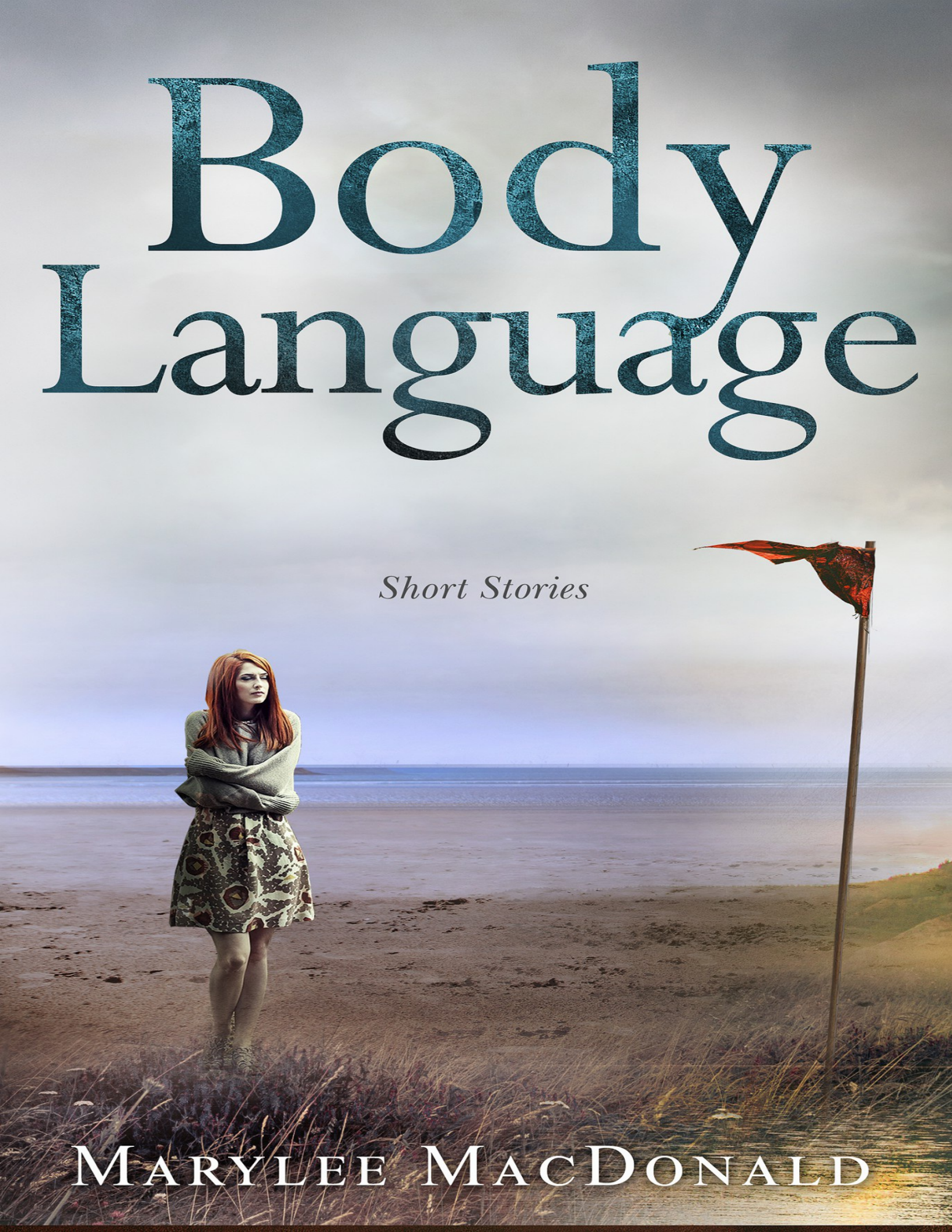
Body Language

Short Stories



MARYLEE MACDONALD

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Short Stories

by

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License Notes

Tempe, AZ: Grand Canyon Press [2020]

https://www.grandcanyonpress.com

Cover design by: https://www.tatlin.net

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I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,

To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,

To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is enough,

To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?

I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

From "The Body Electric"
by WALT WHITMAN

A Body of Water

The first time I saw Sally, she was leaping from the top rail of a corral fence and into the saddle of one of her daddy's prized stallions, Satan.

At thirteen I was tall for my age (I'd try out for the freshman basketball team in the fall but would make junior varsity instead). Even so, the magnificent horse stood hands above me. Sally's guts and grace stopped me in my tracks. Seeing her all-American good looks, my knees began to cave.

Sally's dad owned Muir Trail Ranch up near Florence Lake, a deal he'd worked out with the Forest Service and that gave him the right to run trail rides. He had taken me on as a part-time ranch hand, and by the summer after senior year, I was a full-fledged groom.

I thought the summer would give me a chance to spend more time with Sally, edge aside the guy she'd been going with. But one hot day in August, when I had just turned eighteen, Sally married him, and so it was me who stood in polished boots and a dress-white shirt, shooing away a misery of mosquitoes with my Stetson and awaiting the new bride's arrival back at the ranch. Without making eye contact, I held the reins while Sally, in a wedding dress and cowboy boots, dismounted. She headed off to supervise the barbecue and greet her guests. While brushing down Satan in his stall, I let it go. Cracking the knuckles of my freaky long fingers, I let it all go. That seals it, I thought. She made her choice. The next day I enlisted in the Navy.

When I got back my dad helped me buy a ranch near Sumner Hill, but a ranch in the foothills didn't sit right. I bought another higher up, edging my way back to the place I'd been happiest in my life. Once or twice a year my wife let me off the leash, and I packed up my fishing pole and headed up State Route 168. When that first sweet smell of Ponderosa pine came through the open windows, my heart began to pound.

Twenty years had gone by since Sally's wedding, six years since my own, and in the ensuing years, I had forced myself into some kind

of normal life. If I saw Sally at all, it was when she was tying horses to the hitching post and waiting for the day's trail riders to finish their steak and eggs. Occasionally, we would bump into each other at the hot springs out behind the ranch. Once, we happened to be sitting in the steaming water when the sky opened up in a typical Sierra thunderstorm: brief and unannounced. The pebbles of rain socking against the canvas lean-to above our heads was an open invite to laugh and tell stories about kids we'd gone to high school with or guys like me who'd worked summers riding trail or washing dishes. Being friends with Sally wasn't quite like being friends with another guy, but out of respect for her husband, I pretended it was and never made my move.

Anyway, early last spring before my last son was born, who should I see driving up to my front door but Sally. She parked in her yellow pick-up by the stoop and walked up, snugging her tan riding pants around her hips. Over the winter, she'd put on a few pounds; but summer always slimmed her down.

"Hey, there." I greeted her with an open door. "What brings you down this way?"

"Well, I don't know exactly why I came, John." She undid her ponytail, then spitting on her fingers, cinched it up again. The worry lines on her forehead matched the squint lines around her eyes. We were both getting older.

"Come on in and meet the kids," I said, taking her elbow.

"I won't take but a minute," she said.

"You're not interrupting anything."

Eight months pregnant, short and stocky, Margie waddled out of the kitchen. With her curly brown hair and apron tied up under her breasts, she looked a little unnerved by Sally turning up like this. Margie wiped her hand, front and back, as she'd been flouring chicken, then offered a handshake. Over the years Margie had heard me mention Sally, mostly in connection with my summers as a young, single ranch hand. However, actually seeing Sally, with her square jaw and athletic build, her 5′ 11″ frame, and her horse-riders' bowlegs, well, that was a whole different deal.

"You want to meet my kids?" I asked.

"I'll go see what they're up to," Margie said, not taking her eyes

off Sally.

"I can go out back if that's where they are," Sally said.

"No, I'll get them." Margie slid open the patio door and slammed it shut.

The hallway where we stood was a regular rogue's gallery of family pictures.

Sally leaned in for a better look. "Cute kids."

"Wait a minute and I'll show you around the Ponderosa," I said and apologized for the dirt on my hands. "I was putting in some walnuts."

"Can't stay long. Just wanted to know if you'd like to go fishing up by Colby Meadow."

"It's early."

"I think we could get up that far."

"Horses or foot?"

"It'll have to be on foot. I don't want to take the animals up there. Water's too high."

"I guess I could do that."

Out back, through the closed door, I could hear Margie doing the two-tone call. "Tom-my! Raaan-dy! You boys get in here right now, and don't make me come find you." She would be back any minute.

"When you want to do this?" I said, lowering my voice.

"A week from today."

"How about in two weeks."

"No, a week," she said. "Has to be."

"I guess that can be arranged."

Sally seemed in anxious to leave, and I walked her to the truck. Margie brought the kids around to the driveway. Jason was going on six and Randy five. Sally looked at me. She probably hadn't bothered to figure out the math, and I had never told her I'd had to get married. Either that or she just figured my kids weren't real, like the characters in a movie everyone else is talking about but you haven't seen yet. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped Randy's nose. She asked him what he'd been doing, and when he pulled out a blue belly lizard, she took it and stroked its chin. Randy's eyes got wide. His mom never let him bring lizards in the house. In fact, if anything, Margie was a little at odds with the natural world. She'd grown up in

Sacramento.

Sally handed back the lizard and told the boys she hoped I would bring them up to the ranch sometime. She shook hands with Margie again, Margie gave me a look, and then of all things, Sally took my hand, letting her own go limp. Puzzled, I watched from the porch and felt my stomach turning the way it does when I'm coming down with the flu. Sally got in her truck, threw an arm across the seat, and backed one-handed out to the road.

Margie slid past me. "You going to stand out here all night?"

"Is dinner ready?"

"Soon as you set the table," she said, "and I don't mean set *at* the table."

All week I worked like the devil to get the walnuts in and adjust the irrigation. When Margie heard me going through my tackle box, she came out to the garage. Splay-footed, she stood massaging her stomach. We had sort of joked about "accidents," how they happened, why we'd been careless, how I should have pulled out and let her put more jelly in her diaphragm.

"What if the baby comes early?" she said.

"That's why I'm going now," I said, bending over my pack so she didn't see my face, which would have told her I was lying. "In another month I wouldn't risk it."

"Get it out of your system, then." She slammed the door, her signal that she'd be stewing about it for some while.

It certainly didn't require any deep thinking to know what Sally was up to. I have not been entirely faithful to my wife, and from the tone of Sally's voice — and even more from her limp hand; so unlike her usual crush-your-fingers-to-prove-a-point grip — I guessed that she wanted me to sleep with her, but I didn't know why. There are certain conditions where I would not sleep with a woman, one of them being if she was mad at her man, and I was just convenient revenge. Her man or her father, in Sally's case. And the other case was where some gal wants to get me tangled into the web of her life. I already made that mistake once with Margie. Turned out she wasn't a bad wife, as wives go.

But as I was driving up to Florence Lake, singing and whistling my way around the curves, it struck me that in spite of my financial security and the enjoyment I took in my kids, this truly happy feeling came over me less often than when I was young.

I parked my truck down the road from the boat dock, shut up the cab, and threw the keys under the left front wheel, since one year I'd lost the keys in a stream and had to hitch a ride home to get the spare. Besides, when you're going into the back country, it's very freeing to leave all but what you absolutely need behind.

The outboard that carried people from the dock over to Sally's father's ranch was out on the lake, and I thought about waiting till it came back. It would cut three miles off however long I had to hike today. Then it occurred to me that maybe Sally didn't want my presence to be public knowledge. I could walk the three miles in less than an hour, and so I did.

