

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Shawna Bethell Paramore for the Master of Arts
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This thesis is a collection of short stories and an introduction to my work. In the introduction I attempt to explain, as well as any writer can, why I choose to examine the issues that I do and why I look at the use of language in the manner that I do.

The stories themselves are a vehicle through which I express my views of reality, and I attempt to remain true to that reality whether it is an uncomfortable view, for the reader or myself, or not. Over all I am pleased with the language and the voice. The story, or content, is something that develops itself, sometimes choosing a route I would not have expected. But that is part of the fun of writing, seeing in the end what your project has become.

THIS DRY LAND

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Preface

I have an affinity for the West. It is an ever surviving land, despite what humans do to attempt to control it, and it is this aspect of the land that represents what I most like to explore in my writing. The West is vast and uncontrolled. It gives the truest essence of freedom I have ever experienced.

As someone who feels this attraction to the land, I also like to read about the people who inhabit the western United States. The only problem I have found is that books and stories about the West are also about men. I do not intend this in a negative way. I have read many wonderful books about men in the West. Ed Abbey's iconoclastic refusal to harness the wilderness has almost become biblical to me. More recently, Cormac McCarthy's The Crossing, a tale of a young man in Texas and Mexico who tries to save a renegade wolf, is one of my favorite novels.

However, as much as I truly like these writers and characters, I am curious about the place of women in the American West. There are emerging women writers who are placing their female characters in this vast landscape, but these characters are predominately mother figures, women who remain at home and nurture. I wonder at the fact that neither women, nor men, create female characters with the need to roam, to explore. What I

want to do is offer a realistic alternative for female readers. These considerations, land and the place of women in contemporary western literature, are the genesis of the female character in these stories.

The Craft

I think the most obvious characteristic of my writing is that it is somewhat sparse. As a friend told me, I leave a lot unsaid, much like the stoic people who inhabit the land that I write about. In some instances this is favorable. Some readers like to take a story at face value. At other times this characteristic is not a plus. Some readers enjoy details. Hopefully, as I grow as a writer, I will gain the ability to keep my language succinct without cutting needed details from the story.

Another aspect of my writing is that there is not always a cataclysmic event to import tension in the story. In the past I would get frustrated with my fiction because I could not "make things happen" as I was often advised to do. What I preferred to write about were the connections between people. Early this semester I read "The Other Half of the Story" by Claudia Johnson. She wrote that conflict is necessary, however it is the "ebb and flow of human connection" that is essential. Through her I saw that tension could be

created by the interactions of people. It did not have to be the result of a significant event. I felt that my interests were validated and I think my prose has improved. The language is less contrived and so are the plot lines. There is still a need to make tension more elemental in my stories, but I hope to do it with language and image instead of events.

Influences

For most beginning writers there are experienced writers who have influenced them either in content or craft. I am no exception. As I mentioned I have read and attempted to pull from Cormac McCarthy. McCarthy can create an image so vivid that it will not fade from a reader's mind. And he does this in a matter of a few words. An entire scene will be unfolded in a single sentence. His words are concrete. There is nothing extraneous.

In addition, I read Barbara Kingsolver, Terry Tempest Williams and Linda Hogan. These three women also use vivid imagery to capture their reader's imaginations. They, too, use concrete word choices as compared to abstract imagery. It is this solidly built prose that I admire.

Economical word use also lends to a subdued, subtle

voice that I have attempted to imitate. Though not all the characters of these writers have the same voice, they are all similiar in the respect that they are representative, in my opinion, of the people of the West. They do not waste words. They are direct. McCarthy's character in The Crossing is distanced from the reader by a narrator, Kingsolver's characters often speak in the first person, yet they all depict the same quiet, determined demeanor that is created by voice, and this is what I hope to portray in my own characters.

Going

He hadn't spoken since we got in the pick-up this morning and as he slammed the door and walked towards the well he didn't even look up. As a child I had come here with him every Saturday morning, my voice ringing in the cab as the truck bounced through the tall grass. Today, I'm home for the weekend, and we go through the same motions, but in silence. He has come to this pasture, this well, for more than fifty years now to blow the oil and moisture out of the gas line. Every week he has slogged over the thick pool of crude--so thick he walks across the top like a prairie savior--to insure our house would have hot water and heat. Before he came here my grandfather came, and before him my great-grandfather. All those years of black lay before me as I watch him cross to the well.

I used to be afraid he would get stuck out there, his feet adhering forever to the black pool, leaving me to find my way through the grasses and home by myself. But it didn't happen. He always came back.

I'm afraid now, too, as I watch him loosen the valve to release the pressure in the well. Afraid of his silence and his stubbornness. His loneliness. I'm afraid of his fear. This farm and I are all he has and he sees both of us slipping away. He leans now to listen for the sound of the oil working its way up the

pipe, then turns and heads back to the truck. Behind him the crude bubbles to the top of the pipe and slides down the age-blackened well. I watch him walk, his tired bowed legs pulling against the sticky surface. I know he understands why I'm going; he had the same desires himself years ago. But that doesn't make it easier, doesn't make it right in his eyes.

His once yellow work gloves hit the running board with a swack and he leans against the open window cupping his hands against the wind to light a cigarette. His eyes still do not turn to me but scan the horizon of the land.

"You don't need me to run this farm, you know," I tell him. "You and Stan have been doing it for the last four years and you can do it for the next forty without me."

