

DOGWOOD PRIZE IN NONFICTION

Meeting Lori

Christy Shick

EAST OF RENO ON INTERSTATE 80, past the giant billboard for Moonlight Bunny Ranch and tiny road sign for Lovelock Correctional Center, fingers of what looked like snow reached across the desert. It couldn't be snow, I thought. The thermostat in my car read 104 degrees, and even with A/C full blast my dog sat panting in the backseat. Still, it was hard to dispel the illusion. Could it be snow? Had some magic befallen the landscape in these cool white drifts that fattened toward the horizon?

It was miles before I realized it was salt.

I was headed toward Salt Lake City where I'd booked a room for the night at a Motel 6. From there it was only six hours to Steamboat Springs where I'd meet Lori.

"You're really coming?" Her voice cracked in a half-cry through the phone.

"I'm almost there." I told her my route, watching my dog sniff the chain-link fence that guarded our Motel 6 parking lot, diamond-shaped shadows blending with the ginger pattern of his fur.

"You're coming on the 40?" She said. "You can see the horses! There's a wild horse ranch up in Maybel. I don't know if you can see them from the highway. If you want to see them." She sighed. "The mustangs are really beautiful."

Leaving Salt Lake, barren gravel and rocks stretched up and up to a parched sky, until after Park City where small farms

appeared, and folksy towns, then the road opened onto a grassy spread of hills that seemed to roll on forever, blanketing the top of the world.

Cruising on that mountain sea with the hypnotizing humps and sways of empty two-lane highway, the low sky stretching its flat blue sheet to infinity, I'd forgotten about the horses until I saw a herd of them. Arched necks and wild manes. Pinto, dappled, gray. Frolicking and whinnying, unbridled and abrasive—stronger, I thought, than horses I usually saw. Then the sign for Maybel. But I didn't want to stop. I was so close now. And I'd come so far.

I'd known about Lori since the fifth grade, when my mom took me to Pittsburgh for my grandmother's eightieth birthday party, and I met my dad for the first time after looking him up in the white pages.

He'd met me in Mt. Lebanon park for a heavy walk through the humid heat, hardly saying a word, before bringing me back to his house where Lori's blue eyes sparkled from a photo on the mantel.

"Who's *that*?" She was beautiful.

My dad stared into his glass of iced tea. "That's an old picture," he mumbled. "She's at college now."

The framed 8x10 must have been her senior portrait. Maybe someday he'd put mine beside hers, I thought, but my dad and I remained strangers, meeting only twice after that, and decades passed before I'd learn Lori's name—the youngest of his *real* kids, I found out, from his first marriage, before he'd met my mom.

None of them knew I existed, until now.

More cars appeared on the road descending into a valley where the speed limit decreased every quarter mile—50 mph, 45 mph, 35 mph approaching the first traffic lights in

Steamboat—a surprising patch of stout brick buildings, with luxury A-frames and pitched roofs of newer homes winging the foothills for miles. Sunbeams flashed from the side of a tram swinging up the mountain on its cable.

I'd booked my room at The Holiday Inn on the far side of town, near Lori's address, and driving through, I saw a dozen bars and restaurants and marquees for live music. Perfect! I thought. One of the reasons I'd reached out to Lori first was the music I saw we had in common on Facebook. She was a Deadhead and wrote folk tunes, like me. I knew she was in hard times. Seasonal work as a landscape artist was coming to an end, she'd told me, and it sounded like she'd moved a couple of times in the past few years. I'd offer to treat.

"You're really here?"

"I'm really here."

I requested a room change at the front desk before going to meet her. "It's too dark and closed in," I said. "Is there anything with a nicer view or deck?"

"All our patio rooms are taken." A freckled boy who couldn't have been twenty looked at his computer. "I'll have one tomorrow if you want to switch then," he added. "It's a sweet room."

That settled, I found my car in the parking lot and drove up the hill, palms sliding in a slick of nervous sweat on the wheel as I zigzagged up the lane to Lori's address. And there she was, crouched on a stump at the edge of her driveway, hunched forward with her head down and thick long bangs hanging over her face like a shield. It wasn't until after I'd parked, gotten out of my car, and stood two feet in front of her that she finally looked up at me with a shock of ice-blue eyes.

They weren't familiar like I thought they'd be, not like my dad's had been the last time I'd seen him. Looking into his

eyes made me weep, but not Lori's.