I was all the way around the lake and heading up the granite ridge toward the ranch when I saw Sally heading toward me. She was concentrating on the trail, looking down at the rocks and taking the slope in giant strides. She had on a sheepskin coat with her thumbs tucked in the pockets. Her long brown hair was clipped at the back of the neck, and her eyes shown green as the lake. When she smiled, it wasn't seductive, but rather open, frank, and warm. Just the same, I felt a jump in my groin.

"Hey, Sally!" I shouted.

"Shh!" She put her finger to her lips. "Do you need a hand with your gear?"

I climbed to where she was waiting on a boulder. "What's the deal?"

"Come on. Let's go up this ridge and cut over to Blayney Meadow. I left my pack there. Did you bring flies? I didn't have time to tie any."

"I've got buzz hackles."

"They think I'm just going up by myself. My husband wanted to come, but I'm trying to think a little, and I can't when he's around."

"But you can with me? Why didn't you go alone? You're not about to get lost."

"I wanted company. Come on. We've got four days to talk." She

pushed me ahead. Like me, Sally must have made her excuses. I wondered what she'd brought to eat. Cornbread, I hoped. That went well with fish. But if she just grabbed food from the storeroom, we'd be cooking freeze-dried turkey tetrazzini. The smell of frying bacon drifted over from the ranch and made my mouth water. Marge says bacon's off limits.

We passed through some trees. Sally grabbed her pack from a tree. We went up the trail, stepping around mule deer pellets, and walked in silence until lunch, when we stretched out under the trees, resting our heads on our packs. Most women talked your ear off. Sally was the exception. Offering her a handful of trail mix, I must have been watching her out of the corner of my eye.

"Stop staring," she said. "I'm not that fascinating." She scrambled to her feet and walked over to the river, dipping her Sierra cup.

I retied my boots. If she wanted to be like that, I wouldn't look at her again ever, and she could see how she liked being ignored. She drank her fill, then refilled the cup and brought me my first taste of sweet, pure — almost thick — mountain water. My jaw unclenched. Look out, John, I thought. This woman is a peck of trouble.

"Want a hand up?" she said.

"I was just enjoying the sound of the river," I said, "but I guess you want to go…"

"I do," she said.

The trail grew slick. An open bog smelled like a dead marmot. Skunk cabbage. Further on, snow flowers, like stalks of red asparagus, poked through the loam. It was early yet for Indian paintbrush and penstemon; but, plenty of lupine, which she saw first.

By the time we found a campsite, the sun had dropped behind the trees. "Let's stop here," I said.

She pulled out a topo map and spread it on a log. "Before it gets too dark, we should talk about our final destination."

I bent over the map. Her hair brushed my cheek. The creamy vanilla scent of frozen custard. She'd been smelling like that since high school, and I wanted to lick her neck.

Seemingly unaware of my rapid breathing, she put her finger on a spot. “Let’s go here!”

“Sure.” She knew the good places to camp. “We going to cook on propane?”

“Nope. I have a fire permit.”

This early in the season, the ground was saturated, and even if a spark hit the duff, pine needles wouldn’t burn. By the time I came back with downed wood, Sally had made a cook-fire from twigs and pine needles. A pot of coffee balanced on a rock. While she boiled water, I rolled out our sleeping bags and put them a foot apart.

“Is that okay with you?” I asked. “Or you want the fire between us?”

“What, like cowboys in movies?” She was squatting over the fire, pouring out a silver pack of dehydrated spaghetti. “No, John, I’ll bed down next to you.” She gave me a thumbs-up.

After we’d eaten and washed dishes, we sat across from each other on logs. I sang Garth Brooks’ songs. She liked my voice, even when it got choked up from thinking of the three summers at the ranch, back when we were kids, and how she’d never given me the time of day. Course, she was a year older and that made all the difference at that age. I put on another pot of coffee. Caffeine might keep me awake, but it didn’t matter. I was too keyed up to sleep.

I kept waiting for Sally to tell me why she’d invited me on this trip, but all she talked about was the tourists at the ranch. A lot of the old regulars, people who’d watched her grow up, were getting on in years, and now their kids and grandkids were coming up.

“What do you think about when you’re alone, John?” She had her arms wrapped around her knees and held a coffee cup tight in one hand.

I tried to see her face. I could usually tell more about what she was thinking by how she looked, in spite of the way she tried not to let her feelings come out that way either.

“I guess I’m not alone that much,” I said.

“I’m always alone.” She stretched her feet out to the fire and tapped the toes of her boots. Then she yawned.

A signal. That part of the talk was over. In the flickering light I caught her looking at me, quickly, to see if I would take the bait.

People with a mind to fool around always make out that their spouse is the Devil incarnate.

"I have to apologize about this body." I stood, patted my belly, and began kicking dirt on the fire. "I'm a little out of shape."

She looked me up and down. "Could have fooled me."

I laughed.

"Leave a few coals for morning," she said. "It's easier to start."

I stopped kicking. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Sally walk over to our sleeping bags, strip down to her underwear, and crawl into her blue cocoon. Didn't look like she had in mind what I thought she did.

"Damn," I said, digging through my pack. "I forgot my long Johns."

"Just sleep in your birthday suit."

"I don't favor waking up at night and having to stand buck-naked while I take a leak."

"You're right," she said. "Another hour, and it'll drop below freezing."

I kept on my flannel shirt and folded my jeans for a pillow. When my bag was zipped, I put my hand on her shoulder. "You still awake?"

"I'm looking at the stars," she said.

They made us learn our stars in the Navy. I guess they thought if we were ever stranded on a desert island, we could get home. Above, where the treetops almost joined, I could see Orion.

"Do you know the constellations?" I said.

"My father made me learn them."

"Your father kind of over-prepared you for life."

"What kind of thing is that to say?"

"I didn't know. It was more a feeling than anything."

I waited, but she didn't say anything back. She just lay there with her hands folded under her head.

"Good night, Sally," I said after a while.

"Good night, John," she answered.

"We sound like the Waltons."

"I always wanted a big family," she said.

The next day I got up early, started the fire, and made coffee. Sally hardly touched her breakfast. She didn't like to hike on a full stomach. After a couple hours walking, a stop for lunch, and another hour on the trail, we bushwhacked to a little lake. Since it was a pretty easy day, we got out her pole and I dug out my flies. While we waited for the fish to rise, I showed her how I tied a buzz hackle, and she showed me a woolly worm that she thought worked pretty well in spring runoff. About the time we cast our flies, the wind died down. We ate the fish and boiled up some RiceARoni, but between the mosquitoes and Cutters stinging our eyes, we had a miserable dinner and climbed into our bags, holding them closed at the top and nearly suffocating.

I woke before sunup and got breakfast over quick so we could skedaddle before getting attacked. Since all the lower lakes were sure to have mosquitoes if this one did, we decided to head up to Evolution Valley. The only problem with the plan was that no one had been up there yet, and the snow had been heavy.

We retraced our steps back to the place where we'd camped the night before. Just beyond that campsite, after we had crossed a slick, striped granite saddle, we ran into our first patches of snow. Switchbacking steadily uphill, my boots left pink sinkholes. Then we walked for what felt like a long, long ways before I noticed that the lodgepoles, junipers, and aspen grew closer together and that the ground had leveled out. Fallen wood and crusted snow made it hard to see the trail. Sally led, going by the diagonal slash marks on the trees. Back in high school a Forest Service crew had taken me as mule wrangler when they went to blaze the trail. Twenty odd years ago the ax marks had left gashes on the trunks and sap oozing like tears. I hadn't been up this way since. The bark had regrown, filling in like scar tissue around a wound, but seeing those slashes made me miss that mule. My shoulders ached from the weight of my pack, and I stopped to adjust the straps.

When I caught up to Sally she was standing at the edge of a vast tangle of branches. Trees lay on their sides, their tops pointing downhill. An avalanche.

"This is going to be a bear," she said.

"Do you want to head back?" I said.

"No, we can make it." She began picking her way. The tree

trunks were black and slimy. The bark came off like dead skin. Branches caught at my jeans. The slash marks lay buried in the decomposing brush, and it was impossible to see the trail on the other side. We'd just have to hope it didn't veer off one way or another.

Sally heaved her pack over a five-foot trunk, hoisted herself up, and slid down the other side. "Is this fun for you?"

"Hell, no," I said.

"It is for me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm doing it with someone I really like." Midway over another slimy log, she gave me an earnest smile.

"Well, apart from that…"

"There is no 'apart from that'. Who you're with makes all the difference."

When I was younger I might have thought that. Now, it felt like life was more a matter of endurance.

Almost to the other side of the avalanche, she spotted where the trail resumed: a slash mark on a standing pine. We were home free, but with all the snow we had walked through and all the snow still on the peaks, the water in Evolution Creek was going to be damn cold.

The trail ended at the water's edge. I walked up and down the bank, looking for the ford. Creek was the wrong word this time of year. River was more accurate. Evolution Creek fed the south fork of the San Joaquin, and its roar hurt my ears.

"Did you bring a rope?" I shouted.

Sally shrugged off her pack and pulled loops of climbing rope from the sleeping bag compartment. "A hundred foot."

"I'll go across first and come back for our packs."

"If I've got a rope, I think I can make it over without your help."

"The water's too deep. You'll be off balance. Listen to me for a change."

"Okay, fine. We'll do it your way."

Sally tied the rope to a tree.

I stripped down to the tighty-whities, stowed my clothes, and put my boots back on. With the water rushing so fast, all I'd need was to cut my foot on a rock.

She looked me up and down, the corner of her mouth curling.

I put a hand on my chest. “What?”

“You idiot.” She shook her head. “Do you really want to go first?”

“You’re not that good a swimmer.”

“Try not to get hypothermia.”

“Agreed.”

As I stepped into the creek, the first shock of cold made my nuts shrink up. I looked back. She stood sober-faced on the bank, playing out the coils of rope. The current felt like a gale force wind. I would have been scared to go downriver on a raft; but walking and being careful where I planted my boots, I made it across and tied off the rope. Then I made two more trips with our packs. When I stumbled out after my third trip, I huffed with the effort it took to breathe.

Across the river, Sally stripped down to her sports bra and underpants. She untied the rope, looped it like a lariat, and stepped into the stream.

I cupped my hands. “Tie it back! Tie it back!”

Maybe she couldn’t hear. The slack rope dropped in the water, and the current carried it downstream. To keep the tension, I coiled fast. Halfway over, Sally stepped in a depression, and the water made a collar around her neck. I pulled up the slack and hauled her to shore.

Soaked, spent, shivering, she threw herself on the meadow grass. “My husband would have let me drown.”

Furious at her recklessness, I turned her on her back and pinioned her arms. “Why in hell did you untie the rope? Didn’t you hear me?”

“I was afraid someone might follow us.”

“Who?”

“My husband.”

“Jesus, girl!” I collapsed on her and cried. It was the first time I had cried since Marge showed me that first and unwanted pink test strip, and I could feel Sally’s arms around me, rubbing my back.

“It’s okay, John. We made it.”

“Yeah, but…”

“We’re safe. Nobody can get to us here.”

Even with my body half frozen, I was utterly relieved to have made it across the river. Sally tried to smooth out the goose bumps with her fingers. After a while, I stopped shaking, but I could still feel

her fingers going up and down my spine and into the small of my back. Down my legs even. It was as if she was seeing me for the first time, but with her hands.

I moved off her and hunkered on all fours. She lay there, arms flung and legs spread and laughing like a crazy person. I was just about to tell her to stop it, for God's sake, when I noticed a brown pencil-like line heading south from her navel. The same line Margie had. Sally's stomach was flat. No stretch marks on her hips. None visible on her breasts. Through her bra, her tits looked like acorn caps, bumpy and brown.

She turned her head. "Long enough rest?"

I pointed to the brown line. "When did you lose the baby?"