He squints into the sun and runs a calloused fingertip over wind dried lips. "A person can't rely on farmhands, Miss. You never know when they'll up and leave you for a farm of their own."

Beyond my father's profile the fountain of oil has reached six or seven feet. As the pressure is released, the oil will reach further into the air. It rises then falls heavily around the well like thick, dark syrup. I think of the hundreds of dollars lying in this pasture and wonder at the irony of the struggling farmer standing beside me.

"Dad, Stan's been here ten years at least. He's not going anywhere," I say.

He shakes his head. "It's just not the same. Not the same as family."

I lean back heavily on the cracked upholstery and sigh. Looking out the window opposite my father I watch the breeze sway the tall grasses, yellow and red, all tipped with black from the oily spray that drifts across the pasture. Together we must have walked every inch of this farm, hunting, checking crops. After my mother died I went everywhere with him. I know this land by heart. But I'll never own it. Never want to own it. And that's his fear. What will become of the land when he is gone.

The black fountain is about ten feet and thinning. When the weight of the oil is gone, just moisture and air will rush from the line and as it blows it will reach a high pitched scream. That's why both dad and gramps couldn't hear much; walking back out to cap the well, that scream becomes deafening. And neither would wear earplugs.

"Dad, what if this farm were to become Stan's farm eventually. Then he'd have no reason to leave and you could still work together." I'd been thinking about this for a long time and it seemed the most logical decision.

"I haven't worked my whole life to give it all to a stranger, Miss."

"A stranger? My God, dad, who stayed with you after the accident when I couldn't get home last winter? And who sat with me when I had the chicken pox and you had to be in the fields from dawn to dusk? Strangers?" I can feel my anger clash with his stubbornness and my voice rises with frustration. Out in the field the last of the oil rises from the pipe and the white mist screams forth.

"And where have we spent the holidays every year dad, when you didn't want me to have a lonely Christmas or Easter? We spent it with the Murphys, because they are family. Blood doesn't make a family."

"Blood made this farm, girl. My blood and granddad's and your great-granddad's. It's not to be thrown away because you don't want to be bothered. Because you don't want to be tied to a bunch of dirt and a tired old man."

"You know that's not true," I yell over the whistling stream of mist. But he has already bent to pick up his gloves and has started back to cap the well. I feel tears burning my eyes and I curse him for doing this when they spill over to warm my cheeks. I watch him cross the black pool once again and for a time, like a child, I am afraid he will get stuck and not come back. But he doesn't. He makes it to the well and as the white spray forces its way to freedom, he slowly begins turning the valve, drawing it in until there is only silence but for the rustling grasses.

I could stay. Come back here after graduation and stay on the farm--keep books, drive the tractor, stay with him. But I know even as the thoughts are being processed that it won't happen. I have fought to get where I am going and that, too, is part of his blood--to fight and scrape and make life what you want. I won't give it up now. And he knows it, has known it all along.

I hear the door of the truck open and I feel his weight on the seat beside me. He sits with both hands on the wheel looking out across the plain, seeing nothing.

"Did you really think I'd come back to stay?" I ask watching his face, his hands.

"No," he says. And reaches to turn the ignition. The engine coughs, then sputters to life as he releases the clutch and we roll toward home.

"But I had always hoped."

Utah

She felt the rocks begin to shift beneath her feet as she grabbed at the branches of the nearest pine. The needles raked her skin but she landed the solid grasp she needed and slowly pulled herself back onto the trail. The guide had listed Deer Ridge as difficult and Rae could see why. The last half mile had been solid rock and she was only one-third the way up the twelve mile loop.

With her boots planted solid she pulled out her water bottle and drank. Ahead she could see where the trail began to flatten again as it disappeared into a stand of trees. Above the trees stood the summit and beyond that was the blue mountain sky. It was a deep blue you didn't find on the plains. There you were so distanced from the sky it seemed like a watered down painting.

She put the water back and headed up and into the trees where she had to pick her way through the tangled undergrowth that over grew the trail. It was a sign that the path was rarely used and the reason Rae chose it. As the branches closed in she felt the solitary quiet that came in the forest, as though the trees themselves guarded their world from intrusion, and as she climbed, Rae tried to imagine what it had been like before. Before the whites and their axes, and guns.

Before they realized they were not the most powerful predator, only the most greedy and started their systematic elimination of their competition.

Another mile of switchbacks and dirt trails brought Rae to a clearing on the forest floor. Above the area the trees formed a thick canopy of pine needles and just beyond was an outcropping of rock that looked out over the range of mountains. She climbed to the flat shelf and rested on the sun warmed rock. Her muscles ached and she let the quiet solitude sooth her body and soul. Apart from the wind rushing through the tops of the pines, there was no movement, and Rae felt for an instant that time had stopped leaving her forever lulled by the sounds of this other world.

As she rested she scanned the range of mountains she would walk tomorrow. To the left she could see the trail she would follow as it wound in and out of the trees. Her gaze stopped abruptly as she saw movement on the trail above. Through the shadows the figure passed and Rae gasped as the cat stepped into view on a ledge just up and across from her own. She held her breath. For all the times she had spent in these woods, this was what she looked for. She had often seen deer and elk. They had become plentiful since the predators had been eliminated and their numbers brought hordes of tourists to the park each year. But never had Rae seen the majesty of the cougar. Even from a distance she could

see the power beneath the thick fur and she sat motionless, thanking the spirits that she sat down wind of the elegant animal.

