

EXCERPT

*V*oices

a novel

Roger Ladd Memmott



A GEMSTONE BOOK



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♦ CALIFORNIA / MICHIGAN ♦

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Joan of Arc, Oil on Canvas by Gaston Bussiere (1862-1929)

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Close-up of Jeanne d'Arc – sculpture

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Like death...virginity is a paradox: it is annihilated at the moment it is ascertained.

—Françoise Meltzer, *For Fear of the Fire*



T HIS IS MY FATHER'S STORY.

I am the son he never had. I am the daughter. Most fathers long for a son. Though he would have loved me, had he known me. I'm sure.

Some see him yet in the shape of my eyes. Old acquaintances, an uncle, an aunt. Or in the curve of my mouth: *Them lips*. When Tommy kissed me was he kissing my father's mouth? Others see my mother in me. The blonde hair, for certain. And skin tone. Cerulean eyes. Boys caught her up in their own, I know, with scarcely a thought, like sometimes grown men do me.

She was the love of his life.

And there he is, in a sentence perhaps, or caught between the lines, the way his heart falls in a single exclamation point or marks of elision, as if he were leaving something out so obviously there. As if he were more than the remnants of a few tattered letters—and the little Aunt Cathy will share. As if he were more than the remnants of me.

Accidents happen. But I do not believe he meant to hurt her.

Take for instance Tommy, the night we were driving back from the party. How he had me up against him, one hand on the wheel, and I am burning inside. We are barreling around the curve, the headlights clearing out the dark ahead and the unbroken centerline slipping away beneath us like tape from a spool, when out of nowhere. Just like that. I am singing softly to myself, along with the CD, and burning inside—

*Now the flames they followed Joan of Arc
As she came riding through the dark...*

—when out of nowhere. Just like that, caught in the yellow glare of the oncoming headlights and our own, little more than a suggestion, there, in the blindspot, both sudden and slow: barely a hint of that stunned look in the suspended attitude of what you might call surprise and imminent flight. And I am frozen inside, all at once sliding away from Tommy and frozen inside, the startled driver of the oncoming car scarcely a blink in the headlights as we brake and slew to the side on noiseless drifting wheels, the front end locked and skidding away. When it gives, a galloping herd of trees charge past in the lights as if rushing headlong into some hellish abyss. The other car slips by, around the curve, all at once gone in a lingering red taillight blur. And yet again, the riverside foliage awash in our lights, one long and oddly compressed shadowgreen smear. The airbag is like a punch in the face, and I think we are going over, but don't. We are skirling and bouncing through roadside brambles and all at once jarred from the rear by a solid thwunk and hear something crack like a rotten branch breaking and then a rattling spray of glass. I slam forward and then back, hands bracing the dash, as the headlights come to rest in a dim yellow swath facing the way we came on the

river side, and who knows where the animal went. When Tommy comes to himself, it is in a burst of gratitude and profanity. Some pain, then thinking of me.

"Kala! Kala!"

But the blood is actually his. And I am wondering about accidents. If this one is finally complete. One hand on the wheel, the other astray—the oncoming car and flash of deer hide so sudden like that. I'm just saying...

...how life gets lost in the simple things.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I think."

Like that. But I do not believe he meant to hurt her, Daddy—still to this day. Anymore than Tommy meant to hurt me.

The engine is a hiss and a hum above the music gone soft. Tommy tries to get out, woozy, gives up. He gets the window rolled down, in spite of the rear window being only half there. We are slammed up against the trunk of an oak tree, fifteen miles from the nearest town, maybe more, and I refuse to let him leave me. I turn the radio off, eject the CD—Momma's version of the Leonard Cohen song:

Something in me years to win

Such a cold and lonesome heroine...

Neither of us can get a signal on our cell phones.

"Don't cry," he says.

He starts the engine again, puts it in gear, but the car won't budge. He pries the door open enough to squeeze out, says: "See if that goddamn flashlight in the jockey box works."

But the batteries are dead.

When he comes back, he says: "It's an axle, I think, ana whole lot more."

It is okay to be downhearted, I want to tell him. He put so much time and effort between fender and grille, his heart in the engine, his soul in the paint. Sometimes I wonder which he loved most, flesh and bone or plastic and steel, knowing, of course, how much he loved me.

There was hardly a moon and we sat beneath the oak tree for over an hour before another car came by. In the meantime, Tommy used my skirt, a torn piece of my skirt, to stop the bleeding. He kept the ignition on to give us some heat. I could smell the river, honeysuckle and loam, and the thin light of the sky skimmed through the overhead branches and spidered the windshield as if we'd been caught in some massive web. After a while, I lay against him and slept, the rack of his chestbones rising and falling, a whisper of wheeze.

Kala, he said in my hair.

Daddy once said, of course not to me, once *wrote* in his journal, what Momma had said, said while she lay against him, to put his hand here, up under her smock:

I think she just moved.

