

13 Years in America

One Woman's Pursuit of the American Dream

By Melanie Steele

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Author's Note

In 1998, I moved to America from Canada. This is the story of my 13 Years in America, with some aspects changed in the retelling.

1998

I'm trying hard to enjoy myself as we drive down the Trans-Canada Highway in George's green and white 1978 VW van. I really am. Over the past two and a half days I've told myself a hundred times to focus on the music and the conversation and the incredible changing landscape around me, from ocean, to forests, to mountains, and then to great, vast wheat fields.

But it's hard to leave Salt Spring Island behind. It's easier for George and Sophie because they're just going to a friend's wedding in Toronto, and they'll be back in a week. But I'm getting dropped off to spend the whole summer working in Fort Frances, and even when I get back to the West Coast, it won't be the same. Then, I'll just be visiting Salt Spring instead of living there. Those days, for now, are over.

I remind myself again to focus on the road ahead instead of the one behind me. We drive through small prairie towns, around Winnipeg, and finally into Ontario. We're only a couple hours away now.

George turns on to the highway south and glances at Sophie. "What are we going to tell Customs?"

"That we're just driving through."

"I hate the border," George complains, turning down the music. "You know we don't have any rights there. No right to remain silent or anything. They'll grill us with questions, and make it into this big deal just to drive through their country."

"Stop worrying about it," Sophie says. "You're making it worse."

I don't blame him for being nervous. I know what it's like to cross the border, with the line-ups and the huge American flag soaring overhead. It's intimidating. Last year I went down to Seattle with some friends and we got held up, brought inside, and questioned while our car was searched. We weren't doing anything wrong so they let us go, but we were all shaking for a good hour afterward.

"How 'bout we just drop Mel off in Fort Frances and then go through Thunder Bay and around to Toronto?" George suggests.

"That's a good idea," I yell from the backseat. "Your van's a hippie-mobile, and with your long hair and Sophie's nose ring, I bet you'll get hassled at the border."

Sophie sighs. "The wedding's tomorrow," she reminds us, "and going through the States will save us like six or seven hours."

"Fine," George says. "We'll do it."

Sophie turns the music up and George tolerates it until we turn left toward Fort Frances. I can see his knuckles turning white from gripping the steering wheel. Signs say to keep right for the International Bridge.

"Turn here," I yell. My dad's place is a mile up on the left. I've been here before, but only once, two years ago when I was hitchhiking across the country. I recognize it, but barely.

George stops in front of the garage and turns the van off. My dad and his wife Pat come out to greet us, and George and Sophie say a quick hello while they unload my stuff from the back.

Two suitcases, a couple boxes, and a tote bag. My other stuff is stored in boxes at my mom's in Victoria for when I get back. This is just what I need to get through the summer.

"Call me when you're across the border, okay?" I say, giving Sophie a hug. I add, in a whisper, "and let me know when you're coming back through just in case I can't handle it here."

"I will," she promises, and they jump back in the van.

I watch them pull out, and for a moment I'm overcome with an urge to run after them. I could flag them down and fling the side door open and jump in. Then I wouldn't have to go inside or start my summer job at the toll booth on Monday. But before I can act on it, they turn on to the road, honk twice, and they're gone.

My dad has my two boxes stacked in his arms. He carries the load ahead of him up the walkway and in the backdoor. I follow him in and take off my shoes in the entryway.

"Your room will be down here," he says. "This'll give you some privacy. Our room's at the other end of the house."

"Isn't this your exercise room?"

"We moved everything to the side."

A weight bench, tread mill, and TV stand have been pushed off to the far side of the small rectangular room to fit in a single bed. The one bookshelf is filled with paperbacks and movies. Stephen King, Tom Clancy, Dean Koontz.

"This'll be fine," I say. "Thanks."

Pat is in the kitchen brewing coffee when we come out. She hands us each a cup, and my dad takes his into the living room and opens a newspaper. The kitchen has been redone since I was here last. Oak cupboards, marble countertop.

"How was the drive?" Pat asks.

"Fast. We left Salt Spring Wednesday morning. So it only took us two and a half days."

"Did you bring any clothes that'll be appropriate for work, or do we need to take you shopping?"

I look down at my velvet shirt and Indian cotton skirt. I don't remember what I packed. "I'll go see," I tell her, and I bring my coffee into my temporary room.

I kneel on the floor and open the boxes. I didn't bring many clothes, and what I did bring is crunched up, wrapped around breakable items. I unwrap and spread my things out on the floor around me. The jewelry box and the wooden candle holder with the half burnt black candle can go on the bookshelf. The framed picture of arbutus trees on Salt Spring can go on the nightstand table with my journal. The Mexican blanket I wrapped around me on the long nights in the VW van can hang on the wall.

I sit on the bed and look around. Yeah, if I scatter a few things around the room, it'll make a big difference. I lay back and count the seconds until the bed stops moving...one...two...three...four. The ceiling is speckled with little shimmering flecks. My dad and Pat's muffled voices seep in from the living room.

