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from Balsamroot

Mary Clearman Blew

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Mary Clearman Blew

from *Balsamroot*

Birthprints

During January and February of 1991, after we got Auntie moved over to the Villa Villekula, during those weeks that she sat rocking back and forth in her wheelchair with her eyes fixed inward, waiting while the sedatives slowly drained out of her system, Elizabeth and I stared each other in the face like survivors of a wreck. What were we to do next?

Elizabeth had lost more weight, and her eyes were as white-ringed, her neck as arched and tense as a nervous mare's. She wasn't feeling well, nothing seemed to stay on her stomach, and she shied away from the reports I brought back from my visits to Auntie. Both of us were haunted by the specter of an Auntie who, somehow ascending back up through the black hole of her mind, would demand accounting from us. *Where is everything? My dog, my life? Why have you done this to me?*

What to do with my aunt's possessions that we had packed in Port Angeles only last June and carted back to Idaho with us? My attorney had advised me not to sell her house as long as there was the faintest chance of her returning to live there, and while I knew at heart that there was not the faintest chance, it was advice I wanted to follow. So Elizabeth and Brian would go on living there for the time being. Eventually, maybe, we would clear it out and rent it out. And so for the second time in seven months, Elizabeth and I sorted through Auntie's clothes and books and junk while Rachel carried armloads to the trash or out to the trunk of the car to haul down to the Salvation Army.

Finally, postponing decisions, trying to pretend we were actually accomplishing something, we rummaged through her desk drawers.

"Did you know that she kept a diary?" Elizabeth asked me one morning.

"No," I said.

"Well, she did. I found her diaries last night."

At first I didn't believe her. Elizabeth went and got a cardboard box from my aunt's bedroom and set it down on the kitchen table, and I lifted out the little diaries. Leatherbound five-year diaries, the kind with clasps and locks. They started with the shiny and gold-stamped ones on top and went down to the small and scuffed ones at the bottom of the box. Eleven of them.

"I read a little, here and there," said Elizabeth.

I was still feeling disbelief. "How far back do they go?"

"Fifty years. To 1933. I don't think she ever missed a day."

"From 1933 until—"

"Right up to the day we moved her here. That's where she stopped."

I picked up one of the little books at random and opened it. The closely written lines in my aunt's familiar handwriting leaped out at me, and I shut it again. Diaries? In all the times I stayed with her, did I ever remember her writing in a diary?

A flicker of a memory, once, when we were traveling together—a brief jotting—*don't turn the light off yet, I want to finish this—*

Of course that would have been her pattern. The few lines, last thing at night, written in bed. But how could I not have known about that pattern in a woman I thought I knew so well?

"I felt so sad, reading," Elizabeth was saying. "She was so unhappy. I never knew she was unhappy."

The words chased themselves around my brain. What could Elizabeth mean? Auntie unhappy? Until the cruel blows of the past seven months, she had always seemed to me the merriest, the stablest woman I knew. All those late nights in Port Angeles while a log fire shot reflections against the window that looked out on the dark strait, while I poured out my grief to her and took comfort from the rising haze of her cigarette, her dark ironic eyes as she listened, always sympathizing, always on my side—what had she really been thinking? Of course she had been happy; otherwise, what about my secret belief that if only I tried harder to be like her, to pare my life down as she had to its essentials of teaching and gardening and love of children, I would be spared pain?

Elizabeth, unaware of my disquiet, was talking about something—about birthdays. "Auntie always seemed so pleased with each new baby in the family. Always seemed to love us so much. So I started looking up all our birthdays to see what she said when we were born. And I was so surprised! She never says a word!"

"Oh really!" I said.

Pulling myself back into the present, I found Auntie's diary for 1939, turned to December 10, then leafed over a few pages to December 14, and read the entry aloud to Elizabeth. *Got a card from Doris that Mary Rebecca arrived last Sunday—weight 8 lb—15 oz. I am so excited I can hardly wait.*

"She had to wait a few days until the letter came in the mail," I explained.

Elizabeth looked blank. "Letter?" Then she caught herself, realized what she was saying. Well, of course they wouldn't

phone! The old barbed wire neighborhood lines were pretty much inoperable by 1939, and Bell Telephone didn't run its lines out into Fergus County until after World War II, and even then nobody was in the habit of spending money on long distance telephoning when they could stick a three-cent stamp on a letter.

