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Ricochet

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RUBY HANSEN MURRAY

RICOCHET

- Winner: Montana Prize in Nonfiction -

I'M DRAGGING MY suitcase up uneven stone steps to the rental car when my husband calls. I stop beside the sandstone blocks that stringy CCC boys fit together to make this cabin on our ancestral land near Bartlesville. I've stayed on this hill surrounded by black jack oaks during the June dances and our congressional election, and I'm ready to go home. It's early Sunday morning, and the air is warm and soft. My husband tells me fifty people have been shot in a nightclub in Florida. I sit on a stone step and trace the length of oak branches that fill each of the windows with green. In the moment it takes to learn that the killer was also shot and to pray there's no retaliation, I try to close the doors to my heart, like the heavy doors to the cedar barn at home. My husband, a man who has ready words for friends and strangers alike, says *I'm at a loss*.

Even if I wanted to see images from the shooting, there's no television in the cabin. I drive toward Hominy. Cars and trucks crawl around the McDonald's, Sonic, the Kum and Go where Pawhuska's Main Street and the highway intersect. The new construction is miles from the BIA superintendent's office on Agency Hill, the faded downtown.

I drive the easy curves south toward the Friends church. No one mentions the killings in Orlando. Sometimes the reservation feels like a

place apart. While the pastor's daughter reads a Bible verse, I remember the first time I went to a gay club and how free I felt. We used to call clubs the meat market; being out with Jerry made the air itself feel lighter.

It's potluck Sunday. We eat under large photographs of Hazel Harper and her sister, the old ladies in their blue striped blankets, presiding over the room in which they taught scholars Osage. The ugliness in Orlando doesn't pass through my lips, because there is nothing our words can do. And I don't want to witness fresh grief.

I travel toward the airport on roads over rolling hills in a grid that intersects small towns in oil country, listening to young reporters on the radio with repetitive post-shooting coverage. The Orlando victims' families speak shakily about the final phone call or text they received. A survivor talks about a girl shot in the arm, who bled out while they hid in the bathroom. *I shook her and I said, stay with me, now.*

There's an Orlando, Oklahoma, 21 miles north of Guthrie. It was first called Cherokee and was founded by the Doolin gang. Orlando, Florida, is full of theme parks, Disney World and Universal Studios. Orlando is a word familiar to literary and theatre people, a charade, a masquerade.

While I drive through small towns and a few churches surrounded by a scattering of cars, the reporters plan a call-in program to offer condolences and share sorrow. Whenever I scanned radio channels this last week, I heard white male preachers arguing *not right, not right. You're not right.* I'm afraid the reporters on this country station will slide into judgment about the gay club or Muslims, but they don't.

Xaxier Serrano Rosado was thirty-five, a dancer and the father of a five-year-old boy. Yilmery Rodriguez Sullivan was twenty-four and told her family a gay club would be safer, *there are shootings at the other clubs*. I listen to the radio for the two hours it takes to drive to Oklahoma City. It makes me angry to hear the surprise in the voices of the reporters that the survivors would live with the effects of violence for years. We will learn that the killer was a man hyped on steroids, spraying pain-hate-sadness outward, calling himself a jihadist for cover.

The Cimarron River winds across New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and into Oklahoma. Few people picture bison ranging this far, but Osages hunted them along the rocky slopes of the Cimarron. This is where Cherokees attacked our Osage family camp when the men were hunting. Osages women and children hid in scruffy cover while the Cherokees tracked them, killing and capturing. They hid overnight, listening and waiting. My great-great-grandmother was taken then; the course of her life, our lives, changed.

In my twenties, during a workday in Houston's Fourth Ward, a man carried me away from my car through a fence to an empty apartment. I remember moving through space, dull light and carpet.

I wonder if my mother said to my father, *your daughter was attacked*, in her English with its slight Caribbean inflection. Or *Ruby was raped*. Or whether my father overheard a conversation between my mother and my brother.

