

Spring 2011

My Mother's Disappearance

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Recommended Citation

Del Duca, Rosa (2011) "My Mother's Disappearance," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 74 , Article 24.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss74/24>

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MY MOTHER'S DISAPPEARANCE

In the picture, they're awkwardly posed. They're trying to re-enact that Chagall painting, the one where a smiling man in a suit has one arm outstretched, holding the hand of a woman floating sideways, seven feet off the ground. My mother's on a ladder, but you don't see the ladder in the picture. It does look like she's flying, and not just because you can't see her feet, but because of this strange, giddy joy spreading across her face, coming out her laughing mouth and eyes.

In the picture, my father's smile is rigid. He's a little drunk, although it can't be past three in the afternoon. It's one of those days where he quits the office early and trudges the ten blocks home, pulling at his tie and wondering if my mother remembered to pick up more lime for his gin. "Being a lawyer for crummy people is like being eaten away by battery acid," he always said. That's how the whole thing started—with Dad getting tipsy and coming up with a wild idea.

She, of course, agrees. She would like him to come home full of charming notions every day, like before they were married and he'd show up on her doorstep and ask if she'd like to have a picnic on the moon. They didn't really go to the moon, of course. They went to the lake. But Dad would drive her there blindfolded, and carry her down to the eastern beach, the one covered in smooth, pale boulders. "The moon!" he'd declare, whipping off the blindfold. So, I have to think that it was some glimmer of my father's former quirks that led her up the ladder that day.

She suffers through four of Dad's attempts to get back in position after setting the automatic timer on the camera. And

he's so excited at the success of the fifth and final take that he lets go of my mother's hand to pump his fists in the air. That's when she falls, her legs tangling, breaking, in the rungs of the ladder.

It took my mother two years to untangle herself. And when she finally did, she strode back in the house, where my father stood, shocked, a slice of lime poised over his glass. She pulled him outside and said, "Watch this." Her feet lifted off the ground, her body light as a dandelion seed. She floated over his head, bending sideways so she looked exactly like the woman in the Chagall painting, but when my father reached out for her hand, she didn't reach back. She drifted clear away and was never seen again.