Henry had stood up, beaten his chest like Tarzan, shouted, and then dived in. It had taken him forever to hit the water. The light from the moon was good, and they had been able to watch him all the way down.

Sometimes Sydney Bean still came by to visit Karen. Sydney was gentle and sad, her own age, and he worked on his farm, out past Utica, back to the east, where he also broke and sometimes trained wild horses.

Once a month—at the end of each month—Sydney would stay over on Karen's farm, and then he would go into her big empty closet, and he would let her hit him: striking him with her fists, kicking him, kneeling him, slapping his face until his ears rang and his nose bled; slapping and swinging at him until she was crying and her hair was wild and in her eyes, and the palms of her hands hurt too much to hit him anymore.

It built up, the ache and the anger in Karen; and then, hitting Sydney, it went away for a while. Henry was a good friend. But the trouble was that it always came back.

Sometimes Sydney would try to help her in other ways. He would tell her that someday she would be going to have to realize Henry would not be coming back. Not ever—not in any form—but to remember what she and Henry had had, to keep *that* from going away.

Sydney would stand there, in the closet, and let her strike him. But the rules were strict: she had to keep her mouth closed. He would not let her call him names while she was hitting him.

Though she wanted to.

After it was over, and she was crying, more drained than she had felt since the last time, sobbing

Sydney would help her up. He would take her into the bedroom and towel her forehead with a cold washcloth. Karen would be crying in a child's gulping sobs, and he would brush her hair, hold her hand, sometimes hold her against him, and pat her back while she moaned.

Farm sounds would come from the field, and when she looked out the window, she might see her neighbor, old Dr. Lynly, the vet, driving along in his ancient blue truck, moving along the bayou down along the trees, with his dog, Buster, running alongside, barking, herding cows together for vaccinations.

"I can still feel the hurt," Karen would tell Sydney sometimes, when he came over not to be beaten up but to cook supper for her, or to sit on the back porch with her, and watch the fields.

Sydney nodded whenever Karen said she still hurt, and studied his hands.

"I could have grabbed him," he'd say, and then look up and out at the field some more. "I keep thinking that one of these years, I'm going to get a second chance." Sydney would shake his head again. "I think I could have grabbed him," he'd say.

"Or you could have dived in after him," Karen would say. "Maybe you could have dived in after him."

Her voice would trail off, and her face would be flat and weary.

On these occasions, Sydney Bean wanted the beatings to come once a week, or even daily. But the hurt, too, almost as much as the loss of his friend, and he said nothing. He still felt as if he owed Henry something. He didn't know what.

Sometimes, when he was down on his knees and Karen was kicking him or elbowing him, he felt close to it—and he almost felt angry at Karen—but he could never catch the shape of it, only the feeling.

He wanted to know what was owed, so he could go on.

On his own farm, there were cattle down in the fields, and they would get lost, separated from one another, and would low all through the night. It was a sound like soft thunder in the night, before the rain comes, and he liked it.

He raised the cattle, and saddle-broke the young horses that had never been ridden before, the one and two-year-olds, the stallions, the wild mares. That pounding, and the evil, four-footed stamp-and-spin they went into when they could not shake him: when they began to do that, he knew he had the beaten. He charged two hundred and fifty dollars a horse, and sometimes it took him a month.

Old Dr. Lynly needed a helper but couldn't pay much, and Sydney, who had done some business with the vet, helped Karen get the job. She needed something to do besides sitting around on her back porch, waiting for the end of each month.

Dr. Lynly was older than Karen had thought he would be, when she met him up close. He had the look to her that told her it might be the last year of his life. It wasn't so much any illness or feebleness or disability. It was just a finished look.

He and Buster—his six-year-old Airedale—lived within the city limits of Vicksburg, down below the battlefield, hidden in one of the ravines. His house was up on blocks as the property flooded with almost every rain—and in his yard, in various corrals and pens, were chickens, ducks, goats, sheep, ponies, horses, cows, and an ostrich. It was illegal to keep them as pets, and the city newspaper editor was after him to get rid of them, but Dr. Lynly claimed they were all being treated by his tiny clinic.

“You’re keeping these animals too long, Doc,” the editor told him. Dr. Lynly would pretend to be senile and that the editor was asking for a prescription, and would begin quoting various random chemical names.

The Airedale minded Dr. Lynly exquisitely. He brought the paper, the slippers, left the room on command, and he brought the chickens’ eggs, daily, into the kitchen, making several trips for his and Dr. Lynly’s breakfast. Dr. Lynly would fry six eggs for himself, and Buster would get a dozen or so broken into his bowl raw. Any extras went into the refrigerator for Dr. Lynly to take on his rounds, though he no longer had many; only the very oldest people, who remembered him, and the poorest who knew he worked for free and would charge them only for the medicine.

Buster’s black-and-tan coat was glossy from the eggs, and his eyes, deep in the curls, were bright. He watched Dr. Lynly all the time.

Sometimes Karen watched Dr. Lynly play with Buster, bending down and swatting him in the chest, slapping his shoulders. She had thought the job would be mostly kittens and lambs, but she was mistaken.

Horses, the strongest creatures, were the ones that got the sickest, he said, and their pain was unspeakable when they finally did yield to it. On rounds with Dr. Lynly, Karen forgot to think about Henry at all. She was horrified by the horses’ pain, almost wishing it were hers, bearing it rather than watching it.

Once, when Sydney was with her, he had reached out and taken her hand in his. When she looked down and saw it, she had at first been puzzled, not recognizing what it was, and then repulsed, as if it were a giant slug, and she threw Sydney’s hand off hers and ran into her room.

Sydney stayed out on the porch. It was heavy blue twilight and the cattle down in the fields were feeding.

“I’m sorry,” he called out. “But I can’t bring him back!” He waited for her to answer, but could only hear her crying. It had been three years.

He knew he was wrong to have caught her off-balance like that: but he was tired of her unhappiness and frustrated that he could do nothing to end it. The sounds of her crying carried, and the cows down in the fields began to move closer. The light had dimmed: there were dark shadows, and a low golden thumbnail of a moon—a wet moon—came up over the ragged tear of trees by the bayou.

The beauty of the evening, being on Karen’s back porch and in her life when it should have been Henry, flooded Sydney with a sudden guilt. He had been fighting it, and holding it back: and then suddenly, the quiet stillness of the evening released it, and he heard himself saying a crazy thing.

