

Constant Love

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The Bindery at the Well



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U.S. 99 in Josephine County, Oregon, by Dorothea Lange

The way I speak

Sheila

The way I speak, you get used to it after a while. After you talk to me for a while you don't even notice it. It used to bug my father. When he called me into his office and told me the news that day, at the end he said, *and by the way, she has that funny little accent, just like yours.*

He told me she lived in Montana. I could go to Montana to see her right away if I liked. He had no idea, no idea at all, that that's exactly where I'd planned to go. I'd taken a two-week leave of absence, without pay, from my job at the radio station. For no reason at all I'd just got the idea to go to Montana and I was getting ready to go when I got the phone call. *Come home*, he said, *I've got important news.*

San Francisco to Seattle is not a long way when you've got my father waiting for you at the other end. He's a lawyer, he doesn't show his feelings much, so when he

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does you know something's coming. You just never know what it is. He's like a stiff board, you step on one end, the other end might spring up and slam you in the face. But he's nice, I didn't mean to say he isn't nice, just not someone you can get real close to. My mother? She's like that too, sort of cool and reasonable all the time, but without that command that makes the train ride from San Francisco to Seattle just fly by.

I went into his office. It's got a lot of mahogany in it, the kind of furniture that makes me feel like I'm eight even though I'm almost twenty-eight. My father was walking toward me with his hands in his pockets. *Your birth mother has contacted me*, he said, *she'd like to meet you*. He had a crooked smile on his face, puzzled, sort of, watching me watch the heavens open up, and then close again. I couldn't believe it. So he said it again, and told me he'd actually talked to her on the telephone. She had a regular family in Missoula, he said, and wanted me to come see her. He got on the phone again when I told him about my two-week leave of absence and, yes, I should come right away, right away. But

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I have to tell you, after waiting so long it's hard to come right away.

The trip to Montana took no time at all, even though I traveled as slowly as I could, by train, all the way from Seattle to Missoula. I was nervous and so by the time I got there I'd told the whole car what was happening. When I stepped off that train they were all crammed at the windows, watching. I had a picture of her, I'd made sure of that, because I was scared, and I'd sent her a picture of me, but I didn't see her first, she saw me first, stepped out of the crowd and when we reached each other we just hugged for the longest time.

I can't tell you what it was like to meet my extended family, my four half brothers, their wives, and George, my mother's husband. They took me in as though I hadn't been gone a day, and it made me wonder why it took her so long to find me. She talks with a funny sort of accent and for the first time I heard how I sound to other people, at least for the first twenty minutes, before they get used to it and stop noticing. I asked her if I talked funny, and she grinned and said all her

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kids talk like that, it's in the genes. It was the first time I ever heard anyone refer to my genes and not want to disappear on the spot.

That next weekend Toby, my next to youngest brother, got married to Eileen, and here's the wedding picture, that's me at the end, on the right. That's my mother, over there on the left next to Toby and Eileen, Charlie's on the other side, my extended family I call it, my father doesn't know what to call it, but he seemed happy enough to see the picture, with me hanging off the end, *take it easy*, he said. First time he ever said that to me and sounded like he meant it.

Mary

I thought it was best. It's as simple as that. I couldn't take care of any baby. You put them up for adoption in those days, that's what most people out here did. You knew good people wanting children would take care of yours as good as anyone had a right to expect. People weren't so psychological in those days. Still, I know now that bearing that child and then giving her up was the hardest thing I ever did.

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I was a kid when I had Sheila, just turned eighteen. I went to Seattle and hid out for six months. My parents took care of everything and when I came back my mother made sure all I had to worry about was acting normal. I lived at home and worked at the department store downtown. Every morning all I had to do was put on a face and get down there. It was about all I could manage at the time.