Then, the phone's ringing. I must have dozed off. A moment later Pat comes in. "It's a collect call from Sophie."

I pick up the extension in my room and wait for Pat to hang up the other line. "Hi, Sophie! You made it?"

"Yeah, we're in International Falls."

"No problems getting across the border?"

"Oh man," she says, "we totally lucked out. We had the coolest Customs officer. He just asked us a few questions and then told us to have a good trip. All that worrying for nothing."

“That’s awesome.”

“So I just wanted to let you know we’re across. I have to go. We’re going to drive through the night.”

“Okay. Have a good time. And don’t forget to call me when you come back through.”

Differences

Fort Frances is a mill town, meaning that most of the people who live here either work at the paper mill or at a job that exists because of it. Here, people own four by four trucks and go driving around for fun. And, because the mill makes paper products, people here don't believe in recycling. In fact, when I ask where the recycling bin is as I'm being trained on my first day at work, my trainer tells me that the recycling bin is the garbage can.

"Job security," he says.

I smile politely and look down at my black cords and white cotton shirt, the only respectable-looking clothes I brought. The guy training me is wearing jeans, though, so tomorrow I'll wear whatever I want.

The job is simple. There are two of us inside a six by ten booth that sits at the base of the metal international bridge that's privately owned by the mill. On one side of the bridge is American Customs, and on the other side is Canadian Customs. Traffic heading into America stops at the right hand window, and traffic coming into Canada stops at the left hand window. Each car pays four dollars to cross.

"Do we pay in American or Canadian?" most people ask, and I'm instructed to answer, simply, "Either one."

At ten, a woman about my age comes in to give us each a break. There's a tiny washroom in the back of the toll booth, but there's never a pause in traffic to allow a break until someone comes to take over. She relieves my trainer first.

"I'm Renée," she says when my trainer steps into the washroom.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Mel. And what's his name again?"

"Ralph."

"Oh yeah."

"It's your first day, eh?"

"Yup."

"How's it going?"

"Alright."

Renée knows about every third car that comes through. She leans out the window and greets people, asking what they're doing tonight, or where they went last night, or what they're up to this weekend. Her laughter fills the booth as she talks.

She comes again for our lunch break at noon and our afternoon break at two. Each time she relieves Ralph first, and then takes my side so I can sit down and rest. When she turns to leave, I thank her for coming.

"Do you drink?" she asks me.

"Yeah."

"A few of us are going out tonight if you want to come."

"Sure. Where?"

She writes down her address for me.

"You might have to pick me up," I tell her. "I don't have a car."

She laughs, writes my address down and says she'll be by at nine.

At eight-thirty, I'm ready. I pace back to my room and glance at my reflection in the full-length mirror behind the door. My long black skirt and boots make me look even taller and slimmer than usual, and my straight blond hair falls over my shoulders, a stark contrast against my black tank top. I grab my purse and walk out to the living room to wait.

By the time Renée shows up, I've already been ready for an hour. My dad and Pat are heading off to bed.

"Should we wait up for you?" Pat asks.

I smile to myself. I've been out of school and on my own for three years. "No, that's okay. I'll let myself in. I'll be quiet."

The Red Dog parking lot is full. Renée drives through the rows and finds a spot way at the back, next to a rusty pick-up truck.

"Wow," I say, "I didn't know so many people went out on a Monday night."

"People go out every night here."

Inside, the music is blaring. The room is hot and smells of sour beer. I follow Renée through the crowds, up to the bar, and order myself a beer. I take a sip as she looks around for the people she planned to meet here.

"There they are!"

I follow her over to the pool tables and let her introduce me to half a dozen people whose names I won't remember. One song switches to another, then another, and I feel a tap on my arm. It's a guy with a crew cut and short sleeves rolled up to show off his muscles.

"Want to dance?" he asks.

"No thanks."

He stares at me. "Really?"

"Really. I don't dance."

He walks away. Renée goes off to get us another beer and stops to talk to a dozen people on the way. I turn my attention back to the game of pool. Solids are winning. A moment later there's another tap on my arm.

"Why wouldn't you dance with my friend?" A tough-looking guy with greasy long brown hair is looking me up and down.

"I don't dance." I yell to be heard over the music.

"It's his birthday."

I shrug. "It's nothing personal."

Renée's back with our beers. She's found one of her friends sitting at a table with two guys. "Let's go sit with them."

I follow her through the crowds and up to a small, high table against the wall. There are four chairs and three people at the table: a dark-haired girl, a sheepish-looking guy wearing a shirt with "ZERO" across the chest, and a guy with a plain black t-shirt and a warm smile. Renée slips into the empty chair, and I stand at the table's end. She introduces me to her friend Lisa, and Lisa introduces us both to the two guys, Steve and Scott. I smile and say hi and answer Lisa's questions about working at the toll booth.

Scott gets up, grabs an extra chair from the next table, and smiles at me as he sets it down. "I thought you'd like to sit down," he says.