But it was too early to know whether I was a he or a she, and so Daddy said: "I think you mean *he*"—which made Momma laugh. And press his hand tight, and kiss him, he said, while he pretended to feel me stir. That's how I know he wanted a son. In an olive tree grove—lying back against those old gnarled roots, her head in his lap, the sky a clear blue (cerulean, too): "I think you mean *he*."

Kala, Tommy sighed in my hair.

"What?"

"Id'z nearly morning," he said.

Maybe it was more than an hour. Possibly two. Us sitting there. Atremble with fright, confused. Dreaming somewhat.

"Hear that?"

"What?"

"Sumbwon's coming, I thing."

"Are you okay?"

"Am okay. You okay?"

"My ribs, maybe one of my ribs. I don't know"—and heard my voice whine. "Put your hand here. No, Tommy, I didn't mean there!" I lifted my blouse to just under my bra. "See?"

"Duth it hurd?"

"Yes."

"Here?"

"Yes."

"I'm tho thorry," he said, the words oddly thick, slurring and slow.

"Next time keep both hands on the wheel."

"I doe thing so," he said. "I'll keep both hams on you."

I moved his hand away from my ribs, kind of shoved it back in his lap. "Let me see," I said, but it was still too dark to see very well. Over his eyebrow, down across his nose, to the top of his lip, like a crack in mirror glass. "You get the bleeding to stop?" I put my thumb on his lips and brushed at his lips with my thumb. I gave him a peck.

"We're luggy," he said, slow, thick, like talking around a wad of banana in his mouth. "Kala. Here they come. Boy, are we ever. I thing id'z a trug."

He forced the door open and got out and limped up the little embankment and stood by the side of the road: a squat silhouette against the slack gloss of a waning moon and early morning sheen coming off the river. But not as squat as he seemed—slender, square—nearly six feet, dark and vague as my father. He loved me, I think. The headlights dipped over the river bridge, swept eastward along the edge of the walnut grove and bloomed around the curve,

catching up Tommy in an odd halo of sorts and blotting his shadow away, then him, all at once gone, like some prophet of old, to wherever the angels sing. At first I thought the truck was going to pass, and it did—Tommy now swinging his cocked thumb after it in a vague gesture. Scofflaw. Someone might have been seriously hurt.

It rattled to a stop. The engine coughed once then clattered to a growl. Idled a while. Gears raked and I watched the slow weaving approach of its taillights dulled by a thin morning mist. There was a dog in the bed. My door was jammed against the trunk of the tree and something told me not to get out of the car, but I was so nervous and I wanted to be with Tommy; so I wiggled across the console to the driver's side and squeezed out. It was chilly and I was halfway between the car and the road when I realized I'd left my jacket on the backseat—the one from *Coldwater Creek* that Aunt Cathy and Uncle Herb had given me for my birthday only last week. I was thinking about going back to get it when the dog barked.

"Gawd amighty," the driver said, rolling down his window. The dog wagged its tail and emitted a whiny-type growl. "Looks like she's totaled. You okay?"

I came up behind Tommy, hugging myself, and snuggled my arm through his. "She mide have a bruised rib," he said. "I doe thing id'z broke."

The driver looked at me. *Sweet thing*. I don't think he said it, though.

He shoved open his door and got out. He looked like Ichabod Crane, lanky and loose-jointed. He was wearing a Dodger's baseball cap. I looked at the dog. The dog looked at me, smiled in the way dogs do, tongue lolling. The passenger door squeaked open and another man got out. He came around the front of the truck, briefly dimming the wash of headlights glossing the road. He was wearing a

red baseball cap turned backwards. There was something wrong in his eyes. He wasn't as tall as Ichabod Crane. They looked like farmers, but weren't, I don't think.

"She's damn well totaled," he said. "Fuck."

I tightened my grip on Tommy's arm and nudged against him. "Maybe you can give us a lift," he said.

"Maybe we can," said the man with the baseball cap twisted backward on his head. He made a little grin that wasn't really a grin. "And maybe we can't. She hurt?" He eyed me up and down, lazily blinked at my chest.

I put my hand against my blouse, over the bruise. The light on the surface of the river was brightening some.

"Look at them skid marks," he said, pointing to the asphalt in front of the truck where we'd spun. "You going that way or this?"

Tommy pointed the opposite direction the car was facing.

"Damn!"

"Looky," said Ichabod Crane. He stepped toward Tommy, a step closer to me. "If we was going your way we would." The dog was standing on some sort of box in the bed of the truck, intent on the conversation, wagging its tail.

"You could take us into Chico," I said.

"We could," said the man whose eyes didn't make sense. "But we ain't. Orvin?" He looked at Orvin, once Ichabod Crane, for confirmation of the decision he'd made.

"God damn it," said Orvin. He shifted back and forth on his feet, like a boxer, dancing almost, but not quite. Then he hauled off and punched Tommy hard in the gut. "Get the girl," he said.

