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Breaking

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Breaking

I.

When I was a teenager, my brother's dog died after getting hit by some asshole speeding down our country road, the dog too close to our property's edge. I went with him to pick up her body. I carried a sheet and tried to tell him not to look, to let me go first. But she was his responsibility, and he knew it hurt me to look at suffering. She was dead, though her body convulsed, so he took his shotgun to her head. He said it was to be sure he wasn't withholding mercy, but I think he just wanted to see what his bullets could do. Still, he told me to look away before he pulled the trigger.

Once, when my father yelled at that same brother instead of me, I didn't know what to do with myself. So I snuck out my bedroom window and sat on the faded green tin roof with my sixteen-year-old knees pulled underneath my chin. My brother came up the stairs after my father stopped hollering while my mother watched approvingly—always approving of anyone's shame but her own. He called out my name in a harsh whisper. "Rachel! Where did you go?" I poked my head back through the window and laughed. "I can't believe that was you and not me down there for once," I said. He laughed, said it wouldn't last. And he was right, it wouldn't. We jumped off the roof, his knee coming up against his lip hard, drawing blood, but still we ran fast. Our father stormed out the front door and yelled but didn't make to catch us. We went down to Lakeshore Market and bought candy, and then we went to the lake bottom and scanned the mud. I looked at my brother as he threw rocks across the dried-up lake bed and thought about how I stayed awake at night until he fell asleep. Though it only happened once, I'll never forgive him for causing me to lurch awake to shove off his hands that were trying to know my fourteen-year-old body. Fuck him for reminding me there was no safe space under my parents' roof.

II.

When I gazed horrified at the positive sign, it was my fellow river guide and friend, Scott, who stood next to me. He said, "Take another. The first one is always wrong." I took two more and still the plus sign showed up in blue and I was pissed. Arizona is one of those fucked states with waiting periods and few clinics that provide abortions. So I

called my boyfriend, whom I had not seen in seven weeks, to tell him what had happened, and then I went back to work on the river while waiting for my appointment. On the back of the boat, Scott offered me a drink, but I felt guilty even though I knew I would terminate. He sensed my discomfort, pushed the drink toward me and said, "It's okay, you're drinking for two now." I laughed, then cried, and he held me against him and said, "At least now we know why you've been such a bitch lately." I laugh-cried and he squeezed me tighter.

Like many women, I now know what it means to be laid back and spread open because my body has become like dark soil for planting. And when the doctor removed the smallest of growths, it contracted my insides, painful. And when the nurse told me to stop tensing so much, her voice harsh, concerned that I would bleed more, I relaxed my thighs like an obedient child and felt my eyes burn.

It had been July-hot in Phoenix. There were girls lined up in chairs against the walls. Some with lovers, mothers, or alone. I was not alone. I had told my summertime boss, Sarah, what I had to do, and she was firm about driving me the two hours to the closest abortion clinic and sitting with me in the waiting room. On the drive back to Flagstaff, she gave me soup and a book she thought I might like. I laid the book across my knees, sipped on chicken broth, and told her that before the procedure began, the nurse asked if I wanted to hear the heartbeat. "Why would she do that?" I asked. Sarah simply nodded her head, a pained look on her face.

I flew back to my winter home, Salt Lake, to rest for a week—Sarah had insisted. I took a cab from the airport to my apartment, which was dense with valley heat, and dragged my mattress to the living room, where the air conditioning worked best, the artificial breeze cool against my body. I watched the cottonwoods out the window, the sky a brilliant blue, and my heart beat slowly, steadily. I was aware of every thump, listening intently for the sound. My boyfriend came by after work, laid next to me, meaning to ask if I were okay, but his dick was hard, and I had to tell him I couldn't, even though I was trying to show that everything was fine. "Sex," I said, "will give me an infection." And worse, I thought, it would make me want to die. But then I used my hands to try to show that everything was all right because I didn't know how to show it wasn't. Afterward, I wrapped up in a sheet to hide that my insides were shedding something like coffee grounds, like blood. A few months later I tried to leave him, and that's when I realized that leaving didn't come easy to me.

III.

I have no regrets and I do not wonder about what might have been. But I do feel sadness the way any woman might when her body is opened up and something is pulled out, or opened up and something is shoved in. But we can't even be left alone with our sadness if that's what we choose—our bodies always the topic of some man's debate, internal or otherwise, asking questions like, "Why was she dressed to make a man want to take her down?" I remember what I had been wearing—a red tank top, a flowing skirt I loved, and flip-flops. I do not remember his name because I taught myself not to, though we spent an entire semester in the same political science class. After he finished, I ran out of his apartment and down the street, 900 East in downtown Salt Lake City. Years later I still avoid that street.