I looked up Elizabeth's birthday—September 28, 1961—and then showed her the entry for October 4. *Baby card from Mary—Elizabeth Mary. Born the 28th. I'm so glad... Oh I wish I could see her!*

Elizabeth took the diary from me and reread the entry about her birth, while I thought about the distance between my generation and hers, whose vital news arrives on a long distance line and fades so quickly.

"What do you want to do with her diaries?" she asked after awhile.

"I suppose I'll read them," I said.

How can I read her diaries when she is still alive, after a fashion? But like a voyeur, drawn by something stronger than curiosity, I riffle pages, reading entries that evoke what I already know.

Late June of 1947, for example: *Sun. Took Mary swimming... Current swift but Mary is not at all scared... Jack showed us a good swimming hole. It is fine—good bottom—deep—not too fast a current... Mary floated at last.*

I was seven years old in 1947, and I was a little dryland girl. I had never been swimming, never seen more water than the Judith River, which I'd been told to stay away from, never even taken a bath in anything bigger than a galvanized washtub, and now here I stood in ankle-deep current while Spring Creek sparkled over the gravel in the sun and reflected its light back into my eyes. I knew that my father's uncles used to swim in this hole, and that

they had tried to teach my father to swim, but he had refused. Solid ground was for him. Now Auntie stood up to her waist in her black bathing suit and white rubber cap in the deep hole under the willows, calling to me. The dark green water concealed the lower half of her, cutting her off at the waist and reflecting back her top half, white cap and black suit, as though she had been rejoined as a woman with two heads and four arms.

Even with two heads, she didn't know that I was terrified? Probably not. I had been taught as surely as she had not to let on. Wade in and try to float, even if you're scared to death.

What about her own fears?

Here is her entry for June 16, 1942. *This is a day I'll never forget. Jack's birthday. We planned cherry pie & rice pudding for supper. I got thrown into the wheel of the mower & badly cut. We handled the situation calmly.*

Imogene's mowing machine accident. My father used to tell me his version of that morning. It had shaken him profoundly. He and my mother were young, in their twenties, and I think now that Imogene's accident may have been their first real awakening to inevitability.

Imogene had gone out to mow hay with my father's team of flashy sorrel colts. Socks and Babe, a bald-faced gelding and a blaze-faced mare, still flashy and still spooky-eyed in their old age, when I remember them. Their names evoke a lost life along the Judith River, where the war on the other side of the world was forcing up prices and making scarcities, but where the Montana-born boys and girls like my father and mother were scratching a living out of the gumbo that had worn out their parents. Imogene had closed her school that spring and come to help get the hay in. She had braided her hair that morning, and worn Levis and a

white shirt—I know, because one of my earliest memories is of her propped in the back seat of her own car with her foot packed in towels after the sorrel colts had run away with her and pitched her off the high seat of the mowing machine and down, somehow into the sickle bar. Those shining iron teeth had bitten into her ankle, nearly all the way around in a deep gouge to the bone that would leave her crippled for months and scarred for the rest of her life.

We handled it calmly. My father, raking hay in another field, glanced across the coulee and saw that Imogene hadn't finished her round. He unhitched his own team, jumped on one of his horses bareback, and tore the quarter of a mile across cutbanks and hayfields to find Imogene sitting in bloodsoaked grass with her own shoelace tied around her ankle for a tourniquet—"and a damn good thing she knew what to do, because I sure the hell wouldn't have got there in time." She had even managed to catch the sorrel colts and tie them to a fence post.

My father galloped back to the house and got Imogene's car. He and my mother packed her foot and lifted her into the back seat to drive her the thirty miles over a gravel road to Lewistown—not before I had climbed into the front seat to look over it, confused by the adult voices and the smell of blood. Auntie laughed when she saw my face. "Look what they've done to me, Mary!" Then somebody, perhaps my mother, lifted me down from the car and set me howling inside the wire fence.

