Fall 1999

Water, Steam, Ice

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WE ARE GOING TO FRANKLIN because that is where a Civil War battle was fought in November 1864. We are going to Franklin because that is where, in a past life, my son Bryce died.

He was a black soldier. He was shot three times, once in the wrist and twice in the stomach. These are the things he dreams about when he closes his eyes beside me and the thread between us stretches longer and longer until he is not even my son, but someone who knows how to clean a gun, how to crawl on his belly so he can’t be seen, how to aim his shots straight and steady so they will kill a man.

Bryce first remembered this other life when he was three, or at least that’s when he started to tell us, me and Greg, about it.

It was the Fourth of July. We had driven over to Warren for the fireworks display there. (Greg knew the mayor, a former client of his at the law office.) We left Red Earth early that morning, around nine, and the day had been hot and sticky, a typical summer forecast for central Minnesota. By the early evening, everyone felt tired and heavy with sweat.

We — Greg and Bryce and me — sat on a scratchy blanket by the river. We drank pink lemonade. With the first pop of the fireworks, Bryce started to wail. At first, we thought it was only a typical toddler reaction to loud noise, but after a few minutes, he was hysterical, his pulsing face the color of ripe tomatoes. I held him in my arms and he crawled deeper into the spaces there, digging his head hard into my chest, just like he had done when I was breast-feeding him.

Then he said the words that only I could hear. My beautiful boy spoke to his mother and told her in a perfect and clear sentence:

“This is just like when I died.”

Now Bryce is seven, but he still remembers. He has something that most people do not, a link with himself that I can only imagine. He is not only Bryce, he is others, deep and mystical
and not forgotten. That's what makes my boy special above all others.

Last year, you might have seen it, we were both featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show.

BRYCE AND I DRIVE INTO FRANKLIN, about twenty miles south of Nashville. We know this is a place of historical significance because all the signs tell us so as we pass into the city limits.

“What does that sign say?” I ask Bryce.

“Home of the Rebels,” he says slowly.

Bryce is being home-schooled.

“Those were the men I was fighting,” he tells me. Then he presses one smooth little boy finger on the window, as if he were touching the dead. “Those were the men I killed.”

To hear Bryce say these things makes my heart sad. That’s why we haven’t come to Franklin before this. Ever since the insurance settlement, Bryce and I have spent our time traveling in great loops around the country, sleeping on crisp white hotel sheets, eating food from greasy roadside restaurants. But we’ve always managed to stay away from Franklin because that’s the one place for Bryce that doesn’t include me. I don’t want us to be strangers there, Bryce transformed through space and time into someone with a different mother, someone who is not me. But Bryce wants to go. He’s always wanted to go, and now that he’s getting older, it’s harder to refuse. So when he asked last month on his birthday to come here, his big eyes shining and his little hand touching mine like it would never let go, I opened my mouth and found it saying okay.

Bryce feels hungry, so we decide to get some lunch before exploring the town. We drive along Hillsboro Road, a street so congested with banks and Burger Kings and neon signs that it doesn’t look very historical at all. We end up at Five Points Drug Store, a retro soda fountain kind of joint, on the corner of the newly refurbished and faithfully rendered olde-time Main Street.

Our waitress, a pretty brunette with pink glossy lipstick and one of those ridiculous paper caps like waitresses used to wear in her hair, rushes over as soon as we sit down. Her name tag reads Howdy! I’m RUBY.
“Hey, mister, why aren’t you in school?” she says happily to Bryce. “You feeling under the weather?”

Bryce squirms on his side of the booth.

“He’s being home-schooled,” I explain. “He’s a very smart boy.”

“Is that so?” Ruby asks, balancing a pen on her order pad.

“Bryce, honey, what’s the capital of Montana?” I ask him.

“Helena,” he says quietly, staring at his fingers.

“And what’s the freezing temperature of water?” I ask again.

“32 degrees Fahrenheit, 0 degrees Celsius,” he tells me, a little louder.

Ruby takes a step back and smiles broadly at Bryce.

“Well, you’re a regular Einstein, aren’t you, sweetheart?” she says.

Bryce giggles shyly. He likes applause.

I order us two vegetable plates with mashed potatoes, green beans, and squash. A Coke for Bryce, iced tea for me.