She swallowed. "It was more than one."

"What, twins?"

"No, more than one time."

"Fixing to try again?"

She reached out for my hand, smiled, and nodded.

"What makes you think this time'll be different?"

"It will. I just know it." She rubbed my fingers against her face.

Her skin felt warm.

Scrambling to her feet, she took out her jeans and her shirt. "Let's go on up to the lake."

I changed into dry clothes. My boots immediately soaked my socks. Cold stiffened my fingers, and I fumbled to untie the half-hitch on the rope.

"Leave it for when we come back." Sally said.

I did and hoisted on my pack. My teeth chattered.

We had hiked eight miles with Evolution Creek on our left. Now, it was on our right. The forest had thinned and the land flattened. Beyond an inundated meadow lay Evolution Lake, four miles long and ringed by granite peaks.

I found a camp spot on a little peninsula. The ground felt dry and that meant the campsite would have good morning sun. There was a fire ring and level ground for our sleeping bags. I built a fire, tore open a packet of beef stroganoff, put water on to boil, and warmed my hands. While Sally hung our food bag, I checked the sleeping bags to see if they would zip together. My toes burned with cold, and I wanted

to borrow some of her body heat.

"Hey," she called, pointing to the lake. "Don't miss the *Alpenglo*." She was already on her way, striding toward a granite boulder out on the tip of the peninsula.

I put the bags down.

Knit hats over our ears, we sat like two birds on a wire and stared at the still water of Evolution Lake; its shimmering surface filled me with peace. Off some ways, in a half-ring, stood four big, snow-covered peaks — Mounts Huxley, Spencer, Darwin, and Mendel. To my knowledge, not one of those great men had talked about love, as if the survival of the human race depended only on the practical stuff — who would bring home the woolly mammoth and who would cook it — but, my life had shown me that all that "survival of the species" stuff is driven by our bodies' needs, who we yearn for and who we cannot do without.

"I'm going to see if my socks are dry," I said.

"Don't be gone too long," she said.

"I won't."

The fire had dried my socks, and I pulled them over my hands. When I returned, I sat next to her, an arm around her shoulder.

"What's this?" She wiggled the sock's toe. "A wool condom?"

I laughed. "You're lucky to be alive. You know that?"

She cuddled against me. "I know." Then, after a pause, "Glad, too."

"You had something to tell me."

She didn't move, but I felt her stiffen. A fish jumped right in front of us. The ripples settled.

"There were five altogether," she said.

"Five babies?"

"Yes," she said.

"How far along were you?"

"Heard a heartbeat on the last one."

I exhaled and it came out like a whistle. She was thirty-nine.

"You sure you want to try again?" I said.

"My husband won't touch me."

"What a fool."

Although, to give him the benefit of the doubt, maybe he couldn't

stand to see her suffer.

I took off my sock and laced my fingers through hers. She squeezed back. I wanted her for more than one night. I wanted her in a motel room where we could sleep with the covers off and wake up to coffee and hot showers. I wanted her for as long as it would take us to make a baby, and for more nights after that. And, if that happened, I wanted to keep her off horses, at least until she came to term, even though asking her to leave the mountains would be like asking her to peel off her skin.

I took her chin and turned her face toward mine. Her lips felt cold and dry. As the sun went down, all the blues, greens, and browns of the sky changed into the red glow of battered, cutthroat trout on their mating run upstream. How confusing it was to be human. How surprising. This moment was one I had waited for my whole life.

Hunger

So decadently rich, the taste and texture of hot chocolate. The heavy white porcelain mug, the froth of bubbles and fresh nutmeg, but most of all the spoonable residue at the bottom. Just beyond the mahogany doors of the United Airlines Executive Club, the best hot chocolate in the whole wide world awaited Olympia Stavropoulis. Pulling her bag of pharmaceutical samples, she showed her Priority Pass. A nervous craving, not hunger exactly, but a feeling similar to hunger, overcame her before international flights.

Inside the lounge, Olympia, gold hoop earrings jangling against the collar of her flowing cape, brushed past the business travelers relaxing on leather couches. She had expected more of a reaction — a cocked head; eyes taking her measure — because she was careful about how she presented herself and wanted to come off as a woman of substance. The purple cape was a statement not just of grandeur but of practicality, for it was often true that in coach, the blankets did not quite cover her body, and the soft wool kept her from freezing beneath the whistling nozzles that blew cold air. But, never mind. A job was a job, for her as much as for anyone else, and she braced herself to endure the indignities of the flight: crowded bins, snoring seatmates, and most of all, tiny portions of food. She considered grabbing a few of the pastry-wrapped Vienna sausages put out as snacks, but decided against it. Just get the chocolate, she told herself, then on to the gate.

At the bar, she parked one buttocks on a stool. The bar was manned by a trim blond, his face half-hidden by dangling wine glasses. High intensity lights shaped like upside down waffle cones lit her diamond ring.

"I'd like some hot chocolate, please," she said.

"No can do," the bartender said. "The machine is broken."

"But you don't need a machine to make chocolate," Olympia said. "All you need is a pan and some hot milk."

"We make our *cocoa* with an espresso machine."

“You grind the beans from scratch?”

“From scratch.”

“I walked all the way down here to get chocolate, and now you don’t have it? You guys have the best chocolate in the world, right here in this bar, and now I know why. You grind the beans. Imagine that!”

“Sorry to disappoint,” the bartender said, wiping lipstick from a glass. “Can I get you something else? A chardonnay, perhaps?”

“Let me think.” Was there something else she craved? Not really. She had counted on chocolate to help her sleep. At bedtime her grandmother, a wiry-haired widow who spoke not a word of English, had always given her a warm cup of Nestle’s Quik. The bedtime ritual had become a habit. A warm drink always relaxed the body and calmed the mind.

“How about a decaf? Cream and sugar,” she said.

“Coming right up.” A moment later the bartender placed the mug of coffee on the counter and handed her packets of creamer.

“Could I have real cream?” she said. “I don’t want to scald my tongue.”

“Sure,” he said, turning and take a carton of half-and-half from a small refrigerator.

Pouring the cream, she hoped the residual amount of caffeine in the coffee wouldn’t keep her awake. She was off to eastern Europe for another round of show-and-tell, peddling out-of-date drugs to government clinics. She hated the beaten-down look of the beleaguered doctors, their haggard, hollow eyes. Cows, she thought. Sheep. Hunger for the drugs was the only detectable glow in their anxious eyes.

“I live in Chicago,” she said, “and once a year I take a vacation for two weeks. I go on cruises. The last time I went up the Inland Passage. Do you know it? It was spectacular, all those glaciers crashing into the sea! And I go back to Greece every five or six years to see my parents’ relatives, who are all dying off now. They live on olive farms overlooking the sea, but the streets are all stone, and I usually twist my ankle and end up being carried around the town in a straight-back chair. Like one of the Madonna statues they carry around on feast days.” She laughed. “It’s really pretty hilarious.”

“You must rack up the frequent flier miles.”

"Too many to count."

"What do you do?" he asked.

"I sell drugs to third world countries. I've had the Asian market until recently, but China's been making more and more cheap drugs—knockoffs, like they do with computer programs or CDs. They have little sweatshops where they crank out insulin and antibiotics and old standbys like Valium and Prozac. It seems the whole world is on anti-depressants. 'Course nobody knows the quality of the drugs. The Chinese say they're the same. They don't really test them or anything. A bunch of people got sick in Denmark last year. Turned out they'd mixed in some barrels of drugs from China with product from the Czech Republic, and it made a supremely toxic cocktail. Do you believe that?"

The bartender looked down in the sink. Olympia saw that the suds had gone flat and the water turned gray. So much for hygiene.

"I'm home for a day every couple of weeks. When I was young my mother said I should guard my independence."

"Meaning what?" the bartender said.

"Meaning earn my own money. Don't get pushed into marriage. Now she's singing a different tune. Why don't you ever date? Where are my grandchildren? My mother says it would be cheaper for me to rent a hotel. She's probably right. I've been doing this for three years now. I can't keep a houseplant alive. Isn't that pathetic?"

The bartender pulled the plug. The sink emptied, and Olympia heard a big slurp from the drain.

The bartender picked up a hand towel and dried his hands. "Lady, you've been on the road too long."

Olympia had to admit she was quite fagged out from traveling. The hotels of eastern Europe offered the desultory service of formerly state-run enterprises — smoke-saturated rooms and green cornflakes in the breakfast buffet. No air conditioning. Of course, the company could have put her up at a Hilton, but the Hiltons were near the tourist sites, and she wasn't going there to be a tourist.

At the gate she handed over her ticket and an upgrade certificate. She had flown so many miles by now, she kept three or four in her purse, but they were nearly always useless because the first-class seats

filled early on overseas flights. Besides the ability to stretch out and lie flat, an amenity that might have allowed her to sleep on the plane, a first-class meal was better than most food in the restaurants of Budapest, where the meat, gristly and overcooked, swam in goulash.

"You're in luck, Miss Stavropoulis," the gate attendant said. "Your upgrade has been approved."

"It has?" she gasped. This was her lucky day. But then she'd earned it. As the bartender said, she'd been on the road too long. Once upon a time, back when she was in her twenties and struggling to finish an MBA, she had imagined a man in her life. Maybe children. These she had traded for acquaintances, money, and what could pass for respect. If she occasionally had doubts about whether selling drugs was a meaningful way to live a life, well, no point in second-guessing.

The flight began to board. Now she gave herself permission to be pampered, just as she had given herself permission to buy her own diamond ring. She settled comfortably into her window seat, and the flight attendant offered sparkling champagne. She suddenly no longer missed the foregone hot cocoa.

At the last minute before takeoff, a woman, likely in her late seventies, arms loaded with packages, made a great bustle getting on board. She insisted the flight attendant fit her packages in the overhead bin and hang up her fur coat (a mink, if Olympia was any judge). The woman tottered on her spike heels, her thin ankles bowed. After sitting down briefly, the woman suddenly stood and began to rummage around in the luggage bin. *Oh, great. A fussbudget*, Olympia thought. The stewardess asked the woman to take her seat — the flight was about to take off — but the woman said there was a mirror in her carry-on, and she wanted to freshen her face. Unable to hide her annoyance, the flight attendant took down the carry-on and waited while the woman located the mirror. Once she found it, she sat down. It was ridiculous to care how you looked on a plane. In the airport, okay. But on an overnight flight? Why had the woman insisted on getting her mirror?

The woman's seat faced the front of the aircraft and Olympia's the rear. A glass panel divided the two seats. Olympia decided to leave the panel down. She was curious.

Loose strands of white-blond hair had escaped the net of the

woman's chignon, and she dampened her fingers, setting them right. Like a robber wearing a nylon stocking, the woman's features were smooth but flattened. Makeup caked in the creases around her mouth. The woman outlined her lips with a lip brush, making the contour wider than the lips themselves. There was a perimeter of fine lines around her mouth, as if she'd spent all seventy plus years smoking

The woman grimaced and tucked her lip brush in her purse. "I hate to put on my face in public." She had a voice like twanging string, and Olympia was glad she did not go on. If she had, Olympia would have raised the divider, which would have sent a less than subtle message, but too bad. It was a long flight. She felt an aversion for the visible loneliness of nonstop talkers. Or was it narcissism? There was something not quite right about this woman, and Olympia began to speculate about her possible lives, always so much more interesting than the actual life she probably did lead. Besides hot chocolate, which she had not managed to get, judging others and projecting herself into their lives was the only thing she enjoyed most about her job. That, and the money, of course.

The seat belt sign came on.