My father and mother drove Imogene the thirty miles to Lewistown. It would have taken an hour on bald wartime tires with dust rising and settling and the song of indifferent meadowlarks floating behind them from fence posts along the highway. She and my parents would hardly have spoken. They all knew what the

worst was likely to be. But at the cool sandstone archway of little St. Joseph's Hospital the nuns ran out to meet them and carry Imogene inside. Sister St. Paul and Dr. Solterro went to work with sutures and, against all their own expectations, saved her foot in a desperate operation that returned to her nearly fifty years later when, hospitalized for an arteriogram, she wandered into a time warp where those sensations and fragments of detail still lived as fresh as they had seemed in 1942.

From the perspective of years, I always thought the crucial point about the mowing machine accident—*This is a day I'll never forget*—was that it forced Imogene to leave a dead-end life of teaching for seventy or eighty dollars a month in the rural schools of central Montana. It was an uncertain life—the school boards, unwilling to grant tenure, rarely kept a teacher more than a year or two—and an isolated and strenuous one. The country school-teachers could hope one of the neighbors remembered to bring them their mail or give them a ride to town for groceries, and meanwhile they were expected to carry their own coal and water, sweep out their schools and dust and clean their blackboards, and get out in the schoolyard at recess and play baseball or pom-pom-pullaway with their kids. Who'd hire a teacher with one foot?

"I couldn't get a job close to home that fall. Everybody in Fergus County had heard how badly I was hurt, and none of the school boards would even *look* at me," my aunt always told me, "so I applied at schools where nobody had heard of me." Out in Washington, where the war industry was rolling at full speed and teachers were leaving their classrooms to take the new high-paying jobs in the shipyards, she found a school superintendent willing to take a chance on a woman from Montana on crutches.

But in the immediacy of that moment, she saw what mattered

at a closer focus. *This is a day I'll never forget.* The reason why everybody always remembered the date of Imogene's accident was that it was my father's birthday. Cherry pie was his favorite, and they had been planning to have cherry pie for supper that night.

The precious trivial. My aunt's diaries are filled like a ragbag with the daily doings that make up a life. She hardly ever writes more than a line or two, but she notes which night she made muffins for supper—*they were good*—what the children fought about in school—*kids were mean as dirt today*—or which exact evening in 1939 she finished crocheting the wool afghan that even now lies in tatters in my back closet while I try to make up my mind to throw it out.

To read the diaries is to experience the absolutely linear. A plot of sorts emerges, like a river, continuous, with apparently unrelated details bobbing to the surface and then submerging. Names of characters appear in these pages without reason or description, then disappear in the same way. I learn to read between the lines, filling in with what I already know. Faces loom up, voices speak from the margins. What is most compelling is the immediacy. She is writing *right now*. She is twenty-three, and my mother is nineteen, and they can't see ahead the way I can when I glance down the page.

What she could see was the past. How could she bear it? She used the five-year format, so that a given page contains five entries for five consecutive years; she could take in at a glance what she had hoped for the year before, or the year before that, or what she had dreaded.

She is place-specific. I could draw a map of that thirty-mile radius, recreate its textures out of memory. *I want that pink suit I*

saw in Power's size eighteen, but I can't afford it—and instantly I see the main street of Lewistown, Montana, the way it descends down the cottonwood-shaded hill, past the old junior high school and the courthouse to the two or three commercial blocks, the six-story white marble Montana Building and the overpainted sandstone building presently occupied by a chain clothing store whose racks of marked-down western wear and special-order blue jeans exist simultaneously in my mind with the dignified clerks, the gracious aisles, and the moulded tin ceilings of the old T.C. Power's Mercantile Company.

Or—going home, we got stuck on the bottom last night, and I could walk to that precise mudhole, even at night in a rainstorm; I know just where the dirt road leaves the highway and curves across a treacherous stretch of gumbo toward the cottonwood log house where my father and mother lived during the early 1940s, and where the neighbors, the long dead, reappear in a context where getting stuck, getting high-centered, getting a flat tire is a commonplace of every drive in a car—saw Art and Ester, they were stuck—saw Sid and Carrie Killham—just as I could walk to the precise swimming hole my father showed her—good bottom—deep—not too fast a current—if it still lay under that willow-shaded bend in Spring Creek.