A flash of color among the trees drew her eyes to the trail below. Peering up at the animal was a man in a red plaid shirt. He stood leaning on a rifle. Rae's heart quickened as she watched him lift the rifle butt to his shoulder and squint into the mounted scope. Before the sound of her scream came to her own ears, the cat lay on the sun warmed stone. The man turned in her direction, searching for the source of the voice and raised his hand to block the sun that shone brightly overhead. Across the distance their eyes locked then he quickly turned and began to make his way up the side of the cliff to where the cat lay. As he neared the outcropping of stone his worn cowboy boots lost their hold on the rock and he began to stumble backward. She watched as he dropped the rifle and frantically grabbed at the fledgling trees about him only to have their thin limbs slip from his grasp. When he fell, the momentum carried him over the embankment.

Without stopping for her pack, Rae ran to the trail. She tried to guess the distance to the man, figuring the time it would take to wind her way on up the mountain and back down to the trail again. She would have to follow the path, otherwise she would not find him. She had to know where he left the trail.

The thin mountain air burned her lungs as she ran, rock slipping beneath her feet. She hit the summit and began descending, gravity pulling her through the rocks and pines to where she could see a break in the trees. Her pace began to slow as she entered the sun filled clearing, and though the trail continued down the side of the mountain, Rae stopped. On the rocky ledge lay the cougar. The brown fur looked so thick and soft that Rae was slowly drawn to the body of the cat where she knelt and reached out to bury her fingers in the rich brown coat. It was warm, probably from the sun, because the body it covered had cooled. The bullet had entered directly behind the front leg, it was a clean kill. The man was good at what he did. She touched the wound and her fingers were painted with the life that ran from the torn skin and she felt warm wet tears on her cheeks. She stayed with the cat until the mountain air began to cool.

When she stood, she brushed the hair back from her face, wiped her cheeks dry and headed on down the trail. About six yards down she found the rifle where it landed beside the dirt path. She picked it up. It was a 30-30 mounted with a scope, just like the one they had given her dad for Christmas several years ago. He always thought he wanted to hunt deer, but he had never managed to pull the trigger. Fitted to the end of the rifle was a homemade silencer. Illegal, but effective.

Rae started on down the trail, more slowly, looking for scuff marks that would have been left by a sliding body.

"Hey!" Rae heard the voice coming from below the trail. "Is somebody up there?"

She headed toward the voice and peered over the edge of the embankment. About ten feet below sat a man, his hat had been knocked off in the fall and his thinning white hair floated softly in the breeze.

"Am I glad to see you," he said.

Rae peered down at the man. "You hurt?" she asked.

"Just banged up. Can you get me out of here?" His chubby red face gazed up at Rae. Rae looked out at the distant mountains. The sun was getting low in the sky and it hung between the two peaks just across from the ridge where she knelt. It was beautiful, like a picture she had seen somewhere. The sky would soon be turning a deep purple. It would be much more vibrant in color than the night sky at home.

The man's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Hey, girl, you gonna get me out of here?"

She looked back down at the man. He was pudgy around the middle and his pointed cowboy boots caused his legs to poke out in awkward directions.

"Found a 30-30 up here and a dead cat farther up the trail. Those yours?" she asked.

The man eyed her from below. "You a Ranger?"

"Nope, just hiking around." Rae paused. "So did you kill that cougar?" She let her weight lean back on her heel and laid one arm across her knee.

"Yeah, I killed it. He's been killing my cattle. Tracked him up here and shot the son-of-a-bitch," he said.

Rae nodded as she looked out at the sinking sun.

"Hey, girl, you better get down here and help me. It'll be dark soon." He paused. "You hear me? I don't want to spend the night out here in the cold."

Rae thought of the cougar. It was cold, lying on the rock above them. The rifle lay beside her and she picked it up and used it to lean on as she stood. She lifted it and looked at the stock. It was battered and scratched, years of use, years of cats. The barrel was cold as she ran her red painted fingers across the steel and to the silencer. She thought of her jeep parked below, but there were lots of jeeps in this country.

Below she heard the man's voice call her again. It had a whining sound to it. She had read somewhere unplanned crimes often went unsolved. There was less time for the criminals to mess up, so they weren't found as easily. It made sense when you stopped to think about it. Again she heard the voice hollering to her. She wondered how long it would be before this trail was used again, and who knew where this man was headed when he left home this morning. She raised the butt of the

gun to her shoulder and remembered how heavy the gun had felt when she was younger, shooting at hay bales with her father.

The wind in the trees had picked up and it was calling, rushing through the pines. Below she could hear rocks clattering as the man began to scramble on the ledge.

"What are you doing up there, lady?"

She lowered the end of the barrel until she could see him through the scope. There was a frantic look to his eyes as he looked back at her.

"Look lady, that cat ... I had to protect what was mine. You can understand that can't you? I mean, well, maybe it is too bad these things have to happen, but it's just the way it is."

She could hear a slight whimper in his voice and she felt disgust, wondered if he would beg. She tightened her grip on the rifle, her red fingers at the trigger. She took a breath and steadied her aim. She would only need one shot, close range. It would be easy. The blue black metal swayed. Too easy. To die in a minute.

