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Aces

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Aces

"Kit, baby," my mother says, "he's my lover, not my husband."

Red light, I think. Our voices grate against the Montana to Mexico connection. It's like we're talking in a tin can, vacuum-packed. My mother says lover the way she says *brie*, and husband comes out like *saltine*. She's explaining why she can't ask Dan to front Ruck and me the money to retain a lawyer. I can picture her there in San Miguel, among her geraniums, smoking the Virginia Slims her minister brings her in caseloads from Laredo. She can sit on her patio all day and never see the yoked women hauling well water in molasses cans. I've been to Dan's house, which squats high on a mountainside behind a whitewashed wall. She and Dan treated Kevin and me to a trip there when Kevin was just a baby, five years ago. Dan's generosity was more evident when they were first together. Before Ruck. BR, I've heard my mother say to my brother when she thought I wasn't listening. When she's in a certain mood, time in my life is measured *before Ruck* and *after Ruck*.

"Mother," I start. Then I don't know what to say. I want the money and I'm afraid I'll say the wrong thing and screw up my chances. The pay phone receiver's sticky and dirty. My breath is ashen like the sky. It's twenty-below in Bozeman, enemy cold, two days before Thanksgiving. I'm at the phone booth outside the Molly Brown and smashed paper beer cups litter the gravel parking lot. Chilled rivulets of sweat run under my navy pea jacket. My sneakers have holes in the toes and my pink socks tuft frozen through the holes. My feet ache from the cold.

"This is costing, Katherine."

"Are you getting the drift? We were *busted*."

"How did you get out of jail?"

"This woman. Ruck used to work for her."

"Where's Kevin? Poor thing."

"Kevin's with us." I do not want to tell her the way the local deputy said, "Come on, son," to Kevin and led him away in his pajamas and moon boots in the middle of the night. I do not like to remember the embarrassed half-wave Kevin gave me, ducking his head, as though he'd known all along this might happen. Do you know what you think about when you are suddenly separated from your child by forces beyond your control? I didn't think about the sweet afterbath smell of him or the wilted ox-eye daisies I find lined in a row in his room or the proud way he recites nursery rhymes. No. I sat on the bed in my cell, the walls of which were painted a hysterical orange, and thought of every rotten remark I'd ever made in exhaustion or impatience. I tormented myself and hoped to God Kevin was not remembering what I was remembering. He's out of the foster home now and he sticks like glue to Ruck.

"Did he do it?"

She means, is he guilty? "No, Mother. You know Ruck. He had the utility room of the trailer all set up with his lab, his inventions. Someone—a Jehovah's Witness or the woman who brings the milk—someone just saw all that stuff and misunderstood."

"Metham—what's it called?"

"Methamphetamine. Like diet pills."

"They used to call it speed."

I do not ask her how she knows this, but I remember the *Halcion* sleeping pills, little blue dream wheels, I once stole from her medicine cabinet. I do not tell her that it doesn't matter to me whether he's guilty or not. Just as it will not matter to the lawyer as long as he has his money and Ruck finds a path of even terrain through the truth and never deviates from it.

"They treated us like dangerous people," I say. This seems to strike just the right note, since she knows we are not dangerous people and deserve better treatment. She's bending my way, like a tree under weight of winter snow.

"Are you in Jardine right now?" I hear her blowing smoke away from the phone, a weary sound.

"No, we're in Bozeman. The feds won't let us go back to the trailer yet. They say they're still sifting the evidence."

"Where're you living?"

"In a friend's garage."

"A garage?"

"It's not so bad. Really. It's insulated. There's a wood stove."

"You're not—"

"Not what?"

"You're not sleeping on the floor, are you?"

"Ruck built a loft. Sort of a platform."

She sighs. "What about legal aid? They have that there, don't they?"

"We tried that," I say. "It was no go." Too corrupt for legal aid, I think.

"Give me your number."

"I'm at a pay phone. Ellen can't afford a phone yet."

"Call me again on Thanksgiving," she says. "I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you, Mother," I say. My mooching voice fills me with self-loathing. It's chronic, whenever I speak with her. Thirty-four seems too old to be calling collect, to be asking for money.

"Kit, dear," she says, just before we hang up, "Take care."

And for a split-second her voice brings tears to my eyes, but that is my response to my own life, not my response to her.

Jardine, Montana, is not a place I ever thought I'd end up.

I went to university at UC Santa Cruz for two years, had a surfer boyfriend, took weekend trips with my girlfriends to the Napa Valley where we'd drink our way from winery to winery in a maroon '65 Impala. We still liked to listen to Motown. This was in 1971, a time when I thought

I would—could—be somebody. I wanted to be in advertising or journalism.