But it doesn't. The land has been sold and sold again, and the creek has been bulldozed and straightened, and the willows gouged out, and the current has overflowed its new banks and turned meadows to bogs. Nothing is still there, not the swimming hole, not the cattle crossing, not the woman in the white bathing cap who calls to the child in the shallows. We have lost our connection with the landscape just as we have with the neighbors.

Other entries trouble me. I will never know their context. On

August 11, 1949, my aunt apparently is planning a vacation trip back to Montana. *Letter from Ma. She wants to meet me in a hotel for a day. Damn it, I hate my family to just tear me in pieces.*

So I had thought I knew something about my aunt's life, and about that certain place in Montana, closed among the low mountains and straitened by the circumstances of the 1930s and the early 1940s, when she came to young womanhood. Now I wonder what I do know, and how much of that is my own fiction, and what connection my fiction has to these inexorable lines, written day after day for fifty years, in my aunt's diaries.

But I now believe that, during the late 1930s and early 1940s, another event in my aunt's life drew her deep into an emotional attachment to my father and mother and me. Her diary entries for the last two or three years she lived in Montana increasingly note the details of our lives.

Stopped to see Doris & Mary & promised to come down for dinner on Sunday...Doris & I wrangled horses & watched the men break horses...Got the pictures of Mary. Must start an album soon...The men did not find the horses & we are worried about them...It rained all night & day. Jack had to drive my car up to the road for me. I rode Pardner for him to ride back.

And with what abandon she loved me, her sister's baby! *Doris gets breakfast & I bathe Mary. When she got tired she brot me her bottle & held up her arms to be taken...Mary sure likes her Auntie Gene...Mary was sure glad to see me. She gives little snorts of pleasure & satisfaction.*

I now think I know why she turned to my parents and me for emotional support, and I think that perhaps the most profound effect of the mowing machine accident—a truly accidental one—is that it severed her bond with my mother and father as surely

as it nearly severed her foot, and that it freed her—from what, for what?

But I am interrupted in my deep reading by Elizabeth, who has made an appointment with an internist. She thinks she may have an ulcer.

Between the strain over Auntie and the uncertainty of her application to veterinary school, Elizabeth has quivered between tears and anger all winter. I walk with care around her, thinking before I speak, unwilling to risk an explosion. Could I have been so driven at her age? So racked with frustration?

My friends exclaim at how much Elizabeth looks like me. "Unbelievable! Like twins!" She and I both try to see the resemblance and fail. I recognize only her eyes; we both inherited my father's blue eyes. But though Elizabeth is an inch taller than I, she is much finer drawn, and her wrists and ankles are narrower than Rachel's at age eight. And her coloring is subtler than mine. I could never pick out clothes for her, even when she was very small, until I realized that she preferred the hazier shades, would never wear my bright reds and blues.

Elizabeth. Thorn in my side. When I was the age she is now, I was divorcing her father, and she was ten. Tears rolled down her face when I told her about the divorce, though she never cried aloud. And so she was part of the price I paid for myself.

But now she telephones me, sobbing so hard that at first I cannot understand her. "I'm not ready for this!" she keeps choking out, until at last she manages to tell me that the internist she consulted about an ulcer gave her a routine pregnancy test that has turned out to be positive.

What am I to say?

What was I to say to the ten-year-old? Did I understand enough in those days about the force of my own submerged currents to explain to anyone, let alone to my daughter, that I would have exploded if I had stayed with her father? How could I have possibly told her about the recurring dream in which he took me in his arms, smiling fondly, and squeezed and squeezed until, still smiling fondly, he had cracked my ribs and choked the breath out of me?

Thinking of these things, and about the resentments that have kept Elizabeth and me apart for so many years, I take a deep breath and speak the truth.

"If it were me, I'd certainly rather have a baby than an ulcer."

"But what about vet school?" she sobs. "How am I going to *do* this? This is my best chance, I've got to be accepted this time, and if I am, I'll be starting in late August. That's just when this baby is due. Mother, I'm not ready for a baby!"

What does she want to hear me say? All I can think about is late September rain and the slick stone steps behind the old St. Joseph's hospital in Lewistown, Montana, at two in the morning. I am twenty-one again. I hold a suitcase in one hand and a textbook in the other. My mother has just dropped me off at the curb and turned around to drive back to the ranch to stay with my two-year-old son. I start to climb the flight of steps toward the light over the door.