She lowered the rifle and looked at the pitiful man crying below her. If she let him go he'd kill again. She looked about her, at the age old mountains and the pines that were standing before she was born. She raised the rifle again, but this time she tossed it over

the embankment, past the cowering man and into space.
Hearing the rifle fall the man looked up into her face.

"Thank you, lady," he sobbed. "God, thank you."

She looked at the man one more time, then turned
and headed back up the trail.

Wounded Knee, South Dakota

It's lonely here. Dry and windy. Forgotten. Even those of us who come to visit don't meet one another's stare, but pass without speaking, looking down at the chipped and leaning stones, and wooden crosses. The center stone, a common marker for a common grave, stands as the single reminder of past transgressions, present sins, and future disregard.

Across from where I sit a man leans against the wrought iron fence smoking and holding a Walmart sack. His red t-shirt has been washed many times and there is a tear across the front. His skin is dark. His hair and eyes are black. Behind him stands another man also smoking, also dark. His hair hangs in a ponytail across his khaki clad shoulder. They shift from foot to foot as they wait.

I see her car drive into the lot. She emerges, carrying a canvas pack on her shoulder and heads toward the gate. When she approaches, the man in red steps forward and speaks to her. Her glance is furtive, her smile too easy as she walks past. I figure her for a college student on summer break. She moves to the center stone where she stands, disappointed. Casting about she looks for something more, but sees nothing. She turns back to the stone

and reads the weathered inscription, then starts back down the walk to the fence.

At the gate she meets the men again and the one in red again steps forward with his bag.

"Want to buy some Indian jewelry?" he asks almost too politely. "I have some earrings and some necklaces." He begins pulling things from the bag.

The girl looks around her, to the other tourists, to me. "Uh, how much?"

The wind blows their hair about their faces and both turn slightly to the wind clearing the strands from their eyes.

"Twenty dollars?" he asks after a brief pause.

The girl crosses her thin bare arms and looks at the man standing there holding the sack. She scans the stones and faded plastic flowers, many tangled in long dead grasses. The center stone catches her eye and she faces the man before her. His gaze had not wavered.

"I'll give you fifteen," she says.

He again turns to the wind, then looks into her face. "Why do you offer me less?" he asks.

Her eyes drop briefly, just to his shoulder. "I don't have much money," she says.

They stand silently together, the crackling of the Walmart sack carrying in the wind and he looks to the horizon beyond the wave of her hair, then to the red car in the parking lot.

"Okay," he says quietly.

"Okay," she says with relief.

Colorado

She never said much about where she came from, even after I got to know her, at least as well as most anybody did. Only thing she ever really said was that she'd stayed a bit in Cheyenne-Wells before she found us. Said it was a small town in east Colorado. Had a brother that coached there. As for family, that was about all I knew, too.

She pulled into my lot about the fall of the year and came in and ordered a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich and a coke. I remember because as soon as I set the sandwich in front of her, she took the bacon off. Found out later she didn't eat meat. That caused plenty of talk around here for quite a while, but as soon as people saw she stuck to her own business and wasn't gonna go snooping around their beef with a video camera, everybody settled down. Not that that stopped all speculation about her, but they didn't treat her like a communist after that.

That afternoon, when she made her BLT into an LT, she asked me if there was any jobs available that I knew of. I told her now that school had started I lost my day waitress and asked if she had any experience, she kinda laughed and said "yeah," that she had been a waitress for three days once. She said it didn't suit her and I didn't ask why. Some people take to cooking

and serving and some don't, so I told her that the Hop Shop convenience store at the edge of town needed a night clerk. That job was always open on account of nobody wanted to work alone on the highway at night. You never knew who would be walking in at 2:00 in the morning. She thanked me, then finished her sandwich while I cleaned up the last of the lunch dishes.

I didn't learn much else about her that day even though she came back from the Hop Shop and rented a room from me, said she got the job and needed a place to stay. She's lucky she didn't get to town any later in the season than she did or I wouldn't a had any vacancies. But the hunters had not begun their yearly treks yet so she had her choice, room 9, at the end of the building. She paid cash money for a two week stay; then I figured she'd rent a place of her own since it looked like she was planning on being here for a while. But she never did. She stayed right here in room 9. I asked her once, while we were sitting on my porch having coffee, why she didn't get a house of her own. She just said it was more than she wanted, bills and phones; she'd rather just have a room, didn't need much else. Although she did plant some flower pots out by her door. Guess she needed more of a touch of home than she knew herself.

Anyway, that first day, she paid me the money and I gave her a list of my rules, not leaving dishes in the

sink and such, then told her where the grocery was in case she needed anything. She thanked me for all my help and I told her if there was anything else she needed just to ask. I'd been in this town some forty odd years and knew 'bout everything there was to know. Then I told her my name, Eva, and she said her name was Rae, then she thanked me again and headed out to her jeep which she drove on down to number 9. After that she ate breakfast here every morning at 7:30 and we often had coffee on my porch in the evening before she went to work. She was a smart gal, college educated, and I never could figure why she chose the life she did. But I guess there's people who'd wonder why somebody else would live in a small town like this all their life, never seein' anything new. I guess we all got to make our own choices, depending on where we come from or where we're goin'. Even if we ain't goin' anywhere.

* * * *

He's the kind of kid that stays in check--always. He's smart, gets good grades. The teachers rely on him. He's quiet. Hangs out with the guys playing ball, but he's not loud like the others--though sometimes he's like a child. Kind of lost.

