

how the road went from there to my father's house, and I didn't think I'd make any more wrong turns.

It was when I got on the other side of the bridge and saw the signs that I began to understand my options—so many places other than my father's house to go. *Philadelphia. Washington. 80 and West.* I considered the likelihood of the Cavalier making it all the way to Hope and decided it probably wouldn't. Then I saw a sign pointing back to New England and the Cape and made my decision right then.

I could be back in Provincetown in time to take Marilyn to breakfast at the Café Heaven and we'd talk about the things I'd been afraid to talk about before. We'd walk Commercial Street, and shop strictly for unnecessary items: foot massage lotion and antique shawls. We'd eat lobster for dinner and drink Chardonnay the way I did that first night when I bought the Japanese rabbit and believed myself open to anything. I'd take her out to the place where the lights danced in the rocks and I'd figure out some way to get her to swim in them. I wasn't sure what would happen after that, but I knew whatever it was or wasn't would be okay, because the point would be to laugh in that water together, to see those lights touch our bodies like stars. And she would go home to her bond trader. And I would go back to my ranch and see if another round of seasons would make me any smarter, and wait there by the river for the new Lucy to come home.

Epilogue

ELLIE THE DOG AND I still do the walk every day unless it's raining, down the driveway, out across the front of the property, up the Forest Service road to Spar Hill Pass and on up to the lookout. From here we can see all of Antelope Park and the Rio Grande running through it loopy as my grandmother's handwriting, twelve thousand acres of the neighboring Soward ranch, ringed all around by the Continental Divide.

Red Mountain is catching all the alpenglow we can stand this evening, and there are twenty head of elk lying in the road like belligerent dogs and Ellie gets to chasing them, but only so far. Bristol Head stands in its late-afternoon shadow, my ranch sitting below it like an afterthought dwarfed by everything, even that baby of a river only twenty miles old.

We stopped in the barn on our way up here today, and I found some photographs taken in the twenties in a box in the hayloft—a stern-looking woman, a stooped-over man, a passel of children being told to look serious, none of them managing, an unruly dog.

If you think of a photograph as a kind of a story, then you'll know that the woman prays late at night to be menopausal, that the man has just set this season's traps on the ridge, that the smallest boy worries about his own silence, that the oldest girl is writing letters to her sweetheart in Durango, that the father beats him senseless every night in his dreams.

It's all done the way Houdini did it, angles, lights, and mirrors. I've had a camera hanging around my neck since my fingers could make it focus. I'm afraid how it drives me toward the deep heart of the world, I'm afraid how it keeps me from it, how the stories come with each click of the shutter, how the camera keeps saying *what then* and *what then*. Stories are relentless things that won't take no for an answer. They tell themselves by what's not shown more often than by what is.

There's almost never fog this high in the Rocky Mountains, and when it does come it is gone so fast and so early in the morning it feels like a memory or a dream. What we have instead of fog is big storms and bright sunshine and air so clear you can't ever disappear in it no matter how far you walk. The land never disappears either; it is there day in and day out, the clouds painting shapes across it, the lakes and rivers throwing your own image back at you so clear that you can't ever fail to see.

It's September 21st, a day I love for the balance it carries with

it, and B.J. and Paul Stone are coming for supper. B.J.'s bringing a raspberry pie and Paul's bringing some elk steaks. I'm making a salad from what's left of my garden, and the mashed potatoes with half-and-half and garlic that are getting a little famous around here.

There's a burst of Indian paintbrush growing at my feet, the blossoms the most delicate mixture of ruby and white, and I focus the lens downward and take a still life with hiking boots, liking the way the washed-out brown leather frames the flowers, which are supple and bright.

I had a teacher who told me I should strive to be invisible, that the camera was designed to be an instrument always sitting on a tripod, activated as if by a stray gust of wind. I knew he was lying, even as he said it, knew a photograph tells the story of two lives simultaneously, the one in front of the camera as well as the one behind. I knew the more complicated the relationship, the better the photograph. The world's greatest work is really all self-portraiture, the artist as subway, as mountain, as sky.

It's when I look up from the paintbrush that I see the little girl—maybe seven years old—walking up the hill toward me. She's wearing a red-and-white polka-dot dress and black shoes, white socks with lace around her ankles. She's carrying a suitcase that's small, and yet it seems too big for her to carry it alone. I follow the trail she's made in the tall grass back to Middle Creek Road and see a bicycle leaning on its kickstand, a big flowered basket attached to the front.

She's up the hill in no time, and she sits down on the grass and opens the suitcase, folds her arms across her chest like

she's waiting to see what happens next. Ellie doesn't growl or even bark at the little girl, which is an all-time first in our year together. She pads right up to the girl with only a hint of caution, licks her hand twice, chooses the side away from the suitcase, makes three quick circles and lies down.

The little girl looks familiar, and since she's walked right in like she owns the place, I don't want to admit I've forgotten her name.

"Hi," I say, and she holds up one hand but doesn't say anything.