Six years later I was married and having kids like rabbits, four of them one right after another. After the first couple George would say, *what happened to the birth control?* and I'd say, so far down even I couldn't hear, *what control?* He was on active duty at the time and every six months or so the army would fly the wives out to Hawaii or Guam for R & R. That's where we conceived the last two. George just couldn't figure it out. Poor guy, babies were the last thing on his mind when we were together. When I look back on it now, I think it must have scared him thinking of coming back to all that, and maybe it scared him even more thinking he might not come back at all. It

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must be a funny feeling, every day killing and knowing you could be killed, and having your wife home cranking out kids you had no mind to make in the first place. Our last rendezvous was scheduled just before Tet. You know anything about that? It was the big surprise battle of the Vietnam War, a surprise for our side, that is. Anyway, if we had had our rendezvous in Hawaii, George wouldn't have been caught in Tet, but as it was he wrote me a month before and said, *honey, stay home with the kids, they need you and I don't want any more.*

So Sheila would have been nine when George came home. That was six weeks after Tet. They discharged him from the hospital in Guam and flew him into Letterman in San Francisco. I went out there to see him with Toby and Mick. He hadn't ever seen Mick. When he did he began to cry and I got scared and laid my head against his mouth and he said, *it's ok baby.* Then I started crying too, and I was holding him and Mick, and Toby was climbing up my back, and all this time I imagined Sheila over there against the wall, standing spindly-legged in her gingham dress

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with the droopy lace collar, blond wavy hair tucked behind her ears, watching us.

George didn't know about Sheila. It was something I never thought he needed to know. I was happy with George, happy I married him. Why bring up something that was packed away and done with? Well, no, not really, if I'd been honest with myself I'd have known that lost baby of mine was there all the time— present, not gone, alive, not dead, doing her thing, while I thought I was doing mine without her noticing too much. Well, it wasn't true. Oh, there'd be long stretches when I wouldn't think about her but then— bam— there she'd be. After the boys started coming she never left me for long. I'd think about her every day. She was my first baby, my only daughter. She'd be standing there watching me change diapers, and I'd ask her to go get me some pins, or warm the bottle, and sometimes I'd even ask her to come closer and hold the baby still while I stuffed him into some coveralls. That's the kind of fantasies I had. She was my secret companion, my only daughter.

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Well, after George came home we had a real time adjusting. War and babies and that separation had turned us both inside out. We were different people and at first it wasn't even clear if we liked each other any more. But, to be honest, in the beginning that was the last thing on our minds. The first was, who's going to get the groceries? You think I'm kidding? George came in on a Friday and by Sunday we were due for a week's shopping and I was down with the flu, and four kids don't forget, and I asked George to go to the store. He turned white and said he didn't think he could handle the crowds. What crowds? I asked. This is Missoula, remember, not Saigon. Can't stand the lights, bright colors, all the *stuff*, he said. OK, I said, *you* take the kids and *I'll* go. He took them, I went, 103 fever and I have to say the store was a little brighter than usual and, well, chaotic. I wondered if what I felt in a fever was what it was like for him on a regular basis. When I got home three of the four kids were bawling their heads off and George was asleep on the couch. I knew then that I'd have five kids for a while, plus Sheila of course. I asked

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her to start dinner for the older boys while I went and got a bottle for Mick.

Well, after a while things settled down. I've found in life that if you're patient most things usually do. George and I managed, and after he started making good money and the kids got older, he took real pride in being the daddy of this big family. One afternoon, I remember it so well, it was January, real cold outside, it had stormed so hard the night before George didn't go into work. We were all in the parlor at about five o'clock. It was already dark outside, and you couldn't see much through the windows except the shapes of trees blurred by the moisture of our breath beading up the panes. The stove was glowing and the kids were all huddled around the big table; Charlie, our oldest, was about twelve then, and he was reading *Treasure Island* to the other three. Mick hung on his every word, Toby peppered him with questions about the parts of those old sailing ships, and George, Jr. sat still, drawing up the ship that Toby was having such a hard time imagining. George was on the couch opposite me looking into the fire. I just sat there, took it all in, and said

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to myself, *this is good*. I didn't even think to notice that Sheila was gone.

