



In the bedroom Rose Anne stands in front of the mirror and pulls the red moiré over a black satin slip. The dress flatters her lithe hips and the curves at her waist. The two-inch heels bring her up to a full five-foot, four, tall enough for one good night on the town. Bill has agreed to take her to the play in Helena. Bill is a good man, something she knew from the beginning.

Rose Anne is thirty-two years old, her muscles toned and sharp from working the ranch with Bill. The Montana year hasn't been an easy one, with her restlessness, the dead calves last winter, the wild dogs haunting the pasture, and now the drought. The thought of getting off the ranch, if only for a night, is the cool balm that keeps her from breaking leash and running for the hills.

Through the French doors she watches the dusty sun drop toward the river bottom. In this heat the satin feels good against her skin, the way she imagines the breeze off the Pacific Ocean might feel, the clean fur of dogs washed up and tamed, her heart settled into the soft nook of their home.

She tucks the picture of Raymond behind the black and white of her father standing near the Space Needle, next to the one of her mother's last trip to the hospital. She secures the photo album in the bottom of her partially packed suitcase. On the vanity table she places her father's Robert Service book between her mother's prayer book and a picture of Mt. McKinley, Denali, "the high one," 20,320 feet. That's a mountain.

The first time her mother nearly died, Rose Anne was six years old. During those long weeks, her father put her to bed each night with prayers and Robert Service, the frozen Yukon, the thaw, and a miner's dream. Through the deep rhythm of her father's voice she knew what the words meant. In spite of ambulances and hospitals, the world was a good and beautiful place.

Her father told her that the sky's the limit where the heart's concerned. He told her there's a world out there, a big world. "Sweetheart," he said, "when your mom comes home, we're going to see it." By the time her mother returned home to East Helena and her sick bed, Rose Anne had the full contents of her sock drawer packed into a garbage bag and stashed in her closet. She was going north to the Grizzly bears and real gold and the Malamute Saloon.

She told her mother this one evening at the dinner table. Her mother explained quietly that Mommy was sick, too sick to travel. Their insurance was poor and Daddy would have to work double shifts to pay for her care. "But maybe someday,

honey, maybe someday we'll go."

After dinner her mother opened the pocket book and read the evening prayers while Rose Anne sat at her side.

"A good dream lasts a long time," her father said after the prayers were finished.

When the real trouble came, Raymond's family took Rose Anne in. At first Raymond treated her like a little sister, protective of her to others, protective of his time and privacy to her.

Tag along and he'd be mad. Then one day he started inviting her along. By high school, she and Raymond had made plans to travel to Alaska after graduation. They'd get jobs at the canning factories or work on ships. Or maybe they'd work in the parks and watch the sun go indeterminably down.

After high school, they worked in the same restaurant in Helena to pay for the passage north. When Raymond put a down payment on a cinder block building in East Helena and opened the body shop, Rose Anne knew he was going nowhere north. East Helena had latched him to her like a lazy lover.

Rose Anne loops a string of her mother's pearls around her neck, hooks them in front and twists them around. A dog howls in the back pasture, a soft hum, a quiet lament. The sun through the French doors shines off the mirror onto the pearls, turning them a milky silver. Rose Anne's dark curls drop to her shoulders and she pulls them up into a bundle of tresses on top of her head. Better, she thinks, much better.

Bill should be in from pasture soon. She reminds herself to tell him that she saw a rattlesnake today, out in the north field where he keeps the old bull. He'll go into his usual spiel about the dangers of walking the land alone, sinkholes, coyotes, a rare wolf, the stray dogs, an errant outlaw hunter, and snakes. She doesn't care. She knows that



only the old and infirm die quickly from snakebites. She's seen the old dogs in the pasture, the wild ones that have fed off of the land for years. One day they move too slowly and the bite kills them. When that happens, she tells Bill, and he takes the carcass out to the dump where he leaves the old cows.