The suitcase, I can see, is full of 8x10 photographs as unfamiliar to me as the ones in my grandmother's barn. She sorts through them for a minute and then hands one to me. I can see that she's got a plan, so I sit down on the other side of Ellie. People have always said I'm good with kids but that might be another lie they've told about me, and there's something about this girl that's making me wish I was anywhere other than here.

In this first picture the little girl is pedaling her tricycle hard and fast down a busy street. A young, pretty woman is just out of focus behind her. She has just stepped out of a car, and is running down the street after the girl. A light rain is falling and the woman's trench coat is flapping out to either side. The cars that are starting to pile up behind her have their headlights and windshield wipers on. It is twilight.

The little girl finally speaks. "What my mother says," she explains, "is that I was on my way to get ice cream. What my father says is that I was on my way to see him at work."

Ellie has fallen asleep beside the little girl and starts to

whimper, as she often does, in her dreams. The little girl rubs Ellie's back lightly till she's quiet, then reaches into the suitcase and pulls out another 8x10.

In this one she is being pushed along in a stroller. Two big dogs walk one on either side of her, German shepherd mixes, one mostly light, the other mostly dark. The camera is in tight; the woman who is pushing the stroller is cut off at the waist. The little girl, who appears about five years younger than she does today, looks straight ahead, unsmiling. She's got one hand on each dog, clutching the fur in a kind of a death grip that the dogs, for some reason, have decided to allow.

"That's Salt and Pepper," the little girl says. "Neighborhood dogs who tried to protect me. Sometimes after we went inside they would sit at the bottom of the driveway for hours, until my father came home and threw rocks at them to make them go away."

The next several pictures are blurry and almost too dark to make out, which means either somebody's made a mistake with the aperture, or they've been taken inside at night with no flash and very little available light. There is a woman with her head down on her arms on the kitchen table, her fingers wrapped around a highball glass. There is a big man, face-down on a bed too small for him, his knuckles dragging on the floor. There is a small figure curled into the round of a clothes dryer.

"That's where I hid," the little girl says, "before I got so big."

I'm still trying to place this girl and what I'd like to do with all of it is cheer things up a little, so I tell her how I

taken pictures, that it's my favorite way to tell a story. I talk about how I always try to balance light and darkness a little better than in the ones she's just shown me. How a picture can't work without plenty of both.

She looks at me with her eyebrows raised, and then something like disappointment crosses her face.

"There's only one story," she says, and goes back to shuffling through the pile.

Thunder rumbles in some far-off place and Ellie wakes up enough to curl herself even tighter against the little girl's leg, her whole body shaking now the way it always does in a storm.

In the next photograph the little girl's head is turned, to watch a springer spaniel puppy who has also turned to try to put himself between the little girl and her father, who has just entered the room and is reaching down as though he intends to pick her up. The puppy's black-and-white-splotted ears are pinned back to his head and he is growling the way puppies do when they aren't really sure what they are doing. The little girl's face is in the process of falling, her laugh catching in her throat, her eyes widening. The father is turned toward the girl, and mostly away from the camera, but even at this oblique angle I can see the anger in his body.

"They got rid of the puppy after two days," the little girl says. "They said they had to because it kept knocking me down."

I look toward the driveway, hoping B.J. might show up early and help me deal with the little girl. I try to change the subject again by telling her about some pictures I saw recently, the latest shots from the Hubble Space Telescope, pictures that show

hundreds of thousands of galaxies in a part of space where scientists had always thought there weren't any galaxies at all.

In the shots I remember best, one of the new galaxies is blowing right through another one. Before-and-after pictures: first a perfect spiral and then a torn raggedy doughnut. When I saw them I thought about my credit card bills, my mortgage, all the little things I worried about from day to day.

"So like we could just be sitting here," I say to her, "eating a sandwich, and all of a sudden some other galaxy could come blasting through."

The little girl chews on her finger in silent understanding, as though this possibility is something she has known about her whole short life.

"There is only one story," she says, like it's something she's just thought of, like she hasn't just said it a minute before.

In the next picture the little girl has opened the passenger door of a moving car. The camera has caught the moment right between the time she has pushed herself off from the running board and right before she has hit the pavement. Behind her in the photo, her mother, again out of focus, has just become aware of what she is doing, her mouth just beginning to make the O shape of a scream, her knee bent in her leg's movement from the gas to the brake.

"What they said," the little girl says, "is that I was trying to be like Mr. Magoo."

In the last photo the little girl shows me, she is lying under a huge cement urn, screaming in pain.

"What they said," the little girl says, "is that I thought it was full of water and fish."

I look hard at the little girl and she gives me the tiniest of smiles.

In every picture she's shown me she has big dark circles under her eyes.

I look again toward my driveway, but there's still no sign of anyone. "You know," I say, "I don't know how long it took you to get here or anything, but is there any way we could do this another time? I'm having some friends for dinner. Or maybe you'd like to come eat with us."

The little girl sighs. "I thought it would be best to start slowly," she says, "but if you're in a hurry we can cut to the chase."

While I'm wondering what kind of seven-year-old uses an expression like *cut to the chase*, she hands me the next 8x10.

