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Her face was the first thing I remember seeing when I came to after the accident: ethereal in the glow of the red night lights, that of a nurse from a Battle of Britain movie, bedside with the RAF pilot who is bandaged head to toe and in traction. I was wrapped and trussed like that, but I was hardly a romantic hero, and though she looked relieved when I opened my eyes and spoke to her, there was none of the adoration that I so desperately needed. Maybe it was the painkillers, maybe it was turning thirty and wanting to be someone a woman like her couldn't live without.

I didn't remember the accident but what happened was clear enough. I had set out to ski Corbet's Couloir, the 50-degree drop though a narrow chute just below the headwall at the top of the aerial tram. Later I would see the piece that ran on the front page *Jackson Hole News & Review* with the photograph of what looked like no more than a tick on a white duvet comforter – me with limbs and skis spread-eagled, taken from far above on the tram. The tenor of the article was derogatory – Another thrill-seeker, this time a young natural gas attorney from Denver, fails his final exam on Corbet's." The guide service, to defend itself, told

the reporter that I was a competent skier and in great condition – that I had done Saudan at Whistler numerous times, and was a Marine combat veteran and a graduate of Seal training.

I was fairly certain that the nurse thought that I was a frivolous egotist, for the same thought had crossed my mind. Desperate to make a connection with her, I actually asked her what she thought of me. She said she had given me no thought, except that I should have to pay the county for the expense of my rescue. I asked if she'd feel different if I were local, and she said it didn't make a bit of difference. I said I had to agree with her on the matter of restitution, but coming from "away," I probably sounded more cash-rich than contrite.

She was from central Montana, raised on a ranch up against the Dry Range, so I played Ian Tyson out loud on my iPod, but she'd never heard of him. I had read in some magazine that Ian was the genuine article: the cowboy troubadour, the sounds you'd hear in the bunkhouse. Oh well.

When the ambulance brought me in, I'd had one of those wrist ID bracelets on, so they had some contact information. Still, only one of the three telephone numbers on it raised anyone: one was my firm, which was closed for the holidays; another was my father, who was at sea in the Sydney-Hobart race; the last was Gram, and she right away drove over from Idaho Falls in her pickup. She got a room at the Super 8, but spent most of her time by my bed. Sometime during my recovery, it occurred to me that I got the order wrong on that bracelet – Gram was

the only one who cared and the only one who mattered.

As soon as she thought I was well enough, Gram started asking me questions on the matter of selling the farm in Rigby. She was living in town now and Simplot was farming it, but a ranch broker from Bozeman had someone who wanted the riverside sections; would buy it all if necessary. She had once gone to a meeting of The Henry's Fork Foundation with Granddad where conservation easements were discussed. This was not my area of the law, but she climbed up on the bed and the two of us got on my laptop and got smart about it.

One night when Gram and I were on the bed like this, she whispered, "Reflection . . . in the window." I looked up from the screen. In the window across from the foot of the bed was the reflection of our faces illuminated by the glow of the laptop, and behind us, in the doorway, was the nurse silhouetted against the hall lights. Her arms were crossed, and she was leaning against the doorframe. I turned toward her, but she was gone.

Around the time I started physical therapy, Gram quit the Super 8 and went back home. But she'd still drive over to the hospital a couple times a week to share her deviled eggs with me. She laid out a plan for my future: as to the farm, I would buy out my mother's sister for a price Gram would determine, and she would finance me. I would set up practice in Rigby and live in the house where Mom grew up, on the bluff where we'd spread hers and Granddad's ashes. She saw that the idea had some appeal to me and pressed her case. "Maybe you could recruit a

sure-handed young lady like that nurse to keep you company and out of harm's way."

"Her family runs cattle at a ranch that probably looks like something out of *Legends of the Fall*. If she were to quit Jackson, why would she settle ---"

"Rubbish. She's a nurse. We've got a hospital fifteen minutes away from us, a good one, fancier than this one, where most of the patients would be nicer and politer. If she'd have a problem with you, it'd be your city ways, don't you know, and you being a lawyer. But you could rid yourself of the bad parts of that if you put your mind to it. Then she'd have to trust that you're not one of those easy-come, easy-go, officer-and-gentleman types." She stood to leave, patted my hand. "Piece of advice for you, Ace. Talk less – way less in your case – and say more."

The nurse still had a major hold on me, so I tried dialing it back and it helped. In fact, we had some fine moments together. But as the time approached for me to leave the hospital she seemed to pull back. All she said when I left was, "Enjoyed your company . . . take care of yourself." Just gave my arm a quick squeeze. It gave me a shiver; it was like "bless you on the rest of your journey," like I wasn't coming back, or if I did she wouldn't be around.

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It's April now and I'm back up to fish before run-off. Right away I tracked her

down, asking if we could get together. She was polite about it, but it was a bad week. “Maybe next time,” she said. I gave her my number, said I wasn’t going to stalk her, but that I’d be around for a while.