Rose Anne loves to walk the great expanse of land by herself. It's fifteen hundred acres with, yes, coyotes, wolves, snakes, gophers, deer, elk, wild birds, and a pure dry sun that bakes the blood of dead animals into the ground. There's a free wild way that the dust settles in her hair, on her shoulders and on her boots. The dogs track her, not close, but she can see them, behind the boulders, on the horizon, slinking toward the sunset, escaping the land, disappearing and arriving in the golden red light, amidst the soaring hawks.

She dreams out there. She dreams about the day that she and Bill will go to the tundra, to Denali Park, the day they'll fish for salmon from the Talkeetna River and stay in the heart of Alaska's Matanuska Valley. A good dream lasts a long time. And finally this dream, so long burned into her skin, is about to come true. Bill has promised he'll take her to Alaska this summer.

She looks out the French doors and wonders what's keeping him. They'll have to leave for the play soon or they'll miss the cocktail hour, which wouldn't be too bad. As long as they get out for a night. That's the main thing. She loves the land, but she hates to sit still for too long. Already, it's been nearly two years since she left East Helena and Raymond, sweet Raymond.

She misses him like crazy. Be with a boy from ages ten to thirty and you're bound to go through some massive adjustment. It's all part of the small deaths she's gotten used to, like when her mother first slurred her words, or when her father put the Robert Service book in his bottom drawer, like when Raymond expanded the body shop. Raymond gave her the '58 Chevy Bel Air as a birthday gift that year, the year she turned twenty-five. She loved the Bel Air, but even then, she knew it was an apology.

She touches her mother's pearls. Not much you can count on, that's one thing youth taught her. Time's a funny thing. Since she turned thirty-two, she seems to be losing bits and pieces of time, one precious piece every day. All those pieces can add up to a lot of weeks, months, years even.

"Hey, babe." Bill stands in the doorway. His long lanky arms hang to his sides. His hands are cracked and dirty. Stained shirttails hang outside of his pants. He flips his head and his blond hair falls into his eyes. The look pierces right into Rose Anne's chest, right into her damn cliché of a heart.

"You look beautiful. Absolutely beautiful." He tilts his head in an invitation.

"I thought you'd be in earlier," she says to hide her blush, amazed at the way a simple look from him still halts her breath.

"I went to check on Sun Up. He's not doing well."

"He's old. The heat's getting to him."

"That bull is a Brangus," Bill says.

"As if I know what that means."

"He's bred for the heat, among other things."

Rose Anne shrugs. "Hurry and get ready or we'll be late." At the vanity table, she opens one eye wide and applies black mascara. "Can we drive the Bel Air?" She has a few things in the trunk, her sewing machine, the checkered dishes, the blue enamel teapot, the mohair blanket, all things she and Raymond bought together. Things she couldn't bear to bring into the house with Bill. All things she'd want to have if she ever left the ranch. Driving the Chevy, she feels close to the things of her past, close to the bulk of her life.

"Speaking of old. I hardly think the Chevy will make it to Helena."

"Come on. Be brave. It's less than twenty miles. Besides, you don't know it. A master craftsman rebuilt that engine. Please."

"Who? Your old boyfriend?"

"My dad, silly," she lies.

"That long ago? We better take my truck."

She moves so that she blocks Bill's image from the mirror and finishes applying her make-up. "Please. I only want two things tonight, to go to the play and to drive the Chevy. I don't ask for much." It's true. Asking for something is the slight of hand that disappears dreams.

"OK. Hopefully we'll get there in it."

"Go get ready or we won't get there at all," she says to the Bill she can't see in the mirror.

In the garden she watches a hummingbird flit from rose to rose until, finally, Bill appears, shiny and bright, the ranch washed off him. The summer heat creates a soft light radiance around his body, as if he could separate into a million floating pieces that gently ride the hot air back to the pasture and slowly drop to the ground.

