

The Unseen West

My mother took my hand. "What did Henry say?"

"I'm not going into that," I said, although, his last words to me echoed continuously in my brain.

"Oh Sylvie. Did you know this was going on?"

"No." I took my hand back and lowered my head into it. "I had no idea."

I let my mother absorb the bleak reality of the situation. We sat breathing in silence on the battered Victorian loveseat she'd just brought over from the Flea Bonanza as a prop to lend intimacy to my marriage, before she'd even heard it was over. She wanted me to get it reupholstered, and I would too, because the dead looking relic amplified Henry's words, the words I couldn't tell my mother: "You faded," is what he'd said.

Mom had suggested that a love seat would be perfect for having drinks, by the fire. And so it was. We stared into the remote controlled gas flames, not looking at each other, glasses in hand, the scotch within arm's reach. Just the two of us, again.

"But, how did you find out?" I could feel my mother preparing to somehow solve this problem for me, despite the fact I was almost fifty years old and had been married twice as long as she'd ever been. She would insist on gathering information and applying her wiles, as if that could help against the fact of Beverly.

"I planned a trip, to surprise him--an adventure out west for a few weeks in July. We'd always talked about it." I thought of the plane tickets to Arizona I'd carefully printed out. How I'd placed them in a cream envelope with a wide gold ribbon to present to him at dinner that

night. They were upstairs in my underwear drawer. Dinner was cancelled.

"Out west?" my mother prodded.

"Well, I called Beverly thinking she'd black out the dates on his calendar so he'd be free. She couldn't seem to figure it out. I didn't realize there was no way she'd let him go on vacation with his own wife. Henry came home that same day and told me he was in love with someone else. I said, 'But I'm planning a trip. Camping and visiting ghost towns of the Old West. On horseback.' "

My mother looked horrified by this tale. I'm pretty sure she was aghast at the vacation I'd envisioned to keep the old spark alive. She hates to camp.

"Henry said he couldn't go. He had other plans," I finished. I poured myself another dollop of scotch and threw it back.

The doorbell rang.

"Henry," I said, without meaning to.

"Let me get it." My mother patted my shoulder and gently pressed me back into the pathetic sofa.

It surprised me when I heard her laugh in the front hall. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but she sounded rather chirpy. There was a low voice I couldn't distinguish.

"Mom, who is it?" I called.

"It's all right, Sylvie. It's for me."

"What are you talking about? Who is it?" This was my house. I got up and went to the front hall to see her ushering a strange man, not my husband, across the doorstep. "Who is this?"

The man stopped in his tracks. My mother blushed, deeply. "Sylvie, this is Ray."

"Ray? Ray who? Who is this, Mom?" For a moment, I had really thought it might be

Henry. Then I thought maybe it was Bart, who didn't know, and I didn't want my mother explaining to my grown son that his father had left me. So the appearance of the unknown man completely threw me.

"I asked Ray to stop in here on his way home from the store so he could see the sofa in its intended setting. He has a wonderful eye for pattern and design, and I thought he could help us choose the fabric."

Ray smiled in my direction. He was wearing a leather bomber jacket, and had a large book of what appeared to be swatches under his arm. Despite being an old man, he looked hip and energetic with longish gray hair tucked behind his ears. There was something vaguely Native American about him. I am sure he could tell by my stiff reaction, that it wasn't a good time. But my mother was holding his elbow so he wouldn't escape. He lifted his hand to pat hers. I realized all at once that she had a certain familiarity with this guy. He was a suitor.

"Ray is here to lend his expertise," she enthused, as if I should be grateful.

"I can come back another time," he said. To my mother, he added, "I'll just get home and call you later." I looked again at Ray as I tried to process this turn of events. My mother and the upholsterer? I looked back at my mother again, at her changed demeanor, her uplifted expression. I am sure it was how I looked when I'd brought Henry home. I had never imagined a reverse situation.

"Oh, let's just pop in and see the love seat. This won't take a second, Sylvie. Come on Ray."

My mother pulled him past me into the living room. He tried to nod reassuringly at the gas fireplace setting that awaited, but it was clear he'd rather hightail it. I decided to beat him on the draw.

Grabbing my bag and my jacket, I said, "Mom. Ray. Please, sit down. Have a drink by the fire. I've got to run. Good-bye."

I banged my way out the door, tripped down the steps and nearly fell into my car. I had to drive onto the grass to get by Mom's Explorer and Rays pick-up, but the need to escape my mother's love life was urgent. I thought about her collection of refurbished occasional chairs, which I'd assumed had been an old woman's attempt to keep life fresh and bright in light of inevitable decline, when, in fact, it had been an obvious ploy to spend time with the upholsterer.