Tommy was bent over, sucking for breath, and I stood there for a second, frantic, shaking my hands. I must have looked like I'd really freaked out. *Pu-le-e-e-e-e-eaze!* I think I remember I cried. Then I started

to run. I ran toward the river then back. Then I turned around and ran toward the river again. Zigging and hopping and lurching. Right through the dew-soaked nettles and vines. The little man with weird eyes almost had me before I twisted away, fell, scrambled back to my feet. The dog was still in the truck. I think Orvin might have punched Tommy again. I wondered if they were going to kill us. I didn't think about rape.

"Stupid slut!" the little man wheezed.

I broke through the willows and into the Tule grass. He shrieked when a branch slapped back, screamed something vile. I snatched at the damp blades, high as my shoulders, lunged blindly with all the finesse of a tomboy, girlish nevertheless, and found myself in muck up to my ankles. The river lay before me a hundred or more yards across, calm and lightly rumpled and steaming in the thin morning light. Then I was on my hands and knees, scrambling toward the water and tumbling over a cliff. And you know those dreams? The ones where he has you by the ankle? Maybe it's the devil you think? You are crawling and your heart is about to sock through your chest and you can hardly get your breath? Well, that's how he had me, both of us in freefall, me shaking my leg like a dog to get him free of my foot. But it wasn't enough. He yanked himself right up over me, rolled—a mad dervish of elbows and spittle and cussing and fists. This isn't what I wanted, I thought. Not like this, not caught in a feverish frenzy I couldn't control. *Tommy*, I cried. He tried to pin me—*Roll over, Bitch!*—while I wrenched this way and that, twisted and punched, kneed him and kicked. Saw his hand claw for the stone, big as two fists...

...when I came to, he was on me, his breath sudden, like shock in my face. The ghostly weight of his bones, the way his eyes rolled...and from deep in his throat a stone-gathered wheeze, *You like it like this?* While all I could do was squeal and squeak—gasp and

fight through the pain. Like a ten-penny nail, but formless and red, at least in my mind, jabbing and worming and tearing inside me, spiked all the way up to my heart.

Next thing I know, I am in the water, the taste of his blood in my mouth, the shriek of his voice in my head.

“Orvin! God damn it! She bit me!”

Some angel, you hope, keeping demons at bay?

“She’s in the water,” the little man yelled. “God damn it!”

But I was only in water up to my thighs, maybe twenty feet out. There was a slight eddy, minimal current, and I could hardly feel a tug. My skirt billowed up and I shoved it back down, vaguely aware that the sleeve of my blouse was nearly torn off.

“Orvin!” He screamed. “Come get her.” He ran back and forth along the bank, below the little cliff I’d fallen over, god damning me and shaking his fist. If he couldn’t swim, I thought, maybe Orvin could. But I didn’t want to get caught in the current. Orvin came through the bushes, dancing on one foot to get the other’s boot off then dancing barefoot on that one to get the second boot off.

“Tommy!” I screamed. I splashed backward, dunking myself, and let the current take me, stroking downstream. When I glanced back, Orvin was standing in water up to his chest, the surface fog smoldering around him, his eyes holding me fast. Behind him, the little man hopped about on the bank, like Rumplestiltskin in the fairytale, shouting and shaking his fist. I couldn’t hear what he said.

. . . .

BEHIND THE LITTLE MAN ON THE BANK, another man appeared. It was hard to see beyond the excruciating pain in my head and with one eye swollen shut. But he looked familiar and I thought it was

Tommy at first. He was there and then gone. Orvin slapped the water like a frustrated halfwit and watched me floating downriver, sidestroking slow. As if in a dream, the glistening mist roiled around him. On the bank, the little man gripped my shoe, flailing his arms. He threw the shoe in the riverside muck, kicked at it and cursed. Stomped on it twice. I'd almost gotten beyond where the bank jutted out, where the river started to bend. Orvin stood in the water up to his chest, now studious, but thinking what was anyone's guess. Whether to pursue me or not? How far I might float downriver hugging the bank? Behind him, upriver a ways, someone stood on the highway bridge and leaned out over the water. Searching, searching. After a minute they were lost behind a network of shrubbery and limbs. When I couldn't see Orvin anymore, I started to swim. Who were these people, anyway? Was Tommy all right? I felt the tug of the river pulling me out and swam hard for the bank. It was maybe six o'clock in the morning and the accident we'd had two or three hours earlier hadn't yet quit.

That's what I mean. Accident's happen. You end up killing a person, or maybe getting killed yourself and it's no one's fault but the deer's. We'd never have met Orvin and his weird little friend except for a deer in the headlights. That made me laugh; that made me cry: deer in the headlights. Wide-eyed me. Cerulean. I gulped water and started to choke. I could almost feel the warmth of Daddy's hand resting on Momma's tummy that day in the olive tree grove: "I think you mean *he*."