People do that. Disappear into the ground. She has seen it happen, once when

"A good dream lasts a long time," her father said after the prayers were finished.

she was eight and again when she was ten. They just went away into the earth and never came back. Her mother died of a brain tumor. Her father died of, well, she doesn't really know why her father died. It was a car crash, a crash that must have broken his heart. She understands death and its quick decisions better than most people. She understands that she has this moment and maybe the next to live out her dreams.

"It's too late to make the cocktail hour," she says. "Maybe we can go for a snack or a drink after the play."

"You're sure you want to take the Chevy?"

"Actually, I'm completely happy now that I've talked about it. What a satisfying experience."

"You're in a mood."

"I've been waiting all day to get out of here for the night," she says.

"You don't like the ranch."

"The ranch is fine."

"It's me?"

"Oh no. You're good. Let's go. You can drive."

Rose Anne clutches a loosely crocheted shawl and a black beaded purse, a tiny purse, just large enough for the pocket prayer book, her phone, her lipstick, a few dollars and a hidden pocket for her lucky hundred, the luck she never spends. She tosses the shawl into the back of the '58. Summer dust covers the dashboard, steering wheel, and seats in a fine movable gray. She brushes a spot clean and sits down, happy with the thought of going into town.

Bill turns the key to the '58 and nothing happens. He turns it again. "Life on the ranch, one problem after another." He gets out and opens the hood. Rose Anne hears a few scraping sounds and some pounding.

"Battery connectors were loose." He turns the key and the car starts right up.

Rose Anne smiles.

"I need to help Toby with Sun Up in the morning," Bill says

"You said we'd float the Missouri tomorrow. Give Toby the ranch for a day."

"That bull is a Grand Champion. His sons and grandsons can be found on ranches all over Montana and Wyoming. He was good in his day. He won first place in Denver."

"Your champ has seen his last days for about two months now."

"He's done right by us. I'll do right by him," Bill says and sets his jaw. "Toby will take a few minutes in the early morning. Then I'm all yours. If it's the river you want, we'll be casting our rods by noon."

"So, no wild parties in town after the play tonight."

"How about something wild at home? Home's not so bad, is it? You're happy you decided to come out here, aren't you?"

She turns her head to the window and nods to a passing sagebrush. A gray shepherd dog strolls across the road, his ears cocked back. She can see his ribs through his frazzled fur, imagines a soft growl in his throat.

"Have you thought any more about our talk last week?" Bill asks.

Rose Anne looks at him blankly.

"About a real ceremony and a reception? We've been married over a year. The Justice of the Peace was great, but I'd love to celebrate with our friends and family."

"Your family," Rose Anne says before she can stop herself. Reaching out quickly, she ruffles his hair. "You silly, sweet guy." The sun is bright orange now and low in the sky. She wonders what color the sun is in Alaska.

"We'd get presents. We could take a real honeymoon."

"Bill." She says his name cautiously, like it might be the frail wing of a hummingbird, or maybe she and the moment light on the hummingbird's tiny bones. "I'd like to make reservations for Alaska tomorrow. We'll have to make them soon or we'll be chipping ice off the Talkeetna."

Bill sits back and stares at the road in front of him. He says nothing.

Rose Anne stares at the road in front of her. "I want to see Alaska for the first time in the long glorious light, when it's full of life."

"The girl's a poet in the making."

"Have you thought about dates yet?"

His fingers drum against the steering wheel. "I've got a lot on my mind. Let's enjoy the evening. We'll talk tomorrow on our way to the Missouri, our own river."

"I really want to see Mt. McKinley." Denali, her unrequited love.

"Can't you start with a smaller mountain, say Granite Peak or something?"

"It's only half the size."

"We have a perfectly good mountain the other side of Helena. Mt. Helena. Hell, we'll go tonight if you want."

She punches him in the shoulder. "Stop it. I've never even seen the ocean. I've never even been out of the state. Please. Choose some dates."

"Oh, no. Did you hear that?"