"Thank you!" It turns out that he didn't need to bother because Renée leaves a minute later to go see another friend who just walked in, and I slip over into her empty seat. Lisa and Steve are chatting across the table, facing each other and shouting to carry on a conversation. Scott leans toward me and asks if I live in town.

I nod. "For the summer. How 'bout you?"

"I live on the U.S. side, in International Falls. For the summer."

"You're American?"

"Yeah. Is that okay?"

I shrug. "Doesn't matter."

"I grew up in the Falls," he continues, "and I came back to work for the summer. I live in Moorhead, next to Fargo. I go to school there."

I nod and look around the bar. People are on the dance floor, playing pool, standing in groups, falling into each other. I can't see Renée.

"You don't look like you're from around here," Scott says. "How'd you end up in Fort Frances?"

I tell him about my dad, who's willing to pay for me to go to university. "So I came out here to live rent-free and work for the summer. Save up some cash. Some friends were on their way to Toronto, so I caught a ride."

"I just met a couple people who said they were going to Toronto. Were your friends driving an old VW van?"

"Yes! Where'd you meet them?"

"I'm working at U.S. Customs for the summer. I was in the booth when they crossed."

"They told me about you. They said you were really cool."

He smiles. "I am."

"I bet you are."

We're joking, but I'm also serious. Maybe George had been overreacting a bit, but I know he had reason to worry. Everyone I've ever heard of crossing the border in a VW van has been hassled. But Scott didn't stereotype or label them. Not in a bad way, anyway. That's pretty awesome.

"Did you say you were in school?" I ask.

He tells me about Moorhead State University, where he's about to enter his last year and graduate with a criminal justice degree. The only reason he chose that major, he says, is because that's what Customs encouraged. He's been an intern for the past three summers, and he's been guaranteed a job on the northern border when he graduates.

I tell him about graduating from high school three years ago and traveling around Canada for two years afterward, trying to find my passion and calling in life. Then, still searching, I moved in with some friends on Salt Spring Island.

"Where's that?"

"It's a little island off the West Coast, between Vancouver Island and the mainland. It's where all the hippies went when the sixties were over. I lived with my friend in her parents' house, since they were off working in Victoria. There were five of us, and we each had to come up with a hundred bucks a month rent to cover the bills." I laugh. It was such a good deal. I earned that, plus spending money, selling handmade necklaces at the Saturday craft and farmer's market.

"Awesome."

I nod. "It's so beautiful there. It's magical. It has the most amazing natural beauty you can imagine. And the people are awesome, too. So open-minded and helping each other out. And they really care. They even have a cat—the whole Salt Spring Island community does!"

"A cat?"

I smile, remembering. "A few years ago, a couple people found a stray cat hanging around the movie theater, so they adopted it. The whole Salt Spring Island community adopted it. Someone

built a house for it and people signed up to feed it and take it to the vet. They named it Fritz the Cat and everybody on the island knew his name.” I sip my beer and continue. “This one time, a tourist met Fritz and fell in love with him and put him in her car and headed to Victoria. When people found out he was missing, they freaked. They shut the island down. Ferry workers stopped traffic, and searchers questioned every driver.”

“Did they find him?”

I nod. “They found him and returned him to his little home at the movie theater where he belongs.”

“That’s awesome.”

“Yeah, it was.”

Suddenly, Renée’s back and she’s ready to go.

“Are you going to be here tomorrow?” Scott asks.

Renée shrugs and looks at me. “Do you want to?”

“Yes, I do.”

Scott smiles. “I’ll see you then.”

Rainy Lake

The next night, Renée brings me back to the Red Dog. It's two-for-one night, and the place is packed.

We make our way through the crowd and find Scott sitting at the same table, waiting for us. I wonder if he got hassled, crossing the border into Canada. I sit down next to him and we pick up our conversation from the night before. As Renée bops around and the clock ticks away, I tell him about the traveling I've done, from Canada's West Coast to the East Coast, up to the Yukon, and everywhere in between.

"I went with Sophie at first," I tell him. "The girl you met at the border. We hitchhiked, and then we'd meet people and go with them. It's a great way to see the country."

"Everyone I know would be too scared to hitchhike."

"It's not scary. It's an experience. I mean, everything's scary if you let yourself be scared of it. But that whole thing about meeting crazy people and serial killers and all that. Well," I wave my hand to dismiss the thought. "You could meet a crazy person at a house party, or walking down the street, just as easily as traveling around."

"Maybe it's safer in Canada," he suggests.

"I think it's safer everywhere than most people think. Besides, if something's going to happen, it's going to happen. No point worrying about it or letting it stop you."

Scott touches his beer bottle to mine. "I'll toast to that," he says. "My dad and I went to Mexico once. When I was twelve. We went to California and decided to drive across the border into Tijuana, and there were all these street vendors set up, selling blankets and bracelets."

"My friends went to Mexico last year and bought me a blanket from a vendor," I chime in, eager to point out the connection, albeit a small one.

"I bought one too," he smiles. "But what I really remember is wanting to go past the vendors. Like you said, go experience. But there were these other tourists who told us it was too dangerous, that we should stick to the tourist area." For the first time, his attention is far away, off of me.