The river pushed me toward a snag, and the snag reached toward me a branch, and I got hold of the branch and tugged hand-over-hand toward shore. The force of the water plastered me hard to the stump and I had to kick and step and pull myself hard to the shore. In the process, I jabbed my thigh good. By the time I got out, I was

bleeding all down the inside of my leg. I lightly touched the pain in my head, bleeding there too; it felt like someone had blown up a balloon in my skull that wouldn't deflate. I sat in the mud on the bank in a kind of hollowed-out thicket and hiked up my skirt. Shivering, I examined the wound. But the wound wasn't there. Just a smear and droplets of blood. I gazed out across the river, and the river rolled by in a series of glints. A couple of blue jays, close to the surface, were scolding and chasing a crow. And then a dove flew up in a kind of desperate but encouraging way. I jerked at the torn sleeve of my blouse and tore it all the way off. It was only a half-sleeve anyway. But when I jerked at it, I ripped half the front of my blouse away, too. Lucky I was wearing a bra. Sometimes I don't. That's what they wanted, I thought. *Me.*

I shredded the sleeve and tied it around my thigh, as if I were fashioning a tourniquet for some major wound. But I couldn't see the wound for my tears. I tried not to cry but can't always do what I try.

I thought of that girl in Salt Lake City who'd been taken in the middle of the night right out of her bedroom while her little sister slept in the bed beside hers. She was only thirteen, I remembered, I think. But that wasn't an accident. Well, maybe—when the girl's father hired the loon to do roofing or whatever it was. I guess it was an accident of sorts. Simple decisions can be accidents, too. We shouldn't have gone to the party—the residual of a raucous amalgamation of two sororities and a fraternity—that was the problem. If we hadn't gone to the party, Tommy wouldn't be in the trouble he's in, maybe hurt like he is, and I wouldn't be freezing my cute hindend screwed down in the mud. Orvin and his simpleminded sidekick would be somewhere else, beating someone else to a pulp, trying to get their hands on somebody else.

I felt a surge between my legs, kind of a lunge down there,

vaguely familiar and sore. And for one instant I believe I am caught, dumped flat on my back. The red cap is twisted around on his head like I feel inside. And he is pushing against me, into me, smashing my skull with a stone.

Those eyes.

If Tommy hadn't looked at me like he had in the cafeteria that day. That's what started it all. Or, I guess, if I hadn't been born. That's about as much sense as you can make of it. If Daddy hadn't persuaded Momma in the drive-in one night. If my mother'd said No. But they were married of course. You don't say No to your husband. I suppose she even wanted him to. In the *drive-in*, Aunt Cathy told me: Momma was sure. Couldn't wait to get home, Daddy loved her so much, and *I am* while they are watching Tom Cruise and Kelly McGillis, making love in the car, making love on the screen...whether they want me or not, I all at once *Am*.

I've watched that movie a thousand times, I'll bet: *Top Gun*. Trying to decipher the exact moment when the sperm met the egg, a planned accident surprising both heaven and hell.

But a girl like me? That's the trouble. Tommy summed it up on our second or third date when I told him to keep his hands to himself or we'd both wind up in hell—kind of joking, of course. But not really.

"Okay," he said. "I guess I've made my decision."

"What?"

"I'd rather spend eternity in hell than keep my hands off of you."

And then he touched me again.

So it's been up to me to keep us both out of hell. And that's not easy when the weight of heaven comes down in a touch and spreads inside you like fire. Nearly consumes you in unearthly bliss. But Aunt Cathy would tell me it's hell in disguise.

The little bastard, I thought. Such words in my head! But it wasn't

the little bastard, it was Orvin instead. Who punched Tommy, I mean. Then again, *maybe the little bastard...* I bet to myself that this wasn't the first time they'd done something like this. Assaulted and left some girl for dead. Come across an accident like ours. Somebody else's misfortune their own good luck. I must have sat there in that little mud hut, surrounded by a lattice of limbs, for a while or some, trying to get my thoughts to fit and figure out the ache in my breast, before it occurred to me that I couldn't sit there forever. I hadn't heard a car pass. Or maybe I had. The river made a whispering sound, like it was taking a breath and then letting it out, sighing, like maybe it had just awoken but was tired and had something to say before it settled back into sleep. I listened but couldn't quite hear what it said, although maybe I could. Just the kiss of a whisper close to my ear.

What? Oh.

Through the fabric of limbs I watched like a Cyclops from its cave a sleek morning light seep through the mist and green the silver-backed leaves overhead. A yellow bird silently skittered across the water, the way birds do. Even if the river wanted me to, I could never have swum to the opposite bank, well over a hundred yards away, to where someone stood waiting so familiar then gone.

I was probably a quarter of a mile downstream from where we'd wrecked. I crawled between the gnarled limbs and burrowed my way through a lattice of overgrown scrub and clawed my way up the side of the bank, slipping and losing then regaining a grip, purchasing a foothold on this root or that. I'd lost my other shoe in the river, I guess. My clothes were torn. My leg was bleeding. And by my temple, my head. Or something. I must have looked a mess. When I got to the top of the bank, I tried to stay clear of the road and make my way through the undergrowth: a stand of yellowing sedge, a clutch of Pampas grass, a tangle of wild grape vines. It was hard going without

any shoes and my heart was rattling like a hummingbird's. I picked my way across the edge of a bean field and dipped between the wires of a barbed fence, snatching my calf on a barb. I had tetanus written all over me and couldn't remember the last time I'd gotten a shot.