“I pushed him off, you know,” he said, loud enough so she could hear. “I finished my drink, and put both hands on his skinny-ass little shoulders, and said, ‘Take a deep breath, Henry.’ I just pushed him off.”

It felt good, making up the lie. He was surprised at the relief he felt: it was as if he had controlled the situation. It was like when he was on the horses, breaking them, trying to stay on.

Presently, Karen came back out with a small blue pistol, a .38, and she put it next to his head.

“Let’s get in the truck,” she said.

He knew where they were going.

The river was about ten miles away, and they took their time. There was fog flowing across the low parts of the road and through the fields and meadows like smoke, coming from the woods, and he was thinking about how cold and hard the water would be when he finally hit.

He felt as if he were already falling toward it, the way it had taken Henry forever to fall. But he didn't say anything, and though it didn't feel right, he wondered if perhaps it was this simple; as if there was what was owed after all.

They drove on, past the blue fields and the spills of fog. The roofs of the hay barns were bright silver polished tin, under the little moon and stars. There were small lakes, cattle stock tanks, and steam rose from them.

They drove with the windows down. It was a hot night, full of flying bugs, and about two miles from the river Karen told him to stop.

He pulled off to the side of the road, and wondered what she was going to do with his body. A cattle egret flew by, ghostly white and large, flying slowly, and Sydney was amazed that he had never recognized their beauty before, though he had seen countless numbers of them. It flew right across their windshield, from across the road, and it startled both of them.

The radiator ticked.

"You didn't really push him off, did you?" Karen asked. She still had the pistol against his head and had switched hands.

Like frost burning off the grass in a bright morning sun, there was in his mind a sudden, sugary watery feeling—like something dissolving. She was not going to kill him after all.

"No," he said.

"But you could have saved him," she said, for the thousandth time.

"I could have reached out and grabbed him," Sydney agreed. He was going to live. He was going to get to keep feeling things, was going to get to keep seeing things.

He kept his hands in his lap, not wanting to alarm Karen, but his eyes moved all around as he looked for more egrets. He was eager to see another one.

Karen watched him for a while, still holding the pistol against him, and then turned it around and looked at the open barrel of it, cross-eyed, and held it there, right in her face, for several seconds. Then she reached out and put it in the glove box.

Sydney Bean was shuddering.

"Thank you," he said. "Thank you for not shooting yourself."

He put his head down on the steering wheel, in the moonlight, and shuddered again. There were crickets calling all around them. They sat like that for a long time, Sydney leaning against the wheel and Karen sitting up straight, just looking out at the fields.

Then the cattle began to move up the hill toward them, thinking that Karen's old truck had come to feed them. They drifted up the hill from all over the fields, and from their nearby resting spots on the sandbars along the little dry creek that ran down into the bayou; and eventually, they all assembled around the truck.

They stood there in the moonlight, some with white faces like skulls, all about the same size, and chewed grass and watched the truck. One, bolder than the rest—a yearling black Angus—moved close, bumped the grill of the truck with his nose, playing, and then leapt back again, scattering some of the others.

"How much would you say that one weighs?" Karen asked. "How much, Sydney?"

They drove the last two miles to the river. It was about four a.m. The yearling cow was bleating and trying to break free; Sydney had tied him up with his belt, and with jumper cables and shoelaces, and an old shirt. His lip was bloody from where the calf had butted him.

But he had wrestled larger steers than that before.

They parked at the old bridge, the one the trains still used to cross. Farther downriver, they could

see an occasional car, two round spots of headlight moving steadily across the new bridge, so far above the river, going very slowly. Sydney put his shoulders under the calf's belly and lifted it with his back and legs, and like a prisoner in the stock, he carried it out to the center of the bridge. Karen followed. It took about fifteen minutes to get there, and Sydney was trembling, dripping with sweat when they gauged they had reached the middle, the deepest part.

They sat there, soothing the frightened calf, stroking its ears, patting its flanks, and waited for the sun to come up. When it did, pale orange behind the great steaminess of the trees and river below—the fog from the river and trees a gunmetal gray, the whole world washed in gray flatness, except for the orange disk of the sun—they untied the calf, and pushed him over.

They watched him forever and forever, a black object and then a black spot against the gray background of dirt-colored river, and then there was a tiny white splash, lost almost immediately to the river's current. Logs, which looked like twigs from up on the bridge, swept across the spot. Everything headed south, and there were no eddies, no pauses.

"I am halfway over him," Karen said.

And then, walking back, she said: "So that was really what it was like?"

She had a good appetite, and they stopped at the Waffle House and ate eggs and pancakes, and sausage and biscuits and bacon and orange juice. She excused herself to go to the restroom, and when she came back out, her face was washed, her hair brushed and clean-looking. Sydney paid for the meal, and when they stepped outside, the morning was growing hot.

"I have to work today," Karen said, when they got back to her house. "We have to go see about the mule."

"Me, too," said Sydney. "I've got a stallion who thinks he's a bad-ass."

She studied him for a second, and felt like telling him to be careful, but didn't. Something was in her, a thing like hope stirring, and she felt guilty for it.

Sydney whistled, driving home, and tapped his hands on the steering wheel, though the radio did not work.

Dr. Lynly and Karen drove until the truck wouldn't go any farther, bogged down in the clay, and then they got out and walked. It was cool beneath all the big trees, and the forest seemed to be trying to press in on them. Dr. Lynly carried his heavy bag, stopping and switching arms frequently. Buster trotted ahead, between the two of them, looking left and right and up the road, and even up into the tops of the trees.

There was a sawmill, deep in the woods, where the delta farmland in the northern part of the county settled at the river and then went into dark mystery: hardwoods and muddy roads, then no roads. The men at the sawmill used mules to drag their trees to the cutting. There had never been money for bulldozers, or even tractors. The woods were quiet, and foreboding; it seemed to be a place without sound or light.

When they got near the sawmill, they could hear the sound of axes. Four men, shirtless, in muddy boots with the laces undone, were working on the biggest tree Karen had ever seen. It was a tree too big for chain saws. Had any of the men owned one, the tree would have ruined the saw.

One of the men kept swinging at the tree: putting his back into it, with rhythmic, stroking cuts. The other three stepped back, hitched their pants, and wiped their faces with their forearms.

The fourth man stopped cutting finally. There was no fat on him and he was pale, even standing in the beam of sunlight that was coming down through an opening in the trees—and he looked old: fifty

maybe, or sixty. Some of his fingers were missing.

