



Back then, video was a luxury, and camera film was pricey, easy to scratch off her ranch budget. There's not much of her past on paper now, so any memories the electroshock treatments didn't steal, Kay replays like mental slides, blurred but dear.

The girls' scuffed, pink or brown cowboy boots jutting out from the ponies' saddles. Fingers tangling in mane. String-tied straw hats tipping back, and sunlight flashing across their peeling, freckled noses. Giggling, while bottle-feeding butting lambs. Cradling chicks. Alongside the splay-legged newborn calves, often born in an April snowstorm like last week's, Kay's three girls thrived on the ranch. She invests in those memories like crop insurance, to hold her girls close through space and time. Their childhoods rushed past her like comets, though, and she fears devotion isn't gravity enough, to keep them circling back.

Especially today. She checks the power level on her mobile phone, then slips it in her back jeans pocket. She picks up the land line. Dial tone, check. It's not technology failing here. She sighs, trying not to cramp into self-pity. Nibbling a hangnail, she reminds herself; anesthesiologists, public defenders, and social workers work as hard as she does.

The kettle wails. Kay pours, then steeps the lavender-and-chamomile teabag in her chipped mug. Sprinkles of rain tap the window over the sink, clinging to the glass as dark crystals, sparked by the kitchen light. Beyond those droplets, the gray barn squats beside the laddered pattern of the fenced corral.

Guilt cinches below her ribs. Can she do this? Just die without telling her daughters? Is she being considerate, passive-aggressive, or plain hard-headed? Maybe it's that other ailment, back with a vengeance. Regardless, after all she put them through, falling apart after their father died, cancer's another potential derailment. Nursing Kay could knock the girls' marriages and careers off track, and her odds aren't good, even with treatment. Better to die with dignity. But would the girls feel abandoned? Kay still feels the hollow in her heart since her own mother's death, twenty years past.

Today she turns fifty-eight. The age would be only a number, without that damned diagnosis. Besides, what a conflagration a cake would be, with that many candles. It'd singe everybody's eyebrows.

The longer the phones stay silent, the sadder, yet better, Kay feels. It confirms her decision against treatment, to spare the girls.

Just announcing it would be dreadful. It seems dramatic, vulgar, even selfish, to call and blurt out, "Stage Three." Cancer news needs a preamble, or at least a context, or it crashes like a crop duster on a gravel road, all fire, lights, and sirens. Kay fears she'll be the one in the wreckage, screaming loudest of all. The girls deserve better than another maternal disaster. Let their lives rush on. Comets, indeed.



Kay slips on her fleece-lined jacket and settles her Stetson. That heifer could drop her calf any time. Flipping up her collar, Kay hunches and crosses her arms as she kicks through the gravel, averting her eyes as she passes there. Inside the barn door, familiar scents of horse, manure, and hay calm her.

Walking the alleyway to the corral, she studies the heifer, who stands, tail canted, beside the fence. This afternoon, after noticing the springing and the red, wet signs of labor, Kay guided the girl in, to watch her. The first-time mama's not happy, though, lowing, shoving the fence. As if she could escape what's happening, or at least, hide her pain in

a pasture.

Looks fine, so far.

Kay grabs a shovel and rake for the neglected, empty stall alongside Cassidy, who eyes her, likely wondering why she's here after sunset, disturbing him.

"Itchin' to do something," she mutters, feeling her muscles tingle as she scrapes, lifts, and tosses. It's a good feeling, to work. The cozy warmth of the barn feels precious, for being a fleeting thing. She sneezes. Pushes herself, until muscles burn.

After only a few minutes, she weakens. Her eyes tear up from the dust, and then from the pang, the fear of dying. She reminds herself it's more than half-done already, that it's as natural as getting bucked. Maybe some pain to come, but she's tough. She reminds herself how many times she's been thrown, hit the ground, and dusted herself off.

Kay gulps and reaches over the stall to stroke Cassidy, who bobs his head for sugar. She leans the tools, swings open his gate, and coaxes him out. He's a fine stallion, his coat rippling like brown, watered silk under the

dim overhead bulb. Kay grabs a curry brush, simply to feel his hot, twitching muscles pressing back against her strokes, a borrowed strength.