Once, when Uncle Herb was building the playhouse in the backyard, I jumped off its low slung roof right onto a ten-penny nail poking up through a piece of scrap wood. That must have been seven or eight years ago. Sofi was there, too. Aunt Cathy came rushing out the back door and across the patio, still in her apron, to stifle my screams.

"Oh, Honey," she said. "Oh, Honey," she said.

Sofi hopped around as if she had a nail stuck in her, too. "Is she going to die? Is she going to die?"

Aunt Cathy got me down in her lap, right there in the middle of the lawn. She cussed Uncle Herb who was bent over the power saw and hadn't heard for the buzz. Still to this day I haven't a clue what made him switch it off and turn around, peering through his goggles, as if looking at a whole other world.

"It's all right," she cooed. "It's okay, Baby. Goddamnit Herb—your scraps all around!"

I was bawling and Sofi bawled, too. We were like sisters without the same blood. When I hurt, she bawled; when she hurt, I did. She knelt toward me with her hands on her thighs and I could see right down her dress to the titties she had (or nearly, at least). For the life of me, I haven't a clue why at that moment I'd be stricken like that...*titties she had?*

Uncle Herb said: "Now you know how Jesus felt." Which, I came to realize later, Aunt Cathy thought was the stupidest thing anyone ever might say. He wasn't even religious. Next thing I knew, he had my leg across his knee, and I could see a good half inch of nail where

it stuck out, right in the center of my foot. The odd thing was the absence of blood, which I think made me cry more.

"All right, Honey," he said. "All right—"

—and yanked out the nail, still attached to the scrap, which hurt a heck of a lot more than when it went in.

After something like that, a tetanus shot hurts hardly at all.

Something in my gut heaved a little and I realized I was hurting down there, almost as bad as when that nail got jabbed in my foot but this time not in my foot. The front of my blouse kept flapping away from my chest, and I had to pull it up on my shoulder and pin it in place with my arm. Finally, I tucked the torn edge into my bra. I could see a tractor, a harvester, at the far edge of the field, maybe a half mile away, almost as green as the beans. It was making its way lazily along the rows, and I thought about heading toward it. Then I thought it might be Orvin on the damn thing...if he *was* a farmer, that is. And what about Tommy, I thought.

I had to pee and when I hiked up my skirt to gather my underpants down over my hips and squat in the ditch, I peed half as much urine as blood. I'd already had my monthly visit, so it couldn't be that. It was cancer, I told myself, or something wrong with my spleen. Maybe I had a bad kidney, I thought, and started to cry.

When I pulled my panties back up over my hips, I noticed how the blood-dampened crotch had been torn nearly all the way through. I didn't remember tearing them though, try as I might. There was a pipe in the ditch, like a piece of fence tubing, about two and a half or so feet long, one end kind of serrated and bent, so I picked it up and slammed it into the side of the ditch with a sob, gripped it tight in my hand. It was some kind of metal that hadn't rusted too much, if any at all. *Galvanized* came in my head. I looked around, back toward the tractor, some sort of threshing machine. It

was probably about seven o'clock in the morning by then. I heard the whine of a truck or a car and got down again in the ditch, right on my belly and ducking my head. When it passed, I didn't look up to see what it was. Or who. The bend up ahead where we'd run off the road was maybe a quarter mile or so. I figured I was about fifteen miles from Chico and three or so from Ord Bend, which was nothing but a gob of spit in the road, the old general store and little chapel long ago boarded up. Anyway, I didn't want to meet any strangers again, but I had to know about Tommy. So, clutching the pipe, I made my way out of the ditch, back toward the overgrowth along the river side. There, I kept myself between the river and road, edging slowly along, keeping myself hidden as much as I possibly could.

I heard the growl of an airplane, maybe a crop-duster, or someone going somewhere, but I couldn't see it. There was a dissipating contrail, high up, and another intersecting the first. The moon was still up, big and imperfectly round, floating against the early morning sky in a kind of titanium sheen. A lunar morning, I thought. Lunacy. Making my way beneath a lunatic sky. Across the road to the east was an old walnut orchard. To the west, between the river and road, a jungle of cottonwoods thrust among wild grape vines, willows, and Pampas grass. White oleander nearly ten feet high stood between tangles of elderberry. All of it overgrown and harsh, except for a little path that cut through the thicket like a swath, as if someone had taken a scythe to it, leading from a turnout and down a steep bank to the river where tubers could launch. When I was trying to get away from the little man with the red baseball cap, I'd missed that path and instead wrestled my way through the thistles and vines, losing my footing in the riverside muck and tumbling down the bank and over the shallow cliff where he got me for that instant

before I struggled free and into the river, spitting the taste of his blood from my mouth—it all seemed so foggy yet clear in my head.