Her bright eyes shined with tears. She grabbed me in a strong-armed hug then pushed me away, gripping my arms and searching my face, then pulling me in for another hard hug, barrel-chested, like I was, with broad shoulders and skinny legs. Most of her gray-streaked hair was twisted into a clip like I wore mine, except hers was thick and smooth—a perfect wave.

I had my mom's frizzy curls.

Still gripping my arms too tightly, she started sobbing, then just as abruptly stopped and steeled her posture. She smelled like wine, and I hoped she had a glass for me.

"This is my place," she said. "At least for now. I mean I just got it but I might have to move out in winter. I don't know." She stared down at the gravel.

"Is that your truck?" There was a gray Toyota 4x4 with big snow tires parked next to us. "Cool truck!"

She shrugged. "It needs work." Then her cheeks flushed with a sudden burst of energy. "We could take it to the river! I know a great spot! The dog can ride in back!"

"My dog's not used to it—"

"It's fine!" She shouted. "My dog did it all the time!"

"My dog would be scared—"

"Oh, you wouldn't be scared, would you?" Lori kneeled and petted him hard. "He'll be fine!"

Reggie was a hound-faced mutt with a brindle coat and one blue eye that pleaded with me now, while Lori smothered him.

"He really wouldn't," I said. "But the river sounds great! Let's do that tomorrow!"

Lori's broad shoulders and battle-ready chin deflated to a pout. "We'll see."

"I'm here for a few days. We'll just do what we feel like!" She invited me inside, and I followed her down a few

steps to a door at the rear of the house, noticing again her wide back and wiry legs, almost too much for her short shorts and halter, as she lead me into a nearly naked apartment. New-looking shag carpet covered the floors, and sliding glass doors opened onto a large deck and grassy yard, wallpapered by the jagged skyline of mountains.

"This is nice!" There was furniture a sofa, a bookshelf, a dining table, a few half-packed boxes stacked against the wall.

"For now." Lori paced.

"I brought something for you." I sat at the round wood dining table, which was pushed against the sofa back to divide the space.

"But I don't have anything for you!" Her eyes threw shards of light.

"It's not much." In the small gift bag was a card and a small wrapped box. I'd struggled with what to give her—what's an appropriate gift for meeting one's sister for the first time? Finally, I knew. My favorite earrings were dangling silver discs with eagles carved out of them. They sang of wild, of nature, of flight. I wore them all the time. But once I thought of giving them to Lori, no other present would do. They suited her, and leaving them with her felt like leaving a part of myself, creating a permanent attachment between us, which I thought I wanted.

"Oh, I love them!" She put them on right away.

"They look great on you!" They did.

"I can't believe you're giving these to me!" Her face contorted to weep again, her voice breaking. "I've never had nice things." Then, she leapt to her feet. "You have to see these pictures!" She fluttered around the room collecting photographs from boxes and on top of the tv cabinet where she had some framed. My dad, a stranger with my smile, stared out from his pilot's uniform, alongside family Lori named off one by one.

She went on and on about this cousin or that uncle, pointing to grainy faces she held in front of me.

I couldn't have been less interested, not now, meeting this half-sister I'd wondered about for thirty years. But Lori had different ideas. She'd just learned about me. She started sobbing again.

"It's okay." I put my hand on her shoulder. "Do you have anything to drink?"

"You want a drink?" She stopped crying, eyes blazing through her curtain of bangs.

I kept thinking her emotions would settle, that we just had to get past these awkward first moments to relax and lighten up and enjoy our time together. But worry crept in my gut as she went to the kitchen.

"I have a bottle of wine somewhere." She looked out from the galley. "Oh, there it is! By the sofa." She pointed to the floor where I found an open bottle of warm Chardonnay. "If I had a glass..." She rummaged in empty cabinets, finally pouring my share of wine into a coffee mug she found on the counter, slowly, carefully eyeing how much was left.

"We can get another bottle," I said. "I would have brought something but I figured we'd go out." I took my quarter-mug of wine. "Let's do that! Let's go out. My treat!"

"I don't know." Lori combed her bangs over her eyes, then took a swig from the wine bottle. "I haven't unpacked any cups yet."

"We could go have drinks by the pool at my hotel—"

"I don't know, I said! Don't pressure me!" She rushed to the table where she'd left my card and gift box, stuffed the earrings back inside with a smash of tissue, and marched with the small package clenched in her fist down the short hallway to her bedroom.

I stayed at the edge of the living room, calling after her. “It would just be nice to lighten up a little, you know? Have some fun. It doesn’t have to be so heavy, so all at once—”

Lori flung herself from the bedroom, staring at me from the end of the hall. “Don’t tell me how to feel,” she cried. “You don’t know what this is like for me!”