How Henry would love this. He had always maintained a strong rapport with my mother based on mutual respect for their social positions and an unspoken appreciation for the dutifully borne project of me. And now they should have a lot to discuss. They were both alight with the fire of love, while I drifted into the shadows, disintegrating like ash.

With no idea where I was headed, only following the primal urge to *run*, I raced the Bronco along the back roads outside of town. I knew I was running from Mom and Henry, but maybe I thought I could escape from myself. I took out a few curbs and felt the acute agony, yet again, of how clueless I was.

All fall and up until the day he walked out, I'd been hoping to rekindle romance between Henry and me, and I'd thought it might be possible. I'd been inspired last October when I noticed how good he smelled. He leaned across me while we were going through the bills and I caught the scent of fresh soap--a really crisp smell I'd never noticed on him before. It struck me as intensely masculine, or maybe there is just something about a man figuring out how much life insurance he needs that is sort of rousing.

Passing out of the trees and into the open countryside, I noticed the familiar maze of colonial stone walls and realized I had found my way onto Old Bushmill Road. Of course. Naturally. I was headed for the field with the historically preserved Great Oak under which I'd first yielded to Henry on a blanket spread out next to the car. The tree I had always loved for what it meant to Henry and me, for its inevitability and beauty. In full leaf it was regal and triumphant, anchoring the surrounding landscape and owning the rolling hills leading up to it. For all these years I had relished the memory of the soft night under the wide spread tree, the wildflower meadow, the clear moon and the beautiful boy who was in love with me.

You know, having sex in a field by the side of the road is not exactly romantic. As I sped toward it, I remembered being eaten alive by mosquitoes and feeling alarmed by the proximity of nature to my bare skin. I had sacrificed myself in the pursuit of true love, while Henry was simply overwhelmed by what every man on a hot summer night is overwhelmed by.

I had hoped my impulsive decision to marry would shock and upset my mother. It was 1970. I was supposed to start at the University of Delaware in a few weeks, just like a lot of my friends, all of us planning to be true feminists with big careers in some ineffable, powerful future. But, Mom practically pushed me into the wedding because he came from the finest of Philadelphia families, and we had lost all our men folk, as she put it. Our men folk.

A sudden siren sent me skidding off the road along a wood rail fence. The car stalled out as I abruptly came to a stop on the grass shoulder. Old Bushmill is a country lane, no one is ever on it, but there's a roundabout halfway along, to allow for several farm roads to come in. I hadn't seen anyone there, and breezed through on my way toward the tree.

The sheriff himself was waiting, expectantly, as I fumbled with the push button and the keys to finally get the electric window down. Although I'd never officially met the man, I knew

that Henry didn't think too highly of him. I wondered if his dislike was only because the sheriff is quite tall, unlike Henry, who is not.

As I handed him my license and the paperwork Henry always stored neatly in a leather pocket between the seats, the sheriff said, "Lady, when you approach the rotary, you have to slow down and look first. That's what the yield sign is for. You're driving recklessly."

There were no other cars in sight. No pedestrians or joggers, or horses or cows grazing, as there sometimes were. Nothing. "Sir, you scared me to death. And, you don't have to stop at a yield sign. There was no one there. I looked and then I drove on. How is that reckless?"

"Because *I* was there, and you almost killed me. Going sixty in a thirty mile an hour zone!" He could barely look at me he was so mad.

"Well don't take it personally." I was angry myself. "I wasn't trying to kill *you*." He did a sort of double take and seemed to realign his attitude as if his initial outburst had nothing to do with me.

"Who *were* you trying to kill?" He looked right into my eyes and waited for an answer.

At the absurdity, the particularity, of the question, I blinked a few times. I saw the tree up ahead. You couldn't drive up to it anymore the way we used to. The wood rail fence got in the way. It bordered the field by the road and you could only read about the tree's two hundred and fifty year reign on a little plaque the preservation society put up a few years ago. The tree had been witness to the American Revolution and the Civil War, to our entire courtship and, most momentously, to its demise. I sighed.

The sheriff looked back to his pad and started to write up the ticket. "This is a major violation," he said.

I noticed his gun belt creaking and straining as he wrote purposefully with his pen. The

gun seemed prominent even from the height of my lopsided 4 x 4. I found myself wondering how often he had to draw his weapon in this town. Pretty sedate crowd in these parts, if you didn't count us speeding housewives.

He stopped to look at me as if he could hear my thoughts.