Bryce and I don’t eat meat: bad karma.

Ruby heads back towards the kitchen, and Bryce stares out the window at the shiny cars passing by, at the electric lights in the shape of gas lamps, at the smooth cobblestones lining Main Street.

“Can we go to the battlefield after lunch?” Bryce asks, not looking at me.

“Oh, honey, I’m really tired,” I tell him. “How about we just find a hotel and relax this afternoon. Some place with a pool, how about that? Then we can go to the battlefield tomorrow when we’re all rested.”

Bryce doesn’t say anything, just keeps looking out the window.

“How does your wrist feel, sweetie?” I ask him, reaching out to touch his arm lightly with the tips of my fingers.

“Okie dokie,” Bryce murmurs.

His heavy brown eyes dart back and forth at the window.

Sometimes, it’s there in his profile, I see something so much like Greg that my heart seems to beat faster, so I hear it in my ears like the ocean. But that’s only an illusion. He is not Greg. He’s Bryce, my beautiful boy.
Greg, my husband, is three and a half years gone.

We went out there once, me and Bryce, to the place where the crash happened. Outside a town called Moxley, about forty miles or so from the airport.

Forty miles.

The grass in the field was still brown in some places, still flattened to the ground as though a huge boot had stepped there. The sun was shining, a light breeze waved through the tender sprigs of grass that had started to return.

Bryce—he was four then—ran in the field, his arms spread out like airplane wings, his voice imitating the roar of an engine. I leaned against my Volvo, parked on the side of the road, and watched the other cars zooming along with no idea that forty-eight good lives had stopped here.

Forty-eight lives.

That was the only time I ever cried about the plane crash.

Before we left, I gave Bryce an empty Folgers coffee can and told him to gather some of the dirt from the field to take back home with us.

Ruby brings our food, two white plates balanced on her tiny arms.

"Here you go, Einstein," she says to Bryce and he smiles. "Can I get you two anything else?"

Bryce looks at me uncertainly, no longer my shy boy. Then he turns to Ruby and says:

"I used to be alive here. I used to be alive and then I died in a war. Now me and my mommy are going to see where I died."

Ruby stares at Bryce, then she turns to stare at me. The look on her face is totally blank.

"Bryce has past life remembrance," I tell her. "It's really not that uncommon in children."

"Is that so?" she says.

I fish a pen out of my purse and take a napkin from the dispenser at the edge of the table.

"Here, Bryce honey," I say. "Draw the map. Draw the map of the battlefield for Ruby."

Bryce obediently takes the pen into his left hand and begins
making lines on the napkin, just like he did last year on Oprah, only then it was on a larger sketch pad.

“Bryce was a black Union soldier. He was shot and killed at the Battle of Franklin,” I tell Ruby while Bryce draws.

“Sometimes my wrist hurts,” Bryce says, not looking up from the napkin. “Where I got shot.”

“How do you know he was black?” Ruby asks.

“He remembers in dreams sometimes. He can see himself when he sleeps,” I say.

“Here, this is the battlefield,” Bryce says.

The drawing on the napkin looks like this:

![Drawing on napkin]

He points to the curving line behind the tree.

“This is where our troops were. In a ditch,” he says.

He looks up at Ruby, who's watching his fingers as if hypnotized.

“We were hiding,” he explains.

“This is where the Rebel soldiers were,” he says, motioning to a place behind the hill he has drawn. “We had to run out of the ditch. We had to run here,” his finger makes an invisible line towards the hill, “after someone made a shot.”

Ruby stares at the napkin. I wonder how many pins it takes to make the paper cap stick to her head that way.

“And here,” Bryce says slowly, pointing to the X on the left side of the drawing, “here is where I died.”

“Is this for real?” Ruby says, looking at me.

“Oh, yes. He can also identify different types of artillery he used
in the war, and give details about everyday items like saddles and lanterns,” I say.

“Are you sure you didn’t read these things in a book, honey? Sometimes when you’re little, it’s easy to get confused,” Ruby says.

“Most of it was dreams. Parts I just knew, just like,” Bryce says and then pauses a moment, “just like you know what someone you know looks like. You don’t have to think about it.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Ruby says, shaking her head.