She touches a cool hand to her forehead, pushing back the head pain, and when she drops the brush, she curses her clumsiness, her faltering flesh. But anger is better than that other. Could the cancer unleash her depression, after such long control? That's her best reason, to not drag the girls into the mix. "God knows what shape I'll be in," she mutters, retrieving the brush and placing it on its shelf with forced tenderness. She clutches one shaking hand in the other until she settles, then leads Cassidy back to his stall. She switches off the lights, holds down her hat against the wind, and scurries to the house. Storm's coming.

Kay settles into her corner chair and opens her book, reminding herself how it was to be young, when there weren't enough hours in the day to do everything, let alone call your mother. Still, she thinks, you need somebody who's known you always. Who remembers.

There are things she hasn't said, like, "I'll love you forever, even if I'm nothing but molecules, fragments of stars." Gwyn, who feels so unworthy, needs that assurance. For Mare, Kay would advise, "Don't worry so much. Nothing you plan for will happen, anyway," to help her take life as it comes. And for Freya, with the wicked sense of humor, she'd quip, "I'll die, but you'll never get me out of your head."

Thunder rumbles, and wind rattles the flue.

Kay switches on the lamp and cracks open her book, following Feynman through his theories of light and matter. Substitute teaching's not only kept her ranch afloat, but strengthens bonds with her neighbors, her town, and through science, the universe. Since Bob died, she's shared *QED* with hundreds of high-school juniors, and tonight, Feynman's insightful humor again comforts her, like a favorite song.

The knock on the door jolts her out of gamma rays, and she struggles up from the recliner. She's weakened, even since the biopsy, and that workout in the barn spent her.

"Mom, let us in," Freya calls. "We're frickin' drenched out here," and then, in a mutter, "What the hell, did she change the lock?"

Mare mumbles something about the wrong key and, "For God's sake, don't cuss, it's her birthday," followed by the whopping of a shaken umbrella.

"Seriously? I learned profanity from Mom branding calves," Freya laughs.

Kay smiles, but hesitates. It's good they've come, but how far can she let them in? Leaning against the door, she feels their impatience radiate through oak.

More pounding and calling. Kay cranks the deadbolt and swings open the door. Her gut clenches. Seeing them, she's not ready, and never will be, to trumpet such news.

They cluster in the entry, dripping, and as they wrap her in loose, noisy hugs, Kay breathes them in: Mare warm with spices, Gwyn sharp and cool as mint, and Freya still sweet as baby powder.

"You came," she whispers, blinking hard as she leads them in.

Kay struggles to smile, paging through her gift, a photo album packed with the older girls' families and Freya's calico cats. She strokes the metallic stars on the black cover, their glitter catching the lamplight. Surely Freya chose it. With Mare and Gwyn at college,

Kay would drag Freya out of bed into clear nights, to study constellations through their telescope. Kay taps the star and glances at Freya, who nods and grins.

Kay lets them wait on her, so her poor balance and tremors won't give her away. Mare cuts the cherry chocolate cake. Gwyn grumbles about calories. Freya plunges in, spinning a story about her car's flat tire, and the sexy policeman who rescued her.

My God, Mom looks horrible. Something's wrong, but I won't call her out in front of Gwyn, who'd somehow make it about her. Freya tips an imaginary cap and lowers her voice, mimicking the handsome sergeant who saved her during rush hour. Is Mare hiding bad

news about Mom? Freya announces they've had dinner twice, and the guy has true potential, meaning not married, no kids, and a steady job. Not even a drinker. "Not that I'd mind if he enjoyed a beer, but who needs that?" Noticing Gwyn's frown, and suddenly self-conscious for rambling, Freya sits and stabs a fork in her cake. Once her mother's distracted, she mouths to Mare, "Is Mom sick?"

While Gwyn complains to Kay about the price of gas in the city, Mare raises eyebrows and shrugs.

Freya turns back, interrupting Gwyn. "Mom, you should see his tight glutes. They look . . . squeezable."

I'm the one most like Mom at heart, Freya thinks. She's a youngest child, too, and always stood up for me. But what if she's really sick? Losing Dad when she was four, Freya barely remembers his wavy hair and blue eyes, as faded as her old Polaroid of them splashing in the inflatable pool. Breaking out of comedy, Freya leans toward her mother and murmurs, "Carl reminds me of Dad."

Kay does a double take, then chuckles. "You mean the tight glutes? I guess your father was . . . nice, that way."

Gwyn flares up. "Seriously? A little respect." She stands and walks the perimeter, studying wall photos in their wood and silver frames.