Then I remembered how he'd knocked me over on his way to a cup of coffee a few days before. Despite the fact that I am six feet tall, sport a red beret and a giant polka dot handbag, he hadn't seen me. I had somehow been invisible. When I saw him eying my spotted tote on the passenger seat, I thought I caught a spark of recognition from him. Maybe, he'd seen me after all.

The sheriff really was rather fit looking. So trim, in fact, I had always thought he was a much younger man. But seeing him up close, the creases at either side of his mouth and between his brows, I realized that he was at least my age, probably a few years older. It's just that he carried his years with ease. He peered more closely at me and seemed to be taking me in with interest.

Aware of how I must look, I tried to wrench my face from acute annoyance into something more becoming.

I was shocked when he asked, "Have you been drinking?"

My hands flew to cover my mouth. Had I so grossly misinterpreted his interest in me? Utterly ridiculous. I had just been going a tad fast. In an instant, any remaining semblance of self-possession I had ever had, collapsed. I blurted a tiny sob—like a hiccup. I wished I had simply wrapped the car around the damn tree silhouetted in the cold dusk ahead. Is that what I had wanted? Is that what I was doing here? As my possible intention dawned on me, and I realized that the option, whether I sought it or not, was no longer available, I struggled for

breath. I sensed something coming, rumbling like a gathering stampede. I looked to either side frantically as I felt the threat grow imminent. The sheriff was still looking at me. He didn't seem to hear or feel anything. How could that be? It was pervasive. Overwhelming. Upon us.

He leaned towards me with concern.

I opened my mouth wide, and a strangled moan escaped.

“Is everything okay, ma’am?”

I nodded and meant to reassure him, but, instead, shocking even myself, I unleashed a gusher of loud, croaking sobs that must have erupted from my own hidden roots. Steaming geysers of blackness, bewilderment, and grief erupted of their own volition. I was powerless to stop their flow. Hearing myself wail and gasp, tears and saliva dripping from my chin, I was astonished that these sounds, and oh my god, viscous, were issuing from my own body. My innards were taking over and seizing without my full participation. I have never been a crier. I have always thought of myself as calm, unflappable. Yet, this is what it meant to be wracked with sobs. I watched myself in amazement as if I were witnessing an accident. In the meantime, there it was. I could taste the scotch in the back of my throat. My disembodied presence looked at the sheriff to see how he was taking it.

“Whoa, now. Okay. Easy there,” he said. He had reflexively stepped back and moved his hand to the butt of his gun. When he observed me looking through my histrionics at his gun hand, he quickly moved it to adjust his wide brimmed hat. “We're just talking. You're okay. It's okay.”

“I am not intoxicated,” I protested thickly. “I just had a few sips. Really.”

I needed to blow my nose and wipe my face, Jesus. I wanted to sound logical, not hysterical. The best I could summon was, “Today is my anniversary. The Pearl Anniversary.

Thirty years. Nobody cares.”

At first he didn't say anything. He just blew air through his lips in a sort of silent whistle. And then, he said, "I see. Okay. All right.”

“I planned a trip...” My voice trailed off as I realized the futility of even talking about it or trying to explain a damn thing.

Let's face it. I am not one of those women who can soften a man with tears. I do not become beautiful when I well up. I am red and sticky and bloated looking. The sheriff had no idea what to do with me, but it didn't look like he was going to let me off with a warning the way some cops do for a pretty woman. He waited by the window. He didn't offer me a handkerchief. I went ahead and just blew my nose into my scarf.

"Ma'am, I don't think you're in any condition to drive. Park the car here and I'll take you home. One of my guys will come out and get it for you later."

"I'm perfectly fine," I told him, as I wiped my face.

"Look. I could take you in for driving under the influence, but I can see you're a little raw. I'm trying to give you a break.

The sheriff drove me home silently after calling his actions into dispatch and requesting another car to meet him at my address.

As we pulled up the circular driveway, I saw him studying the house. The outdoor lights were all on and the place looked well tended in the dusk.

"I've been here before," he said. "You must be Bart's mother.”

"Do you know Bart?"

"Yes. Well, it's been a long time, but he and my boy, Danny, used to be friends when

they were little. I remember I picked Danny up here once."

I tried to picture a little boy named Danny. Nothing came to mind. That had to be more than twenty years ago.

"How is Bart these days? He was such a nice kid." The sheriff went on as he pulled up to the front and turned the car off, looking at me in the rear view mirror, where I was visible in the swath cut by the porch light.