It took another forty minutes to convince her. She kept breaking into tearful narratives about her dog who’d died last year, and her brother who “doesn’t give a shit about me,” she said. “Nobody gives a shit about me! Our dad was never there for me. Maybe because of you!” Her eyes piercing, “Maybe *you’re* the explanation!”

“I only met him three times,” I reminded her, but she didn’t seem to hear me.

“That would explain a lot!”

Fantasies about my dad—the dad I thought he’d been for his other kids—fantasies I’d painted with my mind’s eye for decades vanished in seconds. “I never knew him,” I said.

Lori squinted at me, suspiciously.

“Let’s go. Let’s get out,” I cheered. “At least pick up more wine.”

That’s what finally got her out of the house.

There was a liquor store at the bottom of the hill, across the street from my hotel. We each picked a bottle of wine—mine red, hers white. And at checkout Lori grabbed a single serving of Jim Beam whiskey from the bucket next to the cash register.

“We can do better than that!” I asked the guy behind the counter for a fifth of Bulleit instead.

“Good choice,” he smiled.

Lori shifted nervously from foot to foot.

I shouldn’t have enabled her.

"I'm a broken person," she'd told me on the phone weeks earlier.

But I hadn't believed her. "Don't tell yourself that!" I knew how it felt to lose hope, to struggle with substances—something else we had in common that no one on my mom's side shared. It wasn't my business to control Lori.

Plus, I wanted a drink. I couldn't imagine surviving the day without one.

After I bought the bourbon, things seemed to loosen up between us. We poured our drinks into plastic bathroom cups in my hotel room and walked out with the dog. Behind the hotel parking lot was a trailhead that followed a short wind of creek through big bluestem grasses aflutter with red-winged blackbirds who quieted as we passed.

"They're watching us," I said.

"You noticed them!" Lori raised one brow, as if the birds were her secret. "There's a better trail on the other side. We should do that tomorrow."

We stopped on a footbridge where I lit my spliff and stared over the rail at lily pads and leafy shadows playing in the glare of evening sun. "Are you still playing music?" I'd heard Lori sing like Joni Mitchell on an old YouTube recording, and I'd brought my guitar.

"Not really. Not in a while." She frowned. "I don't play anymore."

"But you're so good!"

"Maybe," she said, "I could have been." Her voice wavered like she might cry again, and I would have done anything to stop it. Going back to my room to play songs seemed a sweet solution at the time.

Now, I wonder if I forced it on her like she'd forced photographs and family lore and pools of tears on me. It didn't take long for that spiral to continue—down and down, her

fiery avalanche of tears burning themselves up before they hit the hotel carpet.

But when we'd first entered the room, I was hopeful.

"Bob Weir talked me down from a bad acid trip once!" Lori sat in the tweedy armchair, one leg folded under the other. "I know you won't believe me. Nobody does!" She rolled her eyes. "I was at this party in Boulder—did I tell you I played with the String Cheese Incident! You won't believe this either but they invited me to join their band!" Lori's eyes widened as I listened. "That *same* week I was asked to be in a play with Carol Burnett's sister! Can you believe that choice!" She cackled, leaning back in the chair, staring at some high corner of the room. "Nothing good happens to me my whole life, then bam!"

"What did you do?"

"I chose the play, which ended up being nothing. Of course! I should have gone with the band." She bit a smile. "Story of my life."

"I know String Cheese Incident—"

"They're nice guys," Lori said, then barked, "Let me tell you this story!" as if I'd changed the subject. "I was bad tripping at this party—I mean *bad*, and my friend Dave brought me into a bedroom to talk on the phone with Bob—Bob Weir! I swear to *God* it was him. He talked to me for-*ev*-er. Sweet as a bear cub." Lori's gaze drifted, smile fading into the lamplight. "You probably don't believe me."

"I believe you—"

"It was a long time ago," she said. "Before—." She was vague about how long she'd been addicted to heroin or how many years ago she'd quit, but clear about God's help overcoming it. "I don't know where I'd be without my church," she said, snapping eyes on me.

"I've never been religious," I told her. "You know my mom was Jewish."

A blank look washed over Lori's face, eyes still as a statue. Then, she announced, "You know in eighth grade I ran for class president and got three votes—*Three votes!* Can you believe that? Have you ever heard anything so pathetic?"