“That’s amazing.”

Bryce and I shake our heads, too. Yes, my boy is amazing.

“I’ve seen all kinds of folks come through that door, but I’ve never met one yet who remembered a past life,” Ruby says. “You’re the first.”

“You might have seen us last year on Oprah,” I tell Ruby.

“There were five kids with past life remembrance, but my Bryce and his map were the hit of the show.”

“On Oprah? Are you serious?” she says. “Well, you two are practically famous! I’m glad you sat here in my section.”

Ruby walks away slowly to wait on another table, still watching us as if we are going to levitate or speak in tongues or simply disappear without paying for the meal. I smile at her, my best opened-mouth Minnesota smile, and Bryce and I begin eating our lunch.

“Is it okay to tell her?” Bryce asks, his mouth full of mashed potatoes.

“Sure it is, honey,” I say, reaching out to smooth his light brown hair, the color of old wood. “We don’t want to keep you all to ourselves. Everyone should know how special you are.”

When we’re finished, Ruby comes back with our bill. We talk a little more, mostly her asking questions. I tell her that my name is Lisa Cardinal; that at one time I taught third grade, but now I don’t; that Bryce and I are from a little bitty town in central Minnesota nobody has ever heard of except the people who live there.

“How long are you two going to be in town?” she asks.

“Oh, I couldn’t say,” I tell her, looking at my boy. “Bryce and I are free spirits.”

“Well, why don’t you stop by my place while you’re here. I
have a little girl about Bryce’s age, Molly. Bryce might like the company,” she says, looking sweetly at my boy. “And we’ve never had such celebrities in our midst before.”

Before I can say no, Ruby takes the napkin, the one Bryce has created the battlefield on, and draws a map to her apartment on the back.

“You can come over for dinner tonight if you want,” she says. “Around seven.”

Beside me, Bryce is smiling. He reaches out and touches the arm of this Ruby, this stranger.

“Can we go, Mommy?” he asks, his words unusually quick and strong.

What can I say to those little boy eyes, big and clear as glass jars?

“Sure we can,” I say.

Not all children are as well-adjusted as my boy.

In India, for example, it’s not unusual for children to remember their past lives. Often, however, these strange and distant memories are very traumatic for them. Often, they suffer a deep depression or homesickness to think of the families they left behind.

When this happens, the children are placed on potters’ wheels and spun in a counterclockwise direction, sometimes for hours. This is done to make them forget, to deaden the recollections of lives that are no longer their own.

Ruby lives in an apartment complex called Royal Oaks, although it doesn’t look very royal and there are no oak trees in sight. Bryce and I sing songs as we drive to the apartment, through the gates and around the shrub-lined little streets of the complex.

We sing “Like a Rolling Stone.”

Ruby’s apartment is small and quaint and full of brown and beige things. It smells like baking bread. Ruby herself looks neat and pretty with her hair pulled back in a French twist and her lips shadowed with liner, like a doll that’s too nice to play with, a doll for looking at. She smiles as she takes our jackets, as she shows us the upstairs with the bedrooms and the downstairs with the
kitchen. She smiles as she touches the top of Bryce’s head with her thin fingers.

“This is Molly,” she says, gesturing to a small blonde girl sitting at the kitchen table, cutting construction paper. “Say hello, Molly.”

“Hello,” Molly says loudly. She’s smiling, too.

Bryce holds onto my hand.

“Hi, Molly,” I say, and squeeze Bryce’s fingers. “Hi,” he says.

“Mom said I could make name cards to put on the table, just like we did at school when we had our Thanksgiving feast last year. I was an Indian. My name was Pretty Eyes. That’s what I wrote on my name card,” Molly says, holding up the piece of brown construction paper. “Pretty Eyes.”

“It’s so nice to have people here,” Ruby says, looking at her smiling daughter and then at us. “It makes the whole apartment a little brighter.”

We all stand quiet there in the kitchen.

“Molly, why don’t you take Bryce up to your room and play? Why don’t you show him your new Nintendo game?” Ruby says.

The grip tightens between me and Bryce. I’m not even sure who’s holding on to whom anymore.

“Maybe that’s not such a good idea,” I say. “Bryce is very shy.”