"He's getting married. A lovely girl." The thought of Bart and Aimee and their impending wedding was too much. I didn't want to think about it and decided to get out of the car.

When he saw me fumbling around for the door handle, he remembered he had to open the door from the outside. You can't open a cruiser from the inside, for obvious reasons, I guess.

The sheriff helped me out of the car, cupping his hand above my head so I wouldn't hit it on the door frame, just like they do in the movies. I was almost enjoying the novelty of this episode. He walked me up the steps to the porch, and he was sort of gallant about it, holding his Smokey Bear hat in his hands. We stopped at the front door. It was odd to be standing there, waiting, with someone taller than me.

"I am not a drunk driver," I said.

"But you do have a lead foot," said the sheriff. He actually looked at my feet, as if to confirm their leaden quality, laughing softly to himself. Then he had to raise his eyes the length of my body to look at my face again. I wasn't sure what to do.

"Is anyone home for you?" he asked. "Husband? Family?" Once again, I flushed at my idiocy.

"Sheriff, thanks for the ride. I can go get the car. I don't want you wasting man-hours on this. I am sure you have better things to do."

"It's already in the works Mrs. Cavendish. My guy will be here any second to meet me."

I turned to let myself into the house and realized I didn't have my keys. The sheriff had taken them when he pronounced me unsafe to operate a vehicle.

"Oh. Sorry," he said as he pulled them out of his pocket. He unlocked the door and let me in to my own echoing foyer. He took a look around, assessing what little he could from the light that fell through the door and windows. The console table with the mail, the coat hooks, the front stairs, the lamps, unlit. We heard his officer pull into the drive. He slipped my keys out of the lock and re-pocketed them. He called over his shoulder, "We'll go in your car, Harris." The black pick-up in the drive looked strangely familiar. I couldn't tell who was driving it though. Considering I had just been escorted home by law enforcement, I hoped it wasn't someone I knew and I backed further inside. The sheriff turned to me and said, "I'll be right back."

As I stood alone in the dark, I heard the skid of the trooper's tires leaving the gravel drive. Then there was nothing. A heavy silence so immense I cowered. Suddenly, I missed my dog, who'd always come at me scrabbling and sliding across the wood floor. He'd been gone for years, but I felt exposed in my abandoned state. No husband. No children. No self-respect. The dead dog seemed more likely to return than any of them. I couldn't turn on the lights. I would be too visible, too vulnerable. I felt my way upstairs, eager to hide.

The old glass knob on the door to the linen closet on the landing caught my eye. I pulled open the door and inhaled. It's a wide walk-in, with floor to ceiling wrap-around shelves that housed linens as old as our marriage. And it smelled heavenly. I like a lot of fabric softener, and I had lined all the shelves with lavender paper. I decided to climb in, and lay myself as far into the corner of a middle shelf as possible, squeezing behind an old comforter and several down

pillows. I became small and safe. It was very quiet, but it was not the overwhelming silence of the hallway; it was the warm quiet of feathers, settling, of the wood, gently adjusting to my weight, of my hair, brushing against the pillow. Even the scent of Spring Meadow seemed to carry a soothing, soft hum. I relaxed and let the closet absorb my quaking.

The kids used to play school when they were little. Bart was always the schoolmaster, trying to teach his little sisters to write cursive when they could barely hold a crayon. And, for their illegible scribbles and giggling, he would have to give them detention. So, he'd tuck them into the shelves of the linen closet, turn out the lights and close the door. When I tried to put a stop to the game, which involved a lot of screaming, the girls cried and insisted that it was their favorite thing to do. And now I was experiencing the closet's warm embrace. No wonder they had loved it. I thought of Maggie and Celia now, happily crammed together in a tiny dark apartment in New York City, apparently thriving in its comforts and reliving their favorite childhood pastime.

Perhaps they would enjoy the Victorian loveseat my mother had brought over that morning. It was like doll furniture after all and would fit perfectly into their apartment. They could re-upholster it and it'd be just right for having drinks. By the radiator. I envied their New York lives, the wide-open futures that welcomed their fresh faces. I could practically hear the horizon beckoning them. The way I'd felt when I first met Henry. What had happened to all those possibilities?

I thought of the morning we'd been doing the bills and I'd noticed his fresh smell.

"Are you upping the payoff on your life insurance?" I raised my eyebrows in what I hoped he might recognize as suggestiveness.

"Mm-hmm," he said, not looking up.

“Don’t you think you have enough?” I tried again. “If it’s too good, I might be tempted to get rid of you.”

He looked at me then.