"I wasn't popular either." I'd pulled my guitar from the case and stood with one foot on the bed, propping it on my knee, finding E with the green light of a clip-on tuner. "*I wasn't popular in high school,*" I strummed C to E, singing with a country twang. "*Everyone had friends but me.*" I wanted her to play with me.

"Huh." She got up to refill her wine cup from the bottle on the dresser.

"Play one of your songs." I offered the guitar. "Please."

"You play something." She spat, taking the bottle with her to sit back down and stare up at me with those too-bright eyes.

I'd just finished writing a new song. Only two people had heard it. "*Back when I had no shoes,*" I played for her. "*I sang to the stars, and I found you.*" When I finished her eyes were wet with tears again.

"You wrote that?" She cradled the wine to her chest, resting her chin on the lip of the bottle. "I wish our dad could hear that. He played piano, you know."

I didn't know.

"He loved when I played for him. I'm the only one who shared that with him!" A spiteful flash shadowed her eyes for just a moment like a bird flying under the sun before Lori brightened and went on with more stories. "You have to meet our nieces!" She said, rising with a burst of excitement. "Let's drive to Dallas!"

For some reason, in that moment, the idea didn't seem crazy. Lori's brother—my estranged half-brother—and his four daughters all lived near Dallas. I wanted to meet them.

I wasn't totally broke. It was a two-day drive, and I couldn't help wonder if my going would help heal some wounds. There were many, as Lori told it. Daughters not speaking to fathers. Brothers not speaking to sisters. In my grand, egotistical fantasy I imagined I'd help repair their broken ties—be a hero, instead of the interloper I was.

Talk of the trip animated Lori for a while, describing her favorite nieces. The beautiful one, the cool one, the religious one, the daddy's girl. And she told me about the last time she'd seen our dad before he died—entertaining him with a song and dance she'd done for him as a girl. "*You're upsetting him!*" Lori imitated his wife, Val. "But I wasn't upsetting him!" She threw her arms out exasperatedly, eyes wide at me as if I could fix it or it were my fault.

That's when I told her about the last time I'd seen our dad, the year before he'd died. I'd looked him up and taken a chance, knocking on his door in Pinehurst, North Carolina. Dementia had softened him, weakened him. "I felt sorry for him cooped up with Val! You know she never let him out of the house? She said it was *too hard!*" I thought Lori and I might bond over the mutual dislike of our dad's widow. "It's like he was a nuisance she just wanted rid of."

"That's how she treated all of us." Lori rolled her eyes. "I *never* saw him after he married her."

I put the guitar down and sat on the edge of the bed close to Lori, more fantasies about my father crumbling in her words. "You didn't see him on vacations or anything?"

"When I was little. We all used to go. But he stopped." She poured more wine into her plastic cup. "Maybe because of you!" She said again, stabbing me with those icypick eyes.

"I told you I only met him three times."

But Lori didn't believe me. Like a trembling rabbit one minute and startled tiger the next, she leapt from her chair to

pace the room. "When? I don't understand when all of this happened!" She marched across to the windows, span and crossed her arms, then stomped back to the dresser where she put her hands on her hips and stared down at me.

"I was born in 1972," I said slowly. "My mom dated our dad in 1971. She was in love with him. But he didn't love her." I told her about my older brother and sister—my mom's first kids. "They're the same age as you and Michael."

"Oh my god!" Lori gasped. "I remember your sister!" She grabbed my arms, gripping hard. "I remember her!" It was as if she'd doubted my whole story until that moment. "She has dark hair. I met her one day." Lori's face lit, cheeks flushed. "With your mom! I remember your mom!" She shook me. "I remember your mom!" Something in her eyes seemed to unravel, and from then the evening took a dark turn.

From enraged and ranting to weeping and pitiful, Lori threw herself around the hotel room, still in her halter and short shorts, gray-streaked hair whipping in a tantrum, flip-flops strewn to opposite corners. I could not recount the many speeches and fragments of speeches and wandering dramas. "I'm like this because my dad never gave me anything!" She wailed. "He didn't leave me *anything!*" Lori was fifty-five. "I've never had nice things!" She moaned and sobbed.

I succeeded in calming her down but only for minutes at a time until, inevitably, another outburst.

"All I want is to help people!" she cried.

"Can I get you a taxi?" I finally offered.

Lori collapsed in a fetal mound of tears, hugging and rocking herself on the floor. "I thought I was staying here." She whimpered, then growled. "Of course, you want me to go!"

"Look." I tried not to raise my voice. "You just can't keep acting like this—"

"Oh—acting like *this!*" That triggered another eruption.