The woman pulled her seat belt tight across the wrinkles in her skirt. The woman's hips were only half as wide as the seat. She looked like one of those rich, spindly old ladies you read about who start writing checks to strangers, a woman with many acquaintances, but no true friends. But who was Olympia to talk?

The woman leaned into the aisle and, waving a heavily veined and bejeweled hand, called forward. "Miss, bring me a whiskey sour."

Olympia watched cartoon people on her individual screen go through the safety drill: no smoking in the lavs, computers and cell phones off until ten thousand feet, oxygen masks on children first. Blah, blah, blah.

The woman rested her hand on the divider, addressing first Olympia and then the flight attendant, who had returned with a napkin and drink.

"I've had a frightful ordeal," the woman said across the divider. "I am just shaking from the stress of getting on this flight."

This will be a difficult customer, Olympia thought, and she was curious to see how the stewardess managed.

“Bad traffic getting to the airport?” The stewardess spoke placatingly, as she would to an unaccompanied minor. She herself was in her mid-twenties, a petite brunette in just enough make up.

“Not traffic at all.” She turned to Olympia. “I bought my ticket at the last minute. Can you believe they charged me $8,225?”

Olympia choked on her champagne. “I hope that’s round trip.”

“No, it’s one way.”

“Why didn’t you travel coach?”

The woman pursed her lips and frowned. “One can’t really fly in coach, can one?”

“One could if one had to,’” Olympia muttered.

Olympia always flew coach because her trips often had to be arranged at the last minute. Surplus drugs had a tendency to pop up on the market unannounced, and she had to scurry over to Europe and try to sell them, or they would have gone to the landfill.

“Excuse me,” the flight attendant said. “Would you like a hot towel?”

Olympia opened her eyes and took a washcloth from the tongs. Damp heat seeped into her pores. The good thing about this flight was that she had no paperwork. All that could wait until Hungary. Down in her gut she detected a knot of hunger. But of course. The coffee, plus she hadn’t eaten since breakfast.

“Would you prefer salmon or sirloin?” the flight attendant said, her pencil poised to take a note.

“Salmon, please,” Olympia said.

“That’s the last salmon,” the stewardess said, her eyes bright. She turned to the other woman. “Will sirloin be fine?

“I don’t eat beef,” the woman said.

“But you eat fish.”

“Yes. I need the calcium.”

The stewardess walked backwards a few paces and addressed the entire cabin. “We have a pescatarian onboard. Would anyone be willing to change the salmon entrée for beef?”

Olympia heard mumbles that sounded like “What the hell’s a pescatarian?” but otherwise no response.

The stewardess returned with a wicker basket to collect the towels.

“I paid over $8,000 for my ticket,” the woman said. “You should have all selections available.”

“Let me just check again.” The flight attendant went back to the galley.

Olympia heard her clanking about and discussing the matter with the other attendants.

Olympia wasn’t about to give up her salmon voluntarily. This was a treat she deserved. She wasn’t fond of beef, even in the best of times, and it was never cooked right on an airplane. Too well done and stringy.

“I just recounted the dinners.” The flight attendant’s voice came over the loudspeaker. She had picked up the galley phone. “It seems we’re one dinner short. Please ring your call button if you’d be willing to volunteer for a coach dinner.”

Papers rattled. Throats cleared. No one volunteered.

A moment later the stewardess stood by their seats. She looked from Olympia to the woman. “Since you were last on board, I wonder if you would help us out by taking a coach dinner.”

“I paid $8,000 for my ticket!” Visibly flustered, the woman snapped, “I insist on a first-class meal.”

“Please,” the stewardess cajoled. “We’re happy to give you all the alcohol you want.”

“I don’t want to get drunk. I want the meal I paid for.”

The woman’s complaint could be heard throughout the cabin. Olympia turned and saw heads nodding in solidarity. The plane had leveled off, but the seatbelt sign was still on. The woman unbuckled. “I want to talk to the Captain about this.”

“The Captain’s flying the plane,” the stewardess said, stiffening and spreading her arms to the adjoining seats.

The woman stood, and shakily, ducked beneath the flight attendant’s arm. In the galley a male flight attendant attempted to intercept her, but she slipped past and banged on the cockpit’s door.

“Open up,” she demanded. “I need to speak to the Captain.”

The steward attempted to guide her back to her seat, but she pounded his chest and clawed his face. The stewardess picked up the phone to talk to the Captain. Olympia heard snatches of conversation.

Did this woman think a dinner would fly through the air and

suddenly fill the vacant spot in the warming oven?

The male steward, holding a towel to his scratch, told the woman, “Take your seat immediately, or we’ll have the police waiting for you when we land.”

“I paid for a first-class dinner.” The woman hunched over, chin dimpled, mouth trembling. “It’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair. Come along now,” the steward said, adding under his breath, “You old bitch.”

She went meekly, obedient only to a man it seemed.

Back in her seat the woman sat stiffly, a child put in detention. She finished her drink and ordered another.

Returning with a glass of merlot, the flight attendant eyed them both with a frown, her look of disapproval lingering on Olympia. No way was Olympia going to admit she was the cause of the fiasco. The young woman must have figured out that Olympia was traveling on an upgrade and that the last-minute upgrade was the reason the cabin came up one meal short.

At last the stewardess brought dinner. The woman stared at her coach meal — peas and carrots, mashed potatoes, and small portion of overcooked beef. She sighed and squeezed her temples. Then she began to cry, those big, gulping sobs Olympia remembered from the class warfare on playground. She herself had never bullied girls in lower grades, but she recognized that such people, existed: thin-skinned and with no defenses.

“Oh, come on. It’s not as bad as all that.” Olympia reached over the divider and exchanged the woman’s meal for her own. “Dry your eyes.”

The woman looked at the salmon. “That’s very kind.” She picked up a cocktail napkin and blotted her cheeks. “Your good deed shall not go unrewarded. I’ll write you a check after dinner.”

“Don’t be silly,” Olympia said.

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

Finally, the woman conceded and unwrapped her silverware.

Olympia watched, dismayed, as the woman picked at the salmon and ratatouille and couscous so artfully arranged on the china plate.

How was it possible, she wondered, for a person to hunger for a

dish she had no appetite to eat?

Ink

Spiked gray mountains surrounded the Valley of the Sun, and at its eastern fringe, subdivisions and trailer parks gave way to the Sonoran Desert. Ahead, over the Alero's sun-cracked dash, loomed the Superstitions' brooding, mahogany cliffs. It was Saturday. Just off the Higley exit, Porter Smith, who had come to buy a car, turned the Alero into the Circle K. Beneath the mesquites planted in the berm, he spotted a white Hyundai Sonata. He parked and got out.

A heavyset man opened the Sonata's back door and swung one foot at a time onto the softening asphalt. Porter stopped in his tracks. Tattoos covered the man's head and the folds of his neck, and inky snakes covered the hand extended in greeting.

Porter stared at the hand, then shook it. "Hope I didn't hold you up," Porter said. "My manager kept us late."

"That's okay," the man said. "Anyway, thanks for making the trek out to Gilbert."

"I didn't think it would be this far."

"Higley's not that far."

"My buddy could have driven me to your house."

"Half the streets don't even show up on a GPS. Circle K's pretty convenient, huh? Right off the 60, just like I said, and it don't make no difference, you being late, 'cause I needed to put some gas in the tank. Now, she's all topped off and ready to go."

"I want to take a look first. Take it for a spin."

"Sure, sure." The tattooed seller nodded and stepped back.

Porter walked around the car. Shopping cart had dinged the door. The bumpers had a few scratches, but the tires still showed a good amount of tread.

"I ran the VIN number by CARFax," Porter said, "and it doesn't look like you had any accidents."

"I would have told you if it had," the seller said. "I hope you checked Bluebook. They say a 2010's worth $6300, but I'll take

$4200, long as it's cash."

Porter reached for the inside pocket of his sport coat. "Can you take a check?"

"A cashier's check. Yeah, I'll take that."

"I didn't bring a cashier's check. All's I've got is a personal check."

"You gotta be kidding."

Porter looked toward the freeway. The roar of traffic spilled into the parking lot.

"I guess I could give you cash, but my bank's in Tempe."

"I can follow you."

"It's 11:15."

"Let's make it snappy then. If you want it, that is."

Porter looked at the man again. The tattoos came over his head and ended just above his eyebrows.

"I have to admit that when you got out of the car, I kind of caught my breath," Porter said.

"Guess you're not into tattoos."

"Not really."

"They're not just for gang bangers and criminals."

Grimacing, Porter loosened his tie. "I wouldn't know."

"When people see me for the first time, they go, Whoa! But, actually, I'm not like that at all. I'm a pussycat. Ask my wife."

The car had been idling all this time. The side windows of the sedan were tinted. Porter bent down to look in the driver's window. The front seats were empty.

"You have a wife?"

"Sure, I have a wife. What do you think?"

"Is this her car?"

"It was. Now it's gonna be yours."

"If you want to get to the bank —"

"Don't worry. We got time. Wait'll the wife comes back."

"Where is she?"

The man pointed to the Circle K. "Inside getting a Coke."

The convenience store's cantilevered overhang shaded its windows. They were dark and coated with dust. Plastic garbage cans stood on either side of the door. Customers moved from the gas pumps

to the store and came out with bottled water and salty snacks.

"I wouldn't buy a car without a test drive," Porter said.

"Sure. Me neither. But unfortunately, I can't squeeze my ass behind the wheel. I mean, look at the vehicle. Koreans are small, right? You ever see a Korean my size?"

The man's belly formed a shelf beneath the slipcover of his shirt. He wore baggy jeans with ripped knees; his tennis shoes were unlaced, and he wore no socks. His round cheeks and relentless cheer turned his eyes to slits.

Porter pulled off his tie and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. "You into sumo wrestling?"

"Not particularly. Why'd you ask that?"

"I thought you might be into martial arts is all."

"Why, because of the shaved head?"

"Actually, your eyes are slanted."

The man frowned. "My eyes are not slanted. Where you getting that?"

"You kind of remind me of Leonard Peters."

"Should I know him?"

"He played safety for the Jets. My buddy and me met him in Hawaii. Can you believe he was performing Polynesian dances with flaming swords? He had a big old tattoo all across his chest and arm. Only you've got more of them."

A white Ram Charger squealed into the parking lot. The seller turned to look at it.

A highway worker wearing a hardhat and orange safety bib hopped down. He walked around to the truck bed, rooted around among the caution signs and tarps, and found two three-gallon thermoses. He carried them inside.

"What the fuck is my wife doing in there?" the tattooed man said.

"Maybe she fell in," Porter said.

"There's always a line for the women's."

"I swear you've got some Polynesian blood in you. Tongan, maybe. So, what are you anyhow?"

"I'm Mexican and German, if it makes any difference."

"Okay, I got it."

"You have to place people in categories? Everybody's got their

little slot? Ker-ching, ker-ching?"

"I just want to know who I'm buying from."

"You're buying my wife's car. You're not even buying from me. I'm just the pimp."

"If you say so."

The sun had nearly reached its zenith, turning the air thick and close. The inked designs on the man's head looked like large commas. Some were red. Others blue. There were dots and crosshatches in contrasting colors.

"What are you staring at?" the man said.

"Your head kind of reminds me of one of my mom's old scarves."

"Now you're making fun of me."

"No, I'm not. I'm just curious about the design. Does that have some significance?"

The man ran a palm over his head. "It's hard to engrave a head with as much hair as mine has, so it was pretty much paisley or nothing. Once I broke free of the hair line, it was back to smooth skin." He lifted his shirt. "This here on my belly's Neptune with his triton, and below him — you can just see their heads poking up above my belt line — those are the Naiads."

"Like that woman who tried to swim from Cuba?"