The coaches rely on him. The best athlete, natural talent, forced on him by a father seeing his own dream reborn.

The girls love him. Dark and silent. Violet eyes in black lashes. I've seen the way they watch him, lust in their eyes, before they turn away.

He's their American Hero. Clean cut. Going to school on a baseball scholarship, earned by catching his father's fastball at age seven, tears in his eyes. He's the one they rely on to pitch the strike, catch the pass, make the shot. To keep their daughters wholesome, to defend their honor. Everyone's honor.

Saturday mornings they sit around these plastic tables drinking coffee and smoking, talking about their hero. And when he comes in to pay for his gas they pat him on the back and smile, not noticing that he doesn't meet their gaze before walking back out the door.

He's been coming here the last couple nights. Coming in late and alone he sits at one of the plastic tables and watches. When I look at him he drops his gaze and fingers the paper cup in front of him. But when I turn I can feel his eyes. His stare surrounds like the smoke the men bring early in the day. It moves with me as I clean the counter and count the register. I check the clock, 1:30, half-hour to close. No one comes in for gas or coffee at this time of night. Even the trucks passing on the highway are few.

I spread yesterday's paper on the counter and look at the travel section. The reporter is telling me White Rim Canyon is lonely and desolate. He stands in the

picture with his new Jeep Cherokee and his Nike hiking boots, the year's latest color, and I know he doesn't understand.

"You're new in town, aren't you?" His voice startles me and when I look up he doesn't turn away.

"I've been here a few months," I say.

He turns to look out at the black night, when he meets his own reflection he turns back to me.

"If you weren't born here," he says, "you're new in town."

"Yeah, I know," I say, looking across to where he sits. "It's not the first small town I've stayed in."

He nods once and asks, "You travel around a lot?"

"Some," I answer.

"Why'd you come here?"

I shrug. "Why not?"

He turns back to his reflection. "Better places to be," he says.

"That's true," I grant him.

"So why here?" he asks, turning violet eyes back to me.

I fold the paper and toss it in the corner. The man would take it away later when he came to bring the day's news.

"Money was running low. There was a job here, a place to stay."

"You like it at Eva's?" he asks.

I watch him, looking close, but I shouldn't be surprised that he knows where I'm staying.

"Number 9," he says letting the sound hang in the air and I know he has felt my hesitation.

I look into his eyes and answer. "Yeah, I like it. Like Eva, too."

"Yeah," he says. "She's different."

My brows knit together, unsure of his response. "Different? What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Just that Eva is what she is."

"How does that make her different?" I ask.

"How many people do you know that are what they appear to be?" he asks.

I don't answer and my eyes drop away from his. His from mine. In the silence I hear the cooler kick on.

"I've seen you," he says, "at some of the games, leaning against the back fence. You had a dog with you."

"That's Ched."

"Is he mean?" he asks.

"We're all mean sometime," I tell him and he looks again to the paper cup, shakes the remaining ice, then empties the cup into his mouth. We're both quiet. Neither looking at the other but just beyond. I hear him slide from the booth and turn to see him approach the counter. He is tall. His skin is smooth and dark, browned before the summer sun touched him and I picture him in the canyon a hundred years before.

"See you around," he says placing the cup on the counter in front of me before he turns the door.

I see us both reflected there before he pushes one side open and his image slides out into the deserted lot.

"See ya," I tell empty air.

* * * *

The place was too quiet. Despite the music on the radio and the dog following at her heels the silence filled the corners of the rooms. There were shadows the light didn't reach and the beer in her hand didn't disguise the empty space. She turned the dial on the radio and the music grew loud, but the stillness was like a cavern that absorbed the sound. She wandered from window to window, moonlight falling across her face as she stared out at the empty streets.

She downed the last of her beer and crossed the room to the kitchenette where she sat the empty bottle on the counter. Reaching for another she twisted the cap and tossed it into the sink and counted the bottles left. There were eight. She had brought the 12-pack from work despite the "No beer on Sunday" sign that was fixed to the cooler door. Two a.m. was still Saturday night.

When a car door slammed outside she checked the

clock, 3:00 a.m. Eva would be asleep. She grabbed her keys and headed for the door. "C'mon Ched," she called. "Maybe we can keep them from waking Eva." When the knock sounded on her door she stopped mid-stride. The dog began a low growl.

She patted the dog on the head. "It's okay fella," she said, then continued to the door where she checked the security lens, then opened the door.

He stood in the glow of the porch lamp, lips cut and swollen, his cheek and eye turning a dark blue. His shirt was bloody and the sleeve was torn. His violet eyes searched her face.

She leaned against the edge of the door and crossed her arms. "Have a little trouble?" she asked.

"Some," he said.

She took a heavy breath and raised both brows. "More than that, I'd say."

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other and looked down at the cement beneath his feet then wiped the blood from his lips before he looked at her again. "Can I come in?" he asked.

She took a step back out of the doorway and let him enter. The dog stayed beside her as they moved into the room. "Want a beer?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," he said stopping just inside the door.

She went on to the kitchen where she took a beer

from the refrigerator and twisted off the cap. Taking her own from the counter she walked back to him.

"So, were you the cause of the ambulance I saw go through earlier?" she asked, looking at his bloodied knuckles as he reached for the beer.