She stayed gone for a long while. Yes, I thought about her, sure I did, but she didn't seem a part of me like she had before. What I thought was, she's safe, well taken care of, she's a young woman now, going out into the world, she's got a good family behind her, I'm sure she has. I felt good about it, finally. Meanwhile my boys were growing up. George and I were proud of them and proud of ourselves for having pulled it off. Well, I thought, everything's just fine, as fine as anyone has a right to expect. To tell you the truth, I felt relief as well. I was so thankful that after such a rough beginning I hadn't messed up. You know what I mean?

Then it happened. Right out of the blue. George, Jr. came home one night, he was nineteen, and he told me his girlfriend was pregnant. *She wants an abortion*, he said. It was so hard for him, his face all red and it seemed to me he was practically in tears. I was stunned. My heart fell into the pit of my stomach and stopped beating. I dropped into a chair and laid my head on the kitchen table and sat quiet for the longest time. George, Jr.

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didn't say a word. We have a real thing, he and I, he let me be.

Well, after a while I got my head up off the table and asked a few questions. Does Molly want the baby? *No*, he said. *It's only been a few weeks, Mom, it's not... She wants it done right away.* Well, a lot of things may have changed since my day, but not much of that change is as yet reflected in the laws of the state of Montana. George, Jr. was planning to take Molly to Seattle. We need some help paying for it, he said. *Yes*, I said, *it's all right.*

Sheila came back that night. She took hold of me, real hold, and she wasn't about to let go until she got what she wanted. Well, that's just a way of putting it. I can talk like that now. At the time I was in agony. I couldn't bear the thought of that girl with a baby inside her going off to Seattle. *Yes*, I said, *it's all right.* But it wasn't all right, it wasn't all right at all.

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George

Nobody tells me anything until it's all over. If I sound bitter, I am. It really hurt that George, Jr. could go do a thing like that and not talk to me about it. His mother and I are practicing Catholics, both of us. We're against abortion. He wouldn't have so many brothers around here if we weren't. We've lived our beliefs, his mother and I. He needs to know that. So why'd he cut me out, and talk just to her? We could've talked man to man.

So how do I finally find out about things? They happen. It's that simple. They happen, and then something goes wrong and they need me to fix it, and I do. When Mary bounced a check to pay for the abortion I asked her, what's this all about, you've never overdrawn in your life? Well, she burst into tears and told me all about it. The kids were already in Seattle, waiting on the money. I asked her, what did you tell them? It's their decision, she said. Well, it's not just their decision, god dammit. I was yelling by this time. How could you cave in like that? She stopped crying and looked at me like she was

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a million miles away, her eyes were that cold. Oh, brother, I thought, this time I'm going to stand up to her.

So I laid it out. That's not just their baby, I said, it's ours, too. That's our grandchild there, don't you see? What's happened to you? We had four kids. You wanted those kids and I didn't deny you, or them, just because I thought I couldn't handle it. So, what was good enough for us isn't good enough for George and Molly? You don't want them to have to handle it? Better to scrape it out and throw it away, better to just forget about it? Well, I'll tell you one thing. There are some things you can never forget, no matter which way you play it, and having a kid, or killing it, is one of them. Well, by this time Mary had walked. That last thing I said to her, it chased her backside right down the driveway.

It was like a bubble had burst. I never thought these things before, felt them maybe, but never thought them out. I couldn't figure Mary out, why she'd changed her tune like that, why she didn't tell the kids to hang in there or go for adoption or something. I was

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mad, madder than I had any right to be, I guess. The next night George called from Seattle and asked to speak to his mother. I told him straight out, I said, George, I know what's going on, let me talk to Molly. Well, he stuttered something and the next thing I hear is Molly's voice on the line. *Mr. Carlson?* she said, a question, and all of a sudden I didn't have any answers. *Mr. Carlson?* I can still hear it. A big blank. That's what my mind was, a big blank. *Mr. Carlson?* Yea, I said, how are you feeling, honey? I'm ok, she said. Good, I said, now let me talk to George. And in no time George was back on the phone, and I told him his mother and I were coming to Seattle. Can I talk to Mom? he asked. I told him she was already on her way. So where are you staying? I asked. Mom didn't tell you? he replied. By then George knew something was up, and he sounded a little strained.