Here we were, empty nesters, at home on a late Saturday morning after a hot breakfast and a big pot of coffee, the warm smells of eggs and bacon still in the air. Out the window, a sparkling autumn day. The weekend stretched before us, full of time and promise.

“I’m sure I could think of some creative, visceral end you could admire with your last breath. You might even enjoy it.”

Oh, his eyes, the easy smile.

“What makes you think you’re even named on the policy?” he said.

A bit of the old banter! I quickened. We hadn’t been so engaged in a long time.

His relaxed pose encouraged me. “What must I do to be named?”

He hesitated and looked away, teasing, as if he were thinking of what exactly he might require. But then he turned back and said, “Of course you’re the recipient. I want you to be well cushioned if anything should befall me.”

“Befall you?” I laughed. “Well, I guess I’d rather have you alive. I won’t let anything befall you, nothing *lethal* anyway.”

This far into the marriage, he knew all my signals, and they weren’t too subtle anyway. We’d been together since we were kids. Sometimes I thought I married him just to escape my mother, but it’s not like it was a sacrifice. He’d made me feel then, for the first time, that I’d been lucky, chosen.

I extended my arm toward him, and with a flourish, swept all the paperwork on to the floor. I am too big to have sex on the dining room table, but I thought he might appreciate the

gesture.

He startled, looking a little confused, and then irritated, though he tried to hide it. Ultimately, he just patted me on the knee. With a controlled sigh, he said, “Not now, Sylvie.” He bent down to retrieve the bills. “I want to get a handle on our personal finances, and then I’ve got to go to the office.”

I was more disappointed than usual because we’d been so connected for a moment. Elements of our younger selves had almost found purchase. The fun we used to have. “Your loss,” I said, and headed to the kitchen to finish the dishes.

I attributed Henry’s lack of responsiveness to the intensity he’d been experiencing at work lately. He and Buddy had gotten into commodities futures, silver and oil. I didn’t really understand it. The money was coming in fast, which should have been good, but Henry was tense and exhausted. Still, his Paul Newman blues twinkled. His voice still rumbled and soothed. He was an attractive, exciting man. It made me want to put a little effort into thinking of something special to celebrate our longevity. That’s when I ‘d come up with the idea of the anniversary trip.

When I heard the floor creak outside the door, I realized I’d fallen asleep. I remained absolutely motionless, listening. After a moment, there was a knock on the door. I couldn’t help myself. “Who is it?” I said.

“It’s me.”

I held my breath, wondering if he had somehow, miraculously changed his mind.

“Sylvie, it’s me, Henry.”

I liked that he felt the need to clarify who he was, as if I wouldn’t know. That he feared

his own forced separation from me had somehow diminished his status with the woman who had known him, and his voice, better than anyone in the entire world, in his entire life.

I said. "How did you know I was in here?"

"Your mother called. Plus you dropped your bag on the floor out here. We've been looking all over for you." He waited. "May I come in?"

Oh, I liked that too. A little formality. He was treading lightly. Maybe the formality was a precursor to an apology.

He opened the door slowly and the lights from the hallway fell across the shelves, leaving him backlit in the doorframe like a cowboy in a western, hesitant to cross the threshold of the stoic woman who might offer him respite from the harsh dangers of the range.

"Your mother called me in a panic," he said. "She was worried when she saw the patrol car out front, but she couldn't find you."

I sighed. "Mom over-reacts for dramatic effect. You know that."

"Well, I got her to breathe. She's sitting downstairs in the kitchen." He remained in the doorway, unsure. I thought it might be all right. I started to actually pat my hair and smooth the front of my blouse in my shadowed corner.

"Sylvie, what are you doing in there? Did something happen? What about the police?"

"The sheriff is doing me a favor," I said, hoping he might wonder at my sudden connections and resources.

"What? What is wrong with you?" He leaned in and yanked the pull string that brought the uncovered bulb overhead to life. "Come out of there. Your mother said you sped out of here like a lunatic on two wheels." He stared at me, wedged behind the linens with my feet sticking out and my hair mussed, while I blinked at the brightness.

I guess he wasn't here to win me back after all.

"You've had your cell phone off for days," he went on. "I talked to all the kids tonight and they haven't been able to get in touch with you."

"What did you tell them?" I pushed myself up sharply and banged my head, hard. "God damn it!" I slid off the shelf bringing half the linens with me, tripping over the piled mess and falling into Henry. We tumbled to the hallway floor with me on top. I propped myself on his chest so he couldn't get up. "Don't tell the kids yet. Okay? I want to tell them myself."