“Oh, Molly doesn’t bite, Bryce,” Ruby says, and she puts her hands on his shoulders. “Why don’t you go play?”


Bryce looks at me with those eyes, those big and brown Greg eyes, and I want to pull him to my chest and to hold him there. But I can’t do that, not in the kitchen of this strange woman with her perfect makeup and her perky blonde daughter.

“Go ahead, sweetheart,” I tell Bryce. “Go ahead and play.”

Bryce slowly lets go of my hand and follows Molly upstairs. I watch him, and it seems like he’s floating, floating away. I watch him climb the stairs behind Molly. One step, then two. I watch him as each part of his little body is swallowed by the upper part of the stairs, until he is gone, until finally there is nothing left to see. That’s how it is with leaving sometimes.

ICE ON THE WINGS, they told me.
A phone call from Sheila Hicks, the airline spokesperson. Her voice like a cat's: soothing and manipulative.

She tells me about physics. She tells me about a settlement. She tells me she, the airline, they are all sorry, so very sorry. *Ice on the wings.*

She tells me it happens sometimes.

"Now the mommies can play, too," Ruby says, and she laughs.

Ruby's making spaghetti. She stirs the sauce in a big green pot on the stove. I sit at the kitchen table while she flutters around me.

"Lisa, I'm so glad you two came into the restaurant this afternoon," she says. "You both just seemed so alone, sitting in that big booth. I'm a sucker for the lost types that come into the restaurant. My boss calls me Saint Ruby."

"Bryce and I aren't lost, though," I tell her. "We're simply on an extended vacation."

Ruby smiles.

"I don't mean to pry," she says slowly as she butters the bread, "but where is Bryce's father?"

I look at her in surprise.

"Well, I notice you have a wedding ring," she says, gesturing to the band on my left hand.

"Bryce's father is dead," I say, leaning hard on that word: dead.

"Oh," Ruby says, then she gives me the look they all give me. "That's rough."

We both sit silently for a moment.

"I know how lonely it gets," Ruby says, then she sighs. "I'm doing it on my own, too, since my husband skipped out six months ago. I don't care so much for myself, he can rot in hell before I'd want to talk to him again, you know? But he doesn't even call his own daughter, for Christ's sake."

I nod in agreement. My husband wasn't like that, though. Greg was a lawyer. I was a teacher. We drove a Volvo. We were going to be happy.

"My parents live in Arizona," I tell Ruby. "They were hippies, back in the sixties. Now they're New Agers, in a place called Sedona. I used to get so mad at them when I was little, the way
they would just pick up stakes and follow around any old com-
mune they could find. I just wanted to be a normal kid, go to
college, get married, have babies. They never got married, though,
my parents. They’ve been together thirty-five years, and they never
got married.”

Ruby stares at me. I usually don’t talk so easily to strangers
and I don’t know why I am telling this nosy woman the threads
of my life. Maybe strangers are the easiest people to talk to.

“Maybe that’s the secret,” she says.

“Could be. The only time I ever saw both my parents cry was
the day I told them I was going to take my husband’s last name,”
I say. “But I didn’t mind. I met Greg in college and knew I had
found what I was looking for. We were one person. We were
happy.”

I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. I try to concentrate
on naming everyone in my kindergarten class, instead of the field
outside Moxley with the burnt grass.

“You two need to settle,” Ruby says. “I know people, it’s a
gift I have. After waitressing for a while, you get to where you
can tell what the customers want before they even ask. And I
know you two need to find a home. Not everyone was made for
leaving, and you two weren’t.”

Ruby puts her hand on top of mine. It’s been a long time
since anyone besides Bryce has touched my hand like that. Her
fingernails are red, the color of sweet and sticky candied apples.
Her kitchen is warm and bright, and reminds me of my kitchen,
mine and Greg’s, back in Red Earth. I feel like I could sit in this
chair for a long time, like maybe I could grow roots here all way
to the deep, deep ground and never move. Maybe.

Then we hear the noise upstairs. A crashing sound, then yelling.

“You liar!” Molly screams.

Ruby and I run up the steps. We stand in the doorway to
Molly’s room, and I see the thin trickle of blood down her cheek.

“He, he hit me with the Barbie Corvette,” Molly wails.