"It was for the other guy," he said.

"The cops take you in?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Never do."

They were both silent and in the dimly lit room he felt her watching him before she spoke. "Never? This happens often?"

He heard the disbelief in her voice and he stared at some indefinite spot on the carpet and nodded slowly.

"Why?"

He looked to her with his violet eyes and raised both arms. "I don't know," he said and his voice was a whisper, as distant as night haze against the moon. They both stood in the silence.

"The bathroom is to the right of the counter," she said. "I'll get you the peroxide so you can clean up."

He followed her as far as the counter where she pulled a clean cloth from a drawer then took the peroxide from the cabinet. When she handed them to the man-child in front of her she was again aware of the lithe movements of his body. When his hand brushed hers he looked to her face.

"The light-switch is outside the door," she said.

From the room across the space she could hear the water rushing from some dying source to the shining faucet and splashing into the plastic marble basin. In the 3:00 a.m. stillness it was enough to take her to the banks of the river, the stretch before you reached the dam, where the sound of the water still had life. Rushing, roaring, carrying history in its turbulence as it cut the stones that stood on either side.

This was where he found her when he turned out the light and came back to the counter. "Thanks," he said hoping to draw her distant eyes.

She turned as he had hoped. "No problem," she told him.

In the faint light from the living room he finished his beer and set it on the counter among the others. She watched him count the bottles silently with his eyes before she walked back to the lighter room.

"Is there someone somewhere wondering where you are?" she asked, sitting on the edge of the bed, the gold coverlet splaying on the floor from her weight.

"Probably," he said, and sat on the chair across from her, elbows on knees, hands clasped between.

"Should you go?" she asked.

"Not unless I'm not welcome here," he said.

She didn't speak, only pushed herself back on the bed until she leaned against the headboard. She reached to the nightstand for her cigarettes and an ashtray

which she balanced on her thigh. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke to the side, away from him. "You're welcome here," she told him. "I just don't know why you're here."

The dog, who had been lying by the door jumped on the bed beside his owner and lay down. She buried her fingers in the soft fur.

"I want what you have," he said leaning back in the arms of the chair.

She raised her brow doubtfully. "Which is?"

"Not sure, exactly," he said shaking his head slowly. "Life. Maybe freedom."

"Freedom's an illusion," she said exhaling smoke into the air then crushing the cigarette into the tray. "There's no such thing." She placed the ashtray back on the table beside her and looked to him.

"That's not true," he said. "Look at yourself, you have nothing that ties you down."

With her fingertips she traced a black line of fur across the cheek of the dog beside her. The pattern of the design was distinct. "Freedom isn't just mobility," she told him, looking up to meet his gaze. "It is also your past, decisions you have made, people you have left. Those things you are never free of, no matter how far you go."

In the timeless quiet of early morning she watched him, sitting across from her, and she knew he understood

those ties. He rose and knelt beside the bed where she sat. With his nearness came his scent, blood and earth, and when she felt his lips soft against her own she raised her hand to the torn cotton of his shirt, warm silk lay beneath her fingertips. When he moved away she looked into his eyes. "There is nothing for you here," she said.

He raised his hand to her hair letting the strands tangle around his fingers and nodded slowly. "I know," he said and rose to leave.

In the distance again she could hear the sound of the rushing water and she could even feel the river's mist on her face as it rushed toward the barrier of the dam. As the white current beat against the concrete and the steel, deep inside, below the boiling surface, a crack was forming, and slowly, slowly the water would find its way through.

Nevada

"I need my sink fixed Mr. Beaty," she said, a dish towel in one hand, pushing dark blonde hair behind her ear with the other.

"Fixed that sink last week, Stella," said the balding man across from her. "There's nothing wrong with it. Just need to be patient." He spoke in a sigh and didn't raise his eyes to look at her.

"Patient!" The woman raised her voice. "I've got two kids and a husband to cook for. I can't wait around twenty minutes for a sink to drain. We paid for rooms with a kitchenette. I need a sink that works."

At the sound of footsteps on the metal threshold the two turned to see a woman enter the dingy little office. She pushed her sunglasses back on her head which pushed her wind tangled hair from her face.

"I need a room," she said.

The balding man stepped behind the counter and with a new found sweetness to his voice he addressed the woman. "I can help you with that, Miss," he said.

"I have a dog," she said. "Is that a problem?"

The man's smile disappeared and his voice became like old smoke, stale and lifeless. "Does it pee on the floor?" he asked.

"No, he doesn't," she said.

The woman with the clogged sink rolled her eyes and

laughed shortly. "Like anybody could smell the difference around here if it did!" she said.

The clerk gave her a nasty look before turning back to his customer. "I'll still need to charge you an extra ten dollars," he said. "Just in case there are any damages. Of course you understand."

The woman looked around at the smoke stained curtains and scratched paneling. "Of course," she said.

He handed her a form to fill out and as she leaned on the counter a child rushed through the open door. "Mom!" He stopped in front of the woman with the clogged sink and panted for air. "Mom, guess what I found."

"Toby, where have you been?" she began wiping the dust from his clothes with the dish towel.

The boy looked about eight. Baggy, faded jeans hung on his thin body. His light brown hair was stuck to his face with dirt and sweat and he smelled of salt and sweet candy, the smell of heat and children's games. He pushed away her mothering hands. "Mom, there's a pile of dead coyotes in the ditch down by the dirt road." He pointed excitedly toward the window.