"Jesus, Sylvie. Get off!" Rolling out from under me, he turned himself over onto his hands and knees. We both struggled to our feet. He started to wipe at his pants, as if we had rolled in the dirt. He said, "I didn't call them. They each called me. Today." He lowered his voice and looked away. "To say...about...today..." He seemed embarrassed to acknowledge it. We both just stood for a second. "I thought you would have told them already," he offered up, as if unaware of the fact that I had just fallen out of a closet.

"Tell them what? That the woman who answers their father's phone is somehow more compelling than their mother?"

He sputtered. "It's been weeks."

"Jesus. What did you say to them? Bart's about to get married. This will ruin everything."

"I told them we're taking time off, that we needed space," Henry said.

"Wow. After thirty years. Is that what we're doing? How does your secretary feel about her part in that worn out scenario?"

"I don't know why you insist on calling her my secretary. She's an associate. She has an MBA."

"Oh. So, it's her excellent qualifications that won you over."

He ignored me as I watched him. It killed me that he looked very good, in a way that still stirred me. Henry had always been a handsome man. He had rich dark hair and eyebrows. Perhaps he'd grayed a little, but his hairline hadn't receded at all. His blue eyes shone, and he was so intense looking, it could've been frightening, but he had, of all things, a dimple in his right cheek that simply invited you to find out what wonderful, secret thing he was thinking. I marveled that I had ever enticed this man in any way.

Tonight he looked unusual. I couldn't figure it out because I was also wondering how Bart and the girls had reacted to the news of our separation. Henry looked a lot like Bart tonight. He looked younger. And then I saw it. His clothes.

He was wearing jeans and a dark gray t-shirt. A t-shirt! And he obviously hadn't shaved this morning, and maybe not even yesterday, so he had a bit of stubble going. It was Saturday, of course, but Henry had never not shaved, in all the time I had known him. And, he had never owned a pair of jeans. Always he wore khakis and a collared shirt, if not his business suit. It's just the way he was raised. He didn't believe in jeans.

"Oh my God," I gasped. "She's dressing you."

Henry knew I had nailed it. That I had just registered his new girlfriend's influence upon him. He started self-consciously running his hand through his hair and rubbing his jaw. I wanted to say something caustic and raw, but I couldn't think of a single thing. He knew.

He sighed, like we'd already been over this a hundred times and he couldn't be bothered to explain it again.

This was really happening. The t-shirt seemed so decisive, the way his chest hair escaped above the crew neck. Henry was in love. He was being made over. I wanted to hit him. To hurt him. To make him feel his betrayal. What had happened to his principles? A two-day beard! Did

he fancy himself a contender for the Marlborough Man?

I suddenly grabbed him by his designer tee, threw him against the wall and attacked him. I pounded my fists against his chest and tried to slap his face. Was I too old for him? Is this how an old lady acted? Could a faded housewife start a fire? I went to punch him, but he caught my wrists and tried to hold me still while I continued to flail. Was he not getting enough sex? We'd wrestled quite a bit in our younger days, loving the game, the thrill of us. And here we were now in close, active proximity. Pressing against each other. But despite the sudden pang of those forgotten pleasures, I was too angry to wallow there. He was trying to deflect me but I was getting my knees and elbows into it, and in the end, I managed to land a fist to his nose.

He unhanded me in disbelief. His nose started to trickle dark rivulets. I backed away, tripped over the spilled linens and landed back in the closet. He cupped his hands to his face, and then drew them away, appalled by the blood on his fingers.

He had no place to wipe them but on his new jeans.

“Jesus!” His voice broke. “Just tell me what that asshole sheriff wants.”

I was feeling a little embarrassed about actually having landed the blow, but I was also lying on the floor, defeated. I wanted him to feel more hurt, more guilty. More something. Maybe, if he would just think about me. How I might feel. So, as I got back to my feet, I just told him straight out. “I was pulled over for drunk driving.”

That surprised him. A bit out of character for me, really. That should do it.

“My God. What happened?”

“I don't have to explain anything to you.”

He cleared his throat from the nosebleed. “Was anyone hurt? Are you okay?”

“Everyone is fine.”

“Where’s the car?”

“Out at our tree.”

“The old oak?” He stood with his mouth open, pinching his nose.

“We don’t have any other tree. The sheriff gave me a break. He got an officer to meet him here and said he’d go pick it up. Why are you even worried about the damn car?” I said.

“The sheriff has never liked me. Don’t talk to him about me, okay? Nothing about my business or about us, or about our life. Nothing.”