Who is ever ready? "Your first baby?" says the night nurse who signs me in.

"No, my second."

Her manner changes instantly. "How far apart are your pains? Oh God! Where's Sister?"

A few minutes later I hear her calling down the corridor: "Where's Sister? This baby is *coming*, and I can't find Sister!"

All I care is that apparently I am not going to have to face another twenty-four-hour labor on my own. What I mainly know about birthing is that it is lonely. Last time they told my young husband he might as well go back to the ranch and get some sleep, and then they gave me an enema and a shave and left me alone all night in one of those echoing high-ceilinged rooms where the only distraction was the occasional rumble of gurney wheels outside the door with another woman groaning, or a nurse glancing in to check my dilation and leaving again. This time I've come prepared; I've brought my book.

I really do need to be reading, because I'm missing my first week of classes at the University of Montana to have this baby. It's my last year of undergraduate school, and I hate getting off to a bad start, but I've sent my husband around to all my professors to explain my absence and pick up my assignments. The professors do a certain amount of tsk-tsking, because this is 1961, and they don't yet know a thing about the women who, in another twenty years, will flock back to college with their children slung on their backs or dropped off at the day-care, or who, like one of my sisters, will go into labor during registration at Montana State University, run over to the hospital, have her baby, and then run back to the field house to pay her fees.

But in 1961 I'm an aberration, which is no bad thing; it means I'm easily overlooked. I'm invisible. I can dive in and out of class and swap babies with my husband in time for him to get to his night job at the lumber mill, and nobody notices.

"Oh, your poor husband! How does he stand it?" groans my advisor when I bring him my class schedule with my twenty-two

credits to have him sign, but we both know his groan is only a matter of form. After all, it is 1961, and I won't come across a copy of *The Feminine Mystique* for another five or six years. I agree with my advisor that it is my husband's education that matters, that it is I who should be working nights to support us both, that this sideshow act of mine with babies and twenty-two credits is, at best, beside the point, and, at worst, a hazard to everybody's peace of mind. I agree, I agree! It's just that I can't seem to stop.

But why, I might well ask myself as, my belly a contorted knot, I lean against the admissions desk and gasp and listen to the frantic nurse running up and down the corridor—"Where's Sister? Where's Sister?"—why am I having this baby? The first baby, okay, a bad mistake, my husband and I were teenagers in a stranglehold of lust and impatience and ignorance. But a second baby? Come on! I'm twenty-one years old now, soberer than I will be at fifty, and besides, I've got a diaphragm.

Why? The only reason I can come up with is that I want her. As I will want still another baby, only it will take me twenty-one years and another man to have the next one.

What to say to Elizabeth, who simultaneously sobs over the telephone and rushes to be born so fast that I'm not going to have to endure the indignity of an enema, won't have to grow back the itching, prickling stubble of my pubic hair after the shave? *Does she want to get rid of it?* Is that the sensible decision? Is that what she wants to hear from me?

My heart is in my mouth. The truth is all I can think to speak. "A new baby. I feel so happy."

I'm so glad...I can hardly wait to see her.

And so Elizabeth rushed into the world after an hour's labor, and she has never slowed down from that rush, though her tiny footprints inked on the hospital's fancy certificate are narrow as a bird's, half the size of Rachel's birthprints. She slept in a hamper with handles that her father often carried with him or left on the back seat of the car while he fished the trout streams around Missoula and occasionally ran back to the car to check on her. Soon she was standing behind him while he fished. She grew up to adore him.

When she was fourteen, I met the man who would become Rachel's father. "If you don't quit going out with him, I'll leave home! I'll go live with my father!" she hurtled at me.

I didn't. She did.

How long has Elizabeth wanted to be a veterinary? Ever since I can remember. "An animal doctor," as she said in second grade.

Animals around the house, always. The little old beagle we got while her father and I were in graduate school in Missouri. The Siamese tomcat named Grinch that a man named Pete Daniels gave me after we moved back to Montana, to Havre. A mama cat named Victoria, because she was so fecund.