“You mean like I have *feelings*! Do you even *have* feelings?” Finally, she passed out on the floor next to the bed.

I covered her with a blanket, pushed a pillow under her head, and turned off the light. Things would be better in the morning, I thought, sober. I couldn't abandon Lori. And I couldn't deny seeing fragments of myself in her dramatic antics—times I'd lost control, always with alcohol fueling my behavior, ex-boyfriends who'd felt betrayed, who'd called me “crazy.” And just six years ago, I'd broken —become a stranger to myself taking care of my sick mother. That's how I knew how helpless Lori felt beneath her outbursts, how powerless she felt. And I was learning from her how powerful my own outbursts had been those months I'd flailed for air, drowning by my mother's deathbed, enraged, in denial. I saw my own lost self in Lori and wanted to help her. But just as I shut my eyes, she started up again, moaning, then shouting.

“You can't stay here like this.” I flipped the lamp switch. “You need to go home. Sleep this off. We can talk tomorrow.” But that made Lori as enraged as I'd seen her, face red, leaping and hollering at the top of her lungs.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?!” She threw her arms up.

“You really have to go. This is just—it's abusive,” I pleaded. “Don't make me call security—”

“Ha! Go ahead. Call security—call the police for all I care!” She shook her head, laughing. “*Abusive.*”

“That can't be what you want.”

“Little Miss Perfect!” She clenched her fists, muscles and veins chiseled on tense arms, eyes like windswept lakes, and I thought she might hit me before she stormed out of the room, pulling hard to slam the heavy hotel door behind her.

I leapt to lock the bolt and chain.

Lori pounded from the outside.

"Just go home," I said as calmly as possible.

She pounded more, threw herself on her back on the hallway carpet, and screamed and cried, while I turned off the lights and watched through the peephole. I'd never taken my behavior this far, at least not in public, at least not since high school. Someone would complain, I thought. She'd have to leave eventually. And eventually, she did, sometime after 1:00 a.m.

Saturday morning, I woke to find her sunglasses on the dresser next to an empty bottle of bourbon I hadn't noticed her drinking.

I brought her sunglasses to the front desk and sent Lori a text that they waited for her there. Thank God I was moving into a new room, I thought, and by 12:30 it was ready, with a patio facing the back lot and trailhead. The summer Olympics were on TV, and I was happy to wait out the day there, lounging in the shadow of mountains on the hotel bed, eating take-out, smoking spliffs, and playing with the dog. I knew I'd hear from Lori eventually, but the loud clang of the hotel room telephone gave me a jolt.

"Is this Christy Shick?" It was a man's voice, not one I recognized.

"Yes."

"I'm Sergeant Klein with Steamboat Police Department. Do you know Lori Richter? She says you're her sister? She told me to find you here."

Insides falling, "She's my half-sister," I told him. "We just met."

"Oh, Wow. Well, I don't know what you'll want to do. We found her in some bushes at 11:15 this morning. She was highly intoxicated. Lost her phone and wallet."

"Is she okay?"

"She was talking about suicide, so we had to keep her on

a hold. She's up at the Medical Center—at least overnight. You can call them.” He gave me a number for Lori’s case manager.

This was worse than I could have imagined, yet guiltily, I was relieved—relieved I could leave my hotel room without running into Lori. I left a message for her social worker and took Reggie for a walk, past the footbridge about a quarter mile to where the trail ended at the heel of a cul-de-sac. American flags hung over two-inch lawns in front of matching two-story, two-car garage homes on all sides of the wide empty street.

On Google Maps and with my own two eyes I saw promises of further trails running along the creek ahead of us, and I found one a few blocks over, through a park next to a soccer field. A row of cottonwood stood like ushers along the main trail, which branched into paved pathways through tall bluestem and mosquito grass, but they all came to dead ends—pathways to nowhere.

I read later on Wikipedia that Steamboat Springs was named when some trappers thought they heard a steamboat chugging on what must have been Yampa River, but when they arrived found the sound came from a pump of natural hot springs, which still churned its ancient waters day and night, behind the noise of cars, and wind, and Lori.

By the time I got back to my room, a voicemail from the social worker was waiting. And I drove the short boulevard miles across rolling foothills to Steamboat Medical Center, parking far from the entrance in a nearly-empty lot to give my dog shade under one of few trees planted there—grateful to have him as an excuse not to stay long.