“You think the sheriff personally has it in for you and that’s why I got pulled over?” How fittingly narcissistic that, for Henry, the presence of something unusual or unexpected, such as law enforcement at the doorstep, or hey, even a pretty and attentive new assistant, should appear because of *him*, for *him*. I felt a little defensive, like I wasn’t getting my due.

“I have my own full life you know.”

“I don’t trust him. Why is he going out of his way?”

“Maybe he’s just a nice guy,” I said.

My mother started up the stairs. I had forgotten she was there. "Sylvie, where were you, Love? What's all the crashing around up here? Are you all right? I didn't know what happened, Sweetheart. I came back to check on you and found the police car out front. Thank God Henry came right over."

She got to the top of the stairs, and hugged me and held me to her cheek, and patted me several times. She turned to look at Henry then, all smiles.

"I'm so relieved you're here, Henry."

"Margaret, it's really--" he started.

I cut him off. "Mom! You can't call Henry to come over here anymore."

"Well. I'm sure Henry will always be available in a crisis. You don't mind, do you Henry?"

Henry couldn't speak.

"Of course not," she answered for him as Henry looked down, a hand on his hip, and sort of shook his head. She finally noticed the blood on his nose or hands, I suppose.

"Are you *bleeding*?" she asked. Then she turned to me, horrified.

"Mom! Just leave. Both of you. Get out of here." I pushed them down the stairs, not gently, and opened the front door. Henry was happy to go, but I had to nudge and prod my mother all the way out to her car. Still, Henry had to wait for my mother to leave because along with the patrol car, she was blocking the way, and he hated to drive on the grass. But, as usual, Mom elongated her departure.

"Sylvie, just tell me why the authorities are here. This is terrible," she said through her window, her hands clenching the wheel.

"The old Bronco broke down, Mother. I borrowed that one."

She looked down the drive, but didn't leave. "That makes no sense," she said. She waved her hand, dismissing it. Obviously she had more to say. "Please Sylvie. I don't know what happened upstairs. But, this is a good chance to talk to Henry. He's here. Don't waste the opportunity."

"Mom. I don't want to talk to Henry. I don't ever want to talk to him again. Please. Just go." I slapped her car several times harshly, like it was the flank of a horse and I was trying to make it take off.

She jumped, but she was still my mother. She liked to have the last word. "Just try. Just talk to him. You owe it to yourself... and to me," she said.

She let that linger between us.

Then she drove away.

Henry put his car in gear and pulled up beside me. He rolled down the window.

The cold solidified around me. I pressed my lips together tightly.

“I’m sorry. I really am.” He fixed me with his eyes, with that look that was supposed to mean he was sincere. A look I’d seen many times before in more ardent circumstances. Oh, I believed he was sorry. But he was only sorry for himself. Sorry about the toll of time and energy he’d wasted on his crazy wife and her theatrical mother. And that he’d gotten his new jeans dirty. He wasn’t sorry that he’d left me, that he was a cliché, that he was dressing too young for his age.

“Well, Happy Anniversary.” I said.

I felt him stare at me a moment longer. Then his window rolled up and he gunned the car out of there, leaving me in the driveway alone, the cold night sharp and mean, the taste of frost and bitterness filling my mouth.

It was frigid, and I didn’t have my jacket on. I hugged my shoulders, noting the somehow wonderful cold silk of my blouse as I rubbed my arms. As I turned to the house, I wondered when the sheriff would be back with my car. I looked at his cruiser sitting at the bottom of the steps, and down the driveway to the empty road. Nothing. Something must have held him up. He said he'd be right back but it had been several hours at least. The sheriff was an unusual man, leaving his car in my driveway. Surely, that can't be standard procedure. I think people usually have to retrieve their own cars from the police impound lot after they've been ticketed and towed

I reviewed my encounter with him. His height. His hat. The creaking of his gun belt as he

wrote up my ticket. He left a physical impression. The way he reached for his gun when I started to cry.

The gun. It had been tugging at me.

Why had I not thought of it before? I had been hiding in a closet with it just now. I hadn't thought of it in years, not since that nervous mother had called to make sure the house was safe.

Now I pictured the boy, Danny, in full focus. One of Bart's first little friends. Danny Reid, a dear boy with spiky hair. It was the mother I remembered. Before her little one was allowed to come for a play date, she had called to ask me if I kept a gun in the house. Of course, I lied and said absolutely not, but inside I was appalled at this kind of parent fact checking. I didn't know she was married to someone in law enforcement and probably thought about these things. Ellen was her name. She was enviously pretty and small.