She shakes her head and then nods when the flipping sound gets louder. Bill rolls the Chevy to a stop less than a minute later.

"The damn fan belt," Bill says. "I'll bet money."

Sure enough. The damn fan belt. It shattered, frayed, broke, whatever damn word she wants to use for the damn fan belt. Rose Anne takes in a breath and lets it go. "That's an easy fix," she says in a calm voice. "Do you have one in storage in the barn?"

He just looks at her, a bland, silly look.

"Do you?" she says.

"It's a '58 Chevy. I'm not accustomed to keeping parts for cars made before I was born. I deal in cattle, not cars. Wrong "C" word for me to have lots of spare parts around. Herefords, a rare Brangus or two, and sluggish hot bulls. Pitch forks, a bridle here and there. But no, I do not have a fan belt for a '58 Chevy in the barn."

"It's probably just a regular old fan belt. It wouldn't be much different than a fan belt for the Ford."

"I do not have any fan belts. Anywhere. Other than on my vehicles, where they belong," he says.

"I'm just asking."

"Look. We're less than a mile from the house. Let's walk back, grab the Ford and take it into town. We'll miss the play but we can still have dinner or something, take that stroll up on Mt. Helena if you want. It'll be a full moon night. We can bring wine and dessert in a picnic basket."

Rose Anne stares out the open window toward the western horizon. A rangy border collie sits out at the edge of the property, his head tilted toward the Bel Air. She opens the door, pulls off her two-inch heels and walks toward the only rock within one hundred yards.

"Snake country," Bill says from the Chevy. She doesn't give a damn about snakes or Mt. Helena. She wanted to go to the play. Was that too much to ask? Well, yes, as a matter of fact, it was too much to ask.

At home, Bill climbs into the Ford and starts the engine. Rose Anne opens the passenger side door, throws her shoes, the shawl and her beaded purse onto the seat. She slams the door in front of her and runs into the house. In the bedroom she pulls off the red moiré and throws it on the floor. She opens the French doors and walks outside in her black slip and bare feet and sits on the deck near the gardens.

One morning before her mother died, Rose Anne sat near her bedroom door, just out of sight of her father pacing the gray linoleum of their tiny kitchen. *Pull yourself together*, he said to himself, his fists shaking at his sides. And she did. She pulled herself together. Her mother died a week later and Rose Anne and her father sat properly together on the hard wooden pews at her mother's funeral.

Bill is right. It is a full moon night. On a moonless night she might see Venus in the sky. And Mars. A shooting star to wish

upon. Tonight, she sees the lilacs and poppies drinking in moonlight. Damn. Bill is right again. "I am a poet in the making," she says to no one and stops her shaking fists.

After a while Bill comes out, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and sits next to her. His long legs stretch out before him and she can see the blond hairs on his legs under the bright moon. The moon is so far away and he's so close. It's amazing how much they illuminate each other. He smells fresh and showered. He holds her father's Robert Service book in his hands. After a long silence, he puts the book in her lap.

"Will you read to me?" he asks.

She turns and looks at him. She feels something like tears, crazy, wild tears at the edge of some unknown wilderness she is terrified to enter. She doesn't answer.

He stands and lights the lamp next to her.

She hears a coyote howl out in the north pasture where the old bull lives. She moves her lips to read. Something breaks and she can't go on. She thinks it's her voice.

Or someone's long ago heart.

She wakes up the next morning obsessed with thoughts of Raymond: the gold color of his room when she first moved into the bedroom next to his, the secret waffle recipe he finally shared with her at the end of their sophomore year, the feel of his football jersey against her bare skin, his dark eyes and black curly hair, how he towered over her a little more each year. Even in the early years he'd wait quietly by the large pine while she placed flowers on her parents' graves. Afterward, he'd walk her home or take her out for ice cream, hardly saying a word, just staying close.