But a woman does not find out who she'll be or what life will be like until she has a child. And for most women a child is like having all the windows in your house painted shut forever. Liberty is my oldest—thirteen. She lives in Pocatello with her Dad, who's been through several reincarnations—surfer, computer repairman, snow plow driver. Liberty was pure accident, as I believe so many babies are, even now. When I look back on those times, I do not think I made too many conscious decisions about sex. I was wild and only wanted experience. I did not think ahead.

Liberty is a teenager who knows what she needs to know—about IUD's, about diaphragms. She and her friends call them *phrams*. We talk about these things when she comes to visit in the summer. She can say blow job with the same ease I might have said ice cream cone when I was her age. So far it's all talk. I hope she stays a girl for a few more years, keeps her life for her very own as long as she can.

That was the time of the Big Split between mother and me—when I was pregnant with Liberty. There was no more school, no more surfer boyfriend. I found a job in a bookstore, sold my car to save for the hospital bills, bicycled all over town, and had some notion about baby and me against the world. There were abortions then, but I couldn't bring myself to make the decision, to take control.

Times were tough. Not much money, the colic, food stamps, an apartment where I had to beg the landlord for more heat. The first year of Liberty's life I probably saw the ocean twice. I realized the ocean was not that important to me anymore.

We moved around some after that, to Mendocino, to Klamath Falls, to the Okanagon Valley in central Washington, always looking for a place to be where we could relax, hide out, live cheap. Then Kevin came along when Liberty was seven, conceived in a burst of craziness one weekend when I couldn't stand my four walls anymore. I can't remember his father's name. I had my tubes tied on the delivery table.

Ruck and I met right after that and Ruck babied Kevin like he was his own. I think I loved him for that. There are so many men who won't touch you with a ten foot pole if you have children. The kids were my handicap. Ruck's was an artificial leg—he'd lost his own in a car accident.

We moved to Jardine because Ruck had a friend who'd abandoned this paid-for trailer up there and it sounded good—free rent at the end of the road, with a garden plot, and the mountains like a bulwark against the outside world. We'd given up on getting anywhere, having credit cards, owning anything besides our pickup and chain saw. We wanted to survive with as few hassles as possible. Sometimes I try to remember when it was that I ran out of aces. I think it happened a long time ago, in Santa Cruz, and I just realized it when we were busted.

The next morning Kevin's squirmed down to the bottom of the

queen-size futon we're all sleeping on. He's tickling my feet. I'm not very ticklish, but I pretend to be. When I squeal, he giggles. Ruck's breath is warm against my cheek. Sunlight glazes the aluminum strips of insulation between the studs.

"Wuck," Kevin says, suddenly sitting up and shivering, "I want to watch cartoons." His white-blond hair is cut in a burr all over except for a six-inch rat tail which curls on the nape of his smooth neck.

"Rrrr," Ruck says, his palm on my hip.

"Oh, yeah," Kevin says. "Rrrr . . . Wuck."

Ruck kisses my shoulder and switches on the radio. "Cartoons coming right up." He hops out of bed, his sweatpants loose and floppy below his stump. He slips Kevin's jacket over his PJ's. "You stay here," Ruck says to me. "I'll set him up inside with Darcy and the VCR. Be back pronto." Darcy is Ellen's little girl. We're staying in Ellen's garage.

Ruck puts on his single Sorel, pushes Kevin's moon boots on over his bare feet and lifts him down to the concrete floor. Then they're out the door, Ruck with one crutch, their voices trailing away while I'm still snuggled under the flannel sheets and blankets, listening to the Top 40 station. I push away the thought of the garage and concentrate on the embroidery on the top quilt, a flowery line of worn feather stitches, somehow more valuable to me, prettier, because they're old.

Within minutes, Ellen's at the door. She sticks her head inside and says, "Rise and shine, girl. Blueberry muffins are in the oven." Ellen's a morning person. She just got off welfare with a graveyard shift at a Mini-Mart. When we're waking up, she's unwinding from her job, but she's still a morning person.

"Ruck was coming back," I say.

"No longer. I seduced him with those muffins." She cackles.

I throw a pillow at her, which she catches with both hands and pitches back to me. The door's standing wide open and the cold's flowing in like poison gas.

"Close the door, birdbrain," I say. "I'm coming. I'm coming."

"Sorry," she says, "Does that mean you're multi-orgasmic?" She claps shut the door. Ellen can make a sexual joke of anything you say, so there's no point watching what you say. She hung around the bars when she was a girl. Her Dad owned Rosa's Cantina and her sense of humor was molded by frat boys.

