



**My tracks to the woodshed had already disappeared. In the short time I had been outside I was chilled to the bone. We had been snowed in before, but this time it was different.**

The power lines keened with each gust of wind, a sound that sent a shudder through me as sweat beaded and dripped down my back. I kicked the shed door shut and turned, dumping an armload of firewood into the cart. Snow pelted my face. The yard-light flickered on, casting a bluish glow over the snowdrifts that fingered across the yard. The tire swing twisted in the wind, and snow covered the flower beds where, only yesterday, red tulips were blooming.

As I pushed the cart to the back door, I glanced down the hill at Mary and Dan's two-story clapboard house, tucked inside the shelterbelt of Russian olive trees. The light from their kitchen window blinked behind swaying branches. The bunkhouse, sheds, and pole corrals looked like cardboard cut-outs through the fading light and swirling snow. The path that connected our two homes was a white thread strung down the hill through the horse pasture.

My husband, John, had spent summers working on the ranch when he was in high school. Dan and Mary were childless, a choice due to the thirty-year difference in their ages. When Dan approached his ninetieth birthday, he decided he couldn't wrangle another calving season by himself. He called John. "You can take the ranch over in a few years if it all works out for you and Ruth." John was ready to make "summer camp" our permanent home and give up his job as an engineer with a large company where he spent most of his time traveling.

A strong gust of wind picked up a metal garbage can lid and sent it flying across the yard. Snow plastered the side of the house, the telephone poles, and the cedar fence posts. My tracks to the woodshed had already disappeared. In the short time I had been outside I was chilled to the bone. We had been snowed in before, but this time it was different.

The day we had moved to Birney, five years before, we bumped the population up to fourteen. On a map Birney was just a small dot on a thin black line. It sat on a county road, mostly shale, which followed the Tongue River from the Big Horn Mountains to the Yellowstone River. It was ranch country, out of reach of restaurants, grocery stores, and cell phone reception.

School would start in three weeks and I was the new teacher. John and I had unloaded our boxes, covered with red dust, and a few pieces of furniture from the back of our truck and into the teacherage across the street from the one-room school. Then we had driven to the ranch ten miles up East Fork of Hanging Woman where we would spend the night at Mary and Dan's. They had been sitting in the wicker chairs on the back porch, a pitcher of lemonade and four glasses sitting on the table, waiting for us when we drove into the yard.

When Ann was born I quit my teaching job and we moved into the house we built on the ranch, just up the hill. The addition of a baby to our household was

one more reason for Mary to “check in” every day. She fussed over Ann like a grandmother hen. She offered advice but wasn’t offended when I didn’t take it. “You’re the best little mother!” Mary would tell me. I knew I wasn’t. She wrote in an anniversary card to us, “You’re the family Danny and I never had.” I put it in the box with my mother’s letters.

I came to know every wildflower, every blade of grass, it seemed, on the path to Mary’s house. If Ann and I didn’t go down the hill to Mary’s for morning coffee, she would come up the hill, cup in hand. “What have you accomplished so far today?” she would ask, and then give me a litany of everything she had done before breakfast. The path was Ann’s first adventure all by herself, toddling down the hill with a fistful of dandelions for Mary, who waited at the bottom.

One time, when Mary and I were having morning coffee, she had asked, “If you had one wish in the world what would it be?”

I had looked out the window. It was an autumn day and the ash and cottonwood trees stretched golden along the creek bottom. The cows and calves dotted the meadows. A red-tailed hawk soared above the pine-covered hills.

“My wish has already come true!” I replied.

She had cocked her head and raised her eyebrows.

“Really!” I continued. “When I was little, after my dad died, our family moved to town. Mom sold the cows and horses and got a job as a secretary. But I guess I always hoped I’d find a way back to the country. This country, the ranch... It’s my dream come true, Mary!”

She scooped Ann onto her lap and said, “Me, too.”

#### **AND THEN, I BECAME AFRAID OF THE DARK.**

Maybe it started when, a few years ago in the middle of the night, a ring startled us awake. Heart racing, I ran to answer the phone. “I’m taking Dan to town,” Mary had said.

“I think he’s having a heart attack.” John had followed them, just in case of a flat tire, a breakdown, a deer in the headlights. Just in case. I stayed home, waiting for the phone to ring, trying to push dark thoughts from my mind. Finally, the call came with good news.

Or maybe the fear had taken root the night a pain shot through my stomach and, stumbling to the bathroom, I lost my second pregnancy in a trail of blood. Another rush to town, forty miles of shale and then forty miles of highway, the headlights carving a tunnel in the coal black, no markers ticking off the miles, the night frozen in time.