Rolling her eyes at her middle sister, Freya thinks, Gwyn's a wreck, tonight even more than usual. Tension buzzes from her like static electricity, ready to pop. Freya whispers, "I meant his sense of humor, but you be the judge."

Mom smiles, and Freya feels better. Sure, Mom's a little thin, but she's getting older, and calving takes its toll. Freya promises herself to visit more often. Next week, she'll bring Kyle the Cop for dinner with Mom. He really does have potential.

Studying her windblown veil in the wedding picture, Gwyn dreads perfect Mare figuring it out. Mark left six months ago, and it's a hard-kept secret. Gwyn's proud, actually. Going it alone, not letting the cheating bastard get her down. It burns, though, that Mare was right about him. Gwyn won't give her the satisfaction.

Her sister's successful doctor facade drives Gwyn to distraction, too. Multilevel house in Centennial, with a three-stall garage and an in-ground, heated pool. Flowers from Rick every Valentine's Day. Brilliant children, perfectly spaced. But the hardest thing to swallow, Mare's twelve full years to enjoy both a mother and a father, and yet, Mare never mentions Dad. She's stingy that way, hoarding memories the younger girls could enjoy. Claiming not to remember.

Smiling at Dad's feathered bangs in his graduation photo, Gwyn knows she loved him best. As everybody else slept, she'd wait up until he wobbled in, herded her to bed, and tucked her blanket tight. Sweet and warm with cigarette smoke and Old Spice after shave, but bitter with sweat and whiskey, he'd just been relaxing with the hands in town, at the Copper Pot. No harm in it, he always said.

She was six when a heart attack dropped him like a punch, halfway between the house and barn. Then the funeral under the blazing sun, his casket draped with red roses. Ever since, Gwyn avoids those flowers. Yet, as if she'd forgotten, Mare chose them for her wedding, not ten years after Dad's funeral.

Dusting off one of Dad's old tumblers from the cabinet, Gwyn opens the standing globe bar and pours herself a whiskey. Fighting to stay sober, she shouldn't, but she'd better calm down or she'll blurt some truth, vindicating Mare. Or she'll pick a fight, ruining Mom's day. Just a few swallows. Gwyn sniffs and blinks at her father's adolescent grin, then turns to face the others. Hearing them laugh, she cringes, the only one here with a memory, or a broken heart.

At the threshold, Mare noticed her mother's sunken cheeks. The woman's lost at least twenty pounds since Thanksgiving. Mare's first feeling wasn't fear, but guilt, and now she searches back; with new hospital management, Rick in Guatemala for three months, Joel sick with the flu, and Laya with strep, Mare hasn't called home weekly.

Last month, the sisters did meet in Denver for drinks, which spilled into a wine-soaked dinner. They fought over something, probably the check, made up, and in remorseful unity vowed to surprise Mom on her birthday. But maybe, Mare realizes, resolving that, they've neglected her since.

Mare clenches her fists, then consciously loosens her fingers and inhales deeply. Damn it. Time in the city isn't like here on the ranch, with clear-cut sunrises and sunsets marking the days, and moon cycles wheeling overhead. In the city, she can go months without even seeing the moon. Entire seasons are leveled by stream of pop-

up alerts on her phone, and marked only by different jackets, rain on asphalt, or snow plowed into piles. No spring calving, no fall branding. No roundups or haying. God, she hates her life. Sometimes it seems as featureless as her gray carpet. But today, Mare the doctor looks up to find Mom changed in her seasons, suddenly sickly and old.

Calm down. On the phone, Mom hasn't mentioned feeling ill. What if it's depression again? Please, God, not that. Mare rubs her forehead and shrugs at Freya's upraised eyebrows.

As Freya resumes her sexy pantomime, Mare drifts to the sapphire, glacier-fresh mountain lake in her mind. Mentally sipping cowboy coffee from a tin cup beside a smoky, popping campfire, she's at rest. There's no heart-attack father fallen dead, no mother in the psychiatric ward. The fractured childhood that keeps her awake at night, on her toes, and scared shitless even when there's no real crisis, never happened. She's simply Mare, sustained by glacial melt and rushing streams. She's delightfully irresponsible, so the gods overlook her for a heroic, medical vocation. She's free.

But even near her water, reflected clouds can pull her back. There, in the fluorescent-lit past, piano music plinked through a tinny speaker, and overcooled air carried odors of spaghetti sauce, bleach, and nervous sweat. Elbow-guided by a woman orderly, Mom didn't walk so much as float, the ghostly effect so startling, Mare listened for proof of weight, for her fuzzy slippers to scuff the floor. Mom's left hand crumpled a soggy tissue, imprinted by her fingers. Pillow-smashed dark curls stuck out every which way. Mare itched to comb them down, but hugged herself, instead.