Something happen between you and Mom? he asked.

Not much, I said. She walked out before much happened. She's headed for Seattle, and I want to come, too. George, I want to say my piece.

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Well, he finally gave me the address and the next morning I phoned the office— I'm an insurance adjuster, you know, manage eighth people— and told them I was taking the rest of the week off. It was Wednesday. I figured I had Thursday and Friday and then the weekend. I told them I'd be back Monday. I told them a relative in Seattle was real sick.

The ride from Missoula to Seattle is beautiful. If you have any feeling for nature you can't help thinking so. You can't look out your car window along that road between Missoula and Seattle without thinking there's something bigger than us. So I settled down and started thinking about what I wanted to say to that big question mark. *Molly, Molly, Molly*, somehow I knew it all rested with her. Then, I have to admit it, I started getting mad again. That kid had something of mine inside her, and she was going to decide it all on her own.

I got to Seattle early Friday morning. The kids and Mary met me in the lobby of the hotel, the Excelsior Hotel down by the Pike's Place Market. I thought to myself, this isn't

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half bad, they're treating themselves pretty well. Nobody looked very happy. I put an arm around the women and marched everybody into the coffee shop. I'm beat, I said. Anyone want anything? They all looked at me like they were waiting for me to wake up or something. We got coffee and settled into a corner booth. Small talk. Never knew the meaning of the word until that morning, never felt the pain.

I went up to our room with Mary. I never wanted to talk to anyone so badly in my life. She said she had to go out for a couple of hours, had an appointment. When I asked her what appointment she said it was just some old business she had to attend to, she'd tell me about it later. Well, I thought, what now?

After she left, George, Jr. walked in and plopped on the bed. It felt like we were home, not in some hotel room a thousand miles away. Dad, he said, don't be hard on Molly. Don't worry about Molly, I said, I want to know what you're thinking. I don't think it's bad, he said. It's a sin, I said, the worst kind. The boy looked me straight in the eye, I'll give him credit for that, and I could

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tell he didn't know what the hell I was talking about. So I told him.

You know, don't you, that Toby and Mick were born while I was in Vietnam. They weren't planned. From my point of view they were both accidents, just like your baby is. The thought of them was a constant torment to me— Vietnam was Hell and I couldn't imagine ever getting out. Then I'd think of home and there you were, your mother and Charlie, and then those two new ones, that I'd have to support and be a father to. It was like I was dead and looking up at it all from hell. How could I ever be a husband again, much less a father? George, I didn't want those brothers of yours. I didn't want them in the worst way. I wasn't ready, I couldn't handle it, and to tell you the truth, if your mother had had an abortion I wouldn't have counted it a sin. Well, you should have seen the look on George's face. I had his attention.

Now here you are alive, and Charlie and Toby and Mick are alive, and you can't imagine yourselves not being alive, can you? Well, you've never been dead. Dead men fight wars, George. Every nineteen year old

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who's ever been in combat is a casualty, one way or another. I came home half fried. That's the condition I was in when I began my career as the father to four little boys. You guys drove me crazy, but look at you now. Look at me, telling you go have that baby. The ways of the Lord are mysterious, George. When you know that and then cut life off, that's a sin. I figured maybe you didn't know, so I'm telling you now.

When I'd finished George, Jr. just stared at me in disbelief. *You ever talk to Mom about this?* he asked. Hell, no, I laughed. I don't have to talk to her about it, she already knows. *But she wanted Mick and Toby, didn't she?* he asked. Yes, I said, she did. Well, he said, Molly doesn't— you should have saved that speech for Molly. I don't have any speech for Molly, I said, I wanted to talk to you.