“Lori’s in bad shape. As bad as I’ve seen her.” The social worker, a small woman with curly hair and glasses prepped me. “We’re still evaluating her, but we’re talking about rehab. I’m hoping you’ll help.” She gave me a serious, brow-raised look, forcing a frown. “She’s over here for now.” She led me down a

long clinical corridor to the triage room where Lori lay helpless in her hospital gown under bright fluorescent lights, hair tangled against the paper pillow cover, white bandage taped over the IV drip in her arm.

"I can't believe you're still here," she said weakly, reaching for my hand. She wanted to get to a rehab center near Dallas. "Would you take me there?" She squeezed my fingers.

"She was doing well, until this setback," the social worker chirped. "Not that it's your *fault*," she added carefully.

"I can't take you to Dallas," I said quietly.

"Her mother said she'd pick her up, if we can get her on a flight there."

"I love my mama," Lori cried.

"There must be tons of flights. I can help with that—"

"Would you drive me to the airport?" Lori pleaded, her eyes like melting ice.

"It's only four hours to Denver," the social worker added.

Four hours, I thought, for Lori to cry or yell at me, or jump out of the car on the freeway. "I can't." My voice broke. I looked at the floor, tears burning. "I'm afraid to be in the car with you," I confessed.

Lori sniffed and turned her head away to stare at the bare examination room wall.

"I want to help get you there," I looked back to the social worker. "I'm sure we can figure something out." I told them I'd be back that evening, once Lori was settled in her hospital room, and back at the hotel, I searched for flights while watching the summer Olympics and eating Caesar salad from Rex's Bar & Grill next door, where I bought every meal that weekend. There were a bunch of flights to Dallas in the \$300 range and a charter airport bus that left Steamboat twice daily for another \$79. I didn't have enough in my checking account,

but I did have a thousand dollars credit left on my MasterCard and decided to pay Lori's fare.

Again I took Reggie out the trailhead through the residential neighborhood to the dead-end pathways fingering the creek, my eyes drifting up to the darkening mountainside, which started trembling. At first I thought it was an earthquake. It felt like thunder underground, exploding toward us. My dog leapt barking and growling across the trail.

"No!" I screamed but had no time to grab him, leaping for a branch on a small sycamore tree, swinging into the trunk, trying to hook it with my leg. "Reggie!! Stop!"

I thought for sure he'd get trampled, but the moose galloped over him—her giant nine-foot frame pounding over his tiny barking body, and my heart pounding with her like a drum. I hugged my dog and snapped him to his leash. "Stupid!" Breathing hard, I hurried us away, a hundred feet to the soccer field where two middle-aged women, both wearing visors and sunglasses and silky sweatpants, chatted by a park bench. "Did you see that moose?" I called out, approaching them.

"She was after her calves," one said. "You didn't see them?"

I looked back down the trail, imagining moose calves in the shadows of bluegrass and maple leaves.

"You're lucky," the woman added as if she didn't care whether I'd been lucky or not. "Moose have killed a lot of dogs this summer." She looked at her friend.

"More than usual this year."

They both nodded.

When I went back to see Lori that evening, she'd been moved into her own hospital room and sat with her bed inclined, talking on the phone in a glow of cozy lamplight.

"Christy's here," she said. "Okay, Mama. I love you." She sounded better, some steadiness in her voice for the first

time. And she agreed to go to Dallas.

After a short series of discussions with her mom and her social worker, and with the help of Lori's off-again boyfriend of ten years, Jeff, we had it arranged. Jeff lived an hour away in Craig and said he'd meet us at the clinic the next day when Lori was scheduled to be discharged, then stay with her overnight at her place. He'd have to leave for work at 7:00 a.m. Monday, and I promised to get Lori to the airport shuttle at my hotel by 8:00 a.m. It was all paid for and done. Lori was eager to see her mom and eager to get sober, she said.

"Thank you."

Back in my room, a breeze from the patio washed over me while I ate take-out again and watched B-movies, and sunk into bed with a weight of calm I'd never known. I was so lucky, I realized. For my mother—her courage and intellect. For my son. What if he hadn't come along to anchor me? What if I'd just kept drinking? Lori had told me our Swedish grandmother—our dad's mom—had died of alcoholism. I clearly shared those genes. But my mom—her tenacity and humor had saved me. How I wished I could call her to thank her, but it had been six years since she'd died. And maybe that was part of it. Being on my own.

The next day, in her yellow, scoop-neck T-shirt, designer jeans, and leather belt, Lori looked great. She was sober, really sober, complaining to Jeff about having to wait so long to be released.