Inside, it's festive. Ellen's current boyfriend, Glen, is lighting a small marble pipe of hash and its sharp, musty smell hits me first. The kitchen's warm and cozy. A long strand of red chilies hangs over the stove, souvenir of Ellen's summer trip to visit her folks in Socorro. Darcy and Kevin are lounging in front of the television in the living room, separated from the kitchen by only a knee-high bookcase. Ellen's smoking a black cigarette and lip-synching "Cary," which is playing on the radio. She's glossed her lips with shiny magenta. Six people in the house and we're crowded. For a brief inner moment, I'm in California when I hear that song, and my

life is still ahead of me, spanning open like a fan you might buy at Pier One, something foreign and exotic.

Then Kevin says, "Mom, Darcy says Big Bird's a jerk."

We all laugh. That annoys Kevin, but he turns back to the television.

On my way to the bathroom, I squeeze behind Ruck's chair and he reaches out and pats my calf. He and Glen are talking about hash. They remind me of my mother and Dan talking about their wines. After a while in these conversations you realize you've heard it all before. When I come out of the bathroom, the muffins are on the table.

"Real butter, babycakes," Ellen says to me.

Coffee steams in the mugs. Ellen's opened the back door a few inches to get rid of the hash smoke.

Just as I'm breaking open a muffin, there's a knock at the front door. The grown-ups raise their eyes to one another and Kevin runs over to Ruck. Glen opens the back door wide and the frigid breeze sweeps over us. Ellen flaps her hand, signaling him to close it. She goes to the window behind the television and looks out on the front steps.

"Sally Ann," she says to us.

She opens the door and it's a Salvation Army officer carrying a wicker basket of food. His uniform is royal blue, the elbows and knees shiny from being pressed.

"I'm looking for Katherine Ruckerson," he says, rocking back and forth, toe to heel. His face is a pale slab of authority.

"That's me," I say, spilling my coffee.

"What does he want?" Kevin says to Ruck. Glen has disappeared into the bathroom.

The Sally Ann officer steps inside and Ellen closes the door and folds her arms across her chest and waits beside the door, kind of smirky. His entry into the house changes everything. When someone like that—a social worker or police officer, whoever—comes into your home, you all at once see your house, your kids, the way they might. Kevin's bare feet on the cool linoleum, Darcy's hair ratty, the ashtray full of butts, the cracked window repaired with cardboard and duct tape. Certainly whatever vitality the morning might have had gets let like blood.

I go over to the coffee table. "I'm Kit Ruckerson."

"I'm Captain Cripe," he says. "This is your food basket from the Salvation Army."

"Thanks," I say, taking the basket and setting it on the coffee table.

"Is he a policeman?" Kevin says to Ruck.

The Nylons come on the radio.

"This is a food basket for four. My information stated that you have two children. Is that correct?" His watery blue eyes meet mine.

"I have another child, but she lives in Pocatello."

"Oh, dear," he says. I can see him eyeing the food in the basket, trying to decide what to do. Should he take back the canned spinach or the day old coffee cake?

I look at Ellen and she rolls her eyes. I am grateful for her. Behind me I can hear Ruck hopping to the sink. He turns on the tap.

"Well," Captain Cripe says, "Have a Happy Thanksgiving." This reminds me of the way my brother in New York always signs his letters "Happy Trails," as though he thinks I'm Dale Evans in Montana.

Ellen opens the door and he waddles out. We crack up when she shuts the door.

"At least," Ruck says, plopping back into his chair, "it's not like the old days when you went to them for a meal and they'd make you drag the 'Old Rugged Cross' around before you could eat."

"At least," Glen says, flinging his long gray ponytail over one shoulder. He picks up a wooden match and uses it to scrape the inside of the pipe bowl.

"Paramilitary, aren't they?" Ellen says, patting Ruck's shoulder as she returns to the table.

"It's a turkey, Mom," Kevin says, pawing through the basket.

"A big bird," Darcy shoots at him.

Our muffins are cold, the sun's blocked by a gauzy cloud, and Ruck hasn't shaved in days. He has more gray now than he did a month ago, and there's a frown line between his eyebrows, a groove he must be cultivating. The things that make us happy are like Crackerjack toys: Ellen's new job, the gram of hash, songs on the radio. I pour my cold coffee back into the pot and turn the gas up and stare out the window. I try to imagine what I'll be doing this time next year if Ruck's in prison. Nothing comes immediately to mind. The holidays all seem like rituals made for other people, people who have some refuge in the world, some margin of safety, who've never seen the inside of a welfare office or the lust in the eyes of an arresting officer.