Mary

It's not easy finding a child after twenty-seven years, three months, and thirteen days. I'm not usually so precise, but on the train to Seattle I figured it out to the hour. I wondered where the time had gone.

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It seemed like only yesterday she left me. How can your baby leave you? Well, it just seems like that when I think back on it. In those days, of course, you weren't allowed to see the baby if you were going to give it up. They thought it'd be bad for you, I guess, or that you might change your mind and cause the powers that be a lot of grief. But how can you bear a child without being with it? And that's what they tried to prevent afterwards, being with the child, for even a minute. Of course, by the time it's born it's much too late.

When I got to Seattle I went right to the Catholic Family Services Agency. They've been around a long time. Thank God my parents hadn't used some fly-by-night operation. I told them I wanted to find the child I'd put up for adoption almost thirty years before and they said, that's fine, but you'll have to go through some interviews first, and we'll have to contact the parents to get their permission. Well, I did and they did and in no time at all I knew her name and had her father's phone number on a slip of paper in the palm of my hand. I had to keep

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reminding myself that times had changed, that it wouldn't have been this easy before.

I dialed up Mr. Thatcher's number. He'd wanted me to call him at his office. Some secretary answered and asked my name, and then she asked my business. I hung up. I sat there in that hotel room for the longest time trying to pull myself together. Molly came in and asked if I was ready for dinner. I must have looked upset because she asked me what was the matter. She looked so stricken that I realized she thought it must be her that was upsetting me. I shook my head and held out an arm. *It's not you, honey, it's not you.*

Then the phone rang and Molly picked it up. It's a Mr. Thatcher, she said. I took the call. *Mrs. Carlson?* It was a very firm voice. Well, we had a nice chat. He did most of the talking. I could tell this was a man used to taking charge. He offered to tell Sheila about me, he said he'd bring her up to Seattle and tell her himself in person. I felt like a coward I was so relieved. I have to say, Mr. Thatcher is an impressive man, the kind of man that makes a woman feel safe.

When I got off the phone Molly asked what it was all about, and I told her. I cried

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and talked, and talked and cried. It's been such a burden all these years, I said, such a burden, no one should have to keep those sorts of secrets. Is that why you want me to have the baby? she asked. Who said I do? Oh, I know you're just going along... Oh, my dear, I said, I'm not just going along. Well, she said, I can't have this baby, I just can't. I took her in my arms. I'd hate it, she said. I held her in my arms. I'm eighteen, she said, and George isn't even as old as that. I know, I said, I know.

George and George, Jr. walked in on us like that. Remember dinner? *Uh, oh, woman's stuff*, that's what their faces said. *OK, ladies, enough of that, let's eat!* That's my men. I said, sit down, we're going to have a conversation. Well, they took it standing up. I told them about Sheila and that I wanted her to come and see us, I wanted to know her and I wanted them to treat her like family. Oh yes, I admitted it might not work out, but that's what I wanted, what I'd dreamed about all these years. George finally sat down. When he raised his eyes to mine there was a

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good deal of suspicion in them. George, Jr. suggested room service.

We all ate a little something, in silence, and after dinner the kids left us alone.

George's first question was, *who's the guy*.

That's not important, I said. It is to me, he said. *Toby Weir*. Jesus, he said. I like the name, I said. How could you ever go do a thing like that? he asked. Now what thing exactly are you referring to? I shot back. Get yourself pregnant, he said. Oh, I said, that was the easy part. Always has been, he said.

Well, I just forced myself to sit there and let all that bitterness, his and mine, clash in the space between us and break our hearts. It seemed like we were twenty years old again. He wanted to know how long Toby and I had been together, how serious it was, why we broke up. Well, getting pregnant broke it up, I said. Shame can destroy love as fast as anything I know.

Then he started on another tack, closer to the here and now. Did you ever think to talk to me before you talked to Thatcher? No, I said. Did you ever think, maybe George doesn't want to know this kid? No, I said. Well, by the time George got

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through with me that night, I felt I'd been fed a dish of ground glass. It seemed to me he wanted me to choose between him and Sheila, that she was all those babies I'd made him have, and then I thought, maybe she was.