"I remember thinking that it didn't seem scary," he continues. "Nothing had happened or anything. But we turned around anyway to go back to the States, just because someone told us we should be scared."

He refocuses on me. "What I actually remember most from that trip is crossing back into the States. That was the scary part. There were guards with rifles and these huge line-ups and barbed wire fences and stuff. It's serious down there."

I want to hear more, but Renée's back, ready to leave. Scott asks for my phone number and says maybe we could get together and do something other than shout back and forth at the bar.

"I'd love to."

He calls the next night and asks if he can pick me up after work on Friday. He has something special planned.

So, looking forward to Friday, I turn down Renée's offers to go out the next two nights, and I stay home with my dad and Pat instead. We watch the Antiques Roadshow and the news at ten,

and I read in bed until I fall asleep. They're both up before me in the morning, with coffee ready. Pat drives me to work and drops me off at the curb to bypass the bridge line-up.

"I'll get a ride home tonight," I tell her. "Go ahead and eat without me."

During my last break of the day, I bring my bag into the washroom to brush my hair and refresh my make-up. Then I wait for the minutes to pass. Finally, my shift's almost over. A new-style Grand Am pulls up off to the side of the toll booth and waits. When I walk up, Scott gets out and comes around, ready to open my door if I want him to.

"I've got it," I say, and hop into the passenger seat. He pulls a u-turn and gets in line to go through U.S. Customs.

"You have ID, right?" he asks.

"I have my passport."

Ahead, the cars advance, one by one. Each stops at the window, hands over IDs, sits answering questions, takes the IDs back. Each one then drives under the soaring flag and enters America. We inch forward. Finally, we're next, then we're up.

"Hey Scott," the officer says. "What're you up to?"

Scott's voice is calm and even. "We're just heading out to Rainy Lake."

"Who's with you?"

"This is Mel."

The officer leans down to peer in at me. He's plain, with dark eyes. He's smiling, but he has a face that could look mean.

"Hi there," he says to me.

"Hi."

"Are you American or Canadian?"

"Canadian." My voice is shaking.

"You're just coming in for a few hours?"

"Yes."

"Have a good time," the officer says.

Scott drives under the flag and into the country. A big wooden sign welcomes us to Minnesota, and the main street branches off to the right. I look down it as we drive past. Other than the American flags dangling from the lampposts, it looks pretty much the same as Fort Frances's main street. The only other difference I notice is the speed limit sign when Scott turns left on to the highway, posted in miles instead of kilometers.

"So, we're going to Rainy Lake?" I ask

"I'd like to take you for a boat ride, if that's okay."

"Sure." I watch him drive. "You know," I say after a few minutes, "you don't look like a Customs officer."

"No? What do I look like?"

"I don't know. Maybe a photographer."

He smiles. "Well, I guess I feel more like a photographer than a Customs officer."

"So maybe you should be a photographer."

"People don't really become photographers, do they? That's not something you actually say you're going to do as a career or anything. It's more like a hobby or something."

"I believe in that old saying that you should discover what you love to do, and then find a way to make a living at it."

Scott glances at me and nods. "I like that. I've always been told the opposite, to do what'll give you security and try to find happiness in it. I like yours better."

“So Customs isn’t like your dream job or anything?”

“No. It’s more like what I fell into. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“That seems to happen to a lot of people.”

“I’m just going to do it for a while,” he says. “They’ve guaranteed me a job when I graduate, somewhere on the northern border, and every two years I can put in for a transfer. I figure it’ll be a way to see some different places.”

We turn on to a narrow road that weaves through forest and past houses. Between the structures I catch glimpses of water. Scott pulls into a driveway, and I follow him around the house to the dock out front.

“It’s my grandma and grandpa’s,” he says. “They said I could use it.”

He helps me into the sixteen-foot boat that rocks and sways as I step in. I sit on a lifejacket on the middle wooden seat. Scott takes the back seat and starts the motor. The late afternoon is still and warm, the water is a deep royal blue, and the sky is bright with fluffy clouds floating lazily through. We head out of the bay, past rocky cliffs speckled with birch and pine trees, into the open water. This lake reminds me a bit of the ocean, so expansive. It’s probably the biggest lake I’ve been on, and I’m fascinated by its channels and shorelines.

Scott turns and weaves us through islands and over rock reefs, slowing down and speeding up and cutting to the right or the left, depending on the directions of the green and red buoys. Then he pulls into a sheltered bay and slows the engine.

“You obviously know your way around,” I yell to be heard over the engine.

“I grew up on this lake,” he says. “Every summer I was out on the water. And in the winter, I was out on the ice.” He beaches the boat and we climb out onto the pebble shoreline. “The lake is the only thing I liked about the Falls. Other than that, I couldn’t wait to leave.”

“And now?”

He smiles. “I still can’t wait. Can’t wait to leave Moorhead, either. I need a new experience.”

“New experiences are definitely where it’s at.”