At breakfast, Rose Anne makes waffles. She wears a worn pearl button shirt, jeans, boots, and a yellow scarf tied at her neck. Bill sets a ball cap on the counter and is full of apologies. "I'm sorry about the play. We'll have another chance. We'll go to the next one. We'll start out far ahead of time and have three vehicles ready to go."

Rose Anne smiles. "I'll help you today," she says. "That way maybe we'll still

Even in the early years he'd wait quietly by the large pine while she placed flowers on her parents' graves.

have time to get out to the river.”

“I’ll get the Bel Air fixed sometime next week.”

She nods. When they finish eating, she clears the table. She tries to remember the last time she saw Raymond. It was over a year ago. She thinks about his dark hands and the large veins running through them. She remembers the way her skin tingled when he braced his hands against her ribs. On the way out to the truck she grabs her father’s Robert Service book.

In the Ford she puts the beaded purse in the glove box. She folds the shawl and drapes it over the back seat. She puts the heels on the floor. She’ll remember to take them in when they return to the house.

On the way to meet Toby in the north pasture, she sees a blue heeler skirting the property, searching for food, some smell pulling him close. He’s a wild dog, and she’s seen him before, near the state road where a deer had been killed.

Toby and another hired hand are already in the north pasture with the flatbed and a tractor with a chain and bucket. Toby is a short cowboy with muscles that bulge from his sweat soaked T-shirt. The brim of his hat, softened from years of ranch work, dips forward, sheltering his eyes. The other man is tall, fair-skinned with freckles. They are both covered in grime. The old bull lies muddy behind the flatbed, his black fur slicked against his ribs, his back covered in dried blood, his head lying at an odd angle to the body. The chain is wrapped around his front legs.

“He’s dead?” Bill asks.

“Got stuck in the stock pond last night,” Toby says. “The struggle to get free was too much for the old man.”

Bill swallows hard.

“Birds got their fair share of him.” Toby points to dry droplets of blood on the bull’s back where the fur had been picked apart.

“You tried pulling him out by his head?” Bill asks.

“Nearly severed his neck,” Toby says and pulls out his skinning knife. “Might as well finish the job.”

“Ya gonna get his skull cleaned?” the freckled man asks.

“Sure ‘nough,” Toby says, looking at Bill. “Shame to let it go to waste.”

Rose Anne steps in close to the mud hole. Already flies buzz around the dead bull. The smell wafts out, not strong, but starting.

“The Missouri will have to wait,” Bill says.

She nods. There is always tomorrow.

Toby cuts the last bit of hide away from the neck, completely separating the bull’s head from the body. He and Bill lift the head and the severed hide into the back of Bill’s Ford. Mud smears their pants.

A few minutes later Toby pulls Bill aside. When they are done talking, Bill walks over to the Ford where Rose Anne stands alone. The morning sun has passed quickly and she is sweating from the heat. At least she’ll have a cool shower at home.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

Bill shrugs. “Coyotes and dogs will be happy tonight. Will

you drive the Ford? I want to ride with Toby out to the dead bed.”

“Sure. What’s happening?”

“He’s got a job offer over in Miles City. Pays double what I can afford. I’m gonna try and talk him out of it. I don’t have much hope, but I gotta try.”

“He’ll be leaving.”

“Most likely.”

“When?”

“He wants to go within the next couple of weeks. I’ll try to keep him until the end of the season.” Bill rests the back of his hand on her face, kisses her cheek gently and turns to leave. It’s the same thing her father did before telling her that her mother died. The same thing Raymond did after telling her about the girl from Texas.

“Bill?”

He stops, his back to her.

“I’d like those dates for Alaska so I can make our reservations.”

He turns on his heels, his voice tight. “Sweetheart, I can’t give you dates right now. My prize bull is dead and my foreman just told me he’s quitting me. Unless I can talk him into another year, or I can get someone good in here pronto, we’re gonna have to put that trip off. We’ll go next year. For our honeymoon.”