The next day was Saturday. Molly and George, Jr. went into the clinic to arrange things. It turned out they had to go through counseling and a waiting period before anything could be done, so nothing would happen before the end of the next week. I told George I was glad the kids had someone to talk to besides us. He looked at me and shook his head. I've never been more confused in my life, he said. Thank God the kids aren't, I said.

George started home that Sunday. I stayed on. Molly had the abortion on Thursday and we were on our way home the next day. She slept most of the way, while George, Jr. drove as though he had a china doll in the seat beside him, breaking into the curves with a patience behind the wheel I'd never seen in him before. We dropped her off at home. Her parents didn't know a thing, and she intended to keep it that way. As far

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as they knew, their daughter had gone off with the Carlsons for a spell of fun in Seattle. Now she was home again, a worn-out, edgy teenager they'd have no trouble recognizing. She smiled bravely before she turned to go. George, Jr. leaned across the seat to open the door for her. He said goodbye, then faced forward again, bent his head, and clung to the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. His hands, so large and strong and useless, made me weep. 'Toby'd named it when he wrote me that one time from Vietnam, right before he died. He said it was a trap, that being a man was a trick and a trap. It seems to me, he wrote, that everyone, all my life, has been telling me to be a man. What they never admitted was how afraid they all were of my manhood. Everyone's fucking afraid of me, Mary, can you believe it? Including me. So I think the country (not you, honey, the rest of the country) sent me out here to put this fucking manhood to work where it can't do them any harm. I think they sent me out here to kill people they don't care about, and to fuck people they don't care about. 'They sure don't care about me.

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Well, Toby was never one to mince words, but I never really understood him until that night when I saw my own son's trembling manhood practically break the steering wheel.

When I walked in the front door of my own house that night there was a letter waiting for me, from Sheila. She'd sent me her picture and asked for mine. She'd actually come right up to Seattle after her father's phone call, had actually been in town the week of the abortion. I asked George if he could face her, treat her like a human being, nothing more, nothing less. He took her picture out of my hand and looked at it for a while. She looks a lot like you, he said, want to bet she talks like you too?

So Sheila came to us the weekend after we got back from Seattle. Everything happened so fast. Like a big knot that had been gathering for years and years unraveled all at once. She's so beautiful. I recognized her right away, and I wouldn't have even needed the picture. She's tall and slim, like Toby was, and she's got his hair, tawny and thick, that lies across her shoulders, and the prettiest face, oval, with dark arched eyebrows

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and wide open eyes, and a kindness I'm not used to seeing in one so young. I never had such a hug in my life, so close and full of longing except, I thought, from her father those many years ago.

Sheila's lucky. She's easy to love. We all took to her right away. We had the wedding right on schedule, Toby and Eileen's, and it was the perfect occasion for Sheila to meet the whole family and all our friends. Molly was a little standoffish at first. Well, she'd been through hell and then here's my little girl, in her face, as the kids would say. But it didn't take more than a few minutes before the two of them had their heads together. Boy, would I have liked to hear that conversation. Well, I was mooning over the girls and the wedding and all that togetherness when I heard a crash. The father of the groom had just whipped the tablecloth out from under the desserts. He was drunk as a skunk.

Sheila

Like I said, Toby, my next to youngest brother, got married to Eileen, and they

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included me in the wedding picture even though we'd all just met. The party afterwards was warm and friendly. Everyone seemed to know who I was, I didn't have to introduce myself to anyone, so when Molly came up and asked me where I was from, I was a little surprised. You have an accent, she said, sounds like you might have lived in another country once upon a time. The way she was talking made me nervous, but she held me with those angry eyes of hers and asked me how I liked the family. Was it what you expected? she asked. All of a sudden I felt like crying. Are you upset about something? she asked. No, I replied, what about you? Oh, no, she replied, in a hard voice, like whatever I'd done wrong was *her* own special secret. Well, I wanted to move on. I looked past her, trying to locate someone I could naturally move on to, but I was surrounded by strangers.