~~“The mule’ll be back in a minute,” he said. He wasn’t even breathing hard. “He’s gone to bring~~ load up out of the bottom.” He pointed with his ax, down into the swamp.

“We’ll just wait,” said Dr. Lynly. He bent back and tried to look up at the top of the trees. “Y’ a just go right ahead with your cutting.”

But the pale muscled man was already swinging again, and the other three, with another tug at the beltless pants, joined in: an odd, pausing drumbeat, as four successive whacks hit the tree; then for more again; and then, almost immediately, the cadence shortened, growing irregular, as the older man chopped faster.

All around them the soft pittings, like hail, of tree chips rained into the bushes. One of the chips hit Buster in the nose, and he rubbed it with his paw, and turned and looked up at Dr. Lynly.

They heard the mule before they saw him: he was groaning, like a person. He was coming up the hill that led out of the swamp and was heading toward them.

They could see the tops of small trees and saplings shaking as he dragged his load through them. Then they could see the tops of his ears, then his huge head, and after that they saw his chest. Veins raced against the chestnut thickness of it.

Then the tops of his legs. And then his knee. Karen stared at it and then sat down in the mud, and hugged herself—the men stopped swinging, for just a moment—and Dr. Lynly had to help her up.

It was the mule’s right knee that was injured, and it had swollen to the size of a basketball. It buckled with every step he took, pulling the sled up the slick and muddy hill, but he kept his footing and did not stop. Flies buzzed around the knee, around the infections, where the loggers had pierced the skin with nails and the ends of their knives, trying to drain the pus. Dried blood ran down streaks to the mule’s hoof, to the mud.

The sawlogs on the back of the sled smelled good, fresh. They smelled like they were still alive.

Dr. Lynly walked over to the mule and touched the knee. The mule closed his eyes and trembled, and Karen had just done, or perhaps as if in ecstasy, at the chance to rest. The three younger men, plus the sledder, gathered around.

“We can’t stop workin’ him,” the sledder said. “We can’t shoot him either. We’ve got to keep him alive. He’s all we’ve got. If he dies, it’s us that’ll have to pull them logs up here.”

A cedar moth from the woods passed over the mule’s ears, fluttering. It rested on the mule’s forehead, and then flew off. The mule did not open his eyes. Dr. Lynly frowned and rubbed his chin. Karen felt faint again, and leaned against the mule’s sweaty back to keep from falling.

“You sure you’ve got to keep working him?” Dr. Lynly asked.

“Yes, sir.”

The pale logger was still swinging: tiny chips flying in batches.

Dr. Lynly opened his bag. He took out a needle and rag, and a bottle of alcohol. He cleaned the mule’s infections. The mule drooled a little when the needle went in, but he did not open his eyes. The needle was slender, and it bent and flexed, and slowly Dr. Lynly drained the fluid.

Karen held on to the mule’s wet back and vomited into the mud: both her hands on the mule as she were being arrested against the hood of a car, and her feet spread wide. The men gripped their axes and looked away.

Dr. Lynly gave one of them a large plastic jug of pills.

“These will kill his pain,” he said. “The knee will get big again, though. I’ll be back out, to drain it again.” He handed Karen a clean rag from his satchel, and led her away from the mule, away from the mess.

One of the ax men carried their satchel all the way back to the truck. Dr. Lynly let Karen get up in the cab first, and then Buster; then the ax man rocked and shoved, pushing on the hood of the truck, the tires spun, and helped them back it out of the mud: their payment for healing the mule. A smell of burning rubber and smoke hung in the trees after they left.

They didn't talk much. Dr. Lynly was thinking about the painkillers; how for a moment, he had almost given the death pills instead.

Karen was thinking how she would not let him pay her for that day's work. Also she was thinking about Sydney Bean: she would sit on the porch with him again, and maybe drink a beer and watch the fields.

He was sitting on the back porch when she got home; he was on the wooden bench next to the hammock, and he had a tray set up for her with a pitcher of cold orange juice. There was froth in the pitcher, a light creamy foaminess from where he had been stirring it, and the ice cubes were circling around. Beads of condensation slid down the pitcher, rolling slowly, then quickly, like tears. She could feel her heart giving. The field was rich summer green, and then, past the field, the dark line of trees. A long string of cattle egrets flew past, headed down to their rookery in the swamp.

Sydney poured her a small glass of orange juice. He had a metal pail of cold water and a clean washcloth. It was hot on the back porch, even for evening. He helped her get into the hammock; then he wrung the washcloth out and put it across her forehead, her eyes. Sydney smelled as if he had just gotten out of the shower, and he was wearing clean white duckcloth pants and a bright blue shirt.

She felt dizzy and leaned back in the hammock. The washcloth over her eyes felt so good. She sipped the orange juice, not looking at it, and licked the light foam of it from her lips. Owls were beginning to call, down in the swamp.

She felt as if she were younger, going back to a place, some place she had not been in a long time, but could remember fondly. It felt like she was in love. She knew that she could not be, but that was what it felt like.

Sydney sat behind her and rubbed her temples.

It grew dark, and the moon came up.

"It was a rough day," she said, around ten o'clock.

But he just kept rubbing.

Around eleven o'clock, she dozed off, and he woke her, helped her from the hammock, and led her inside, not turning on any lights, and helped her get in bed.

Then he went back outside, locking the door behind him. He sat on the porch a little longer, watching the moon, so high above him, and then he drove home cautiously, as ever. Accidents were everywhere; they could happen at any time, from any direction.

Sydney moved carefully, and tried to look ahead and be ready for the next one.

He really wanted her. He wanted her in his life. Sydney didn't know if the guilt was there for that—the wanting—or because he was alive, still seeing things, still feeling. He wanted someone in his life, and it didn't seem right to feel guilty about it. But he did.

Sometimes, at night, he would hear the horses running, thundering across the hard summer-baked flatness of his pasture, running wild—and he would imagine they were laughing at him for wasting his time feeling guilty, but it was a feeling he could not shake, could not ride down, and his sleep was often poor and restless.

Sydney often wondered if horses were even meant to be ridden at all.

The thing about the broncs, he realized—and he never realized it until they were rolling on top of him in the dust, or rubbing him off against a tree, or against the side of a barn, trying to break his legs—was that if the horses didn't get broken, tamed, they'd get wilder. There was nothing as wild as a horse that had never been broken. It just got meaner, each day.