When I got in sight of the car, I crouched low. Tommy had washed and waxed it the day before and the blue paint with the red pinstripe he was so fond of glistened like new. The headlight nearest the tree on the passenger side was smashed out, and there appeared to be a kink in the driverside door. Other than that it simply looked kind of tilted, and *parked*—by a bunch of kids tubing on the river, perhaps. I couldn't see the truck. Maybe they'd killed Tommy and taken him somewhere to dump him; although with the river close by why wouldn't they dump him in there. I'd been watching too many CSI shows on TV with Aunt Cathy, I guess.

I squatted my way through vines and tangles, between willow shoots, duck walking, clawing, hunkering low. After a while I got down on my hands and knees and crawled for a ways before finally slipping onto my belly. By the time I got within thirty feet of the car, my knees and elbows were a wreck, and the tightness had leaked out of my chest and spread to my throat. My sense of anticipation doubled. Something was buzzing inside my chest, rumbling, like a large insect.

And then I heard it.

At first I thought it was bees, a horsefly, then a kind of panting-like wheeze like the breath of the little man in my ear. I could hardly bring myself to turn around. I shut my eyes and tightened my grip on the pipe. When I did turn, it wasn't Orvin or his sidekick. It was the dog.

Hello Boy, I whispered, and she wagged her tail. Because she wasn't really a boy. *Good girl*, I said. She was friendly enough, nudging right up to me, showing a wedge of teeth through her smile. A scruffy mutt of some kind...terrier, I thought. Or a mix. Probably a

mix, a mongrel, like Orvin and whatever the little man's name. A Labradoodle. A bitch. I put my hand on top of her head and ruffled her ears, kind of glad I'd found her. Then it occurred to me: if the dog was around, where was the truck?

Go, now, I told her, and got up and did a kind of stooping duckwalk to get as close to the car as I could. My heart started to thud in my ears. What was I doing? I suddenly wanted to know. Tommy, I thought. That's when I heard Orvin call for the dog.

"Gorgeous!"

Go, I told her—*Gorgeous*—keeping my voice low. *Go!*...and that's when I realized she had *found* me.

I flopped down on my belly and hugged the ground tight, but the dog wouldn't go. Some friend, ratting me out. Through a twist of leafy vines, I could see Orvin's boots, maybe ten yards away. They stood there for a minute and then moved out of sight. I crept on my stomach toward the car, as far as I could without revealing myself.

"Where's that goddamn dog?" I heard Orvin say. "Dilbert?"

"What?"

"You got them lug nuts off yet?"

"Hold your horses, Orvin. You could of thought about these tires a hour ago."

"Well, I didn't, did I?"

"Lucky we brought the box." Dilbert chuckled a bit. "Wahn't she a tight li'l piece? Them eyes. Not like that one in Calistoga who just laid there and bawled. Boo-hoo, boo-hoo." He made a crying, sniffling sound.

"Well, I wouldn't know, would I?" bitched Orvin. "You let her get her ass in the water like that—"

I got myself around to where I could see him, where he squatted on the tree side of the car, between the car and the tree—just a man with a flat, changing a tire. Either the hat was too big for his head or

his head was too small for the hat, the way it rested on top of his ears and made them stick out. I couldn't see Orvin. They had moved the truck, but now I could see the back end of it, rusty and red, poked out on the far side of a thicket. In the bed was the box. They had jacked up the front of the car on the passenger's side, and Dilbert hunkered next to the tire. He had his head ducked, unscrewing the nuts, humming in perfect pitch to himself what sounded like a kind of spiritual hymn, something haunting and vaguely familiar...about all our sins and griefs to bear!

Oh, Sweet Jesus, I prayed, I beg you, if you love me...

I don't think he saw me when I rose up, possessed by the rage of a river troll, at least not until I lunged toward him and struck him as hard as I could in the head with the pipe. As I brought it around, he turned his face toward me and I slammed it square in his nose. Asinine grin and whatever vacant loss in his eyes. The force of the blow knocked his hat off, and I was surprised to see he was bald. His head rocked back and then there was blood. He didn't make so much as a sound, except maybe a grunt. And I clubbed him again. And again. He was sprawled on the ground with his face up when I struck him the fourth time, using the pipe like a golf club. It made a hollow *thwock* sound, but a little metallic—like maybe there was hardly a brain in his head. I thought for a second that I had split his skull open, but on second glance I could see that it was only a gash in the flesh above his ear. I shouldn't say this but I looked at his crotch. I wanted to drive whatever he had there right up to his throat. So I slammed the pipe as hard as I could to his groin. He didn't whimper or spit or splutter or groan, and I wondered if I'd killed something that was already dead.

"What the goddamn," Orvin said. He stood next to the opposite fender and blinked.