That day in Houston, my friend Sarah opened her door, looked

at me and asked *what happened, did you lose your job?* For a while she went with me to the downtown police station to look at men lined up against a wall. Getting to the room with one-way glass through the halls filled with a jumble of new arrests and groups of prisoners moving through the jail was as bad as standing with other women in a darkened room looking at the row of men.

On a weekday in Houston at the back of an apartment complex, a parking area under a metal roof, a man said *there's something wrong with your tire*. For months and months after that I stayed within the empty carpeted rooms and white walls of my apartment. Invisible meant safe.

It's not rape, if he's touching your eyelids gently, gently. *Don't look*, a soft voice, *or I'll have to put out your eyes*. I lay on the floor as if my bones had dissolved.

My father's voice on the phone. He was a man of so few words I can count the conversations we had. *Do you want me to come down there?* I had told my mother, but they were already not speaking, the relationship ulcerated. *No*, I said, *I'm okay*.

Jim and Jennie and John, my brothers and sister, feel badly, my mother said. *They're very sorry*. None of us spoke of it later; the words disappeared between us.

For months I snuck through the apartment complex where I lived, the blank white buildings, square windows, sliding through breezeways with my back to the wall, when I had to go to the laundry room, the mailboxes. Predators. A fireman I fell in love with, a battalion chief, married when I

met him, told me how consciously men think and talk about how to get sex from overweight women, single moms. *You just ask them how they're getting along.*

At the tribal college, a man reads from his short story about sorority sisters who never put out on the first date but will blow you on the second. A student reads a scene from a play he's written, has everyone laughing at a dad's desperate advice to his son. *At my age, I can still get it with the tourists . . . They don't look so bad.* His hair down his back, his bright smile. The continuum between getting it and taking it, hazy.

Rape. I can't hear the word, can hardly write it without a turn in my gut, my mouth feeling brackish. Women are trained to know it, fearful of it, conscious of it and the threat of violence. Men are bigger, stronger, those underlying muscles, the threat over our heads constant, the way an abalone sky fits over my home on Puget Island.

I went home to my family's house in Sacramento from Houston, to the ferns under filtered shade, a fishpond in that dry desert valley with its 107-degree days. When my parents' ready-to-go-to-violence yelling began, I left my brothers inside and went to sit under the high northern California sky and its few stars.

The morning of the Orlando shooting, a friend writes on Facebook, *They're killing us*, and I'm ashamed for the distance I want to keep.

I'm circling here, defensive. A year ago I heard munching just outside the window at midnight. I thought a deer was inside my fenced garden. From the back porch I heard the click of horns in the darkness.

In the beam of a flashlight, the backs of two bucks beyond the pasture fence glowed blond. They were breathing hard, making tight circles, their horns clacking as they pushed against each other. They didn't stop when I called, then rapped the flashlight on the metal railing. The light showed them jostling, their horns locked, quick jumps as they changed position. You could see their luminous eyes as they turned, necks curled, their heads down close to their front legs. I went inside while they were still circling, worried they'd hurt each other and we'd find one injured in the morning. My husband went out, and I heard, *Well, figure it out*. His voice was almost loving, compassionate but resigned.

I'd seen a stout older buck and a smaller, younger animal with three points walking back and forth to the trees by the ditch line. The Columbia River White Tailed Deer is a protected species that lives on the island with us. I'm not saying that human violence is inevitable, but maybe it is. At the same time I work for change, I have begun to feel there isn't enough time or good will or synergy for enduring solutions.

The day of the Orlando shooting, I fly out of the Oklahoma City Airport, which is more cosmopolitan than Tulsa's. The Homeland Security people are on edge. We're delayed at the gate by a computer problem on the aircraft. Passengers are unsettled, quiet. An expensively dressed couple waits. Professors at OU, I imagine, maybe Pakistani. I sit on the floor while my phone charges, and a woman in a hijab walks by holding her young child's hand. We're all waiting, the security people, the airline staff and passengers

for the plane to be fixed, for the next evil act. I call my husband to say we'll be late, if we get off the ground at all this evening, and I tell him that I love him.