So he held on. He bucked and spun and arched and twisted, shooting up and down with the man's horses' leaps; and when the horse tried to hurt itself, by running straight into something—a fence, a barn, the lake—he stayed on.

If there was, once in a blue moon, a horse not only stronger, but more stubborn than he, then he had to destroy it.

The cattle were easy to work with, would do anything for food, and once one did it, they would all follow; but working with the horses made him think ahead, and sometimes he wondered, in streaks and bits of paranoia, if perhaps all the horses in the world had some battle against him, and were predestined, all of them, to pass through his corrals, each one testing him before he was allowed to stop.

Because like all bronc-busters, that was what Sydney allowed himself to consider and savor, those moments of rest: the day when he could stop. A run of successes. A string of wins so satisfying and continuous that it would seem—even though he would be sore, and tired—that a horse would never beat him again, and he would be convinced of it, and then he could quit.

Mornings in summers past, Henry used to come over and sit on the railing and watch. He had been an elementary school teacher, and frail, almost anemic: but he had loved to watch Sydney Bean ride the horses. He taught only a few classes in the summers, and he would sip coffee and grade a few papers while Sydney and the horse fought out in the center.

Sometimes Henry had set a broken bone for Sydney—Sydney had shown him how—and other times Sydney, if he was alone, would set his own bones, if he even bothered with them. Then he would wrap them up and keep riding. Dr. Lynly had set some of his bones, on the bad breaks.

Sydney was feeling old, since Henry had drowned. Not so much in the mornings, when everything was new and cool, and had promise; but in the evenings, he could feel the crooked shapes of his bones within. He would drink beers, and watch his horses, and other people's horses in his pasture, as they ran. The horses never seemed to feel old, not even in the evenings, and he was jealous of their strength.

He called Karen one weekend. "Come out and watch me break horses," he said.

He was feeling particularly sore and tired. For some reason he wanted her to see that he could always do it; that the horses were always broken. He wanted her to see what it looked like, and how it always turned out.

"Oh, I don't know," she said, after she had considered it. "I'm just so *tired*." It was a bad and crooked road, bumpy, from her house to his, and it took nearly an hour to drive it.

"I'll come get you...?" he said. He wanted to shake her. But he said nothing. He nodded, and then remembered he was on the phone and said, "I understand."

She did let him sit on the porch with her, whenever he drove over to her farm. She had to have someone.

"Do you want to hit me?" he asked one evening, almost hopefully.

But she just shook her head.

He saw that she was getting comfortable with her sorrow, was settling down into it, like an old wa of life, and he wanted to shock her out of it, but felt paralyzed and mute, like the dumbest of animals.

Sydney stared at his crooked hands, with the scars from the cuts made over the years by the hors and the fencing tools. He cursed the many things he did not know. He could lift bales of hay. He cou string barbed-wire fences. He could lift things. That was all he knew. He wished he were a chemist, a electrician, a poet, or a preacher. The things he had—what little of them there were—wouldn't he her.

She had never thought to ask how drunk Henry had been. Sydney thought that made a differenc whether you jumped off the bridge with one beer in you, or two, or a six-pack; or with a sea of electr blue Psychos rolling around in your stomach—but she never asked.

He admired her confidence, and doubted his ability to be as strong, as stubborn. She nev considered that it might have been her fault, or Henry's; that some little spat might have prompted or general disillusionment.

It was his fault, Sydney's, square and simple, and she seemed comfortable, if not happy, with th fact.

Dr. Lynly treated horses, but he did not seem to love them, thought Karen.

“Stupid creatures,” he would grumble, when they would not do as he wanted, when he was trying doctor them. He and Buster and Karen would try to herd a horse into the trailer, or the corral, pulling on the reins and swatting the horse with green branches.

“Brickheads,” Dr. Lynly would growl, pulling the reins and then walking around and slapping feebly, the horse's flank. “Brickheads and fatheads.” He had been loading horses for fifty years, and Karen would laugh, because the horses' stupidity always seemed to surprise, and then anger, D Lynly, and she thought it was sweet.

It was as if he had not yet really learned that that was how they always were.

But Karen had seen it right away. She knew that many girls, and women, were infatuated wi horses, in love with them even, for their great size and strength, and for their wildness—but Karen, she saw more and more of the sick horses, the ailing ones, the ones most people did not see regularl knew that all horses were simple and trusting, and that even the smartest ones could be made to do they were told.

And they could be so dumb, so loyal, and so oblivious to pain. It was as though—even if they cou feel it—they could never, ever acknowledge it.

It was sweet, she thought, and dumb.

Karen let Sydney rub her temples and brush her hair. She would go into the bathroom and wash h hair while he sat on the porch. He had taken up whittling; one of the stallions had broken Sydney's le by throwing him into a fence and then trampling him, and the leg was in a heavy cast. So Sydney h decided to take a break for several days.

He had bought a whittling kit at the hardware store, and was going to try hard to learn how to do There were instructions. The kit had a square piece of balsa wood, almost the weight of nothing, and small curved whittling knife. There was a dotted outline in the shape of a duck's head on the bal wood that showed what the shape of his finished work would be.

After he learned to whittle, Sydney wanted to learn to play the harmonica. That was next, aft

whittling.

~~He would hear the water running, and hear Karen splashing, as she put her head under the faucet and rinsed.~~

She would come out in her robe, drying her hair, and then would let him sit in the hammock with her and brush her hair. It was September, and the cottonwoods were tinging, were making the sky hazy, soft and frozen-looking. Nothing seemed to move.

Her hair came down to the middle of her back. She had stopped cutting it. The robe was old and worn, the color of an old blue dish. Something about the shampoo she used reminded him of apples. She wore moccasins that had a shearling lining in them, and Sydney and Karen would rock into the hammock. Sometimes Karen would get up and bring out two Cokes from the refrigerator, and they would drink those.

“Be sure to clean up those shavings when you go,” she told him. There were balsa wood curls all over the porch. Her hair, almost dry, would be light and soft. “Be sure not to leave a mess when you go.”

It would be dark then, Venus out beyond them.

“Yes,” he would say.

Once, before he left, she reached out from the hammock, and caught his hand. She squeezed it, and then let go.

He drove home thinking of Henry, and of how he had once taken Henry fishing for the first time. They had caught a catfish so large it had scared Henry. They drank beers, and sat in the boat, and talked.

One of Sydney Bean’s headlights faltered on the drive home, then went out, and it took him an hour and a half to get home.