Scott offers me his hand to help maneuver through an overgrown path and up a small rock ledge. We’re faced with a breathtaking view of the water and the islands and the bold white bark of the birch trees. We sit in silence for a minute, taking it in.

“That’s Canada there,” Scott says, pointing.

“Where? There?” There’s an island right in front of us, and beyond there’s open water and then another island. He’s pointing to the other island. “But there’s no marker or anything.”

“There are some markers, here and there,” he says.

I look out at the two different countries that make up this beautiful, serene landscape, and I’m struck for some reason that the two sides look exactly the same. Two different countries, but water just flows into water, and one island looks exactly the same as the other. Someone at some point just drew a line on a map and called one side one thing and the other side another.

But at the same time, I know there is a difference between my home country and America. I can’t see it, but I know it’s there. I’ve caught glimpses of it, and I’ve seen it manifested on TV my whole life. It’s something intangible yet prevalent, underlying everything, giving it an air of expectance and importance. It’s the promise of the American Dream. The good life. It’s the sense that anything is possible here. I wonder if that’s true.

“How do you like it here?” Scott asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Where?”

“Here.” He motions to the view in front of us.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I think so too. I come here a lot.”

“It reminds me of this place on Salt Spring,” I say. “Only there it looks out on the ocean. And the trees are different.”

“Why’d you leave Salt Spring?”

“My friend Sophie—the one you met when she crossed the border—her parents were coming back, so we all had to move out of their house. I don’t know, I wasn’t sure what to do. I thought about maybe going to university because I’ve already been out of school for three years. Maybe it’s time to do something more serious. So I guess I’m going to go to university in Victoria. It’s about an hour plus a ferry ride from Salt Spring. I’ll go back and forth, maybe on the weekends or something, and stay with friends.”

“You guess?”

“What?”

“You said you guess you’re going to school. Do you want to?”

I consider his question. It’s a good one. “I don’t know,” I finally say. “I only know what I don’t want. I don’t want to be trapped. I’ve seen so many people who go through life and they’re not really living, and I don’t want to let that happen to me. I’ll always try new things, push myself, experience.” I laugh. “Does that sound weird?”

“Not at all. I know what you mean. I’m only twenty-one and I already feel trapped in some ways. Preparing for Customs, going to school for a criminal justice degree. I’ve already spent like three years of my life preparing for this job that I don’t even want.”

“So why are you doing it?”

He shrugs. “It just happened. It sounded like a good idea, and then it turned into what I was going to do, and then it somehow became my whole life.”

“Well it’s not. It’s just a job. That’s where people go wrong. They place too much importance on it. They forget to keep it in perspective, and they lose their balance.”

He’s quiet.

“Does that make sense?” I ask after a minute goes by.

“Yeah, it does. It makes a lot of sense. That’s really cool, that you have that perspective.” He gets up and offers me his hand. “I want to show you something,” he says.

I follow behind him, holding his hand, down a softly worn trail over mossy rock to a clearing covered with wild blueberry bushes. Dark blue berries are scattered on the plants. Scott kneels down, picks a handful, and offers them to me. Their flavour is deep and rich, and it seems to me that there could be nothing better in the world than the sweet, tangy, natural taste of these small fresh berries growing wild around us. And, as we sit together on a fallen pine tree eating wild blueberries, talking, and swatting mosquitoes, it seems for this moment that there could be nowhere in the world I’d rather be than right here, experiencing this.

Summer

On Saturday, Pat wakes me up at nine o'clock.

"There's a collect call from Sophie," she says.

I thank her and pick up the extension in my room. "Hello? Sophie?"

"Hey."

"Where are you?"

"We're on our way back, just outside Thunder Bay," she says. "I think we're about four hours from you."

"Why didn't you go through the States?"

"George didn't want to. Should we come get you?"

My mind's racing. I haven't decided. "I don't know."

"Well, if you want us to, we'll come through Fort Frances. If not, we'll just stay on the number one. It's faster. What do you think?"

Okay, I need to make up my mind. If I leave, my dad and Pat will be upset. And I'd stand Scott up because we're supposed to hang out later. I won't get to know him better.

"I think I'll stay," I decide.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks for calling, though. Have a great drive. And say hi to Salt Spring for me! I'll be back in a couple months."

"You'd better be!" she says. "Don't do anything crazy like stay or something. We'd miss you."

"I won't." I can't picture myself staying in Fort Frances. Although, come to think of it, something about my time with Scott makes me think that I could see myself staying with him.

As the days go by, that idea grows stronger. We see each other every day. He cooks me dinner at his apartment and buys me a red rose that I keep in a vase in my room at my dad's. Before it wilts, he buys me another one to replace it. The first time he gives me a rose, it's because "he cares about me." The second time, it's "a symbol of his feeling for me." The third time, it's because "he loves me."

"I love you too," I tell him. We've only known each other three and a half weeks, but when you know, you know.

Everything but Scott fades into the background. We spend all our time together, at his place or on the lake. In early August he begins to worry about what's going to happen when he has to go back to school, and by mid-August he takes me back to the cliff overlooking Rainy Lake, where we went when we first met. We sit and look out at the water.