He dropped his shirt. "I don't know anything about any woman who tried to swim from goddamned Cuba. Mine come from Greek myths."

"Where'd you learn all this?"

"I was trained. I have a degree in graphic arts from ASU."

"My taxpayer dollars are training someone to be a tattoo artist?"

"I wish you'd shut the fuck up. You're making me agitated. Christ, it must be a hundred and fifteen." The man turned his back and walked toward the berm where the trees provided some shade. He removed a red bandanna from his back pocket and mopped his brow and the back of his neck. "Say, what time's your bank close? Noon? We better book it, man."

Porter looked at his watch. "Actually, I think they might be open till two. Let me check my iPhone."

"What are you, some kind of computer geek?"

"I work in a US Airways call center."

“Man, I’d slit my fucking wrists.”

“It wasn’t what I ever planned to do.”

“What did you want to do?”

“I can’t remember.”

“You got amnesia, or you just don’t want to tell me?”

Porter looked back at the car. Water puddled beneath it.

“You’re wasting gas, letting it idle like that, and it’s bound to overheat,” Porter said. “If you’re cooled off, maybe you could show me the car.”

“All right. Let’s start with the routine maintenance.” The man opened the passenger door and took receipts from the glove box. Then he walked around to the driver’s side, opened the door, and pointed to a sticker. “See, right there on the door’s the oil change. Three thousand miles, like the dealer says. Course, I didn’t take it to the dealer ’cause he’d just rip me off, right? My buddy, he does the maintenance in trade. He was all hot for this dragon I got winding up my arm.” The man pushed one sleeve up to his shoulder. “Flex one way, and the head stretches out. My guy’s got a forked red tongue, good for going down on a woman, you know?”

“I wouldn’t have any idea.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, that made you blush. Well, maybe you go down on men.”

“I’m Mormon.”

“Mormons go down on men,” the tattooed man said.

Porter gave him a push. “Hey!”

“Oh, c’mon. Back off. I don’t mean nothing. Here, here, I gotta show you the wheel cover.” He leaned inside and pointed. “I’m gonna throw it in for free. That’s the little dragon there at ten o’clock. Over at two o’clock, you got Pisces and at four, Leo. If you’re into astrology —”

“I’m not.”

“No? What’s your birthday?”

“None of your business.”

The man held up both hands. “Whoa, whoa! I was just gonna tell you your sign.”

“Show me the car.”

“Let me pop the hood.” The tattooed man turned off the engine, pocketed the key, and closed the driver’s door. The hood latch clicked.

He swung the prop into place. “Engine’s clean. I topped off the washer fluid, so you’re good to go.”

Porter leaned over. The wiper fluid was full. The oil on the dipstick looked clean.

“What’s that brown stuff all over the engine?”

“Oh, that’s just dried mud. I took her out to a wash on the Beeline Highway. When there’s a full moon, my wife and I have a cookout and then we fuck.” He closed the hood. “Hear that slam? Car’s tight. You can take her down to Tortilla Flat and she’ll float across the Verde River. Practically a pontoon boat.”

“What are you going to do without a car?”

“See the tan Bronco?” The tattooed man pointed to an SUV in the opposite corner of the lot. “That’s ours. It’s a gas hog, but our kids like it better.”

“You have kids?”

“The dogs, I mean.”

“I always wanted dogs.”

“Why don’t you get one? My wife’s going to breed ours. If all goes according to plan, she can sell you a puppy three months from now.”

“What are they?”

“Mastiffs.”

“Those are big dogs.”

“Yeah, they eat a lot, and she just lost her job.”

“Why’d she lose her job?”

“Two hundred people got laid off in her division.”

“Oh, she got riffed.”

“Yeah. It sort of sucks.”

“What did she do?”

“She was processing files for that program Obama got going, the one where they have the kids submit proof they’ve been here since the day their parents walked them across the desert. She was a file checker. They paid $11.50 an hour. Trump didn’t like it. He cut it way back. Now, the only jobs in the newspaper say they’ll pay six bucks and no bennies, so we’re pretty much back to square one. I told her it’s either the house or the car, and she decided the dogs needed a yard.”

The door of the Circle K opened. The construction worker came out. His head and shoulders were wet where he’d likely doused them

in the men's room. He set down the thermoses on the blistering asphalt, and squinting up at the sun, lit a cigarette.

Porter looked up. "We've been standing out in the blazing sun for half an hour."

"All right, then. Get in the car and let's take 'er for a spin."

"You're going to trust me to drive?"

"Hell, yeah, man. I can fit in the back seat, just not the front. The way we work it is my wife drives, and I slide the passenger seat all the way forward. I wanted her to give you a tour of the dash, but you can read the manual."

"It's weird that you let her drive you around."

"It is not. It's just the way we do it." He handed Porter the key.

Porter got in the car. He adjusted the seat and mirrors.

The man opened the back door. His weight rocked the car. "All right. I'm in."

"Are you buckled up?"

"Actually, the seat belt's on the short side. Just go ahead and drive."

Porter turned the key. The dashboard showed the tank was full, the engine charging.

"I don't want to get a ticket," Porter said.

"The police don't care."

"I'll stay on Baseline."

"You can take her onto the highway."

"No, Baseline's okay." He backed up, and then eased out onto the road.

A moving van came up on his tail. He put on the flashers. The van changed lanes.

From the back seat, the man said, "What's important to you?"

Porter looked in the mirror. The man's smile had dropped away.

"Jesus. What kind of question is that? You mean about what I wanted to be when I grew up?"

The man laughed. "I meant about the car."

"Oh, the car." Porter tested the horn and turn signal.

The light turned red. The brakes grabbed.

"Well, I guess I should listen to the engine."

"You won't hear anything. It runs quiet."

“Yes. I can hear that. It’s sort of a hum.”

“You ever try yoga?”

“No.”

“My wife likes yoga.”

The signal changed.

“I’m going to head back.”

“Don’t worry. She’ll just wait for us.”

Porter turned north and adjusted the vent louvers. Cool air blasted from them.

“So how do you make a living?” Porter said. “Do you have your own tattoo parlor or work for somebody?”

“It’s my own parlor. I got binders full of designs. Dragons. Hot cars. Devils. Roses. Snakes. Hearts. Tigers. Tigers are big. Everybody wants a tiger, especially the Chinese. I have clients who fly in from Manhattan. The ones on my body, I didn’t actually do myself. I did the design, but my assistants put them on.”

Porter looked in the rear-view mirror. The man took up half the back seat.

“Assistants? You mean you pay people? FICA and all that?”

“Depending on the business, yeah. Business is a little slow now, but it starts picking up in October. I’ll be busy till the end of May.”

“I wouldn’t have thought that.”

“Students’ll be back. Then Canadians. Then spring training.”

“It’s cyclical, then.”

“A little more than I’d like.”

An ambulance screamed out of Banner Hospital. Porter braked and let it pass.

“When you pull into Circle K,” the man said, “park under a tree.”

Porter followed a Cruise America into the parking lot. The RV headed for the pumps. A blonde in a jeans skirt and camisole that showed her tits stood on the island. Her sandals had high wooden heels and leather straps that crisscrossed her calves. What looked like leggings were tattoos. She plunged the windshield squeegee up and down in the water and grabbed a handful of paper towels.

Porter whistled. “Is that your wife?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“She’s good looking.”

“She’s a babe all right.”

The blonde sashayed over to the Bronco and flipped back the wipers.

Porter parked nearby. “Want to switch drivers?”

“No, you can drive. We’ll just follow. I signed off on the registration already. Tomorrow when you go to the DMV, just give them the plates.”

“You’d trust me to do that?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I trust you?”

“Because you don’t know me from Adam.”

“I’m a good judge of character.” The tattooed man got out of the car. Before closing the back door, he bent to look in. “I find that if you treat people right, they tend to rise to the occasion.”

“What about my car? The Alero. How am I going to get it home?”

“We live five miles south of here, in the middle of the cotton fields. We can drive you back.”

“If you wouldn’t mind, after we go to the bank, could we swing by my place so I can drop off your car?”

“That’ll work,” the tattooed man said. “It’ll give us time to get to know each other.”

The Blue Caboose

Sister Salina Limone didn't impose her views on other people. That was the fact of the matter, as anyone with half a brain could plainly see. At the end of the day, she came in to find dishes in the kitchen sink. She tidied up. Simple tidying up like any conscientious woman did. And, yes, she had carried Sister Mary Margaret's books and legal pads to the bedroom, but only because the living room, with its old afghan-covered futon and worn overstuffed chair, was where they invited their neighbors — hookers and crack heads and their kids — to stop in for prayers and soup. The children needed an island of sanity, as did she; and even though it might be the Christian thing to do, she didn't think visiting her father in Colorado would necessarily make her a better housemate.

Sister Nearing held up a hand. "Take a breath, Sister Limone."

Salina hopped up. "Can I get you some water?"

"No, thank you," Sister Nearing said with a tinge of impatience.

One of Salina's housemates had stuck a dead palm frond, a remnant of Palm Sunday, in the corner of a framed picture of Jesus, cradling his Sacred Heart. Salina plucked off the frond, crumpled it, and put it in the pocket of her denim skirt. Heavy black gabardine habits hadn't, thankfully, been around for years, and she was glad to concentrate on ministering to the poor, here in this blighted quadrant of northwest Washington D.C.

"Come sit a moment and let's pray." Sister Nearing, the Director of the Mid-Atlantic region, headquartered in Baltimore, patted the futon invitingly.

Salina pulled a chair from the drop-leaf table. Swinging her leg over the seat, she sat backwards, resting her chin on her clasped hands. "Will you start the prayer, or shall I?"

Sister Nearing rubbed the back of her neck. "Let us be mindful of Our Lord's charity."

Salina sat up straight and closed her eyes. The short pause was

abruptly brought to an end by a motorcycle revving in the parking lot. No doubt one of the neighborhood pimps. Meantime, above her head, rhythmic thuds rattled the light. Jorge and his basketball. Salina crossed herself, ending the prayer. There was a time for prayer and a time to be practical, and this was the latter. She had to defend herself against her housemates' accusations.

"The problem's not me," Salina said. "Sister Mary Margaret's not cut out to live with poor folk."

"I hope you're wrong about that."

"I might be wrong about a lot of things, but not about that. She's an intellectual. When she finishes her psych degree, she told me she wants to go teach at a university. Let her. That's what she's called to do. But in the meantime, she's driving me crazy, too. She's always poking around, trying to get me to tell her things that happened in my past. And I don't like it. She doesn't know anything about me, and the more she pries, the less I want her to know. We could live just fine together if she's pick up after herself."

Salina slid off the chair and went to the window. "I think we need some fresh air."

Pulling back the curtains, she looked out to the parking lot and saw thirteen-year-old Jorge, just beginning to grow a mustache and with a basketball under his arm, hopping on his bike. Opening the door was the signal he could come up for snacks. Apples, oranges, not the things that appealed to him; but sometimes he came up anyway. She opened it and waited for his footsteps on the metal steps. He didn't come.

"Can't you stop pacing?" inquired the Director.

"I'll try." Salina backed against the wall and crossed her arms. "I'm not pacing. All right?"

"I guess you must be wondering why I drove all this way when a phone call would have sufficed," Sister Nearing said.

"You're going to kick me out."

"Is that why you're so defensive?"

"I have as much right to live here as they do."

"You think I'm going to kick you out?"

"It's two against one."

"Sister Mary Margaret only wants what's best for you."

“I know what’s best for me.”

Sister Nearing made a steeple of her fingers. “Your repetitive behaviors get on her nerves.”

“She wants to mess with my head,” Salina said.

“It’s not just Mary Margaret.” The Director shook her head. “Sister Klanac also finds your behavior annoying.”