Two days later I was wading some private water south of Wilson when she called and left a message: I should meet her in the parking lot at Smith’s at 6:00 PM. She’d be driving a white F-150 pulling a drift boat. I should wear jeans and boots, or sturdy shoes, not flip-flops. No need to RSVP – she needed to stop at Smith’s anyway, for gas and to leave the boat trailer in the lot. I didn’t know she had a boat. My grandparents’ place is near the Menan takeout. She would have known Rigby when I mentioned it in the hospital. She never let on.

She drives and we make small talk. She admits she got to know Gram. “Nice lady,” she says, “probably the reason you’re sitting in that seat today.” That doesn’t surprise or offend me, but she turns on the radio, pretty loud, and tuned to the wrong station. I give up talking and will myself to stay positive. Still, by the time we take the left at Hoback Junction, I’ve bled off the romantic head of steam I built up all afternoon. Maybe she is just too big a project. Oddly I feel better, having shrugged off the outcome, the silence now comfortable. I study the Hoback: no holding spots for fish in this straight chute. Postcard-pretty though.

Maybe ten minutes pass and she pulls in at a gravel turnout on the left, close to the river. There is a flatbed semi parked under the cottonwoods next to the bank,

loaded high with baled hay covered with translucent tarps. We park off to the side and get out. She hands me an old-fashioned medical valise, lowers the tailgate, and drops a pair of her sandals on the ground underneath.

The driver of the truck climbs down from his cab and nods at her. He is a tall, rangy young guy with a lantern jaw, not bad looking, dressed like a rodeo cowboy.

"Cade," she says, not real friendly.

He looks at me, and she explains, "Here to help."

"No need now. Made some improvements – put in a trap door."

"Show us," she says. "Then you can stay in the cab – looks better that way." He doesn't object.

We crawl under the truck. He bangs some toggles open with a crowbar and a hatch hinges down. He stands up in the opening, then squats in place pulling down a garbage bag, bits of straw falling on him. He pushes a jug of bottled water, a bucket of KFC, and the medical bag overhead through the opening. He stands again, his legs twisting in front of us like he's moving things around up there, then he squats and moves aside. With a sweep of his palm, he motions us to climb aboard, a gesture that strikes me as theatrical, mocking us. I wonder what their connection is.

She hoists herself up on her bottom and clears the opening. I arrow my arms through the hatch and stand. The smell of fried chicken is otherworldly. My eyes adjust. I am standing in the middle of a small crypt hollowed in the bales, narrow,

about three feet wide and seven feet long. There is four feet of headroom – two bales high, the roof a sheet of plywood. Rip-sawed in the plywood is a skylight of sorts, for light and ventilation. It is comfortable, the temperature, but the space feels close, crowded. Behind me the nurse is attending to a small child under the skylight. Forward, practically in my face, a Latino couple huddle with their daughter. The girl is maybe six, more handsome than her parents, too pretty and formal in her yellow dress, like she's dressed for mass. The man, my age I guess, looks bone-deep weary, his eyes sad. The mother and daughter hug their knees, staring at me without expression, their cheeks moist from tears.

I hoist my butt up next to the nurse. I will have to twist to help her; there isn't space to pivot. The patient is a sloe-eyed boy, about four. He has a ripe boil the diameter of a beer can on his thigh, a plumb-colored roundel with a yellow shirt button of pus at its center.

She cleans the boy's leg, unsheathes the disposable scalpel knife and lances the center of the wound. I hold a spongy absorbent pad against the wound to soak up the pus, while she lays out materials for dressing the wound. I go through three of these blotters and begin to feel light-headed, afraid I might faint. Just then the boy squeezes my wrist, and we make eye contact, and then I'm steady again.

She dresses the wound and wraps the tape clear around the thigh, using plenty of it. "How's your Spanish?" she says. "Mine's sketchy."

"Better than that," I say, and start translating her instructions, as, one-by-one,

she puts dressings, ointment, and sample antibiotic capsules in a shopping bag. She opens a packet of sterile wipes and demonstrates their use. I do the same and she has me emphasize the need to use them, that the infection is contagious. She takes over then: asks in Spanish where their people are, then tells them it will be after midnight when they get to that place, and that the boy will be okay. They beam then, noisily grateful, and she shushes them and exits without ceremony through the trap. I wish them a safe journey and the enjoyment of the *pollo frito*, then drop through the opening myself.

The two of us huddle underneath the truck bed and peer out through the banks of tires, scanning the area: the coast is clear. We crawl out from under, and she rousts the driver. They talk and he tries to give her some cash, but she waves it away with an angry look. He just shrugs and crawls underneath. I hear him toggle the hatch.

We are at the river's edge, scrubbing down, when I hear the rig pull out. We stand together, drying our hands and forearms. She studies my face intently, hers hard for me to read.

"What?" I say.

"You okay?"

I don't know where to start. I want to tell her she just takes my breath away, more even than before; that I'm nearly there about Rigby. And there are questions

about today – I'm an attorney after all. But I swallow all this, and again, like on the trip down, it feels right and natural – elemental: talk less and say more.

I kiss her on the hair. She makes the sign of the cross with her thumb on my forehead, leans against my chest. I listen to the water. That water will be slipping right by the farm, in what, three or four days?