Rose Anne stares at the land. The snakes have all slithered off to somewhere cool. She squints so she might see them under a rock or near the sagebrush. Her small eyes keep the tears back.

Bill is watching her. “We’ll talk about it when I get back from the dump, OK?”

Rose Anne nods, a wild danger breaking loose inside of her, the dust in her hair, mud on her boots. She gets into the truck and moves the seat forward. She waits for Bill to leave in the flatbed with Toby and the hired hand. They drag the bull’s body toward the dumpsite. Dust billows up and clouds her view of them. When they are gone, she starts the engine.

The state road would take her to I-15 where she’d turn north, past Wolf Creek to the Hi-Line and the border town of Sweet Grass. She wonders how far she’d get in a stolen pickup with the head of a dead prize bull in the back.

Denali. A gold prospector had unofficially named it Mount McKinley in the late 1900s. It took years for the Alaska people to return the name to its Koyukon origin. Rose Anne feels like that. Like someone changed her name to suit the rolls on their tongue. She learned to respond, and her true name got lost. "Denali," she whispers to the wild dogs.

But she won't leave the ranch.

She loves Bill. She married Bill. The ranch is her home. Belonging, like time, is a funny thing. First, she belonged to her mother and father, then to Raymond's family. Now she belongs with Bill and the ranch. She belongs out here, next to nothing, in the wild heart of God. The lonely howl of the coyote, the family of wolves in the hills, the sun and wild dogs forever crossing the prairie, Bill's crazy sweet smile over pumpkin pancakes, the turn of his head when she enters the room, his palm against her cheek.

Bill is her home. In his shining green eyes, she sees toddlers, school lunches, teenagers riding the plains, muscles that bulge and grow old and sag, bills that get paid again and again, gray hair and liver spots. She hears him call her by her true name.

She puts the Ford in gear, turns it around and drives to the Chevy. It takes her less than five minutes to put the sewing machine, the checkered dishes, the blue enamel teapot, and the mohair blanket in the truck cab. She sees the Bel Air for what it is, another dried carcass on the parched land, a memory of a life lived and gone.

The day she left Raymond she drove the Chevy up behind a red Plymouth with Texas plates. In the large window of the body shop, two shadowed heads appeared, one of them hovering above the other. She can still see the woman's long hair, and Raymond's arm cupping the woman's waist. Rose Anne's lip twitched like it did when she was a kid. She did not wait to see who opened and closed the door. She put the Chevy in gear and drove to the nearest bar where she sat next to Bill and drank.

Before the night was over, she'd told Bill the whole story, her mother's death, her father's Yukon, Raymond's body shop, the red Plymouth. Bill brushed her hair aside and put her cheek in his palm.

"I'll take you to Alaska," he said. And she believed he would.

She believes he will.

Someday.

At the house she kills the engine and stares at a wild heeler. He circles the truck, makes a bold dash toward her and Sun Up. He licks the mud off the wheel wells and jumps for the truck bed. He'll be an old dog one day in the field where the rattlesnakes wait. But now, he's vibrant and young, fast on his haunches and full of courage.

He bounces from the truck with a thick piece of Sun Up's severed hide. The gray shepherd joins him. Rose Anne reaches past her father's Robert Service book and retrieves her cell phone from the beaded purse. She clicks the travel agent's number and prices two flights to Fairbanks for next summer. They can take a train from there to Denali Park, sign up with a tour group. She

wants Bill to join her, but if he has other priorities, she'll still go. The land, the cattle, they are Bill's dreams. But it's a big land, with plenty of room for her own.

She brings her things inside and smiles as she writes the flight dates in a note to Bill. "Yes," she says simply. She hopes he'll say the same to her, or at least send her off with his blessing. They'll have their ceremony and reception before or after she touches the great base of Denali Mountain. Back in the truck, she returns the phone to the glove box. Satisfied, she turns the Ford toward the Missouri River for the day and drives away from the ranch and the wild dogs who moan now like lovers.



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