Fat Sister Klanac? *Lazy* Sister Klanac, the Croatian who didn’t eat enough at the bakery where she worked, but had to stick popcorn in the microwave the instant she came home?

“I could complain about her if I wanted,” Salina said. “She leaves the lights on. She runs up the electricity.”

The Director sighed. “Sister Klanac says you’re always jumping up to wipe the counter, even during dinner. If someone drops a fork, you’re faster than a busboy.”

“It’s hard for her to bend over.”

“Is that why you get out the dust mop and make a point of dusting around her feet?”

“She’s always dropping stuff she can’t pick up.”

“But you make her nervous,” the Director said, her voice rising. “Can’t you see that it makes people nervous if you’re constantly in motion?”

“I can’t help it.” Salina turned her back and went out onto the balcony. The parking lot, sadly in need of a truckload of fresh gravel, was full of cars with sagging bumpers and broken windows. Jorge had gone off to the park. She came back in and shut the door.

“Please sit down, Sister.” The Director opened her briefcase and removed a manila folder.

“The problem is, I don’t like to sit. I was raised to believe idleness is a sin.”

“Sit anyway.” The Director pulled a handwritten letter from the file. “A year ago you said your father was getting on in years, and at some point, you’d like to take care of him. Has that time come?”

Salina’s chest felt tight. Her feet refused to move. She ran her fingers through her close-cropped hair. The last time she’d seen her father, her hair had hung down to her hips. “I didn’t say I’d *like* to take care of him. I said I might *have* to.”

Standing, the Director put her folder on the chair and reached for

Salina's free hand, pulling her away from the wall. Sister Nearing's fingers felt cold. Her grip tightened.

Salina pulled free.

"Perhaps there is some unfinished business," Sister Nearing said, drawing near. "Something in your past?"

Salina took a step back. "There's not." She disliked anyone standing inside the invisible circle she drew around herself, the "hula hoop" she called it.

"A change of scene might do you good."

"Not *that* change of scene."

As far as she was concerned, once a person cut off communication, it was better to keep it cut off. She'd seen her dying clients mend fences with their families, and others try and fail. You could never really fix what had gone wrong in the past. Some things were so broken they could never be mended, and all that Kubler-Ross, death-and-dying talk only led to unrealistic expectations of forgiveness and healing. Dying people needed their faces washed. They needed their butts wiped. They needed ice chips and swabbed tongues. That much she knew she could do.

"Move me someplace else, then," Salina said.

With a sigh of frustration, Sister Nearing returned the folder to her briefcase. "I can't see any other option, Salina. You have to try harder to get along."

"I *try* to get along with people."

"You get along with your clients fine," Sister Nearing said. "It's just your roommates, which I don't really understand because, you know, we've had this conversation before."

Salina hung her head. "Maybe I should never have — "

"No. Don't go there. Let's not question your vocation." Sister Nearing leaned back on the futon and crossed her legs.

Not leaving any time soon, thought Salina. Her skin crawled with ants. She rubbed her arms, not sure how much more of this she could bear.

"It's an odd thing," the Director said. "You don't have a bad temper. You're hardworking and dedicated to the people we're trying to serve. You've found your ministry in home health care. In all these ways the Sisters of Mercy fits you well. For the life of me, I can't figure

out what's at the root of your behavior."

"Nothing is at the root of it," Salina said, arms crossed and pacing.

Sister Nearing smiled. "Ever since I met you — how many years ago now? — you've struck me as a very old soul."

"What's that mean?"

"Those black eyes of yours — "

"I'm Mexican!" Salina said.

"Don't take offense."

"I just like to stay busy," Salina said.

"What would you think about if you sat down?" Sister said. "Perhaps there's some, uh, abuse in your background? Something you've been reluctant to share?"

A wave of heat washed over Salina's head, like in the shower, with the water ten degrees too hot. There was no abuse, not sexual, if that's what Sister Nearing meant. And as for how she was raised, well, that was her business. Far as she knew, she'd even been able to keep it from God. She'd told them all they needed to know.

"What is it you want?" Sister Nearing said.

"I just want everyone to leave me alone."

"Then, go home, Sister Limone."

Banished. Exiled. "For how long?"

"Two weeks, let's say. Better yet, a month?"

"Hospice won't let me have that much time off."

"I'll see what I can do."

"But will I have to come back here?"

"I don't have another alternative," Sister Nearing said. "We live in community, Sister Limone."

"I know, I know."

"So, what do you say?"

Two weeks off. Maybe a month. Could she bear it?

"I'm not exactly sure where my father lives."

"What does he do?"

"Odd jobs for ranchers."

"Give me the information, and I'll call the Bishop. Maybe reconnecting with your father will bring you some peace." Sister Nearing rose from the futon, collecting her briefcase.

“I doubt it,” Salina said.

“Why’s that?” Sister Nearing asked.

“Because I’ll have to figure out a place to stay.”

“Can’t you stay with your father?”

“No,” Salina said.

Sister Nearing frowned with concern. “Is he homeless?”

“It’s a rural area. Let’s just say hogs live better.”

“I see,” Sister Nearing said. “Well, let’s make sure there’s someone to meet you. What airport would you fly into? Denver?”

“I’ll take the bus,” Salina said.

“Are you afraid of flying?”

“I just need time to make a transition.”

In parting, Sister Nearing kissed the cross at her neck and took Salina’s hands, a goodbye that would have been unthinkable when Salina first joined the order. She bowed her head to showed she’d understood and would take the Director’s message to heart. If she could.

Weary from the eighteen-hour trip from Washington DC, Salina sat near the back of the Greyhound, her parka zipped and hood raised. It was the beginning of May and traveling back to the high plains of Colorado was like traveling back to winter. Snow still covered the Rockies and tears of moisture ran down the fogged windows. She’d managed to sleep through the toilet door opening and slamming shut, but as the bus rumbled from town to town, the smell of chemicals had woken her up. Now, holding a handkerchief over her nose, she checked her cell phone to see if it had miraculously risen from the dead. A black screen. Not even solitaire. Well, what had she expected, insisting that this was the way she would go home. A bus was a step up from hitching a ride, as she had in the old days, so she supposed when she looked at her life in its entirety, this was a step up, though a step she had avoided taking for fear of the memories it risked raking up. Fallow fields stretched to the horizon. Some deacon was supposed to meet her. Good thing, too, because without a car, she had no way to get out to where her father lived.

With an ear-popping exhale of hydraulic pressure, the bus

braked in the station. Near a line of passengers waiting to board the bus, she saw a man holding a poster-board sign. NUN MOBILE. A black Stetson covered the dome of his head, and he wore cowboy boots and a bolo tie. A regular Hopalong Cassidy. In all her time out east, she'd forgotten bolo ties.

Last off the bus, she descended the steps.

"I'm your nun," she said, walking up to him. "Sister Salina."

His eyes ran up and down her sweatshirt and jeans. He tipped his hat. "Dr. Francis Clancy, at your service."

" 'Doctor?' "

"Actually, a vet. Large animal. It's 'Doc' to my friends."

"Am I your friend?"

"Sure. Why not?"

The driver had been unloading suitcases from the luggage compartment.

"Which one is yours?" Doc said.

"The pink vinyl."

"The one with Cinderella decals?" He pointed with the poster board.

"That's the one."

"But it's a kid's suitcase."

"I'm short."

"Suit yourself."

"I found it in an alley."

"Oh-ho! Chip off the old block, I see!"

What was that supposed to mean? She didn't like people who presumed to know her business. The trip had worn her down; and now, on top of seeing her father, she had to deal with this deacon fellow.

He gave the driver a dollar bill and waited in the lobby while Salina used the restroom. Then he was driving east, and she took out her rosary and fingered the smooth, glass beads. As she knew he would, he took the rosary and the movement of her lips intoning the Our Fathers and Hail Marys as a subtle hint discouraging small talk. Eventually he took the exit to a state route, and then a county road lined by crooked, wooden fence posts strung with rusting barbed wire. The parched grass and clumps of windblown trees signaled yet another

rural Colorado town, the one she recognized as her father's mailing address. Passing by the barbershop with its red, white, and blue barber's pole mounted on the wall, she imagined him fortyish, in a worn straw hat, cowboy boots, and ranch jeans—a short, wiry Mexican with a weathered face, thin mustache, and gold tooth. But, of course, he would have aged. White hair? No teeth? Gray stubble?

The town's small brick post office had a picture window, but its shade was drawn. Somehow, she had expected her father to be sitting outside on its empty bench, waiting for her the way he waited to catch a ride with whomever might be heading out to wherever he worked.

Of course, it was possible that the post office had closed permanently. A year ago he'd sent a postcard with the words in Spanish, *No me olvides*, as if pushing him into the darkest corner of her mind could get him to stay there. She had looked up the town on a map and seen that it was like all the places she had grown up: no industry besides ranching and farming, schools barely able to stay open, all the young people fleeing for the cities, the hospitals and government offices closing their doors.

Just after signs for the Elks and Rotary Club—It was seven o'clock by now and she was too tired to figure how many hours she'd been awake—the deacon turned into a gravel drive. A hundred feet back from the road sat a white, clapboard building the size of a one-room school. Weathered, wooden posts held a sign: "St. Mary's Catholic Church."

Stiffly, she got out of the car.

Doc retrieved her suitcase. "Let me show you the church."

"Is my father going to meet us here?"

Doc shot a look at her. In his previous grin, she saw a frown. "But…but, I thought you knew…that's why you've come…"

"What? What should I know?"

Doc removed his Stetson and held it over his heart. "Sister, I'm sorry to have to tell you, your Daddy died. Two days ago."

The ground fell from beneath her feet. "How could that be?"

"He's been sick for some time."

"With what?"

"Old age."

She looked beyond the church. A few brick houses with small,

fenced yards sat among the trees. A spotless Airstream gleamed in the light of the rising moon.

Speechless, she stood shaking and hoping the tremble would stop so she could take a step forward. Go see the church, or whatever the deacon expected her to do.

"Now what?"

"There'll be a service. We figured you'd want to plan it."

"Yes, yes, of course," she said. "But I came all this way to see him."

"Well, I know he would have been glad to see you, to see any of his kids for that matter. But he understood. Busy with your own lives. Scattered all over kingdom come."

He walked to the back door of the church. "See here? Just last week, Hugo put a fresh coat of paint on the church steps."

He took a key from a nail under the top step, and she saw that, yes, the back steps were covered with a slick, gray coat of paint, evidence of her father's recent life.

"Where am I to stay?"

"Right here. I made you up a cot."

"Is there a shower?"

"No, but there's running water and a toilet."

The deacon unlocked the back door and led her into a small room that doubled as an office and a dressing room. Below the window was an Army cot, a camping mattress, thread-worn sheets, and folded blankets. A sorry little pillow.

"This be okay?" He spread his arms as if showing her the Taj Mahal.

"I've slept in worse."

The deacon fiddled with the thermostat. A gush of heat came from the floor grate.

Standing in the corner was an old wooden desk of the schoolteacher variety, its desk chair rocked back as if someone had recently been sitting in it. A priest's white chasuble hung in an open wardrobe.

"Who says mass?" she asked.

"Once a month Father Rodriguez comes out from La Junta."

"La Junta."

"Been there?"
"We lived there."
"It figures."
"What do you mean?"
"There's a lot of Mexicans."
This deacon fellow was getting on her nerves.
"Does Father Ramirez speak Spanish?"
"Enough to get by."

With a name like "Ramirez," Salina expected he would be fluent. But maybe not. You forgot what you didn't use, and if he was second generation, like her, then chances were good he interacted mostly with Anglos.