Screams in the night—I turn on my bedside light in a panic. Elizabeth stands in my bedroom door with blood in her hair.

"The cat's having kittens in my bed!"

I follow her across the hall and into her bedroom, and sure enough, there's Victoria sprawled across Elizabeth's pillow in a mess of blood and mucus and wet kittens. The last kitten spurts out from under her tail just as we get there.

"Here's the one I threw." Elizabeth brings a tiny blind kitten from across the room. "She was having them in my hair. I felt

something wet on my ear, and I put up my hand, and it was alive. And I just threw it."

We return the kitten, mewling but otherwise undamaged, to Victoria. She licks it off along with the other four, then coils around her litter while they nurse. She purrs up at us, as proud as if she were the first cat in the world ever to think of having kittens.

We decide to let the cats have Elizabeth's bed for the night. I take Elizabeth into the bathroom and wash her hair and let her curl up, toweling and damp as one of the new kittens, in my bed with me.

As a child Elizabeth is fearless. (How can I be so sure? I remember that diary entry—*Mary not at all scared.*) Well, certainly Elizabeth seems fearless. She climbs a fence and from the fence to the bare back of a neighbor's grazing horse, from which she has to be plucked, howling, and threatened with bludgeoning if she tries it again. After my divorce she starts spending her summers at the ranch, training a 4-H colt under my father's testy direction. My father has never forgiven me for my defection from the ranch, and this small granddaughter reminds him too much of his ex-son-in-law for him ever to be gentle with her. He demands more and more of her—longer rides, wetter saddle blankets, blue ribbons, championship trophies—but withholds his praise. *Try harder* is the message she gets.

So she never learns from my father the lore or the names of horses that evoke the generations, although to this day she keeps his picture on the front of her refrigerator, the one where he poses with Pet, the big-boned sorrel mare with the blaze face and the sweet temper who nearly died in the sleeping sickness epidemic

of the 1930s. In the snapshot Pet's rein is over my father's arm, and she is saddled, humped with cold and furry with winter hair, and he is grinning, proud of his snuffy saddle horse.

"Pardner? Baby? Old Bauley? Star and Dixie? Socks and Babe?" I ask Elizabeth.

She shakes her head. "I never heard those names from him."

After a year of living in Helena with her father and his new wife, she asks if she can move back to Havre and live with me again. She says she misses her friends, who have all started their second year at Havre High School without her.

All right, I tell her, but I feel pretty tentative. She has grown a foot, or so it seems, since she has been away, though she is still as slim and wavery as a wand. I hardly know her. I don't trust her at all. Any ill-considered words of mine are likely to be carried down to Helena and then carried back, complete with inflammatory commentary, whereupon I will explode in anger and set off another, worsening cycle. So I will try for no ill-considered words.

Our distance comes to seem normal. Maybe we even forget it's there. She gets A's in high school, avoids getting arrested for anything, otherwise pretty much comes and goes as she pleases. I'm busy, have a lot else on my mind, don't pay much attention. When she goes to work for a local veterinary, I enjoy the stories she brings home as she progresses from cleaner of cages and carrier of food and water and disposer of the stiffened corpses of animals to the more skilled tasks of administering shots and assisting with surgery. The jokes that circulate through the veterinary clinic are the best—worst, really—in town; they keep us in stitches. The only one I remember now is the one that asks, do you know what a delusion of grandeur is? A gnat with a hard-on,

lying on his back on a raft in the river, yelling *raise the drawbridge!*

In her senior year she spends longer nights with her friends than she does days in school. Girls I've known since they were second graders drift through the house in a daze, hardly recognizing me, caught in the delusion that only this last year of their lives exists, that high school graduation will alter them so unimaginably that only this soap-bubble time is real. I know about the keggers out at Beaver Creek Park, of course, everybody knows that free beer flows in the dark for the seniors all night, every night. The kids pass the hat for another keg or they get one of the local businessmen to spring for one. Nobody thinks much about it, Havre's a hard-drinking town. After all, it's only beer, at least Havre kids aren't on drugs!

On this particular night it's past twelve and I've gone to bed when I hear voices, Elizabeth's and my husband's, in the kitchen. Then he opens the bedroom door—"You'd better get up and talk to this kid."