I swung the pipe at him, but he stumbled backward and I missed. If only he'd fallen, I thought. Next time I swung, he tried to grab it. But I had a grip on it like it was part of my arm and wrenched it away. He sprawled his legs and slouched in a hunch and hovered his hands like he might grab me, feinting first left and then right. When I whapped his knuckles hard with the pipe he yipped and wheeled around. He ran toward the river and tripped. He fell face forward into a snarl of poison oak and his hat went spinning away, sorrowful man with the hair. In that moment I was on him, stabbing the pipe between his shoulder blades and then with both hands, like Joan of Arc with her broadsword finishing a foe, speared it deep into the back of his neck. He shrieked like a girl, like the sounds of my own voice still bouncing around in my head. I clubbed him in the small of his back, and clubbed him again. He scrambled and crawled, and when he turned over to fend with his hands I jabbed the pipe up under his chin, stuck him twice there. For one brief moment I hesitated, then clubbed him as hard and as hard and as hard as I could, right in the jaw.

That pretty much did it.

His hands fluttered above his chest, as though he were trying to catch something, and a weird little squawk came from his throat. I let the pipe slip from my hand, whimpering snot and choking with tears, at maybe seven thirty in the morning standing there at the side of the road, all the tension in my body like a spring coming unwound, and watched this strange man gag on his blood.

I'm a girl, you morons! I told them both in my head. But I hadn't a clue what I meant. And they hadn't a clue what it meant to have a ten-penny nail, like the shaft of an arbalest, stuck in your foot. You don't mess with a girl who's had a ten-penny nail stuck in her foot, who can hit a softball over the fence—or whose father wanted a son: I

think you mean *he*. Because if I'd been a *he* instead of a *she*, I told myself, this wouldn't have happened, already forgetting Tommy, I guess. I looked up through the overhanging limbs of the oak tree to see if the moon was still there (in the cerulean, titanium, greenish-blue sky) and wondered how the morning light can beautify leaves like that and there be so much blood on the ground.

What it takes to kill a man...something Daddy had written in his journal. I couldn't remember the context, at that moment at least—hardly thinking of a guitar player named Roy.

I slumped down next to Orvin, there, at the side of the road, beneath the sheltering limbs of the oak, and heard myself sob...*what it takes to kill a man*. Even when I hadn't decided on so much of a thing. There was hardly a breeze, the air still fresh and slightly damp from the dew. Close by, the river gabbled and whispered a bit, but nothing to me. Above its faint woody-moist smell something lingered and started to stink, a kind of meandering stench that softened and turned the air inside out and wafted away, and after a while I realized that, in all likelihood, Orvin, during his last moments, being caught up in some hellish rapture reserved for the damned, had, you know, soiled himself. All else was quiet but for the monotonous coo of a dove, somewhere, calling its mate, mourning for me.

When the dog came up, I ruffled her ears.

"Gorgeous," I said.

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SOMETIMES WHEN YOU WAKE UP in the middle of the night you think the nightmare is over. Then when you go back to sleep you discover it's not.

The car was actually far enough off the road, just at that point in

the bend that travelers coming from the north could easily miss it. Those coming from the southeast and sweeping northward around the curve were most likely to see it first, but it was so positioned beneath the shadows of the massive oak tree that without looking twice it must have simply appeared to be parked—tubers, as I've already said, launching their tubes in the river, even though with the change in weather over the last few days, tubing was at the tail end of its season. If only Tommy hadn't gotten out of the car, I thought, to flag them, they would never have seen us slammed up against the oak tree on such a dark night.

Although three or four cars passed as I sat there—Dilbert a few yards away lying silently between the tree and the car, Orvin beside me so gamy and still, the distant growl of the harvester three-quarters of a mile away in the bean field, the bickering of starlings and jays in the overhead limbs of the trees, the occasional caw of a crow—I didn't get up. I kept my eye on the back end of the red pickup, where it stuck out from between a clutch of oleander and elderberry beyond the north side of the oak tree. I could see maybe two or three inches of the top of the box, the nubbed lid either stainless steel or chrome.

I didn't really think much about what I had done. Or how. And couldn't care less if they were dead as ten-penny nails. I was more focused on what they had done—and with Tommy, I wondered. I knew I would have to get up and go to the truck...someday. Today. But I hurt where I didn't want to think about hurting. I hurt where a girl shouldn't ever have to hurt until she decides it's time to feel the good of such hurt.

I got up.

I could hardly see out of my left eye.

I stooped to pick up the Dodger's hat and gathered my hair up away from me neck and stuffed my hair in the hat, as much as I

could, and fit the hat on my head. I wondered if I looked like Orvin. "Gorgeous?" I said. The thought made me laugh, but not loud. I picked my way over the dead oak leaves and acorn-strewn loam to the car, careful to glance slowly inside. It was empty, except for my jacket on the backseat. The jewel case of the CD we had been listening to was open on the back floor, *Maggie's Blue Eye and the Lost Boys' Band*. I couldn't see my purse. Or my cell phone. Or Tommy's. We made our way to the truck, Gorgeous and I. A weatherworn, faded, and slightly skewed bumper sticker between the bumper and gate said: I'M LANKY AND LEAN AND PRETTY DAMN MEAN. I wiggled the chain-anchored pins out of the hasps on either side of the gate and let the gate fall. The clank of the gate startled me, as if the entire world might hear and come rushing to see. But only a crow in the branches overhead seemed annoyed.