The deacon turned on the overhead light. Through the door that opened into the nave, she saw two rows of pews, thirty rows in all. This was where her father would have prayed. She slid into the second row and flipped down a kneeler. With its solid clunk on the plank floor came all the inchoate feelings about the way she'd grown up, the things that had propelled her and held her back. Now she understood why her clients were so eager to have that final, death-bed scene. Why they sought forgiveness. Getting it over with. Getting it done. But getting it right most of all.

Twenty years ago, her sister, married and with children of her own, had brought their worn-out mother up to Laramie, Wyoming. But their father, always with that far off look in his eyes, had refused to leave this blink-in-the-road he'd decided to call home. Manuela, the sister in Wyoming, didn't want to take him on, and Olga, the next oldest, living in Council Bluffs, said she had her hands full. Juan, the only boy, who lived in a double-wide in San Bernardino, said, "Let him live in one of his crazy little houses." And, so now, Salina guessed, they had all demonstrated their heartlessness and lack of compassion, and the only thing left to do was to pray for the soul of Hugo Limone. Once again, she slipped her rosary from her pocket and fingered the beads as if she were fingering a rabbit's foot that would ward off the bad luck that had made her arrive too late. If only she had not been so stubborn about taking the bus, she could have seen him one last time. Add that to the list of sins for which she sought forgiveness.

Crossing herself and kissing the crucifix, she sat back in the pew and looked at the tabernacle on the altar. The altar cloth needed starch. Dust lay thick on an antique organ. It had probably been years since anyone played it. Tomorrow, she could clean this all up. She would be burying her father, but reviving this careworn little church.

Dr. Clancy slid into the pew. She was thinking he'd left unnoticed, but his shoulders were shaking, and he had a handkerchief over his mouth. Was the kerchief he held to his eyes because he was crying?

She bowed, feeling regretful, not so much that she'd missed saying goodbye, but that she couldn't match the deacon for being broken up. But, of course, he would be if he and her father had been good friends.

"How, exactly, did he die?"

"Well, ma'am, he laid down in a field and just expired."

"Did he freeze?"

"Not so's the Coroner could tell. Hugo'd put on his Sunday suit — "

She sat back in the pew. "He never had a Sunday suit — "

" — as if he'd a mind to call it quits."

"People don't just die when they want to," she said.

"Horses do," he said. "Why not people who are supposedly smarter?

Something was off. "Who's the Coroner?"

"*I* am." His eyes crinkled in a squint as he looked toward the modest wood crucifix mounted above the altar. "I looked him over."

She guffawed. "Is this a joke?" she said. "Because the father I remember was quite the practical joker."

He patted her shoulder. "Little lady, I wouldn't pull your leg on something like this."

"I'm still having trouble understanding how he could die. Usually people hang on, even after everyone in their family is more than ready for them to go."

"I reckon that's true."

"Did you tell me what he had? Was it prostate cancer? Leukemia? Pancreatitis? Something painful and untreatable?" A passing truck made the windows rattle. "Otherwise, I don't understand how he could

be painting the steps one day, and then just walk out into a field and lie down with the intention to die the next." It was all too impossible. No one *willed* themselves dead.

She should call her roommate, Sister Mary Margaret, and ask if she could look up in her books why a man would take his own life. Maybe he just didn't want to be eighty-four. Or, was he as uncomfortable and terrified at the prospect of seeing her as she was of seeing him?

She took a tissue from her purse and dabbed her eyes, wanting the deacon to think she felt more than she did. Mary Margaret was always probing with her ice pick mind. "Feelings, Sister Salina. What are your *feelings*?" And this was the thing, as she was seeing now for the very first time, she did not have feelings like other people. She pretended to blow her nose. Until she got back to D.C., she'd have to act shaken up, because that was the expected, the natural, reaction.

"It sounds like you knew my father very well," she said.

"Oh, I do." He flinched. "Did."

"How did you even communicate?"

"Pidgin English. What with my two hundred words of horse Spanish and his two hundred words of English, we got on fine. Say, you should to take a gander at where your father lived. He's got — had — quite the setup."

"Let me get my bearings first."

"It's only a quarter mile from here, and the walk'll do you good. It's just a shame you got here too late."

Yes, it was. It was ridiculous.

"And wear a jacket," he said. "By the time you walk back, it'll be cold."

"Are you going to come with me?"

"It's out by the silos. You can't miss it. I have a sick horse to check on. Shouldn't take more than an hour, and then I"ll swing back and round you up for dinner."

Three Concrete silos stood like the fortified walls of Italian hill towns, and the train tracks ran past them. At the end of a dead-end spur, she spotted the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe caboose, its paint not red, as she had imagined when Dr. Clancy described it, but the shocking turquoise of the Adriatic Sea. The last time she'd spoken to

her father, he'd called from a pay phone. She'd asked him what was new. "Farmers bringing in winter wheat," he'd said in Spanish, but he had never told her about the caboose.

By the time she reached for the steel handgrip and pulled herself onto the rear platform, her teeth chattered, and her body ached with fatigue; she could probably had done with a meal. Inside, the beaded wainscoting that came halfway up the walls reminded her of the kitchen in Robert Andresson's house. A gay man from Abilene, he had shared her love of Fourth of July parades and county fairs; she had walked him through the last six months of his life; and after that she'd told the order she needed a change and requested a job in a nursing home. She was no Mother Teresa and what she couldn't take was letting herself get close to people and then having to go. Now, here she was dealing with death again, her father's death, when she had not sufficiently grieved Mister Andresson, humorous till the end. Those were the ones it was hardest to let go of, the ones who made you laugh, and she was dismayed to find these heart strings still strumming inside her, the deep ache of loss for a man who was not a blood relative.

In contrast to the cool sea-blue of the exterior, the entire interior, save for the varnished wood of the wainscoting, was as yellow-golden as dried maize. It was at once cheering and mellowing, and she could easily imagine her father coming in on a cold day and feeling pleased.

On a table flanked by built-in benches sat an open box of Bicycle cards, the Jokers set aside, the game of solitaire half-played. She wondered if Dr. Clancy had ever come out here. Surely, if he had, there'd be bottles of bourbon or six packs of beer. In his younger days her father had enjoyed a drink, but never to excess, not like her psychologist roommate seemed to assume.

Opposite the table stood a brown propane stove, a box of matches on the shelf above it. It had been fifty years since she'd seen a stove like that, but she remembered how her grade-school teacher lit it. She knelt and flipped open a door and saw the knob that said, "Pilot." Expecting to blow herself up, she pressed the knob for thirty seconds. The match ignited a blue flame, and by the time the match

burnt down to a small black worm, she had the burners on. That'd cut the chill. She would just have a quick look around.

Across from the stove a circular steel staircase led up to a cupola that she had noticed in a glancing way. Now that she stood inside the caboose, looking up to the second story, a wave of bitterness swept through her, and she crossed herself to make it go away. After all these years her father had found a two-story house for himself. She climbed the stairs. A narrow bench seat had a splendid view of the moonlit snow-covered peaks.

Downstairs, four shallow, workmen's lockers stood on one side of the hall, their narrow doors sticking as she yanked them open. Who was this man, this illiterate sweeper of grain elevators, this church janitor for the little parish of St. Mary's, where the steps and handrail had been carefully brush-stroked gray: his last day's work before his seemingly planned death, about which she had plenty of feelings, mainly shame. And of *herself*, it must be said. Not of her blue-collared dad.

Her father had been born in Morelia, Mexico in 1920. Twenty-two years later, in 1942, he came north to harvest sugar beets in Stockton, California. He met Salina's mother Lupe, only thirteen, a girl from a family of second-generation field workers. Salina had been told she was named for the Central Valley town that meant "salts". Whomever had registered her birth certificate had dropped the final "s". None of this she'd given a thought to until her father moved them to Colorado. He'd fallen out with a man at work. By then she was in fourth grade, struggling to catch up in math, but a good reader. She had lived on a ranch near Joe's, Colorado for a year. Then, it was six months in Trinidad, six months in Lamar, six months in Cheraw and finally in La Junta, a town of seven thousand and a place he had attempted to make a home.

At fourteen, hoping to get back to the sunshine and warm winters, she'd run away from home, if you could call where they lived "home". She'd fought off a trucker, using the shiv her little brother Juan had given her as a goodbye gift, and the trucker readily dumped her outside Kansas City. After that, she'd taken up with a Southern

Baptist short-order cook who'd coaxed her into a full immersion baptism in the Missouri River, and it was the shame of letting herself be brainwashed into joining a congregation that heard voices and rolled on the floor that sent her east. Working in the kitchen at Mercy Hospital in Council Bluffs, Salina spent so many lunch hours in the chapel that Sister Mary Alma, head of Food Services, asked if something was wrong.

"I like to pray," Salina said. Prayer was the only thing that calmed her down.

"Have you ever considered a religious vocation?" Sister Mary Alma said. The order was always looking for new, innocent souls with a religious vocation.

"I'm not a virgin," Salina said.

"Your vow of chastity only begins after a period of reflection." Sister Mary Alma had taken her hand, and for the first time since Salina had left home, she felt a slight relaxation of the unkind words she'd called herself for leaving her mother with all those little kids and a quixotic, unreliable jokester of a husband.

He still lived in a boxcar, though one far fancier and more luxurious than the boxcar she'd lived in as a child. His caboose sported a narrow bed with a four-inch mattress. Salina had expected the bed to have no sheets, but it had flowered sheets and an orange and pink comforter, the kind of thing women from the church might have given him. He had kicked the bedding down to the foot of the bed, as if he'd had a restless night. The mattress itself had the old covered buttons and blue-and-white-striped ticking that she remembered from Italian sleeping cars, a luxury for the nuns going to Rome for the first time. And she recalled the rocking motion that lulled her to sleep and the marvel of a tangerine sun, rising above the Holy City.

As in all train cars, everything on the Italian train had been designed for efficiency: the metal sink that flipped down from a hidden cavity in the wall, the upper bunk that pulled down like a rumble seat, and the bench that made a bed.

Here, too, in the home her father had created for himself, everything had its place. His worn overalls hung from a hook. She

folded them to take back to town. Surely the church would have a clothes bin for the needy, though who could be needier than her father, she couldn't imagine. She would have to pick up some Woolite to wash his red flannel shirt; even a thrift shop wouldn't take dirty clothes. Across from the flannel shirt hung an undershirt whose underarms were the color of his wind-burnt face. In the small, silverless mirror hanging from a nail, she imagined him pulling aside the skin of his jaw to approve the face he showed to the world, for, though a short man, he had always been vain about his high cheekbones and the skin of a man twenty years younger. Did her sister or brother have a photograph? Probably not.

At the front of the caboose she found the kitchen and a garbage bag half full of empty cans. Her order hadn't allowed her to send him money. All her earnings went to a common fund. But whenever an employer or family member slipped her a twenty for some extra service — a fault of her compulsive tidying — she folded shirt-cardboard around the cash and sent it by mail to General Delivery, not even wanting the trail of a check because he'd never had a bank account and could only sign his name with his mark, something that looked more like a cattle brand than an H.

A single hot plate was connected by a cracked pink hose to a propane canister on the floor. This could very well be the same burner her mother had used to feed a family of six. Or, maybe it was a hot plate he'd found discarded in an alley. Who knew? It did the job.