The days got cold and brittle. It was hard, working with the horses. Sydney’s broken leg hurt all the time. Sometimes the horse would leap, and come down with all four hooves bunched in close together and the pain and shock of it would travel all the way up Sydney’s leg and into his shoulder, and down into his wrists.

He was sleeping past sun-up some days, and was being thrown, now, nearly every day; sometimes several times in the same day.

There was always a strong wind. Rains began to blow in. It was getting cold, crisp as apples, and that was the weather that in the summer everyone said they were looking forward to. One night there was frost, and a full moon.

On her back porch, sitting in the hammock by herself with a heavy blanket around her, Karen saw a stray balsa shaving caught between the cracks of her porch floor. It was white, in the moonlight, the whole porch was, and the field was blue—the cattle stood out in the moonlight like blue statues—and she almost called Sydney.

But then the silence and absence of a thing—she presumed it was Henry, but did not know for sure—closed in around her, and the field beyond her porch, like the inside of her heart, seemed to be deathly still, and she did not call.

She thought, I can love who I want to love. But she was angry at Sydney Bean for having tried to pull her so far out, into a place she did not want to go.

She fell asleep in the hammock, and dreamed that Dr. Lynly was trying to wake her up, and was taking her blood pressure, feeling her forehead, and, craziest of all, swatting at her with green

branches.

She awoke from the dream, and decided to call Sydney after all. He answered the phone as if he too, had been awake.

“Hello?” he said. She could tell by the questioning in his voice that he did not get many phone calls.

“Hi,” said Karen. “I just—wanted to call, and tell you *hello*.” She paused, almost faltered. “And that I feel better. That I feel good, I mean. That’s all.”

“Well,” said Sydney Bean. “Well, good. I mean, great.”

“That’s all,” said Karen. “Bye,” she said.

“Goodbye,” said Sydney.

On Thanksgiving Day, Karen and Dr. Lynly headed back out to the swamp, to check up on the logger on the mule. It was the hardest cold of the year, and there was bright ice on the bridges, and it was not thawing, even in the sun. The inside of Dr. Lynly’s old truck was no warmer than the air outside. Buster, in his wooliness, lay across Karen to keep her warm.

They turned onto a gravel road and started down into the swamp. Smoke, low and spreading, was flowing through all the woods. The men had little fires going; they were each working on a different tree, and had small warming fires where they stood and shivered when resting.

Karen found herself looking for the pale muscled logger.

He was swinging the ax, but he only had one arm. His left arm was gone, and there was a sort of sleeve over it, like a sock, and he was swinging at the tree with his remaining arm. The man was sweating, and a small boy stepped up and quickly towed him dry each time the pale man stepped back to take a rest.

They stopped the truck and got out and walked up to him, and he stepped back—wet, already again; the boy towed him off, standing on a low stool and starting with the man’s neck and shoulders, and then going down his great back—and the man told them that the mule was better and that if they wanted to see him, he was lower in the swamp.

They followed the path toward the river. All around them were downed trees, and stumps, and stacks of logs, but the woods looked no different. The haze from the fires made it seem colder. Acorns popped under their feet.

About halfway down the road, they met the mule. He was coming back up toward them, and he was pulling a good load. Another small boy was in front of him, holding out a carrot, only partially eaten. The mule’s knee looked much better, though it was still a little swollen, and probably always would be.

The boy stopped and let the mule take another bite of carrot, making him lean far forward in the harness. His great rubbery lips stretched and quavered and then flapped as he tried to get it, and there was a crunch when he did.

They could smell the carrot as the mule ground it with his old teeth. It was a wild carrot, dug from the woods, and not very big, but it smelled good.

Karen had brought an apple and some sugar cubes, and she started forward to give them to the mule but instead handed them to the little boy, who ate the sugar cubes himself and put the apple in his pocket.

The mule was wearing an old straw hat, and looked casual, out-of-place. The boy switched him, and the mule shut his eyes and started up. His chest swelled, tight and sweaty, to fit the dark stained

leather harness, and the big load behind him started in motion, too.

Buster whined as the mule went by.

It was spring again then, the month in which Henry had left them, and they were on the back porch. Karen had purchased a Clydesdale yearling, a great and huge animal, whose mane and fur she had shaved to keep it cool in the warming weather, and she had asked a boy from a nearby farm with time on his hands to train it, in the afternoons. The horse was already gentled, but needed to be stronger. She was having the boy walk him around in the fields, pulling a makeshift sled of stones and tree stumps and old rotten bales of hay.

In the fall, when the Clydesdale was strong enough, she and Dr. Lynly were going to trailer it out to the swamp and trade it for the mule.

Sydney Bean's leg had healed, been broken again, and was now healing once more. The stallion he was trying to break was showing signs of weakening. There was something in the whites of his eyes, Sydney thought, when he reared up, and he was not slamming himself into the barn—so it seemed to Sydney, anyway—with quite as much anger. Sydney thought that perhaps this coming summer would be the one in which he broke all of his horses, day after day, week after week.

They sat in the hammock and drank Cokes and nibbled radishes and celery, which Karen had washed and put on a tray. They watched the neighbor boy, or one of his friends, his blue shirt a tiny spot against the tree line, as he followed the big dark form of the Clydesdale. The sky was a wide spread of crimson, all along the western trees, toward the river. They couldn't tell which of the local children it was, behind the big horse; it could have been any of them.

"I really miss him," said Sydney Bean. "I really hurt."

"I know," Karen said. She put her hand on Sydney's, and rested it there. "I will help you," she said.

Out in the field, a few cattle egrets fluttered and hopped behind the horse and boy. The great young draft horse lifted his thick legs high and free of the mud with each step, the mud made soft by the rains of spring, and slowly—they could tell—he was skidding the sled forward.

The egrets hopped and danced, following at a slight distance, but neither the boy nor the horse seemed to notice. They kept their heads down, and moved forward.

In Ruth's Country

The rules for dating Mormon girls were simple.

No coffee; no long hair.

No curse words; one kiss.

That was about it. It was simple. Anyone could do it.

Utah is an odd state—the most beautiful, I think—because it is one thing but also another. It is red and hot in the desert—in the south—while the north has the cool and blue forests and mountains which smell of fir and snow. And like so many things, when seen from a distance, they look unattainable.