The four-mile neighbor who drove Mare home, a nurse who brought goulash or hamburgers to the girls every night, said what Mare saw was temporary, a side effect of electroshock treatments. Their mother would come back. Bob's death caused Mom's breakdown, but there were new drugs every day. Her mother in the pink water with the

blade had been a terrible accident, of course. Kay never meant to kill herself, with such lovely girls to live for.

Mare didn't confide what her friends already knew from gossip. She closed her locker and slipped away when kids complained about their mothers. She stepped up. The ranch hands covered the outdoor chores, but Mare took out money orders at the convenience store, for paychecks and utility bills. She learned to make pancakes, pudding, and oat bran muffins. She studied in the laundry room, to remember to tumble-dry school clothes and Freya's bed-wetted sheets. She settled her little sisters' squabbles, detangled brown and blond curls, scooped up mac and cheese.

After two months, she'd wake at midnight, dry-mouthed, fists clenched against invisible harm. Trembling, she'd wrap herself in a blanket and walk barefoot through damp grass to the meadow pond. Sprinkled with moonlight sugar, it was like a wet, black bowlful of peace. At school, she'd splash water over her face and uncut wrists, to stop crying. Water—sky-blue and calm, dark and mysterious, murky-green and stagnant, or crystal-white and rushing—water calmed her.

From water, Mare figured out what good girls know. You don't do what you want, but fill what they need. Clearly, if Mom were ever to come home, Mare must convince her to live. Take up the weight, smooth the way. It would take all her effort, and Mare was already so tired, at thirteen.

"Mare," Gwyn interrupts, "focus. We're here to show Mom a good time."

"You're covering that," Freya jabs, nodding at the half-empty tumbler. "Gwyn, getting her drink on."

Gwyn tells her to shut up, Freya flips her the bird, Kay blinks, and Mare lets slip a nervous laugh. "Some party, right?" she says, biting her lip, then adds, "Mom, how're you feeling?"

"Fit as a fiddle," Kay pronounces, raising her mug for more tea.

Freya reaches, but Mare beats her to it.

Gwyn snickers. "Kissass." Takes a sip.

Mare hears Freya whisper to the middle sister, "You're a real bitch, sometimes, you know?"

Kay's mug wavers as she hands it to Mare, who scolds herself for slipping away, for missing something important.

Gwyn never misses a trick, though. Always ready to find fault. How would she like to be the oldest, to see everything broken, and try to be the glue? She has no idea. At first, the others were too young to understand. Then Mare was simply relieved to see Mom improve. Later yet, she doubted her sisters would believe the razor blades and pills they hadn't seen.

Better to forget. Best, not to know.

Until now, Mom's seemed better. Mare believed the hard part was behind them, but now her skin prickles, detecting a silent alarm.

After setting the refilled kettle to boil, Mare leans against the refrigerator, pressing cool hands to her cheeks. Anxiety swirls from her center as she murmurs her mantra, "Water, water."

Freya finds Mare mumbling in the kitchen, her forehead pressed to the freezer door. Her big sister's borne the heat of childhood secrets, keeping Freya and Mare secure in her cool shade. Freya's always felt grateful, and afraid to ask. But it takes a toll. Those gray hairs are new.

Coming up behind Mare, Freya circles her sister's thick waist with her suntanned arms.

"You okay?" She murmurs into Mare's auburn hair, inhaling cinnamon and cloves. Mare always smells like spice cake or breakfast rolls, like home.

"Fine."

Freya lets go. Mare swallows, adjusts her shirt cuffs, and smooths her skirt. The kettle's been whistling, but Mare just now seems to notice.

"Something's wrong with Mom."

Mare nods. "I don't know what."

"I'll ask," Freya offers, lifting her chin. "It's my turn to do something."

"What do you mean?" Mare touches her little sister's elbow. "You're fine."

"It's always been you. Don't think I never noticed." Freya picks up two potholders, takes the kettle, and carries it to refill their mother's cup. Behind her, her big sister sighs, but Freya furrows her brow, calculating ahead.

"So Mom, whatever happened to Grandmother's hair?" Freya casts a sidelong glance at Gwyn, who perks up over her whiskey.

"What hair?" Kay asks.