"I have to go back to Moorhead in eight days," he says.

"Let's not think about that. We're together now."

He turns and takes my hand. "I don't want to leave. I don't want us to be apart."

"Me neither."

"Let's stay together, then. Come to Moorhead with me."

"Moorhead? Would I like it there?"

"It's not about there. It's about us being together."

I run my fingers over the moss on the rock ledge. The water sparkles below. “Why don’t you come back west with me?” I ask. “You’d like Victoria. You’d love Salt Spring.”

“I have to finish school first. I only have nine months left. Then we can move together. Maybe I could even get posted at Customs in Victoria, if they have pre-clearance. We’ll only have to be in Moorhead for less than a year.”

“What would I do there?”

“You’d be with me,” Scott says. “We’ll be together. That’s what I want. Is that what you want?”

“I’d like us to be together. How can we, though? I don’t think I’m allowed to live in America.”

“You can if we get married,” he says. “I want to be with you, for us to be together. Let’s get married.”

I take a long, deep breath, my mind racing. I never thought I’d get married. I love Scott, and I don’t have anything against marrying him, but I didn’t think I’d ever marry anyone. “Can’t we be together without a piece of paper that says we’re married?”

“The piece of paper is what we need,” he says. “It’s a formality. It’s what we need to do to be together. It’s worth it to me.”

“Me too,” I decide.

Together

Thanks to the confidential advice of the immigration officer at Customs, Scott's got it all figured out. I pack some clothes into a suitcase, put it in the backseat of Scott's Grand Am, and tell my dad we'll meet them over there.

We follow the signs to the international bridge and, holding hands, we go through the toll booth and pull into line. Scott wants to go over our story again.

"Remember," he says, "you're just coming for the weekend."

"Okay. What if they know I'm not?"

"It's okay. It'll be fine either way. It's just easier to do the immigration process if you're already in the country, instead of trying to get in."

The word "immigration" makes my palms sweat. I don't like that word used to describe me. It conjures images of people huddled under a false floor in the back of a pick-up truck. I'm not trying to leave Canada, we're just trying to be together.

We inch our way forward. The American flag comes into view, soaring high and proud above the country's gates. It's our turn.

Scott pulls up and puts the car in park.

"Citizenship?" the officer asks without looking at us. He's punching the license plate into the computer.

"I'm American, she's Canadian."

The officer looks over. "Oh, Scott! Hey. What're you up to?"

"Not much."

The officer leans down and peers in at me. "You bringing anything into the country you're going to be leaving?"

"No." My voice sounds strange. I know I'm going to be leaving myself in the country.

The officer nods. "Okay. Have fun."

Two hours later, we're standing in the house of a justice of the peace in International Falls. He's holding the ceremony in his basement, which he does from time to time, he tells us. My dad and Pat stand off to one side, and Scott's mom and dad stand off to the other side, looking miserable. Scott and I each hold a copy of our vows in our hands so we can read them in turn. We've already looked through and, at my request, crossed out all the "obey" parts.

We listen to the justice lead the ceremony, and we each say our lines. For a moment, when we flip to the last page of our vows, I'm gripped with fear. I've known Scott for less than three months. I've never seen the city I'm about to move to. I must be crazy, to be standing here. But even as I think these thoughts, I know they're just fears surfacing. My heart tells me I'm doing the right thing.

"I do," I say. And I mean it.

The Dream

We spend the night in a Super 8 motel just outside Minneapolis. My appointment's at eight o'clock, so we need to be close. Actually, it's not really an appointment. More like I have to sign in and spend the next six hours waiting to have my picture taken and my papers stamped.

We sit on cold plastic seats, surrounded by other people waiting for the same thing. I rest my head on Scott's shoulder and tolerate the armrest digging into my side as I lean into him. I hold the number in my hand: eighty-six. The counter says number fifty-four is being served.

The room is packed, filled with people waiting, hoping, dreaming of the opportunity to call the United States home. Men, women and children of all ages shift in their chairs, clutching papers, watching, waiting. Today we will each have a turn to rise from our chairs and walk up to the window.

I let my eyes close and listen to the hum of chatter, many languages mixing together. I wonder where all these people have come from, what their stories are. I can see their faces behind my closed eyes, and I wait for them to fade away.

In what feels like a few minutes, the pain in my side wakes me up, forcing me to lift my head from Scott's shoulder. The counter says number fifty-eight is being served. Scott digs in his pocket for change and goes to buy us each a bag of Doritos from the vending machine. We finish them before the counter moves to fifty-nine.

After an eternity, it's my turn. Scott squeezes my hand and I walk up to the stone-faced woman behind the window. She takes my papers without looking up and starts flipping through. When she gets to the page with my picture she looks at me for the first time to make sure it's me.

"Everything's in order," she says.

"Do you know how long it'll take to be processed?"