Her tone was a little softer the next time she spoke. Was it what you expected? she asked again. Well, I said, I didn't really know what to expect. She looked at me for a moment before going on, as though

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wondering if I had it in me to tell her what she needed to know. Did you really want her to find you? she asked.

I've been back a couple of times since the wedding. Mick's the only one still at home. George, Jr. broke up with Molly, then moved out to his own place. He hasn't quit school though, I had a long talk with him about that. The family feels sort of hollowed out. Mary says that's natural when the kids begin to leave home. Well, I've come home, I said.

I've taken up chess with Mr. Carlson. Oh, I call him George to his face, but in my mind he's always Mr. Carlson. He likes to talk while he's looking over the board, figuring out his next move. He's pretty easy to get along with then. I told him about San Francisco, and invited him and Mary to come visit. He said he'd heard it was a pretty wild place. I said it was no wilder than Missoula, people just talk about it more. He grinned at that one.

I like Mr. Carlson. He doesn't say much, at least when I'm around, but when he does he's clear and when he asks questions he

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makes you feel like he really wants to hear you out. He asked me about my boyfriends. I said I don't have any. Is it San Francisco or you? he asked. I told him it was probably a little of both. It's easier to settle down in a small town, he said. How'd you and Mom meet? I asked. Oh, through friends, he said. She was getting a little old, he said, past twenty-five. She was ready and so was I. There's not a lot to distract you from that sort of impulse here in Missoula.

It was my third visit, and a real close game of chess, when he asked me how it felt being adopted. I told him I've never known anything else. Well, are you glad to be alive? he asked. Sure I am, I said, but I'm a lot happier now than I was before. Glad to oblige, he said. He sort of half smiled and I felt a certain amount of pain in my stomach. Who was I to come into these people's lives and upset the balance? Mary says it had to be, it'll work out, she says.

It'll work out. I hope so. I hope Mary's done the right thing. I know I'm still getting used to it myself. I've always known I was adopted. My parents told me when I was very

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young. What it does is, it makes you wonder. You feel set adrift, like Moses in the basket. Someone has placed you in that basket and pushed you out into the current. You have this journey to make toward that other person who is your mother, who exists somewhere out there, and you have so much to tell her. You hope she's thinking about you too.

But I feel blessed. I mean how many people get to meet their mothers for the first time? For most people, when they say 'first time', they mean sex, or maybe seeing someone die. But I got to see my own mother that clearly. I remember in particular the day Molly left for good, the day she and Mary had it out in the kitchen while Mr. Carlson and I were playing chess in the dining room. We could hear everything loud and clear. Both of us started listening so hard we gave up on the game, just started pushing the pieces around the board without a thought as to what we were doing. We heard Molly say she could never forgive her and Mary ask, forgive me for what? For finding Sheila at my expense. Well, you can imagine, I felt like disappearing, the way I sometimes do. Then Mary said, calm as could be, well, I guess I

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did. You bet you did. I guess I did all right. And they kept going on like that, like they were both tugging at either end of the same rope. And then, it was a while later, Mary said, if it wasn't for George and you making the same goddamn mistake I did, I guess Sheila wouldn't be here now. But she is here, right in that other room, my only daughter.

And then they lowered their voices and Mr. Carlson and I couldn't hear them anymore and after awhile we heard the back door slam and we knew it was over. Mary came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and told us dinner would be ready in fifteen minutes. She spoke with that sort of soft accent we both share that nobody on the coast can seem to place, the way I speak that bothers people who've traveled a bit and suspect I'm from somewhere else, some place they should know but can't quite put their finger on.

A young woman meeting her birth mother for the first time, an elderly woman attending her dying husband, a boy dealing with his father's shame; these three stories about love examine in exquisite detail what it costs and how we pay.
— from *The Bindery at the Well*

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