The light doesn't seem to be on, and I don't see her face clearly. She just stands there in the hall, she doesn't make eye contact. Just the monotone of her voice, telling me that she and her friend Celeste were coming home from tonight's kegger when they rounded a bend in the Beaver Creek Park road and saw, in their headlights, the overturned Cherokee Scout and the four girls who had been headed back to town at high speed to pick a fight with somebody's boyfriend—

God no.

Dry-eyed, she says their names. Lynn, Sandy, Sarah, Jody—Jody is still alive.

God no! Not Lynn B——? Not Sandy W——?

Yes. In that inexorable monotone Elizabeth tells the rest of her

story. "Sandy was still alive when we got there. She'd been thrown out of the Scout—she was hanging on the fence. I could see her"—and for the first time her voice falters—"I never dreamed barbed wire could cut you open like that. I held Sandy's hand. I don't know if she knew I was there. She just kept saying, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry*. Celeste had called the sheriff on her dad's CB, but for a long time, forever, it was just us there in the dark. After awhile Sandy was quiet. I kept holding her hand. Then all at once there were lights, and noise, and all the people in the world were there, and somebody told me to let go of Sandy's hand and go home."

She doesn't cry. She keeps her arms folded across herself, looks away; and I, caught in my first ignominious reaction—at least it *wasn't my child*—

"Where are you going?" I ask when she sidles away.

"Over to Saint Jude's," she says. "A lot of the kids are going to be there."

What I am thinking about, as I watch my daughter disappear from the reach of the streetlight, is the widening distance between us as her experiences soar into a zone of pain beyond any of mine. What will not occur to me, not during the parents' meetings and the guilt, the crackdown on the keggers and the knowledge that *only by the grace of God it wasn't my child*, what will not occur to me for another ten years is that not once did I try to touch my daughter that night, nor she to touch me.

"We're not a family that shows our affection," Auntie used to tell me. "When I drive down to see Ma, she looks up and says, 'I see you got here,' and I say 'Yes but the ferry was late,' as though I'd been gone half an hour instead of two or three months. Some people might think we're a little cold."

In the fall Elizabeth goes off to Montana State University as a pre-veterinary student. The problem is, men start happening to her. Auntie and I hold our breaths, neither of us daring to say a word, when she gets engaged to an individual whose fraternity brothers call him Thumper. Finally she breaks the engagement, but microbiology is a casualty. Getting accepted into vet school looms more and more insurmountable to her; three hundred miles away, in Havre, I wonder what happened to the fearless child, but she comes home less and less frequently.

She's met an engineering student, for one thing, a real Montana boy like her father. And my home is not a place anyone wants to be. My husband has just been diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. Rachel is a year old, and I can deal with little else.

Elizabeth decides to get married in Bozeman, close to her university friends and to her fiance's family. But will I sew her wedding dress?

I will. All that spring in the early mornings before I go to work, I will sip coffee in the first sunlight while the folds of white slipper satin spill off my lap. Plying my needle, letting my thoughts wander, I will embroider sleeves, bodice, hem, with white satin-stitch roses on a dress she will not even come home to try on.

My daughter plans to change her major to zoology and pick up her teaching credentials. After graduation she will go to live in a small town in southern Idaho, where her fiance already has a good job near some of the best elk hunting and trout fishing in the world. He'll fill out his hunting license every year and drink with his buddies in the little jukebox bars in places like St. Anthony and Ashton and bring home most of his paychecks. She might do some substitute-teaching. She'll settle down.

Sure she will.

So now here we both are, Elizabeth and I, farther to the west than we have ever lived, with our backs to the Continental Divide and our faces turned to the confluence of rivers where the Snake opens out into its roll to the Columbia and the Pacific. And I speak the truth to her, for once: "A new baby. I'm so glad—" and by some miracle the truth is the right thing to speak.

By the next day, Elizabeth is explaining to Brian that nobody is ever ready for a baby. Of course she won't give up vet school. With a good babysitter and support from Brian she'll manage both.

In May she is accepted into the Vet Med program at Washington State University. And, as Elizabeth will tell the story later to friends, in August the baby pops out, and she says, "Here, Brian, catch," and rushes off to class.