In this one the little girl is falling backwards. Her father, whose back is to the camera, has his hands tight on either side of her small collarbones and is pushing her down the back stairs. She is trying to keep her balance, trying not to fall onto the new white gravel that her mother has laid only a few weeks ago. She is tripping backwards over the logs that hold the gravel in place. She is looking away from her father, toward the purple tulips.

And I have to close my eyes then because I don't want to think about how the tulips are her favorite color and how there are more of those than any this year and how her mother said it meant that she would be lucky, that this would be her lucky year, and how she thinks about those tulips as she finally gives up at the bottom, to him and to gravity, as her head hits the ground. She is still thinking of those tulips when he throws her against the woodpile, their bright yellow centers

that remind her of a smile. She keeps thinking about them the whole time, how they close up every night, *so nothing can hurt them* was what her mother had said. She is still thinking about them after he leaves her and she crawls into the clothes dryer because it is just her size and she thinks *maybe the lucky part hasn't started just yet*.

When I open my eyes the little girl is smiling again, but it's all kindness now, hardly a trace of fear.

"Wow," I say.

"Yeah," she says.

And I say, "Come here and sit on my lap."

The wind has picked up, making the grass wave like something out of God's own vision of Paradise, and I know what I'm supposed to do next but I can't quite bring myself to do it.

"You know where I was going that day on my tricycle?" she says, looking up at me, her hair whipping in strands around her mouth. "You know where I've been going every day of my life?"

I shake my head but she knows that I know we both know the answer.

"I'm not very good," I say, "at taking care of things."

"You'll get better," she says, and she makes a sound that's almost a laugh. "You're my only chance."

Ellie's wagging her tail and looking at me out of the corner of one eye, making sure I'm clear on her opinion of what I should do.

"There's more pictures," the little girl says.

"We've got time," I say back, and when I do, her whole body loosens its grip on itself.

"We'll get you some blue jeans," I say. "First thing, and some shoes that make sense."

The little girl rolls on her back and kicks her heels in the air. "I knew you'd be like this," she says, "once you got used to the idea."

She closes up the suitcase, stands up, and brushes off the back of her dress. "I guess I'll leave these with you," she says, "for safekeeping."

She's pushing her luck with that word *safe* and she knows it.

"I'll see you soon," she says, and starts running down the hill. Then she changes her mind and lays herself down, polka dots and all, and rolls all the way to the bottom, where she gets up and starts walking through the grass that's so tall it almost swallows her up.

Ellie hasn't stopped wagging her tail for the last ten minutes. *See?* is what she's saying and I'm right there hearing it.

All those years thinking the truth would kill me and what I feel like doing instead is having a roll down the hill.

I look in the other direction and B.J.'s in the driveway now, holding a big batch of yellow sunflowers, and Paul is pulling in right behind her, no doubt hauling some new invention in the back of his truck that he plans to try out. Someone else gets out of B.J.'s car and I see that it's Bobby, the glider pilot, and I can hardly believe it's that time of year already but then I look around me at the color in the hills.

They are greeting each other and talking, my friends, a bouquet of bright colors in their fuzzy outdoor clothes, and I'm remembering the dead of winter, buried here under five feet of fresh powder, how white everything was for weeks on end,

the mountains, the river, even the sky, as though it had all been frozen crystalline, and then, when spring came, how it got a little warmer each day and the color came back to the world like paint-by-numbers, the blue water rising to the surface of the river, the black paintbrush ridges of the mountain tops, tufts of brown sage shooting up through the thinning snow drifts, and the cornflower blue of a late-April sky.

For a long time I was swallowed like that, by something cold and colorless, but autumn is here and soon the color will be peaking; I can feel it in the air like the late-summer rains.

Ellie, who has been watching each car pull up the driveway, puts her pet-me paw up on my thigh and when I reach down she makes a little singing noise all by herself and takes a few steps in the direction of our guests and then lowers herself like a wild dog and turns to look back at me.

"In a minute," I say, as she catches sight of a butterfly and chases it into the pine trees that scatter themselves on the top of the hill.

I look back at the house again and allow myself a moment of wishing that Marcus were here and could join us for dinner. But the slow change in the seasons has taught me some patience, how to spend the days in living when I would once have spent them waiting, how to love the snow every day till it changes to rain.

"Okay, I'm ready," I say to Ellie and take one more look around me, south to the Divide and everywhere else to the river, back up toward the grave of the woman who knew a lot more than I thought she did when she chose me to come and tend this heaven.

Waltzing the Cat

There have been those in my life who believe I am meant to wind up alone here: my father, Henry, it's what my grandmother says every night to me speaking from the grave. It's easy to believe being alone is the strong thing, but the river taught me long ago that it's a stronger thing still to make yourself fragile. To say I love you, I dare you, I want you with me.

A dog. A friend. A little girl I'd almost forgotten. She was right when she said there was only one story, and here I'd been trying to tell it all along. As B.J.'s fond of saying, the sky's the limit after that.

The elk are bugling from the hills right behind me and the afternoon sun is washing the ranch buildings a color so rich I know I can't get it with my camera.

There's never been a better time to step into the picture.

I pick up the suitcase, whistle once for Ellie, and start down the hill at a run.