I ran back into the house, up to the closet and kicked the linens out of the way to wedge myself upward with my feet on the shelves and my back against the doorframe to the top shelf, about ten feet high, where I had been sure it would be safe from the children. Now that I thought about it, they really had spent a lot of time in here. I wondered if they had ever found it. I felt around for the wood box. It was under several plastic bins of old photos and kids art projects, but I finally inched it out, breathing heavily in the balancing act.

I took the box down to the living room and turned on the fire. I sat in the love seat and waited to catch my breath.

It was an old box, plain, with a smooth dark wood and a brass latch. Holding it on my lap, I unclasped it carefully. First, the worn red velvet lining I remembered, and then, the antique firearm within. The pearl handled grip was dull and the nickel-plated chamber and barrel, engraved with a running herd of horses, was tarnished, but it seemed to suck in air and expand

after its long enclosure.

Mom used to tell us that her grandmother used it to rob a stagecoach at the turn of the century. Her grandmother liked having a pretty gun she said, and one that had matched her name, Pearl. There were six hollows where the fabled silver bullets were meant to rest but did not. I don't know what happened to them but I am sure Mom did something with them after all that.

Images of my father holding the gun, then of Pearl and her crime, the dark, heavy mysteries the gun conjured, invited a tang of guilt, and also, a strange fascination with scandal and the titillation of violence. When I pulled it out of the box, I thought of my brother Tommy, and the glorious cowboy battles we used to wage together as children.

Once, when Tommy had been the Indian, he covered a rag with gasoline, stuck it on a homemade bow and arrow and then lit it. We almost set the garage on fire when the dry grass around us started to spark and smoke. Tommy tried to stamp out the flaming rag with his bare feet while I ran around in circles, waving the gun we had snuck out of its box, and shouting almost gleefully, "Fire! Fire!" Luckily our father was nearby with the garden hose. He aimed it at us and sprayed full volume. When he was sure we were only wet and scared, and not burnt, he hugged us to him and continued our game gently, "Hi-yo Sylvie, Tonto. It's ok. It's ok." He didn't even scold us but I didn't see the gun again until the day my father died.

I polished the gun with a little silver polish. I don't really know what you're supposed to use on it. It was a historically significant weapon, a Colt six shooter with a long barrel, and felt like it weighed three or four pounds. I remember my mother polishing it a few times before the fire incident, and I remembered her telling Tommy, who had been caught with the gun out of the box more than once, that he would not be able to handle the gun until he was an adult.

Then we lost my brother when he was only sixteen. A car hit him late at night. He'd

snuck out to see a girl.

Dad died a few months later with the gun in his lap. He had not shot himself. I don't know how he died. Mom said the stress killed him. I never got the straight answer on that. I was afraid to ask. When the gun came to me eventually, I hadn't even wanted to look at it.

Examining the Colt anew as I polished, the engraving reminded me of Remington paintings.

I pictured the ghost towns I'd planned to see, their empty streets populated with lonely tumbleweeds, a whistling wind unsettling the dust in the sagging remnants of the Old West.

It sort of called to me.

I slipped my fingers around the grip and weighed the gun in my hands. Looking up, I suddenly saw Henry's photograph looking down at me from a silver frame. The one of him I took just after we were married. He is leaning against the wrought iron railing of our balcony, with Lake Geneva at his back on a gorgeous sunny day, laughing at something I am saying. He looks simultaneously devilish and helpless. Charming in every way.

It took both thumbs to pull the hammer back into the cocked position. It made a loud click that satisfied. Then, when I had aimed right at his eyes, I shot Henry's photograph off the mantle.

Or so I thrillingly visualized.

The picture didn't move from its frame. It stood serenely by, mocking me. The trigger had elicited only an ineffectual scraping sound. The chamber needed to be oiled or something. And, of course, no bullet came out of the gun.

The thing was at least a hundred years old. They didn't make the bullets anymore. Kind of tough to go to the local gun store and order up silver bullets for an ancient weapon that

seemed to be purely ornamental. But the weight of it was magnificent. I didn't want to put it down.

I started to walk around the house pretending to shoot at things: Bang! Bang!...the classic vinyl LPs that decorated the walls in his study. Bang!... his flannel bathrobe, still hanging on the back of the bedroom door. And in the bathroom, Bang!... his electric razor. I was having a great time in the kitchen, shooting up his wine collection...Bang! Bang!...which I fully intended to drink up later.

But, why wait? What was I saving it for?

“Let’s ride,” I said, as I uncorked a nice pinot noir, poured some into an enormous goblet and started back on the trek around the house, glass in one hand, gun in the other.