"How long can this possibly take?!" Notes of anger in her voice made me glad Jeff had come. He stood next to her now in flip-flops and board shorts, his long blond hair gathered at the back of his neck in a tangled ponytail.

"Just be patient," he said.

Lori rolled her eyes.

She was discharged with a prescription for Ativan to help her through the night, and I drove the three of us to a pharmacy at City Market, waiting under shade at a café table out front while the two of them went inside. But I hadn't been there two minutes when Lori stormed out the automatic doors, Jeff trailing behind her.

"The line's too long. It'll take forever!" she yelled when she saw me. "I'll get it later."

Jeff shrugged helplessly.

"I'm getting a bottle of wine!" Lori threw eyes like broken glass at both of us. "I don't care what you say. It's just one bottle." She disappeared into a liquor store two storefronts down.

"There's nothing you can do when she gets like this," Jeff said.

I realized it was the first time he'd spoken to me, or looked directly at me since we'd met.

"I really appreciate you coming," I told him about the ranting and raging and *Little Miss Perfect!*

"She went there with you?" He shook his head.

It made me hopeful her behavior surprised him. Maybe I *had* been the catalyst for her spiral. But if I'd opened a wound, it was because Lori wanted it opened, I thought, her lifetime of disappointed entitlement, clinging to girlhood fantasies about her should-have-been doting father. I'd been so like her when I was younger. Still, I thought, she might be better off if I'd never come.

"See you in thirteen hours!" After dropping Jeff and Lori at her place, a mix of worry and relief followed me back to my hotel. He'll handle it, I reassured myself. All I had to do was get her on that shuttle in the morning. I knew she didn't have money for booze at the airport. As hard as she might try, opportunities for alcohol on the way to Dallas would be limited.

Jeff called at 6:30 a.m. "It was a long night." He sounded beaten.

"I'll be there soon."

"Good luck," he said.

Lori was in bed, half-dressed, clothes strewn in wrinkled piles all over the room, with a glass of bourbon on the nightstand when I arrived. The whole room smelled like bourbon. Where had she gotten it? There was no point wondering.

"We have to go!"

She pulled the tangle of blankets up to her chin. "I can't."

"Yes, you can Lori! C'mon. You'll be so down later if you miss this."

"I know," she whimpered, looking up from her nest of sheets like an injured animal, reaching toward the drink on her nightstand, but grabbing instead one of the earrings I'd given her and holding it up. "Only one," she said. "I lost one." Her eyes were glazed.

"It's okay," I told her. "Please let me help you. Where's your bag?"

She pointed to an open suitcase on the floor by the nearly empty closet. Clothes were everywhere.

"I mean, what do you need really? It's rehab, right? Sweatpants and T-shirts and PJs. Maybe a couple cute outfits for afterward. Comfy stuff." I picked from the pile of shorts and tank-tops and sweaters at my feet, while Lori mumbled and cried.

"You think this is so easy!" She kicked at her sheets.

"No." I nearly laughed. "This isn't easy." I was about to give up when Lori's phone rang, and after a few incoherent phrases, she handed it to me. It was her AA sponsor.

"She's a mess!" The woman's voice piped through the phone. "I have a four-year-old here, and I have to go to work."

She couldn't help now but said to take her number and call later. "Get her on that shuttle!" She cheered. "Once she's buckled in, what can she do? She'll sober up by Denver."

Once I'd finally found everything Lori said she needed and had packed it in her suitcase, she cried out, "No!" and dumped everything onto the floor where she scrambled around like a toddler in a sandbox. "I need this poncho!"

It was a quarter to eight when I finally managed to get her with her suitcase into my car. No hope of breakfast, but we'd made it! The big white airport shuttle rolled up to the entrance of the Holiday Inn minutes after we arrived, and soon we stood at its open door, driver waiting. A few steps and she'd be on her way.

"What can I say?" Lori gazed at me with her tear-filled, steel blue eyes. "Thank you for all of this." She hugged me tight and quick, clutched the handle of her suitcase, looked at the driver then back at me. Then she ran off, towing her suitcase bouncing and skidding across the parking lot. "I can't! I'm sorry!" She hollered.

"Lori!" I started after her.

"I can't get on that bus!" She spun to face me one last time.

Then, I let her go, suitcase bumping behind her flapping poncho toward some bushes at the edge of the property, vaguely in the direction of her home.

"She's not coming?" The driver looked down from his high seat in the shuttle.

"I guess not."