"Toby..." Her voice was stern but the child ignored it breathlessly.

"They've been there a long time. They aren't bloated or anything, just fur and bones. Can I cut the tail off one and bring it home? Please, mom?"

"Young man, that road is off limits and you know

it. Now you get to the room and get cleaned up before I tan you.

"But," Toby turned slowly to the door.

"Hurry up. I need you to feed your sister while I finish dinner. Dad'll be home any minute." She pushed him on toward the door then went to the counter where clerk was asking for thirty-five dollars from the woman. "Beaty, you better be down there fixing that sink as soon as you're done," she said and headed to the door herself.

"Maybe if you didn't raise your family in a hotel, you wouldn't have these kinds of problems," he called, but she had already turned the corner. "There's no family tradition any more, it's a damn disgrace to this country." He separated the receipt at the perforation and handed the woman the pink copy. "A disgrace."

She took the paper and folded it before pulling her sunglasses down over her eyes. "Keeps you in business though, doesn't it?" she asked.

He squinted at his reflection in her glasses, then grunted. "Number 7's about half way down."

She nodded and headed out to the parking lot where white gravel dust kicked up about her footsteps. She drove about half the distance of the building and found an orange door with a brass 7 nailed in the center. She pulled in and killed the motor. Through her open window she could hear the T.V. from room 6, its orange door was cracked open showing a slash of the dark room inside.

She got out of the truck and called the dog in the passenger seat to follow her. As they stepped onto the sidewalk a man in a brown coat pushed past her; his hair was disheveled and he wore blue tennis shoes with his stained dress pants. "Harnden!" he called as he hurried past. "Harnden, you in there?" He pushed open the door to number 6 and walked in. She could still hear him from the dark square of the doorway. "I've been talking to Toby, Harnden. He said he found some dead coyotes down by that road."

The voice was rising to a fanatical squeal as she opened her door and went in. She opened the curtains to let in the last of the sunlight before she went back to the truck to get her bag. The man was still shouting at Harnden. "If my Rascal gets ahold of that..."

She returned to the room and dropped the bag on the chair. The hotel sat alone on the highway and for several miles around it lay nothing but grasses and scrub cedar. They'd been in the truck about five hours and they could both use a walk. She called the dog and they went back out and toward the end of the building. The man had gone from number 6 and only the sound of the T.V. remained. As they came to number 10 she saw the clerk pounding on the door toolbox in hand. "Stella! You want that sink fixed or not?" he shouted.

The door was opened by Toby who yelled that his mom was with Sabrina but to come on in. In the background a

child cried and as she passed the open doorway the smell of old spattered grease and cooking hamburger floated out into the dry air. As she rounded the end of the building she heard the door of number 10 slam closed and the sound of the crying child stopped abruptly. The desert was quiet again.

They walked for an hour before returning to the hotel and it was well into evening when she pulled the cooler from the back of the truck. The door to number 6 was closed now, as were all the orange doors along the walk. Two other cars in the lot were the only sign that she was not alone at the hotel for the night. In her room she fed the dog then made a sandwich and pulled out a bag of chips for herself. She rummaged through the watery ice but could not find anything to drink so she took two quarters from her wallet and headed toward the office where a pop machine stood by the door.

As she made her selection the door to the laundry room opened and the disheveled man stepped out. He looked at her with suspicious eyes that moved rapidly over her face. In his arms he held a wad of laundry. It smelled fresh and out of place against the odor of gravel dust and diesel from the highway. He still wore the brown coat he'd had on earlier in the day and he looked as wadded and wrinkled as the clothes he held.

"If you want to do any laundry you'd better wait," he said harshly. "Harnden's been smoking in there

again. He never pays any attention to that sign I made. Everything stinks like smoke and fat old men in there." He looked at her again, quickly, then looked at the walk.

"Um, thanks," she said reaching down for the can that clunked into the plastic bin. But the man had moved on down the walk muttering as he went, stopping when he reached number 4. When he pushed the door open a brown mutt type dog ran out and between his legs. They danced for a minute, the man looking down and around the load of clothes trying to locate the dog before they both went in and closed the door behind them.

She had walked as far as number 2 when she heard the roar of tires on gravel and turned to see a rusted blue Chrysler pull into the lot. It skidded slightly before it stopped in front of number 6 and the door made a loud screeching sound as the driver pushed it open and stepped out. He was a large man, husky--not fat--and his chestlength white beard reminded her of a sailor. He rounded to the passenger door and opened it for a small woman in a pink dress. The skirt was full and she looked as though she came from a dance out of time. Her hair was curled close to her head and she laughed as her heel caught in the rocks and she leaned on him for balance. Together they entered number 6, still laughing, and closed the door.

From her own room where she ate her sandwich she heard the radio click on next door. The sound of the distant music mixed with the movie on her own T.V. created a disembodied scene that she was not a part of, though the voices floated about the dismal room. She turned off the set and cleaned up the crumbs and potato chip bag that littered the bed, then called the dog back out into the night.

The air was cooler as they walked toward the open space of desert and there was a faint glowing arch from the hotel's florescent light that would guide them a few yards into the darkness. The door to number 10 had been open as they passed and as she walked into the glowing arch she took with her the sight of the family in their dimly lit rooms. A man who she assumed to be dad watched the movie she had just turned off and beside him Toby sat begging to be allowed to cut the tail off one of the dead coyotes. The mother, kneeling by the bed, struggled to get a younger child into its pajamas.