Always looking for scraps of corrugated roofing, discarded boards, or half-used cans of paint, he spent Sundays after mass exploring. His walks took him through the alleys behind La Junta's neat grid of bungalows, the houses where Anglos lived. And if it wasn't shameful enough that their only shelter was a boxcar, where everyone in town knew the Limone family lived, over the years a subdivision of outhouse-sized buildings grew up around it. Her father decorated each little structure with hub caps and parts of bumpers. Each dwelling had a small door and a window with a single pane of glass. Hers was painted barn red, her sister's the yellow of egg yolk. When she was small, she had been pleased to busy herself wiping the window and

sweeping the floor, making believe it was a real house and hers alone. “If you want to be building these places for the children,” Salina’s mother had told him, “you should look for a third job.” Hurt, he’d hopped down out of the box car, out of the chaos of toddlers and bickering brothers and Salina’s endless rounds of blanket folding, sweeping, and changing the divisions of the fruit crates that made up the low, splintered walls of the children’s half, and off he’d go to drag more treasures home.

When she was young, the family’s drinking water had come from an aluminum watering can of the kind farmers’ wives used for their gardens. It sat by the boxcar’s door, along with an aluminum cup. Here in this boxcar, she saw, he had upgraded to a much nicer water container, a two-gallon, Coleman camping thermos. She pushed a button to see if the water had frozen. It had not.

Of the items stacked in a pyramid on a shelf, she saw cans of peaches, apricots, menudo, and one of Rosarita tamales. On the counter sat a white enamel wash bowl with a red rim, and in it, a plate with a dried brown crust and a dirty spoon, almost as if he had left it for her to wash up. The loaf of Wonder Bread in the bread box had not yet hardened. Squeezing it, she suddenly felt his presence as a fresh thing, her burden, because of all the children, she was the only one here, the only one who would attend the funeral of the man whom this desolate parish, in its generosity, had honored with its care. It was too much to say he was beloved because she had not yet met the other parishioners and couldn’t tell. Maybe it was more that he had carved out a tiny niche of work that he alone could do. He had made himself essential, and at the same time invisible, the way he had done when she was a child.

She was hungry and wanted to get back for the dinner the deacon had promised, but she could not just leave without finding some way to make her visit useful. After another drink of water, she gathered the cans and carried them to her father’s room. Heat from the stove had warmed the caboose She took a deep breath to inhale whatever remnant of his essence remained. All old men had their odors. She likened it to cloves or chewing tobacco, and she sniffed the objects that had been close to him as she made her hobo’s bundle. The only smell that called up a memory was a sliver of soap next to his razor. Fels-

Naptha, a combination of mothballs and bay leaves, a smell she associated with her mother and the round steel tub in which she could clearly see her mother's hands working a shirt up and down on the corrugated washboard. No one used that soap nowadays. Fels-Naptha was for serious dirt — oil and black grease, or for the dirt embedded in the knees of overalls. It was the soap for a man who'd spent his life close to the ground and the woman whose constant struggle was to prevent her children from looking like what Anglos called "dirty Mexicans."

Turning, she looked over her shoulder at his mattress. Lifting it all the way up, she saw his hidey-hole, a single nail securing a coffee tin's ragged lid. She spun it sideways. Reaching into the hole, she felt around, her fingers touching something furry and stiff. She recoiled, and after catching her breath and telling herself not to be squeamish — she wiped people's asses for a living and if she could deal with excrement, this was nothing — she put her hand in the hole again.

Shredded paper. She pulled it all out, along with a poor dead mouse. The paper made up a punctured sheet that reminded her of the snowflakes from her long-ago days in school. Carefully she smoothed the paper across the mattress. An official document of some kind. State of California. The name of a man she'd heard her father mention. Oliveira. At the bottom of the letter, she saw the man's brown-inked signature. How exactly this Oliveira had cheated her father, she could no longer remember, only that it had to do with why her father had fled California. He'd always told her there was money due, that he had papers to prove it, and she wondered if these had been the papers, the record of his years as a *bracero*. Maybe he'd kept them to show he'd existed, that the State of California had blessed the labor of his hands with its official, brown-bear seal.

She opened a latch on the wall below the bed to discover a storage space, empty apart from a train lantern whose chimney had not been washed and whose kerosene had hardened into a yellow bolus. Putting the lantern aside, she felt up where the papers had been and discovered the sharp corners of a wooden box. A cigar box. Tugging it, she tried to take it down, but her father had attached it so firmly it wouldn't budge.

Fourth grade was the year they began living in La Junta. He had found the boxcar when he'd ridden into town from the ranch, and he had come all the way to Cheraw, where her mother had found a job changing sheets in a hotel, enough to pay for the small adobe building out behind someone's grand, new home. And Salina remembered the cold ride in the back of a pickup truck, her mother holding her belly, and she, with her arms around her little sisters, shrunk down to keep the wind from tangling her hair. By the time they reached town it had been hours since they'd had a drink of water. Her mother had looked around the dusty streets and begun crying. "It will be fine," her father had promised. "Don't worry. I have prepared a new home and it will cost us nothing to live there."

It was a year after they'd settled in that the accident happened.

She remembered only that they hauled water from a red pump at a farmhouse that had burnt down, and since she was the oldest, she walked with him to carry it home. Before the days of plastic, the containers — jerry cans — weighed nearly as much as the liquid they held. She must have been nine or ten, maybe as old as eleven. It was when she still wanted to be with her father, when she desperately wanted to win his smile.

On this particular day, her father sang songs from his youth. It hadn't started snowing, or at least no snow had accumulated on the ground. Droplets of breath froze in her nostrils, and when she asked her father if he could pump the handle while she took a drink, he said yes, and told her to open her mouth. She'd never been sure how her tongue attached itself to the handle. Maybe he'd told her to put it there. For a long time she'd thought so and held it against him, but now she thought she'd made that up, one insult that stood for the many insults of poverty she had absorbed. More likely some boy at school had put her up to it because it was a kid's prank. She only remembers that her father had shouted, "Don't do that!" and pushed her away, leaving her taste buds and a layer of skin. Youch!

The first month her tongue had bled and bled. Pulling off the gauze only made it bleed more, and she sat mute in the back row at school, not daring to speak. Even these many years later, there were still things she couldn't taste. Salt, for instance. Lemons. Parmesan

cheese, which she could feel as gritty slivers, but never craved.

When he'd pointed down the road at the caboose, the deacon had said he'd swing back by the church in an hour. She shut off the propane — no sense wasting fuel. The caboose grew instantly frigid, and walking back, her burden of clothing heavier with each step, her elongated shadow a ghost's. After going around to the back of the church, she found the key and let herself in. She dropped the clothes by the wardrobe and rubbed her hands.

Father Rodriguez would know who needed these things most. Or she would ask Dr. Clancy if there was a woman with children who might like to cut up the fabric for a rag rug. That is what her mother would have done, cut every bit of fabric into inch-wide strips and sewed them end to end

A lifetime's work went into her mother's rug, which grew wider by the year, and eventually allowed them to step on the boxcar's floor with bare feet. Salina's job was to wind the endless rag-ball, and when she'd finished her homework, her eyes straining in the flickering light of the kerosene lamp, she would pick up the wooden crochet hook and, sitting cross-legged on the floor, hook the rug's circumference, her hands always busy with that work or some other. Half asleep, she would have heard the boxcar's door slide its final inches shut or the poof as her father blew out the light and murmured in Spanish, "Sleep well, children."

There was so much to remember. The dry air. The way it opened her nostrils. The intermittent shush of passing cars. Dr. Clancy had left the door unlocked, and until he returned, she would give herself a moment of quiet reflection. She pushed open the door to the nave, and there her father sat, hands on his knees, dressed in a black, wool suit with wide lapels, white hair slicked back in a ponytail. Hugo Limone. His skin no longer looked young. It had more wrinkles than any old man's she had ever seen, but if that skin had been stretched out, plumped out by nourishment, hydration, and youth, she would have recognized the man whose blessing she'd not asked for when she left. She remained standing by the altar, afraid that he was a ghost rather than the man who had sent a piece of his heart traveling with her wherever she went. Finally, the pounding in her chest subsided.

He stood and moved out of the pew. He had shrunk since she'd

seen him last, or else she had grown.

Callused fingers pressed her cheeks. The skin of his fingertips felt silky and cool. In the black irises of his eyes flashed tiny, moonlit windows. "*M'hijita*." My little daughter.

A cry of rage and anguish escaped. Then she fell against his shoulder and allowed herself to be comforted.

A Message from the Author

Thank you for reading this preview of *Body Language*. I hope you enjoyed meeting John and Sally, Olympia, Porter and the tattooed man, and Salina and the Deacon. If you did, I hope you'll return and read all the stories. If you're part of the Goodreads' community, please follow me there because I'll be announcing the official release date. You can also sign up for my email list. That's the easiest way for me to let you know if I'm doing a giveaway or running a sale.

https://www.goodreads.com

You might be wondering what's up next. My forthcoming book is *Surrender: A Memoir* about adoption and identity.

1961. High school sweethearts. An unplanned pregnancy. A first-born child. Her young life changed in an instant. Now she must share her story with the child she gave away.

Caught in the middle of her parents' ugly divorce, a fifteen-year-old honor student clings to dreams of college. But the sudden death of her beloved grandmother sends her into the comforting arms of young love.

When she discovers she's pregnant, she has an even bigger surprise. Her gravely ill mother reveals a secret from the past. Lacking support and out of options, the desperate girl turns to a home for unwed mothers. With no high school diploma, the young mother-to-be faces an impossible choice that may echo for generations. To save her mother, she must surrender her son.

Surrender is a touching story of the healing power of wisdom and a mother's love.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to everyone who helped me make these stories a reality. My husband, Bruce Rittmann, is my first reader and unfailingly makes me believe that writing is a worthwhile endeavor. Members of my writing groups in Phoenix and Evanston have also played a big part in helping me shape the clay of my rough drafts. Special thanks in that regard go to Greg Williams and Kathy Hughes, both of whom seem to intuit what it is I mean to say and then tactfully find ways to help me polish the prose. And, to my beta readers, I can't praise you enough. No matter how carefully I go over a manuscript, there are always typos. I'm grateful for you finding them and sparing me the embarrassment.

I'm also grateful to literary magazines that have made room in their pages for these stories. Here is where the stories first appeared:

"The Memory Palace," *Sandy River Review*, Volume 39, 2019; published in conjunction with Alice James Books and the Humanities Department of the University of Maine at Farmington; pp. 45-51.

"A Body of Water" was originally published as "Evolution Valley" in *The Mountain Pass: A Zimbell House Anthology*, 2017; Zimbell House Publishing, LLC, Union Lake, MI; pp. 35-40.

"The Blue Caboose" was originally published as "The Caboose" by Willisden Herald: New Short Stories #11, 2019.

About the Author

Before turning to fiction, Marylee MacDonald worked as a carpenter and magazine editor. Her nonfiction has appeared in *Sunset, Better Homes & Gardens*, and the *Old-House Journal*. She holds a Master's in English/Creative Writing from San Francisco State, and her short stories have won the Barry Hannah Prize, the Jeanne M. Leiby Memorial Chapbook Award, the *American Literary Review* Fiction Prize, and New Delta Review's Matt Clark Prize.

Her debut novel, *Montpelier Tomorrow*, won a Gold Medal for Drama from Readers' Favorites International Book Awards, and her short story collection, *Bonds of Love & Blood*, was a *Foreword Reviews* INDIEFab Finalist.

Marylee is married to Bruce Rittmann, an environmental engineering professor at Arizona State University, and she divides her time between Santa Rosa, CA and Tempe, AZ.

When she's not writing, she's walking on a beach, strolling in a redwood forest, trying to keep the snails from eating her tomatoes, or hiking in the red rocks of Sedona. See what she's working now at https://maryleemacdonald.com.

Other Books

Please visit your favorite e-book retailer to discover other books by Marylee MacDonald:

Montpelier Tomorrow, a novel about caregiving and a mother's love

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