"You'll be receiving your card in the mail in a few months." She stamps the last page and glances up again. "You should look a little happier," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"You should smile." It's more an order than a suggestion. "You're about to live the dream."

Year One

Moorhead

Just after the trees and the lakes and the hills fall away, when the landscape flattens and stretches on forever, there, up ahead, is Moorhead. It's gray and plain in the distance. We don't need to turn off or exit for it. We need only keep going straight and reduce speed, and the road brings us in. Gas stations, stores, and a Perkins restaurant pop up around us. Down that street is Moorhead State University, where Scott goes, but he'll show me that another time. First, he wants to show me his apartment.

The building is eight blocks from campus, next to the railroad tracks. It's plain beige, three stories tall. A plain beige rectangle box. Scott leads the way down the hallway. It smells a bit like garbage and the carpet is stained. His apartment is halfway down on the left. Our apartment, I should say. Scott unlocks the door and steps aside, letting me go first. There's brown carpet covering the floor and the walls are painted white.

"I wish the place was a little nicer," he says.

"It's fine." I've seen better, but I've also seen worse. It's only temporary, anyway. We'll only be here for nine months.

That night, I lie in bed and listen to the sounds of the place. The floor squeaks above us, the pipes tap in the wall by our heads when the neighbours flush their toilets, and cars drive by every few seconds on the street outside our bedroom window. There's a blanket tacked over the window to keep the light out, but it can't block the sounds from coming in. It'll be alright, though. I'm used to unfamiliar surroundings. I take a deep breath and let sleep come.

Suddenly, the walls are shaking. I sit straight up in bed. "What's that?" I call out.

"Just the freight train," Scott says. "It comes every night."

The train horn sounds, and it's like someone's blowing a whistle in my ear. "It does that every night?"

"You'll get used to it."

"Get used to it?" My words hang in the air and fade away with the passing train. I don't want to get used to it. I'm not here to teach myself to tolerate and put up with stuff and get used to things. I'm here to...what? Experience. Love. Be with Scott.

And what else? What am I going to do here? In a few hours Scott will be getting up and heading off to school, and after that he'll be going to work at his part-time job at a motel nearby. What will I do? Nothing. Fact is, I don't have anything to do. I won't be able to enroll in classes, get a job, or even get a driver's license until the immigration paperwork goes through, which will be months. Until then, I'm just waiting. Watching Scott do his thing, waiting for us to start doing our thing.

Thoughts of Salt Spring flash through my mind. Friends gathered around the fire pit in Sophie's back yard. Sitting on the ledge, watching the ferry roll past. Selling bracelets in the park. Walking. Drinking lattes in the coffee shop.

An eternity later, light starts to bleed through the sides of the blanket hanging over the window. Then, the alarm goes off and the new day begins. When Scott leaves for class, I head out on foot to explore the neighbourhood. I can't go to school, I can't get a job, and I can't drive, but I can walk. I can walk as long and far as I want.

I zip up my jacket, pull my floppy hat down to cover my ears, and head to the right. Beside our building is another one just like it. In the next block there are two more, darker brown, and then two beige ones, like ours. In the fourth block the street narrows and some houses are intermingled with apartment buildings. Chain-link fenced yards hold barking dogs, and flags dangle from porches and mailboxes. Block after block of this, and still no sidewalk, I turn around and retrace my steps.

The next day, I try another direction. No sidewalk this way, either. Three blocks ahead there's an intersection with no walk sign or cross walk, and I get honked at when I try to dart across. It's not made for pedestrians. After a few more blocks of nothing but the same, I give up and go back.

A couple weeks later it's too cold to walk anyway. Fall in Moorhead is like the short winter on Salt Spring, cold and wet. Freezing rain batters the windows, driven by the howling winds. Dead leaves blow against the building and lie in soggy clumps. All the trees are bare, and in the morning everything is covered with frost. By the end of October, the wide, flat landscape is white with ice and snow, and I'm struck by the total and utter lack of color.

I sit inside and read or watch TV and wait for Scott to get home. He's always running off to school for three, four hours at a time, and when he works his front-desk shifts at the motel, he's gone even longer. I've never been alone so much in my life.

I think of all the things I could be doing, what I would be doing if I wasn't here. If I hadn't moved here, I'd be going to the University of Victoria now. I wouldn't just be waiting around. I wouldn't actually be looking forward to my daily walks down the hallway to our little mailbox in the lobby to see if my work permit has arrived.

But I am here, and all I can do, I guess, is look forward. I can sit and wait for us to move and for our lives to begin. And I can plan. I can pull out Scott's road atlas and gaze at the different places along the northern border that might become our new home soon. Our new home. A new life, together. I pull out a sheet of blank paper and start making a list of the places we might be moving to. There's several border crossings in Washington State. That's my first choice, after Victoria. My next choice is Maine. Vermont would be cool, too. Minnesota and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan might be alright.

"When will we hear from Customs?" I ask in early December. It feels like we've been waiting forever.

"Probably not 'til after Christmas."

So I wait some more. Outside the wind blows snow against the building, and our windows ice up until we can't see outside. But I can still hear the cars passing by, the wind howling, and the train blowing its horn in the middle of the night.