She stood in the glowing light and watched as the dog sniffed each stand of grass and every bush that lay in the perimeter of light. When he strayed beyond she called him in and they started back to the room. By the time she passed number 10 a second time the television was quiet and the woman stood alone at the sink doing the supper dishes. The man was now leaning in the doorway of number 6 where the hollow music still played

from the radio. As she approached he turned and smiled. "Evening," he said.

"Evening," she returned. The man had a long blond ponytail and was wearing a shirt with his name on it. 'Ray' it said in white letters stitched on a blue patch. On the other pocket were the words 'Carlson's Motors.'

"We regulars are going to have a beer to finish off the week if you want to join us," he invited. Just as he spoke the woman from number 10 joined him carrying a half a six-pack by the plastic rings.

"I see Beaty didn't scare you off," she said smiling. "My name's Stella, you going to join us?"

"Why not," she said and they all entered number 6, the dog stopping to lie on the walk outside the door.

In the dim light she saw the disheveled man in a recliner, arms crossed tightly to his chest staring at the television from which no sound came. The large man, now shirtless, sat on a plastic chair beside the bed where the woman in pink sat daintily. They both drank from clear plastic glasses that were filled with amber whiskey.

"Hey, it's about time you got here, party's started without you," shouted the bearded man as he raised his glass high in the air.

"Hey, Harnden. We found a friend along the way and thought we'd ask her to join us," said Ray.

"Fine," hollered Harnden. "The more the merrier!"

Then he introduced himself and pointed to the woman in pink. "This is Delores. She's from town. Serves drinks at the casino.

The woman said 'hello' before Harnden pointed to the man in the recliner. "That's Arty over in the chair."

"My name is Arthur," said the man not looking away from the television.

"Yeah, whatever," Harnden growled. "Arty's just pissed off because he thinks I'm trying to poison his damn mutt."

"You poison those coyotes?" asked Ray as he took a seat on the last plastic chair. The women sat on the heat duct along the wall. "Toby's been talking about those things all night."

"Nah, I didn't poison the goddamned coyotes."

"I'll bet you did, Harnden," complained Arty. "And if Rascal gets into that poison I'll kill you. I swear I'll..."

Harnden cut him off mid sentence waving his thick hand toward him. "Look, goddamnit. I didn't do nothing."

"Well somebody did," said Ray. "Toby said there's about six of 'em piled down there under the cedar by the road."

Delores took a sip from her plastic glass. "Poor things," she said.

"Honey, them coyotes are nothing but the underbelly of the animal kingdom--they ain't no good," said Harnden and he finished his drink before pulling the bottle from the table behind him and filling his glass.

"I don't care if they're no good. I feel sorry for them anyway," said Delores and she looked down at the glass in her pale hand. A thick semi-circle of pink lipstick smiled on the plastic rim.

The room got quiet except for the static laced music on the radio and everyone looked at the silent T.V. until Harnden spoke again.

"So what's your name anyway, honey?"

She lifted her beer in the direction of the man with the ponytail. "My name's Rae, too," she said and they all thought that was funny except for Arty who still stared at the T.V.

"I got a cousin in Tupelo named Rae," said Stella. "But we all called her Rae Lynn... I always thought that was such a pretty name."

"I knew a Rae Ann in Cedar Rapids," said Harnden. "What a woman," and he raised his glass in cheers before he drank the last of the glass. He reached again for the bottle, turning into the light. Across his upper arm Rae could read an inscription tattooed there. 'Lily Harnden, beloved wife. 1223 E. Chestnutt, Cincinnati, Ohio. Annah Harnden and Scott Harnden, children.' Turning again he caught her eyes. He held out his arm.

"My family," he said. "In case they find me face down and dead somewhere they'll know who to contact." He filled his glass and Delores' and set the bottle on the floor beside him.

"Doubt they really want to know," muttered Arty from the recliner.

"You know, you're probably right, Art," and he raised his glass again looking into the amber liquid it held before he downed the contents.

"I don't know. I'd be lost without my family," said Ray, and he turned to Stella who sat behind him. "Can't wait 'til we can afford a house and have a real home for the kids." His voice gentled and the mood in the room became somber.

"What! And leave us behind?" Harnden roared and empty laughter filled the room.

Rae tipped her can back and finished the last of her drink. "We're heading out early in the morning," she said. "I'd better get going." She turned to Stella and Ray. "Thanks for the beer," she said. There were good-byes all around and she and the dog returned to their room.

The next morning as the sun broke over the vast plain Rae loaded the cooler and her bag into the truck and headed east down the highway until she found the gravel road. About 50 yards down stood a lone bushy cedar. She parked the truck and let herself and the dog

out into the morning air, the dry grasses whispering against her legs. When she reached the ditch she bent to pick some yellow wildflowers that flourished in the desert heat, then headed on toward the tree. In the distance her dog chased the night scents that still lived in the ancient ground. As she reached the sprawling branches of the cedar she slowed, lying in the shadows were the lifeless bodies of the wild dogs. The slight breeze ruffled the silken fur and she watched life come again to the drying carcasses. Staring at the coyotes she raised her hand and released the yellow flowers. One by one they floated across the desert plain.

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Shawna B. Paramore
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