Back in my room, getting my own things packed, I kept my eye out for Lori, leaning out the patio every few minutes to look for her in the parking lot, or near the bushes and trail where she'd seemed headed. But after a quiet hour I accepted she was gone, probably home with her bourbon by now, and

there wasn't anything more I could do. I packed my car—my suitcase and backpack, the dog food and dog bed, and took Reggie for one last walk—a short walk, just to the edge of the cul-de-sac where I again noticed how all the houses looked the same, even landscaped with the same maples and chokeberries.

What a snow-globe view I'd had of this town, no hot springs or music or tram rides, or bird watching or Yampa River adventures.

Now, I just wanted to go home.

I was almost back to my car, by a small clump of pine trees at the edge of the hotel lot when I heard her. At first, I thought it was a bird. But as I walked the last steps of the footpath I saw her from the corner of my eye, collapsed next to her suitcase at the foot of a pine tree, half-hidden by branches and bushes.

"Christy," she whispered, almost like a whistle.

And I pretended not to see her, instead marching onward to my car, starting the engine quickly and putting three miles between us before pulling over to call Steamboat police.

"We'll check it out," the sergeant promised. "You want us to call you if we find her?"

"Please."

My route back was different from the way I'd come, following the gush of Colorado River toward Interstate 70. I stopped at an overlook—a dirt lot on the curve of highway—to watch the current. So violent and dark and cold, it scared me, even just to watch it. I called the sergeant from the safety of my car.

"We're with her," he said. "But there's not much more we can do."

I'd lost the paper with the AA sponsor's number written on it. But as the distance between Lori and me grew, I was filled again with that newly found calm and gratitude. For my home.

My job. My son. So lucky I hadn't turned out like Lori. *Yet!* An inner voice warned, but my dog smiled again in the back seat as we weaved down the wooded mountain. Down and down to Utah, then up and up toward Nevada as the sun played hide-and-seek behind the mountains, casting rainbows of pinks and oranges on scalloped cliffs that edged Great Basin. From there rural roads descended into the ash of premature mountain sunset, zigzagging toward Highway 50—"the loneliest highway on earth"—that would bring me home to California.

It was a left turn onto that long highway, with great grassy pastures framed by mountains east and west. And not two clicks up, I saw what I couldn't believe, ready to disbelieve anything. It was a bull, a big black bull that must have weighed two tons, upside-down at the shoulder of the road, as if something had picked him up and flipped him on his back, legs and hooves stiff in the air, horns on the ground. With the trick of twilight and my tendency to imagine things, I doubted my vision. But there he was, as I drove by, a king of beasts on his head with dead open eyes.

It had to be a truck, I thought, a big Mac truck—but how? On this flat road, how had they not seen each other coming? The magnificent animal still in shock. Eyes wide. Legs in the air. I couldn't shake the image, the spirit of the thing. I thought about the ranchers. The loss. And minutes later, a black sheet of night covered everything, leaving me in the orb of my own headlights on an endless road, which seemed to incline toward the horizon, but I couldn't tell for sure. Reggie was asleep on the backseat now, and I concentrated on lane markers flying by faster than I wanted to drive. It was like a scene from *Close Encounters* when a snowflake of bright lights descended in front of me. I couldn't tell if it was far and large, or close and small. It was blinding. I slowed to 30 mph, alone on the dark highway, smoking my spliff, staring at this surreal

light that seemed to be floating my way.

It turned out to be an emergency vehicle with the brightest whitest lights I'd ever seen—like fireworks whizzing past me in the black night. I figured it was about that bull. At least, I hoped it was a big deal to kill such an animal. I hoped it wasn't common.

After the excitement of lights disappeared in my rearview, the highway rose into stars, thousands of them strung so big and low above my head, it felt like I could grab them. And roadkill. It was a landmine in those late hours. The blue glow of starlight spread over the desert mountain and hundreds of carcasses on the highway, unlucky marmots and rats and moles carpeting the road in grim proof I wasn't alone out here, after all. My headlights caught a white owl soaring low over the road with so many others, I imagined, stalking their midnight feast. The carcasses would be gone by sunrise, I realized, and was comforted by that circle of life, sitting in the safety of my car, until I hit the snow rabbit. I saw the flash of her big pink eye—wide in the terror of headlights. Her tall white ears. She was exquisite. Rare. And a horrible thud bumped under the car when I hit her. My dog jumped in the backseat. It happened so fast. She was so beautiful. So helpless. It was awful. But there was nothing I could have done to save her.

To waver even a little on that dark road might have killed us both.