There in front of her, the Corvette lies upside down, its wheels
slowly turning in the air.

“She called me a liar,” Bryce says. He looks at me.
“You are a liar,” Molly screams. “Nobody lived before. Nobody remembers being alive before they’re alive!”

Ruby swoops down on Molly, pushing the child’s head into her stomach.

“He didn’t mean anything, did you, Bryce?” Ruby says. “Why don’t you two just say you’re sorry and play nice?”

But the warm feeling of Ruby’s kitchen is gone. Now it’s just Molly crying and Bryce with his scared wide eyes.

“I think we should go,” I say, holding my hand out to Bryce. “Come on, sweetheart. Say you’re sorry to Molly.”

He stares at the floor.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

“People go to heaven when they die!” Molly screams back from the refuge of Ruby’s shirt.

“Thank you for everything, Ruby,” I say, “but we’re going to go.”

“You don’t have to leave, Lisa,” she says. “Kids have these spats all the time, it’s no big deal.”

But Bryce and I get our jackets downstairs. We unlock the front door and then close it behind us. Molly is still sobbing upstairs.

“I was alive,” Bryce finally says when we finally get in the car and I realize he’s crying, too. “I know I was. I remember.”

“It’s just like water,” I explained to the skeptical audience last year on Oprah. “Water can be water, or it can be steam, or it can be ice. But it’s all still the same thing.”

Oprah nodded and smiled.

“It’s still the same thing,” she said.

Bryce and I stay at the Holiday Inn in the center of town. It’s early in September, but the pool is heated, and I let Bryce swim there in the shallow end. I sit on the edge, my legs dangling in the cloudy warm water, and watch as he blows bubbles underwater, bubbles that rise to the surface and then pop under the pressure of air.

“Can we stay here, Mommy?” Bryce asks. “Maybe I can say I’m sorry again to Molly. Maybe we can play again. I don’t care if she calls me a liar.”

Fall 1999
"Maybe," I sing to Bryce, making the word long and melodic. We stay there, like that in the pool, for a long, long time.

**THE NEXT MORNING we go to the battlefield.**

The Battle of Franklin was fought just over from what is now Columbia Avenue, on the southeastern edge of town. The Union soldiers marched across the hill and down the Columbia Pike, away from Nashville, when the Rebels decided to strike. The battle lasted for only five hours, but it was one of the bloodiest in the Civil War. 9,000 men died. The Rebels eventually lost the battle, and the Union Army escaped back to Nashville, burning the wooden bridge across the Harpeth River behind them.

9,000 men. Including my boy.

We park the car in the parking lot of the Historical Society, which has an office in the house right there on the battlefield. Bryce is quiet, his brown eyes moving quickly in the bright light of the morning. I hold his hand as we walk out across the field.

“What do you think, honey?” I ask. “Does this look familiar?”

“No,” he says.

He stares at an oak tree.

“No,” he says again. “I thought I would know this place.”

It’s hard to make the pieces of geography here fit Bryce’s map. There are so many trees along the edge of the battlefield and little rolling hills, and they all look the same from where we stand so that it doesn’t look like a battlefield at all but more like an ocean, a rolling sea with no definite boundaries, a place that could go on forever, a place where we are alone.

“Does your wrist hurt?” I ask.

“No,” Bryce says. He sounds very sad.

He takes off across the battlefield, running in circles, larger and larger, around the giant oak trees near the road. And something inside me is pulled with him, pulled tight until it hurts, right in my chest there. I watch Bryce running across the grass burnt yellow and brown by the last of the summer sun and all I know is that my heart is beating in a hollow sound and my husband is not here as he should be and there are lots more roads just like the one that brought us into this town.
I stumble to the ground underneath a tree.
He runs to me, his breath quick, his cheeks red.
“Pop,” he says. “Pop, pop, pop.”
His fingers are curled around in the shape of a gun. I reach out to grab them, sandwiching his little soft hand in my own.
“Bryce, you don’t really want to stay here, do you?” I ask.
“You want to be with your mommy. You want to be an explorer, don’t you?”
His hands are soft. His eyes are brown. His hair is beautiful, shining like that in the sun.
“Pop,” he says. “Pop, pop, pop.”