My uncle and I were not Mormons. We lived in southern Utah, Uncle Mike and I and the rest of the town of Moab. In the summers, at night, thunderstorms would sometimes roll across the dry valley illuminating the cliffs with flashes of lightning. There would be the explosions of light and for a second—beneath the cliffs—we could see the dry creeks and the town itself. The town had wide streets, like a Hollywood stagecoach town.

There would be flash floods out in the desert: water so muddy and frothy, churning, that its anger was almost obscene. But then the floods were gone quickly, and they were easy to avoid in the first place, if you knew about them and knew to stay out of their way, and out of the places where they could occur.

Tourists came through our town on their way to the national parks. They reminded me of the bloated steers I would see floating down the Colorado, sweeping along with the current, steers that had fallen over the cliffs and into the river below; but the tourists came only in the summers.

Mormons couldn't date non-Mormons. It was a logical rule. There were different values, or so it was supposed, and we chose to believe.

Among the elders of Moab there were corny handshakes, secret meeting rooms, silly passwords, but because I was young, I could move easily through the town and among the people. I could observe as long as I made no threats against the religion's integrity, no overtures against its gene pool.

I was allowed to watch.

There was a Mormon girl, Ruth, whom I wanted to get to know. She was two years younger than I was, but I liked the way she watched things. She looked at the tourists, and it seemed to me that she too might have been thinking about the cows, the ones that sometimes went over the cliffs. She looked at the sky now and then, checking for I don't know what.

Other times I would see her watching me. I liked it, but knew better than to like it too much. I tried not to like it, and I tried not to watch back.

It did cross my mind, too, that perhaps she was just crazy, slightly off, to be looking at me for so long, so directly. Just watching.

That was how different things were. I really did not believe she could just be watching, and

thinking.

Uncle Mike and I ran wild cattle in the sage for a living, scrub steers that could handle the heat and rattlesnakes and snows of winter. The country in which the cattle were turned out was too vast for fences. Instead, we used brands, or nothing.

Sometimes the cattle would be down along a salt creek in a willow flat, grazing in the dry fields behind an old beaver dam. Other times they would be back up in the mesas and plateaus, hiding in the rocks.

They had all the country they wanted, and their movements seemed to be mostly whimsical. All of the cattle were about the same size, and in trying to cut yours away from the others, out of the big herd for market—for slaughter—if you got someone else's cow, it was all right to go ahead and take that one instead of the one you wanted. They were all pretty much the same.

But if you had scruples, you had to tell the person whose cow it was, when you did that, so that he could take one of yours.

It wasn't a thing Uncle Mike and I ever worried about, because we were good at cutting the cattle and we hardly ever picked out anyone else's cattle, even by mistake. We knew what we were doing, and as long as we didn't make mistakes—if the job was done properly—there wasn't a need for rules or scruples, or morals in the first place.

What you had to remember about cutting cattle—and it was a thing Uncle Mike had often told me—was to pretend that you were capable of being in two places at once: where the cow was going, and where it wanted to go.

You had to get there ahead of it.

We cut them on foot with our barking dogs. Sometimes we'd use the jeep. It was hard work, and it seemed to need doing always. Without fences, the cattle kept trying to drift north. The blue mountains shimmered, and seemed a place to go to. The mountains looked cooler than anything we had ever seen.

So I couldn't ask Ruth out. And why would I want to? One lousy kiss? She was flat-chested, like a seven-year-old boy, and wore librarian's gold wire-rimmed glasses, grandmother glasses.

Her hair was a reddish color—the kind that you think is brown until it gets out into the sun—and it was thick. I admired her freckles, and also the old overalls she was always wearing. They looked as if they made her feel good, because she was always smiling. I imagined what the denim softness felt like, on her ankles, on her thighs, and going higher.

It was good, being out on the north end of town the way we were. At seventeen and eighteen, one expects the things that happen, I think; they do not come as a surprise. Sometimes Mike and I would sit out on the patio and drink a beer or some vodka, or gin-and-tonics, with ice and limes—limes from faraway, tropical cultures—and we would watch the purple part of dusk rising up out of the dry valley, moving toward us, covering the desert like a spill. And the lights in town below would come on, in the purple valley.

Ruth's old Volkswagen came up our road one evening, trailing dust from a long way off, and when she pulled up and got out she did not hesitate, but walked up to Uncle Mike and said that her car was dying on cool mornings, and also on hills, and that she needed new windshield wipers too.

It was unnerving, her having come up out of the valley like that and into our part of the desert, driving in such a straight line to get there. She just did it. But once she was there, I did not want her

leave. I knew it did not fit with the unspoken deal Mike and I had cut with the town, but I liked h
being up there, on our plateau, and wasn't eager for her to go back down.

"This is a beautiful view," she said, looking around at the purple dusk and the lights coming on
town. I offered her my drink, which I had not tasted yet, and she sipped it, not even knowing what
was. Mike went in the garage to look at her car. I got a chair for Ruth and seated her. We didn't sa
anything, just watched the desert, until it was completely dark.

After a while, Mike came out of the garage with her old spark plugs, but I knew that spark plug
wouldn't make her car do what it was she said it was doing.

"Your wipers look fine," he said. "The spark plugs will be five dollars."

She took the money from her shirt pocket—some of it in bills, some in coins—and handed it
him, but seemed to have no interest in leaving.

Instead, we sat there and each had another drink, and then the wind started to blow, the way it d
every night, and made the wind chimes tinkle back behind the garage.

There was lightning to the south. We saw it almost every night, but it never seemed to reach Moab
It took her a long time to finish her drink. Then she left, the long drive back to town: her brake light
tiny and red.

There was a bishop in the church, the head bishop for all of Moab, whose name was Homer. He was a
attorney, the richest man in town. He had thousands of cattle, maybe more than anyone in Utah. Th
way he got his cattle when he wanted them for market was to send some of his men out into the dese
with rifles to shoot them.

It was lazy and simple and I thought it was wrong. The men would load the dead cattle into the
trucks that way, and take them to Bishop Homer's own slaughterhouse. We had to bring ours in alive

Uncle Mike and I did not like Bishop Homer, but we did not waste time worrying about him either

It was my job to keep Uncle Mike's and my cattle away from the others, if I could. Every day aft
school that spring, Ruth and I drove out into the desert in the jeep and chased Bishop Homer's catt
with the dogs. We tried to keep his red-eyed, wormy dwarves away from our registered Hereford
heifers. Bishop Homer had his men buy whatever passed through the auction circle at a low price
whether it was healthy or not—he didn't look at the quality of an animal at all—and we tried to c
Mike's and my cattle out of the big herds, and to keep them by themselves. All of the cattle gather
at the rim of the gorge, high up over the river, and they were always trying to find different trail
leading down. There wasn't any way to get to the river—the cliffs went straight up and down—but th
cattle watched the river daily, as if expecting that a new path might miraculously appear.