Campus administrators may as well just come out and say women should work harder at not being assaulted; after all, rape just isn't the kind of epidemic bad enough to make real change. So we are left with the Clery Reports twisted into unnecessary, violating details of vaginal penetration with fingers, dicks, and whatever-the-hell. And just to be sure the shame seeps into female bones, the truth about the assaulted woman's sobriety finds its way into the report. After all, if she weren't irresponsible, she wouldn't be such an invitation to men. If I believed such things, I'd say that of myself—I was an irresponsible invitation. That is, I had been drunk. Afterward, I never said a word, not even when the man whose name I don't remember left wilted flowers that reminded me of his weeping on my doorstep. Whether a woman is wept upon or beaten while being raped, she will carry her scars and an understanding that, for the most part, justice is just a dream.

I do not understand why so many fixate on what women do with their bodies. Nor do I understand the way brothers become men who make laws and speeches about what can be done with women's flesh, while mothers' soft voices whisper in daughters' ears about modesty until girls understand that it's just another word for shame. Sadly, I think there will always be at least one man holding a Bible on the Senate floor shaking his righteousness against us. And there will always be a man begging for relief because he can't penetrate his hurt girlfriend. Always some men will be on women's bodies.

IV.

Thankfully there are moments of true kindness. Kindness, like grace, like Scott moving up a rough trail in flip-flops and then over the cliffside onto the talus, his feet taking a beating in the hot rocks and dirt. He

approached me carefully. “Rachel, I’m here,” he said, and walked toward the body of a woman who had fallen off the cliff. I had seen her fall and die and I could not help, though I sat with her and spoke anyway. I’d laid gauze on her wounds to keep the bugs away, waving them off when they had still landed. That morning at breakfast she had talked about how much she loved the blueberry pancakes Scott and I had made, and on the trail she told me of the thirty years she’d spent hiking Colorado. I had told her I was moving to Missouri and that I was scared to leave the West, and she’d said the mountains would wait for me, to be tough, school could only last so long. And she was tough, and stubborn too. She would not take my hand when I offered it, would not let me help her as we walked near the cliff’s edge, and when she fell she had said nothing, but her friend had screamed. I ran after the body, knowing it was too late and that’s all she would be now. But she was still around, her life there in the afternoon heat. I’d spoken to her, repeated, “I am so sorry.”

I’d muttered those same words the first time I saw death. I was a kid riding in the backseat of my father’s car that he called “Old Girl.” He’d given my two older brothers and me ice cream cones and was driving us along Texas back roads. There, ranchers hang coyote skins on fence posts—and I’d mourned their fleshless hides and the cruelty of the hands that ripped fur from flesh. I swear there were catfish heads drying out there too, but I couldn’t say why.

V.

In my twelfth year as a river runner, I drove through Dalhart, Texas, on my way to Arizona. I thought the dirt wasn’t good for much but leading into New Mexico dust. The way it coated a dead coyote lying in the median, blowing against painted pictographs on abandoned buildings that once advertised “Authentic Indian Jewelry,” made something twist in my stomach, guilt, a pressure on my chest. In the Canyon I’d seen a litter of coyotes running alongside the riverbank, the runt struggling to keep up amidst invasive cheatgrass and tamarisk. I’d slowed my oars, watched their bodies disappear into a den, knowing that because of me, their mama would have to move them once more. Later, another guide and I pulled boats out of the Colorado and then hopped in the winch truck, rusted and hot, and headed to Meadview, Arizona—trailers upon trailers. We saw a coyote on the road and he swerved to hit her. Pitifully I cried out, reaching for the wheel. He firmly responded that the coyote was nothing but a scavenger, though he steered away all the same. I leaned back against the sun-soaked leather that was cracked

and peeling, and I thought about how we are all scavengers—people living off a dying river, prosperous Western cities draining the land of her resources, farmers farming where they shouldn't, ranchers grazing their livestock where there shouldn't be any livestock, and us driving past poverty-stricken land with our judgments.

Once I stood on the bow of a man's boat to look at the body of a mountain lion that had pulled herself to shore by her own massive paws, or maybe she was washed there by the river—I didn't have the facts. Her perfect golden body, sun-beaten and still, made me feel sick—all her grandness gone and me working with tourists to make a living in her wild. The boatman, mean as he was, looked pained, still couldn't stand the sight of a dead thing. I gazed at her carcass spread on a bit of earthen ground amidst the black and pink rocks—Vishnu Schist and Zoroaster Granite. Later I recalled the mountain lion and somehow that recollection felt less like death than sipping coffee on my porch in Missouri, slapping mosquitoes and wishing for Redwall cliffs and the sound of oars pushing water. And what did that make me? Knowing the bad that'd been done to the wild and me still wishing to go back there, to take from her, to feel alive. All that wishing is like a festering wound, like unnaturally chilled waves lapping at breaking beaches in the Canyon.