"The braid she cut off when she married Pop-Pop. We could send it for DNA testing, learn our ethnic heritage."

"My God, I was thinking that, too," Gwyn says, clunking her glass on the coffee table. "I'm sure she was Indian. You can see it in her photos. The cheekbones, like mine. The dark skin."

"This again." Kay waves a thin hand. "We're not Native American. It's a crazy theory, not to mention every American claims a Cherokee grandmother. It's so . . . cliché."

Freya refills her own cup. "Is it in your cedar chest? I think I saw it once, when I was snooping." Freya dips the teabag up and down, steeping. Freya's never seen the braid, and guessed Gwyn stole and sold the fabled hair during her cocaine days, before

she found New Age and recovery. But maybe not.

Her big sister's borne the heat of childhood secrets, keeping Freya and Mare secure in her cool shade. Freya's always felt grateful, and afraid to ask. But it takes a toll. Those gray hairs are new.

"I'll go look," Gwyn announces, fingering her gold feather necklace as she leaves the room.

Kay turns to Freya, blows on her hot tea, and frets, "Now she'll be digging through my things, and you know it's not there. My sister stole it back in the '70s, before you girls were born. It was only a story I told, anyway. You never saw that braid."

"She's a pain in my ass. I wanted her out of the room."

Kay nods. "She is crabby tonight. You think, maybe, early menopause?" Kay chuckles, her eyes squinting a real smile.

Freya glances to make sure Gwyn's out of earshot. "Gwyn's just Gwyn. But what's with you? Diabetes? Cancer? STD?"

Kay startles, then sets her jaw. "I'm not having this conversation, so don't bat those eyelashes at me, you little con artist."

Freya sips her chamomile. "Fair enough. But the truth will come out. I have my ways." Freya leans in, smiles, and blinks twice.

"Talk about a pain in the ass," Kay blurts, shaking her head.

Coming through the arched doorway, Mare overhears and raises her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

Freya slumps back and grins. "Sorry. Mom finally admitted what she thinks of you."

Kay shakes her head, smacks Freya's knee, and smiles up at Mare. "Not you. Actually, yes, all of you, showing up unannounced like this. You have me flustered, and I . . . have a headache. Time to go."

Freya stands and gives Mare a meaningful look. "It is late." Looking at her mother, she pushes back a stray curl from Kay's face and adds, "Dinner at *Eddie's* this weekend, you, me, and the cop, for *derrière* evaluation. Also, I will have answers."

Gwyn slams a bedroom door and hurries in, flustered, empty-handed. "Are you sure you didn't take that hair, Freya? You got everything else you wanted."

"You never changed into a big brother."

"True," Gwyn huffs, half-smiling at her sister. Such a nut, not a care in the world. Must be nice. She glances out the window. "Let's go. I-70 will be a disaster if this freezes." Digging in her purse for keys, Gwyn adds, "I wish you still had that hair, but I could do the saliva test. Find the truth of who we really are."

"You brought that up?" Mare eyes Freya. "What were you thinking? You know she burns sage to that Native flute music." She puffs a sigh up through her bangs and mutters, "As if being a Rayburn isn't complicated enough."

"I feel Native in my spirit," Gwyn calls from the door.

"It was strategic," Freya murmurs to Mare. Leaning down to hug her mother, she says, "Don't get up. You're exhausted."

Kay sinks back. "Don't tell me how tired I am, Miss Smarty Pants. But thanks for the party. I figured you forgot." She shrugs. "Sorry, I underestimated you."

"You did underestimate us, but barely," Freya says, stroking her mother's cheek. "We strive to underwhelm."

"Blessed are those who expect nothing, for they shall not be disappointed," Mare adds with a guilty smile. "I'll call you Tuesday, Mom," she says, leaning for a hug. Please, God, she thinks. Nothing serious.

"Water the flowers," Gwyn calls, unlatching the door to a cold gust and mist. "They're expensive, Asiatic lilies from the florist. Not grocery store crap."

The onrushing cool scents of wet gravel and manure recover the past and echo pain, bringing tears to Freya's eyes. Looking back at Kay before following her sisters, Freya wishes again her father were here, to figure out what Mom needs.

Unsettled, Kay rinses out her mug and tips it to drain. She's tired enough for bed, but that heifer needs checking. Kay almost told the girls about her, and it would have been like old times, sharing the birth. But Kay needed them to leave, before she spilled everything.