The bulls were always hopping up on our heifers. Bishop Homer had it in his mind that the bul
could survive the desert better than the heifers, and he was keen to buy any bulls that passed throug
the auction, no matter that he already had too many. He was too lazy to make them into steers. He ju
turned them out.

The dogs raced alongside the stampeding bulls, snapping and barking. We ran along and behin
them, shouting and throwing rocks, whenever we found them in with our heifers. Their great testicl
tangled between their legs when they tried to run too fast, and they were an easy target. It was a h
spring, and Bishop Homer's cattle began to lose weight.

Ruth and I made picnics. We carried mayonnaise jars wrapped in newspaper to keep them cool, fu
of lemonade with ice cubes rattling, and we took a blanket. There were sandbars down in the riv
gorge, and some days we would climb down the dangerous cliffs to them. There were caves along th

river, dark recesses out of which small birds flew, back and forth into the sunlight. The water was cool and green and moved very fast.

“Can you swim?” Ruth asked one day.

“Yes,” I told her, though I could not, and was hoping she would not ask me to show her. I would have had to try, and almost certainly would have drowned.

“I don’t know if I can or not,” she said. She didn’t seem frightened, however.

Other days we talked about Bishop Homer as we chased his cattle. He was in charge of Ruth’s ward. That was a church subdivision, like a platoon or a brigade.

Ruth had taken an after-school job that spring as Bishop Homer’s secretary. He was good friends with her parents, and it was how she got the job.

“He’s got three wives,” she said. “The one here in town, plus one in St. George, and one up north, Logan.”

Logan was a ski town, in the very northern part of the state. It took money to live in Logan, and was usually where the not-so-very-good Mormons went, because it was a good place to have fun. A lot of people in Moab looked at Logan wistfully, on the map. I wondered what the wife in Logan was like.

The bulls ran ahead of us at a steady trot, a sort of controlled panic; sometimes they stumbled but caught themselves.

“I’m not supposed to know that,” Ruth shouted. “I’m the only one who knows.”

We stopped the jeep and watched the cattle on the trail ahead, still trotting, back up into the rocks to where there was no grass or water, not even a thin salt creek. I thought about how far we were from anything.

There was a red-tailed hawk out over the gorge, doing slow circles, and Ruth told me that Bishop Homer had touched her once.

The engine was baking in the heat, making ticks and moans, and the wind was gusting, lifting the jeep off its shocks and rocking it. We watched the hawk and were pleased when we saw it fold its wings and dive, with a shrill cry, into the gorge.

Later in the spring our heifers began dropping more calves. Wildflowers and cactus blossoms were everywhere. There were dwarf calves, red calves, ugly cream-colored calves, and stillborns. They all had to be taken away to market; not a one was worth keeping.

Mike and I had Ruth over for dinner. She had church meetings almost every day, but she skipped some of them. We drank the gin-and-tonics, and it was okay for her to sit with her head in my lap, or mine in hers. The wind on the back patio was stronger than it had been that year; it seemed to bring new scents from new places. Sometimes Ruth asked me if I was afraid of dying.

We didn’t associate much in school. Being younger, she wasn’t in any of my classes, and it would have been trouble for her to be seen with me too often. Her parents didn’t like her spending the evenings out on my porch, but she told them she was proselytizing. So it was all right, and she kept coming out to our place to sit up there in the evenings.

And then it was summer. We had more time than we could ever have wished for.

We had all the time anyone could ever need, for anything.

Our heifers were still dropping ruinous calves, and Mike said it had to stop. So one day, knowing what we were doing, and with the dogs to help us, we ran three of Bishop Homer’s woolly bulls right over

the gorge. We shouted, throwing things, and chased them toward it, and their fear took care of the rest.

~~We stood there, dizzy, exultant, and looked at the green river below, the slow-moving spills of white that we knew were rapids. One of the bulls was broken on the rocks and two were washing through the rapids.~~

“How many cattle would you say he has?” Ruth asked me. She slipped her hand in mine.

I didn’t know.

“What are his other two wives’ names?” I asked her. She had told me Bishop Homer was still bothering her.

We watched that hawk again—it seemed to have come from nowhere, right in front of us, I could see the light brown and cream of its breast—and Ruth told me that their names were Rebecca and Rachel.

“You’re going to stay here with your Uncle Mike and work on trucks and cars, and raise the wild cattle, too, aren’t you, is that right?” she asked, on our way back. It was dark by then, with bright stars and the night winds starting up. The stars seemed to glimmer and flash above us, we didn’t have a tent on the jeep, and instead of lying to her, I told her yes, it was what I would continue to do.

We stopped wearing clothes when we were out in the desert in July, hot July: just our tennis shoes and socks. We raced the jeep, wearing our seat belts, and we set up small piles of stones, up high on the slickrock domes, where we could see forever, and we practiced racing around them, and cornering: we designed intricate, elaborate courses, through which we tried to race at the fastest possible speed.

She was starting, finally, to get her breasts, which was all right with me. Both of us were lean, from chasing the bulls. The sun felt good, on our backs, our legs. We drove fast, wearing nothing.

A bad thing was happening with the cattle, however; with Bishop Homer’s cattle. They were getting used to being chased, and would not run so far; sometimes we had to ram them with the jeep to get them even to break into a grudging trot.

The desert was like a park that summer. Flowers bloomed as never before: a different batch of different colors, every couple of weeks. It stormed almost every night, the heat of the day building up and then cooling. The lightning storms rocketed up and down the cliffs of the river, and into town.

Each night we tried to get back to Mike’s in time to watch the purple and then the darkness as it sank over the desert, like stage lighting, like the end of a show. But we didn’t always make it, and we would watch from one of the slickrock domes, or we would hike up and sit beneath one of the eerie looping rock arches.

Some nights there was an early moon, and we could see the cattle, grazing in the sage, and the jackrabbits moving around, too, everything ghostly in that light, everything coming out after dark.