Ellen laughs. "He sure took the fucking wind right out of our sails."

Speed's not a substance to mess around with. Rumor has it that it makes men impotent and women bitchy. I don't think many people do it anymore. I have tried it once and I know what homemade speed looks like: gooey and gray, kind of like Sterno fuel, but not nearly as dangerous. I never knew what Ruck was doing in the utility room. He was home, he was affectionate, he spoke to Kevin with respect. That was enough for me. But speed, sweet Jesus, speed.

The time I ate that speed was with Casey, an old boyfriend of mine, who came to see me one June when I was thinning apples in Brewster, Washington, near the Columbia River. I remember we used to catch carp in that river and cook them up with plenty of curry to cover the trash taste. And I remember Liberty had gone to see her Dad and Kevin wasn't born yet. I can remember all this as though it were yesterday—even the songs on the jukebox at the Bohemian Tavern. I guess you can consider yourself fortunate if some of the events in your life take on the sheen of a movie, that romance sheen, when trees are in bloom, light's gold on the water,

and you look in the mirror and know you look the best you ever will. That summer was like that for me.

I had worked for nine days straight, thinning the little green reds and golds from the trees of a man named Cooper who provided a trailer and some cabins for his workers. He had a Bible on the front seat of his pickup truck and every year I'd ever been there he offered the women extra money—fifty cents more a tree—if they would work topless. I never did, but it's possible I never did just because the price wasn't high enough. After nine days, I woke up thinking, "Today's my day off." I dressed up in an old forties church dress, blue rayon with padded shoulders, painted my toenails a color called Sea-Lily, which shimmered like the inside of a seashell, and thought about hitching into town to the Bo for lunch.

I heard a horn toot and when I looked out the window, there was Casey in a little green sports car with rusty fenders. He doffed his cap and said, "Hi, Sugarpie," just as though it hadn't been three years since we'd last met. Casey is the kind of man you can have a good time with for a night or two, if you're in the mood to strain your capacity for excess.

We bought a fifth of Cuervo Gold and headed over to Chelan where he had a connection to buy the speed. We rolled over the river highway, feeling like we owned it, listening to the Dead's "Mars Hotel" and catching up, gossiping about every old hippie we knew between Spokane and Bellingham. Casey was a shameless gossip.

In Chelan I waited in the car outside a ma-and-pa grocery while Casey went in and made his deal. I could see the long lake and the carloads of tourists lined up to take the ferry ride into the glacial heart of the Cascades. I remember I imagined what it might be like to live there in Chelan, on the edge of the wilderness. I liked the thought. This was not unusual for me in those days to think of moving. Moving's something you can do a lot of when you're young. You can kiss your friends goodbye and not look back. When you're older moving takes its toll—it's a kind of death to give up all you've known and start all over somewhere else. But then I could daydream, I could picture it. I wanted to go to brunch in the old white clapboard hotel there, on a Sunday morning. I thought that would be the ultimate in elegance.

After Casey came out we went over to his friend's place, near the lake, and we stayed there late into the night, eating speed with a knifeblade from a sheet of aluminum foil, drinking the tequila, and when that ran out, we walked out for beer. We talked and talked. It seemed we could remember every tiny detail of every meal we'd ever eaten, every argument we'd ever had, every relationship we'd ever been in. We shared the most forgettable details of our childhoods, my Dan River dresses which had sashes in the back, his obsession with Sherlock Holmes. We told the true stories of the lovers we'd had before one another, including all the parts we'd left out before, out of discretion or fear. And all the while, there in that Chelan apartment, over a paint store, we listened to the country station on the radio, which was so unlike us, but the music seemed to fit that

night: Kitty Wells and Bob Wills and Patsy Cline. I remember Casey saying, "She's very sexy," when Patsy Cline sang "Crazy." And the next day, I really didn't care that things seemed a little raw around the edges. I was happy in a way, happy to have talked myself out, to someone I could trust, in Lake Chelan where nobody knew who I was and the very air seemed a precious cold blue from the firs, the deep lake.

The next day we do Thanksgiving: cook and bake and eat and watch the Christmas parade with Kevin and Darcy. Ruck and Glen go out several times and each time they return they seem a little more wasted. "It's a holiday, baby," Ruck says, when I give him an evil look. In between the sweet potatoes and the parade and the time Ruck and I make love in the bathroom, I keep going out to call my mother. My whole day revolves around making that connection. Each time, a butchy high-tech voice says that all circuits are busy. Around seven that night, snow begins falling in lacy ellipses and I decide not to go out anymore.