Or maybe it started the last time I called my mother and there was no answer. Then I called the front desk of the nursing home. The nurse had explained everything was fine “...but she doesn’t know what the phone is anymore, Ruth. It will ring and ring and when we hand it to her she just holds it, a confused look on her face.”

The nighttime fear that gripped me wasn’t the childhood dread of the bogeyman who would creak and groan and make the curtains in my room move. I would duck under the covers, but not before I cried out for my mother.

This fear was different. If Ann whimpered in the night I would go and comfort her, a nightlight casting a soft glow. I’d stop and look out the window. I wouldn’t see the stars, the crescent moon. I’d see only black, like spilled ink, covering the hills, the buildings, the path to Mary’s, the road to town. There was nothing, just my reflection staring back at me. So far, the night contained my fear.

#### **THEN THE BLIZZARD HIT.**

John had fed the cattle before he left for town with a load of culled cows. The day had dawned bright with an east wind. In the afternoon the sky darkened iron gray and the thermometer plummeted. The snow, blowing sideways, started by mid-afternoon. “I can’t make it home tonight,” he had called in the late afternoon. “They closed the roads out of town. I’ll stay at the Outfitter’s Motel. How’s Ann?”

“You’re breaking up a bit,” I held the phone tight to my ear. “I’m worried. Her fever is up and her breathing is so rattled.”

“I can’t hear...I’ll get home as soon...” His voice had sputtered, and then the phone had gone dead.

I stomped my boots at the back door and saw Mary’s house fading behind the heavy curtain of snow. Out of habit I made a mental note of the horses in the pasture. They were huddled on the lee side of the barn. Four. There should be five. Squinting, I counted again. The black mare, Sombre, was missing. I scanned the horse pasture and then I saw her through the chalky film of snow, standing near the fence line on the far side of the pasture, facing into the wind, her ears forward, and her tail whipping in the wind.

The yard and house lights blinked out.

“Mama!” Ann’s voice wailed. A raspy cough followed.

I ran inside, pulling the door hard behind me, making sure it was latched.

Ann lay whimpering on the couch where I had made a bed for her. “Ann, honey, I’m right here.” I pulled her onto my lap and rocked her back and forth. “The electricity went off. That’s all.” I could feel the heat of her body through the blankets. “I’m going to get you some ice chips, sweetie, but first I need to light the lamp. Lie right here.”

I lit the wick of the kerosene lamp and my hands shook as I settled the chimney glass in place. The lamplight glowed and shadows leapt into the room.

Ann moaned and then a cough wracked her body. Her eyes were glazed with fever. I hurried to the kitchen and scooped ice chips into a glass, then dampened a washcloth before going back to her side. The embers in the woodstove were fading. Outside the dark was nearly complete and I felt the anxiety start to grow. Shaking my

head, willing it to subside, I held the ice chips to Ann's mouth. "This will make you feel better." Then I laid the washcloth on her hot forehead. Her eyes tried to focus on me, then flickered closed. I bent down to kiss her cheek.

I kept up a rhythm of dabbing the washcloth in ice water, holding it on her forehead, wiping her cheeks and hairline. As she settled into a restless sleep I puzzled over Sombre's odd behavior. Sombre, part Morgan, part mustang, had come to live with us after John's cousin moved from New Mexico to Denver and couldn't find a place for the horse. Although she had been bottle-fed after her mother died, Sombre wasn't spoiled. She was gentle and well trained and, at age twelve, a perfect first horse for Ann. Ann would sit on Sombre's back and I would lead them through the meadows and out onto the forest to our favorite picnic spots. What had drawn her away from the rest of the horses? Surely she would go back and join them during the storm.

*Brrring. Brrring.* The crank phone rang. Mary. I hurried to the utility room and picked up the earpiece. "Ruth? Is everything all right up there? How's Ann, dear?" Mary's voice shouted into the phone.

I had to stand on my tiptoes to lean into the black mouthpiece on the front of the oak case. "Hellooo!" Even though the reception was good, we always yelled into the antique phones, as if we had to force our voices by sheer volume into the wire that looped down the hill between our houses.

"Ann's fever is up, but I'll give her some more Tylenol. We'll be fine," I said, trying to disguise the waver in my voice. "How about you and Danny?"

"We're fine. The cook stove is keeping us toasty. You let me know if you need anything!"

I hesitated, resisting the urge to blurt out how worried I was about Ann, how afraid I was of what the night might bring. "I'll be sure to give you a crank if I need anything!" For a few seconds I held the phone to my ear even after I heard the click on the other end. Then I slowly hung the earpiece back onto the side of the wooden case.