But other nights the storms would wash through quickly, windy drenching downpours that soaked us, and it was fun to sit on the rocks and let the storm hit us and beat against us. The nights were always warm, though cooler after those rains, and the smells were so sharp as to make us imagine that something new was out there, something happening that had never happened to anyone before.

It was a good summer. Though there were too many cattle and too much grazing on the already spare land, the cattle did not eat the bitter flowers, and as a result, wild blooming blue and yellow weeds and wine-colored cactus blossoms rushed into the spots where the weak grasses had been sprouting up out of the dried cattle droppings.

In August, the mountains to the north took on a darker blue. And the smells seemed to change. They were coming from another direction. From behind us, from the north.

Occasionally, Ruth's parents would ask her how I was doing, if I was thinking about changing yet. "Converting" was the term they used, and even the thought of it terrified me.

Ruth said that she had told them I was very close: very, very close.

She watched me as she said this. We were sitting on the boulders down by the white rapids, throwing driftwood branches into the center.

Then, above us, I saw a man looking down, a man with a camera. He was on the rim. He was so far up there. He took pictures of us while we sat on the rocks, and I looked up at him but didn't move because there was not much I could do; our clothes were up by the jeep. Ruth didn't see him, and I didn't want to alarm her. Just a lost tourist, I thought. A lost tourist with a big lens.

But it was him, of course. I found that out soon enough, though I didn't know what he looked like. When we got back up on the rim, I saw his cattle company's pale blue truck, tiny and raising dust, moving slowly away to the north, and I realized that he had come into the desert for some of his cows.

Ruth didn't say much all the rest of the day, but that evening, driving home, when we stopped at a junkyard outside the city limits and pulled in and turned the lights off, she looked at all the old rusted heaps and goggle-eyed wrecks, and then, as if we had been married for fifteen years, she helped me get the picnic blanket out. The night was warm and we lay there among the wrecks, and I thought that one of us would get her soul, Homer or myself, and wasn't sure I wanted it. It seemed like a pretty big thing to take, even if she was determined to be rid of it.

I had her home before midnight, as was the rule.

We did other new things, too, after that. Some new ground was opened up, it seemed, and we had more space in which to move, more things to see and look at and study. We learned how to track Gila monsters in the sand. Their heavy tails dragged behind them like clubs and they rested in the shade of the sagebrush. We tracked them wearing nothing but our tennis shoes, following their staggering tracks from shade bush to shade bush. Eventually, we would catch up with them.

They would be orange and black, beaded, motionless, and we never got too close to them once we had found them. The most beautiful thing in the desert was also the most dangerous.

We had a rule of our own. Any time we found a Gila monster, we had to kiss: slowly, and with everything we had.

We waded in the river, too, above the rapids. I was still afraid to go out into the deep and attempt swimming. But it was a game to see how close we could get to the rapids' pull. Knee-deep, for Ruth, her small behind, like a fruit, just above the current as it shuddered against the backs of her knees.

Down in the gorge like that, there was only sun, and river, and sky, and the boulders around which the river flowed. I watched for the man with the camera, but he did not come back. Ankle-deep, and then knee-deep, I would come up behind Ruth, hold her hand, and then go out a little farther. The water beat against my thighs, splashing and spraying against me. She didn't try to pull me back. She thought it was fun. And it was; but I kept expecting her to tighten her grip, and try to pull me back into the shallows.

Her hair was getting longer, more bleached, and she was just watching, laughing, holding her hand out at full arm's length for me to hold on to. But she knew to let go if I slipped and went down.

As the summer moved on, the thunderstorms that had been building after dusk were fewer and smaller; mostly it was just dry wind. Ruth had missed her period, and though I was troubled for her

worrying about her church and her parents' reaction, I didn't mind at all, not a bit. In fact, I liked it. I put my hand on it all the time, which pleased her.

But I knew that, unlike me, she had to be thinking of other things.

We still chased the cattle. Once in the jeep we ran an old stud Brangus over the edge, and got too close. A sliding swerve, gravel under our tires; we hit a rock and went up on two wheels and almost went over, all the way down.

I had names picked out. I was going to build my own house, out even farther north, away from town, away from everything, and Ruth and I would be just fine. I had names picked out, if it was a boy.

I was picturing what life would be like, and it seemed to me that it could keep on being the same. I could see it as clearly as I thought I'd ever seen anything.

I thought because she liked the gin-and-tonics, and the river wading, and chasing cows, Ruth would change. Convert. I knew she liked her church, believed in it, attended it, but I took for granted that when she grew larger, she would not remain in it, and she would come out a little north of town to live with me. That was the picture. In my mind, the picture became the truth, and I didn't worry about anything.

Tumbleweeds blew down the center of Main Street, late at night. Dry and empty, they rolled like speedballs, hopping and skipping, smashing off the sides of buildings. They rolled like an army through town. We would sit on the sidewalk and wait for them, looking down the street—the town like a ghost town, that late at night—the wind would be in our faces, and we could never hear the tumbleweeds coming, but could only watch, and wait.

Then, finally, very close to ten o'clock, their dim shapes would come blowing toward us from out of the darkness. We would jump up and run out into their midst, and, as if they were medicine balls, we would try to catch them.

They weighed nothing. We would turn and try to run along with them, running down the center of Main Street, heading south and out of town, but we could never keep up, and we would have to stop for breath somewhere around Parkinson's Drug Store. Mike had said that tumbleweeds were more like people than anything else in the world; that they always took the easiest path—always—and that the only way they would stop was if something latched on to them, or trapped them. A branch, a rock, a dead-end alley.

During the last week in August, the north winds began to grow cool, and we wore light sweaters on the back porch. Ruth sipped lemonade and kept one of her Mormon Bibles—they had five or six—on her lap, and browsed through it. She'd never carried it around like that, and I found it slightly disturbing, but there were new smells, fresher and sharper, coming from the north, and we would turn and look back in that direction, though it would be dark and we would see nothing.

But we could imagine.

The north winds made the mountains smell as beautiful as they must have looked.

Neither of us had ever been all the way up into the mountains, but we had the little things, like the smells in the wind, that told us they were there, and even what they were like. Sometimes Ruth turned her head all the way around so that the wind was directly in her face, blowing her hair back.

She would sip her drink. She would squint beneath the patio light, and read, in that cold wind.

I had told Mike about Ruth and he had just nodded. He hadn't said anything, but I felt as if he was somehow pleased; it seemed somehow, by the way he worked in the garage, to be a thing he was looking forward to seeing happen. I know that I was.

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