On Friday, it's a piece of cake. The call goes right through.

"Kit," she says, and right away I hear that she's swallowing tears. "We just can't."

We. There's static on the line behind a shadow conversation, a man saying, "I'll meet you in Butte. At Denny's. We'll take it from there." Even at this distance, I recognize the optimism in his voice and I wish I were talking to him, someone upbeat, someone with solutions.

"You can't."

"But Kit. I have an idea."

No ideas, I think. We need money.

"I could send you that brooch. Grandma's brooch. You could pawn it."

I'm standing at the phone booth behind the Safeway and I can smell the heavy grease from the deli. There's a man with a bedroll and an army surplus pack, opening the lid to the brown dumpster. The snow has stopped and the sky is a pale winter blue, like old jeans. I can picture Dan at his roll top desk writing checks and I wonder why he can't just write one for me, why he wants to make it difficult for her, why she has to cry and offer me the brooch. Which is probably worth about three hundred dollars anyway.

"Don't do it, Mother," I say.

"Why not?"

"It's not enough anyway."

"It could get you started. You could get it back from the pawn shop when your ship comes in." She giggles.

I want to say, we are marooned on a desert island, there is no freshwater, there are no fucking ships. But in her giggle there is more desperation than I am feeling.

"It would take too long," I say, improvising a response. "To mail it, hock it. We need the money this week."

"What will you do?" she whispers. She's afraid.

"I think we'll sell the truck," I say.

That makes her feel better and, in truth, it makes me feel better, too, knowing that selling the truck is an option, and that if we do, we'll consider ourselves really on the bottom, two people without a vehicle in winter, and that that will probably be the very worst time and improvements are bound to happen after that. I promise to call again in two weeks and we hang up.

I walk down to the courthouse to see the social worker I've been assigned. There's not much traffic and the snow is still pure and untrammelled on the sidewalk. I remember Jardine and wonder if we'll ever call it home again. On a day like this in Jardine, I might have strapped on my beat up cross-country skis and glided down to town, to Gardiner, where my friend Louisa and I would drink drafts at the Blue Goose and complain about our lives in a good-natured way. Almost always we would go out at dusk, across the potholed street to where the park begins, and we'd listen to the elk cows calling, singing, the way they do. Then she'd have driven me home, five miles into the mountains. I liked going downhill and not having to work my way back up.

At the courthouse, there is one receptionist for all the welfare workers. She is young, around twenty-two, I guess, with a polished made-up face, no smiles, and she keeps herself removed, at a distance, as though she might catch a disease from the people who pass through the door asking for help.

"Did you have a good holiday?" I say, just to put her on the spot, force a reply.

"Yes, thank you," she says, her eyes scanning the appointment book. "Have a seat in the waiting room."

The waiting room is a dull place, with old copies of *Family Circle* and *Redbook*, posters about nutrition, and a laundry basket of broken toys, firetrucks without wheels, dolls without eyes. I count the change in the bottom of my purse and consider buying a bag of Bugler and some rolling papers. Smoking's a crutch I pick up in times of crisis.

My worker comes to the door and invites me in to her cubby hole. She's a big woman, with hair the color of old brass doorknobs, and she wears paper maiche jewelry in the shape of animals—whales, herons, grizzly bears.

When she asks me if Ruck has found a job, I say, out of the blue, "I wonder why I ended up with a man who's handicapped?"

She looks up from her triplicate forms and says, "They're all handicapped, Kit. His just shows." And I see that she has been crying recently, and for a long time. Her eyes and cheeks are swollen. She's not wearing her fake fingernails and her thumb cuticles are ragged, as though she's bitten them.

I stare out the window and say, "No, not yet. We're both looking."

And I think about what might have happened to her Thanksgiving Day to make her that cynical, that hard. A woman can get hard from hurt

if it's repeated often enough, and the hardness can make her say the bitterest things. I haven't been hurt much. It's true I've been in some rough water, but I've never been with a man who called me names or made me cry all night. And even as I tell her about the garage and the food basket from Sally Ann, I am picturing Ruck and Kevin waiting at Ellen's for me, and I can be sure that Ruck is giving Kevin his pb sandwich for lunch and conning him into drinking a glass of milk. I think of selling the truck, finding the lawyer, going to trial, starting over afterwards, all the slogging months of winter ahead of us as we pick up the pieces. And I think, it's just another one of life's predicaments, worse than some, but not as bad as others. For a few minutes, it's like I'm up on Sacajawea Peak, looking down on all of us, instead of locked in my life like a child in a closet.

Patricia Henley