Halfway to the barn, Kay stops. She passes this spot ten times a day, but usually pushes the thought away. She inhales, picturing it now. This is where Bob fell and died. The moment is gone. So how can she still see it?

Shrugging inside her shearling jacket, blinking against the mist, Kay crosses to the corral.

The heifer stands outside the open barn door, under the eave. Head down, lowing with contractions. There's a shining, placenta-shrouded tip of hoof and a nose peeking out her backside. Things are progressing.

Kay settles on the fence to keep vigil. The rain clouds drift apart, spilling stars and a chunk of moon. The lesser lights sparkle on the wet gravel, flinging silver rags of moonlight here and there, on puddles. Leftover snowdrifts by the fence posts melt, clear lace around their edges.

Kay reconsiders that awful summer day. The hot smell of the gravel dust when she rolled him over. The dull absence behind his eyes. The way his hand fell open beside him, empty of tools or intention. That's how she knew he was gone.

Forgetting him seemed the only way to move out of depression, and the doctors, with their drugs and electroshock therapy, seemed to agree. None of it helped, so Kay learned to lie to herself. Said she could live without him, might even someday love again. She acted normal and happy, until the borrowed clothes of ordinary life almost fit her. She mimicked this neighbor who smiled, that cowboy who roped, and that woman in the produce aisle who thumped melons. She went back to school, to teach, to keep the ranch out of debt. All of it, as if she meant it. As if she didn't remember a painful thing.

But tonight, Kay's glad the doctors didn't wipe the slate clean. She

cherishes her painful fragments of memory, glad for the resilience of her mind. A mind, as Feynman pointed out, consisting not of the same atoms or cells from those terrible days, but formed of entirely new atoms. Miraculously replaced, regenerated by last week's potatoes. Tenacious mind, fighting to send forward echoes of Bob, the only love of her life, and their girls, too.

God, how it all hurts. Kay watches the heifer pace and hang her head, unable to escape. Resigned. Because some things are too overwhelming to ignore. For example, Kay admits, Gwyn's drinking again. Mare's on the verge of a breakdown herself, trying to get everything right, while Freya clings to them all, childlike, clowning for affection. How had Kay been so blind to the evidence? The girls' proofs of need? Thinking she could just let go and die, leaving pain behind.

Closing her eyes, Kay feels Bob behind her like heat, as if he's putting his arms around her. Then, or here and now? She doesn't care. He was funny with his limericks. And handsome, with that cleft chin and curly hair. He had a temper, though, and was too good a friend to Jack Daniels. Loved cattle, tolerated sheep. Detested chickens, but hauled home pullets in a cardboard box each spring, to make Kay smile. These details matter, but eventually, despite all the potatoes Feynman could peel, those memories will dissolve with her. Unless she passes them on.

Kay shivers, chilled again. She whispers, "Robert Davis Rayburn," but the name has lost the man, as stars shed their particles or waves, shedding light to die.

Kay sighs. Hears the heifer moan and huff out a frustrated breath. Poor thing.

If only Kay could make a graceful exit. She'd rather run headlong into death, getting it over with, and not be a burden, but her daughters will lose her smell, her face, and her habits soon enough. Loss is inevitable, a universal truth, like the expanding galaxy, the separation of the stars.

Kay opens her eyes. Looks up and studies where the stars have been, knowing that's not where they are now, despite appearances. To look up is to look back, she knows. But she is still here, living now, painfully, but consciously hurtling through space. Life. What a small extravagance, a burst of light to see, to reflect, if not to keep.

The heifer strains and treads a circle, panting. With no idea what's next, the animal pushes, her body full to bursting, blind with pain. Liquid splatters on the ground.

Kay slips off the fence. Stepping near, she rests a hand on the mother's taut side. Smells the rusty blood, the stink. Feels the life tensed within, the struggle, the coming separation. Kay presses a glove against her forehead and sighs.

That oncologist's number is in the kitchen drawer.

The heifer kneels on her front legs, then heaves down.

Kay squats, knees cracking, fresh manure squishing under her soles. Stroking, murmuring strength.

The heifer rolls an eye back at Kay. Strains again.

"Aw, hell," Kay mutters. "It won't be so bad."

It's a good lie, as useful as her others. She knows better, from watching her own mother, how it will go. But she'll offer up her veins, puke in a bucket, hold her daughters' hands, and lose her hair. She'll swallow her pride, kneel, need, and push through.

Because here, where we only remember stars, the truth isn't all there is to love.

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