Gorgeous leapt up in the bed. She sniffed at the box.

I started to kneel myself up in the bed; then I decided first to check out the cab. It was a good decision. I found my purse on the seat and inside it my cell phone. It was turned off. I thought about switching it on, but instead I dropped it back in my purse and sat in the cab and looked out over the river and ate one of the two sandwiches I'd found in the glovebox. It looked like Wonder Bread spread with mustard and mayo, a slab of cheddar, and a pile of shaved ham. I took it out of the Ziplock bag and sniffed it. It smelled okay, and it probably wouldn't be enough to fill the hole in my gut anyway. And if I died of botulism, so what? Salmonella. E. coli. Who'd care? There were also a couple of bags of chips and some half liter water bottles in a Styrofoam cooler on the floor.

I had my new hat on, the lapel of my torn blouse tucked into the cup of my bra, pinched between my boob and my bra, and no shoes. Tommy liked me in that blouse, the way it shaped my breasts, I

suppose, like Daddy must have liked Momma in hers. One night he unbuttoned it down to my waist, before I realized it was unbuttoned at all. He lightly caressed me, and I let his hand wander over my belly and wherever it would. That was the same night, at the drive-in (at the *drive-in*), that I couldn't keep my hands to myself, doing to him what I shouldn't have been, until, in mortification, *accidents happen*, one of us said, and I had to dab my dress clean. Now I wished I'd let him do more, *his lovely young slut*. A snag floated down the river, and I wondered if I'd lost my other shoe in the muck when the little man wrestled me down or in the water itself when I'd splashed in. If in the muck, I might be able to find both of them. But the thought of going back to where I'd been pinned quickly settled my plan.

My breasts hurt, or maybe it was something under my breasts beneath the bruise over my ribs, close to my heart, and I shouldn't say this but for one instant I remember having this thought, that I am married to Tommy and when we make love it is nothing but nice; that is to say, *nothing* but nice...there, down by the riverside, lost between heaven and earth, the sensation inside me, his kisses so sweet. This is a quick thought and I shed it. Hardly what a good girl thinks. But it is etched on my brain. What a bad girl thinks. And I want to tear my heart out or maybe slice the flesh of my arm down to the bone with a piece of broken glass to get rid of the pain.

I opened the door and got down from the cab. I stepped on the running board and swung my leg up over and into the bed and hoisted the rest of me in. Gorgeous was happy to see me. I was happy to see her. I sat on the wheel well inside the bed and looked at the box. Gorgeous sat beside me and together we looked at the box. The box appeared to be chrome-plated steel with cleats or raised hobs adorning the lid. It sat loose in the bed, lengthwise. The hasp and lock were toward me, the hinges away. I put my foot against one corner

and shoved, but it wouldn't shove. It was heavy, sturdy, about two and a half feet wide by four feet long by a couple of feet high. You could put things in it. Tools and such. Of course, if you wanted to put something into it and that something was too long, you would have to break it down or take it apart in order to get it to fit. Gorgeous seemed to sense what I thought and put her head in my lap and I gave her a pat. I gave her a hug. Then I knelt next to the box. In the top were three holes about the size of my thumb, eight or ten inches apart. They appeared to have been drilled in the lid. I stuck a finger in one of the holes as far as I could. I turned my head and laid my ear against another of the holes. I made a fist and tapped on the lid of the box.

I listened.

I tapped.

When Gorgeous emitted this low and hardly heard whine, I started to cry. She lightly panted and whined and the sobs took hold of me and wouldn't let go. They came up through my bones and quietly shivered my flesh. For a while I lay on my back in the bed of the truck and gazed up through the leaves at the sky. I wondered if angels somehow rode on light through the sky. I told Tommy, I want blue ribbons in my wedding gown and a blue sapphire in my ring. Forget-me-nots in a sheaf of Blue Speedwell for a bouquet.

Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey.

A kiddley divey too, wouldn't you?

It is true: Sometimes my eyes are blue and sometimes green. Or greenish blue. But mostly blue. *A wash of copper and desaturated cobalt,* is how Daddy described Momma's eyes. Cerulean. The color of water. The color of sky. Femininity, Aunt Cathy says. The stroke of a brush

≥ Roger Ladd Memmott ≤

on canvas in oil. *Fidelity*, she says. Such purity, blue. The color of heaven. A bouquet of forget-me-nots. Stable and lightfast. The color of me.

I sat up and jiggled the lock in its hasp.

I put my lips against one of the holes in the lid.

“Oh, Tommy,” I said.

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End of Excerpt