Mary collected antiques – crank phones, cast iron cook stove, kerosene lamps – not for their sentimentality but for their reliability. I had scoffed at first when Mary had lugged the heavy phone into the house three years ago, insisting that John mount it and string the line between our two homes. "Electricity isn't reliable; we could be without power for days. This is just for emergencies. Just in case ..."

Mary had forty years of experience of "just in case." Her vehicles always had a full tank of gas and good spare tires – not the doughnut kind – in the trunk. She carried emergency supplies year round: blankets, hard candy, and bottled water. As I approached my due date, I had looked in horror when Mary had shown me her birthing kit – a bag that held sterilized thread and a sharp scissors. "Well, I've helped Doc Hayes more than once pull a calf. And Sally had her baby in the car on the way to the hospital... you never know."

Ann moaned as she kicked the blankets onto the floor, another tight cough followed by a wheeze from her chest. I quickly threw two more logs in the stove and pulled open the damper so the flames flared and lapped at the log, then rushed to her side. "Mama's right here." Her eyes half opened as I spooned cough syrup into her mouth, her lips dry and chapped.

What was it my mother did for coughs when I was little? I remembered a smelly hot pack on my chest. Was it a mustard pack? And what about fevers? A cold bath? Wouldn't that make her cough worse? I looked at my watch, gauging the next dose of medicine, wondering if I should double up, wishing I could call Dr. Lowell, the pediatrician, for advice. I could feel the

fear coiling.

Outside, the wind howled around the corner of the house and the heavy snow thudded against the windows. There were no inside sounds, no refrigerator or freezer humming, no heater clicking on. Silence, but for the storm battering the house. I pulled the rocking chair next to the couch and leaned back into it. I closed my eyes against the black. My breathing quickened and my lungs felt as if they were being squeezed.

"Deer, right there, look..." Ann struggled to sit up, pointing at something; a string of incoherent chatter followed.

I tried to shush her. I flipped the washrag over, patting the cool side over her arms and legs before placing it back on her forehead.

I propped her head up with another pillow. Her face was flushed and her eyes fluttered behind closed lids in a restless dream. I stroked her arm, her forehead, trying to still her delirium. Without thinking I began singing.

*Slumber, my darling, thy  
mother is near*

*Guarding thy dreams from all  
terror and fear*

My grandmother had sung the lullaby to my mother, my mother to me; a song even my bones remembered. When I was a child and after my mother had said good-night, I would lie in bed and wait, listening to her footfalls descending the stairs, listening for the pause before the song. She would stand at the bottom of the stairs, flick the light off and then sing. My mother's sweet voice would swirl up the stairwell and into my room, blessing me into the night.

*Sunlight has pass'd and the  
twilight has gone,  
Slumber, my darling, the  
night's coming on.*

My mother's voice. How many times have I wanted to pick up the phone to talk with her, to tell her the news? "Mom, Sombre and Ann and I went on a picnic today! Mom! We found the first buttercup! We have chickens now, Mom, and Ann loves to collect the eggs!" There were times I just wanted her advice. "I didn't know it was so hard to be a mother! How did you do it, Mom, by yourself? The farm, us kids...how did you do it?"

"Early onset," Mom's doctor had said. And it came on fast. First the confusion, the lost keys, not finding her way home in the small town where she lived. Before I had moved her into the nursing home I had walked into the kitchen and found her standing in the middle of the room, crying, holding the beaters, not knowing what to do with them, the banana bread recipe propped up on the counter. I had visited her last Mother's Day. I had done most of the talking, her eyes watching me, as if searching for something.

*Slumber, my darling, I'll wrap  
thee up warm,  
And pray that the angels will  
shield thee from harm.*

Ann lay still, finally, and though trying to be vigilant, to stay awake, I could feel my head nod as I fought off sleep.

A loud crash woke me, followed by the wind wailing like a siren. I quickly looked at Ann. But she continued to sleep; there seemed to be more ease in her breathing, her face was less flushed. The medicine was finally taking hold. Now, fully awake, the room dark, I stood up to put another log on the fire. When would this storm blow itself out? I could feel the night and hugged myself, rubbing my arms against the chill in the room. I dared to look out the window, to see what had crashed against the house. Instead, I saw her reflection, my mother's, looking back at me.

#### **THE FEAR WAS COMPLETE.**

Paralyzing. I couldn't look away. Her eyes, uncertain, as if she was lost or afraid. I wanted to turn away but couldn't. I squeezed my eyes closed and stood motionless. Then, from far away I heard her singing, a distant thread of a song, tender and sweet, the melody looping over and over, the lullaby wrapping around me. Hours or maybe minutes passed and I finally opened my eyes and saw that reflection in the window was mine.

I turned and went to Ann's side and laid my hand on her forehead. The fever seemed to have subsided. She was sleeping deeply, her chest rising and falling with each breath. I tucked the blankets around her and then lay down on the floor beside the couch, an afghan for a cover, and slept.

*Fill the dark void with thy dreamy delight—  
Slumber, thy mother will guard thee tonight.*

"Mama!"

I jumped awake to the sun pouring through the window.

"Look! It snowed!" Ann's voice was thick and scratchy, her cheeks pink from sleep, and her eyes were clear.

I sat next to her on the couch. We both stared out the window at the sculpted snowdrifts, whipped cream swirls topping the fence posts, the tire swing, and the haystack in the meadow. That's when I saw the big cottonwood branch on the ground just outside the window, the cause of the noise in the middle of the night.

"Can we build a snowman?" Ann asked.

"You must be feeling better, sweetie."

I hugged her tightly and then stood to tend to the stove and find some breakfast for both of us.

"Hellooo!" The back door opened and Mary let herself in, stomping her boots before slipping a heel in the vee of the bootjack. Her double-breasted brown coat buttoned down to her ankles and a wide belt hugged her waist. The fur-lined hood fell loosely around her face and drooped down her back. Strands of silver hair curled out from under the hood.

She lifted a paper bag and shook it. "I brought some doughnut holes..." She pulled a thermos from the bag, "... and coffee!" She placed it on the kitchen counter.

"Mary! You're just what the doctor ordered!" I said. Ann clapped her hands. I gave Mary a big hug. She unwound the woolen scarf around her neck and unbuttoned her coat, tossing it on the chair.

"Whew! There are some impressive drifts out there, but not so bad a person can't make their way." Mary sat on the couch beside Ann. "How's my Annie doing?" She set the bag of doughnuts beside her and looped an arm around Ann's shoulders.

"Mary!" Ann cuddled closer. "We went camping last night and had a fire and Mommy lit the lamp and..." Her eyes got big and she turned to face Mary as she said, "... and deer live under my bed!" Mary's eyes got big and she clasped her hand over her mouth in mock surprise. "And a tree fell down and some angels were singing!"

"Well," said Mary, "it sounds like you two had quite a night!"

I poured a cup of coffee and a glass of apple juice and carried them to the living room. Ann already had a doughnut hole in her hand, the sack now sitting on Mary's lap.

"Mary, would you mind sitting with Ann for a little bit while I do chores?" I handed the cup to Mary and Ann reached for her glass. "I need to feed the chickens and the horses. I'll wait until this afternoon to feed the cows." I was anxious to check on Sombre.

"Of course, dear! Ann and I have lots to talk about!" Ann peered into Mary's bag and retrieved another doughnut. "We have breakfast covered, don't we, Ann?"

I already had my coat on and sat down to pull on my boots. Ann coughed again but it was loose, not sharp and wheezy. "There's more apple juice in the fridge. I won't be gone long."

The sun was bright and the snow blinding. I trudged to the corral and tossed hay to the horses. No Sombre. I grabbed a bucket of oats and set out with a halter and rope. As I crested a small rise in the pasture I saw her, standing in the far corner next to something lying in the snow.

I quickened my pace as much as I could, pushing a trail through the snow while rattling the bucket. Her head lifted and her ears perked up. "Sombre!"

I yelled, holding the bucket up, shaking the oats. She held her ground. Usually the sound of oats was irresistible; she would forget all else for the taste of the sweet treat.

Snow had crusted on her back and stuck to her long eyelashes. She faced me and nickered but still didn't move. Then I stopped and stared. A small deer, last year's fawn, lay curled in the snow.

I stepped closer. Sombre stretched her neck and shook, a wave that started at her head and finished at her rump, the snow flying from her back. She snorted and shook her head again, looking at me, her ears forward, eyeing the bucket but still making no move to come to me. Right next to the lifeless deer, almost touching it, was an indentation in the snow where Sombre must have lain throughout the night.

I couldn't make sense of it. How had the deer died? Had she been hit by a truck? But no one had been by since the storm. I knelt down and took my glove off, then swept the snow from the deer's head and let my hand rest on the soft velvet just above her nose. It was then I realized the mystery wasn't in her death, but in the mare's vigilance. Sombre dropped her head and nuzzled my hand. I looked into her dark fluid eyes.

A distant rumble came from down the creek. I looked up and saw the yellow snowplow spraying a fountain of snow into the ditch.



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