Christmas break I'm alone even more because Scott has to cover shifts at the motel. Christmas morning, he's gone when I wake up. I brew myself some coffee, watch Hallmark movies on TV, and wait for him to come home.

Early afternoon, in the middle of Home for the Holidays, the phone rings. It's so unexpected that I actually jump, and my heart races as I run to pick it up.

"Hello?"

My mom's voice comes in, faint and far away, "Merry Christmas!"

I smile and sit down at the table. "Hi Mom! Merry Christmas!"

"What are you up to?"

"Watching a movie on TV."

"Where's Scott?"

“At work.”

“What?” She sounds disappointed for me. “Why on earth is he working today?”

“He was scheduled.”

“Well that’s not right.”

“We’re living off his student loans and his part-time job, so he has to work when he’s scheduled.”

Silence. Then, “How do you like living in America?”

“I’m not sure, Mom,” I tell her. “I don’t know anybody and Scott has his life and I feel like I’m just standing on the sidelines of his plans, waiting for our lives together to begin. I’m alone all the time, and it’s too cold to go outside, and there’s nothing to do.” It all comes pouring out, and I can’t help complaining.

She’s quiet a moment. Then, “do you still want to stay there?”

“I don’t know.”

“You still have the bond, right?”

“Yes.” My grandma gave me a thousand dollar bond when I graduated from high school, and my mom told me to hold on to it so that I’d have resources to get out of a bind if I ever have to. I can withdraw it at any time, and I suppose now she’s thinking I could use it to move back to Canada if I want. “I’m not ready to cash it in quite yet, though,” I say.

“Well, we miss you here.” It’s a white Christmas in Victoria, she tells me, and everything else is good. She’s taking some Women’s Studies classes at the university and is enjoying them immensely. “Oh, and what do you want me to do with the boxes you left here?” she asks.

“Hang on to them a bit longer. We’ll be moving in a few months, and I’ll figure it out then.”

When I hang up, I turn the TV back on and turn it up to fill the emptiness of the apartment. I lay on the couch, grateful that the TV drowns out the howling wind.

Before the movie's over, Scott's home, and he's brought a rotisserie chicken for our Christmas dinner. I push my loneliness aside and give him a smile, reminding myself to enjoy this time. Scott brings out a bunch of presents and hands them to me one by one. A ceramic Christmas tree ornament, a framed picture of “I love you” written in the sand, and a new journal.

“I noticed you’ve already filled yours up,” he says. “I thought you’d like a new one so you can keep writing.”

“Thank you.” He’s right. I write in my journal all the time, and the one I brought with me from Salt Spring is full. I’ve been using loose pieces of paper for the past two weeks, folding them and tucking them into the back. I run my fingers over the smooth black cover and flip through the lined pages. “This should last a year or so,” I tell him.

“Then I’ll get you a new one next Christmas.”

My gift to him is a poem I wrote on a piece of parchment paper. I have it rolled up with a ribbon tied around it. He unrolls it now and reads it carefully.

“Thank you,” he says. “I love it.”

We sit down at the small scratched wooden table and share the Christmas meal. Scott carves the chicken and pours us each a glass of white zinfandel wine, and we toast to our first Christmas together.

In the New Year, Scott starts making calls, and he manages to get a hold of his old supervisor to find out where he’ll be placed and when he’ll find out.

“Soon,” he tells me when he hangs up. “Not long now.”

I repeat the words to myself. Not long now. Not long now. It becomes my mantra, pushing me forward and getting me through the days with the endless falling snow. Then, in February, just

when it seems that my daily trips to the mailbox in the lobby are pointless, I find an envelope with my immigration card in it. It's small, credit card-sized, with my picture watermarked on it and "Permanent Resident" etched across the top. I'm now officially allowed to live and work in America.

Finally, something else to focus on. I ask Scott to bring home a newspaper, and that night I circle all the waitressing and housekeeping jobs. The next morning I wake up and start making calls, and I have two interviews lined up by eleven o'clock. One is at a housekeeping service agency and the other's at a restaurant in the mall. I schedule the restaurant interview for earlier in the day so that if they offer me the job, I won't have to show up for the other appointment.

Both interviews seem to go well, but I don't get offered either job on the spot, as I'd hoped. The next day, I ask Scott to bring home another newspaper, but before he gets back, a manager from the restaurant calls and offers me the waitressing position. I start this weekend. I feel a smile spread across my face. Something to do outside the apartment.

I've waited tables before, usually for three weeks or so at a time when I needed a bit of extra cash while I was traveling. But experience is experience, and I catch on fast. On the third night, I get my own tables and make decent tips, and I'm invited to stay after work to have a beer with the other servers.

Within a few weeks, I'm working every weekday plus Friday and Saturday nights. I pick up extra shifts, preferring to make money and be around people than to sit at home alone. Scott and I have to juggle one car, but I can usually catch a ride home with Joyce, another server who lives a few blocks from us, so Scott just needs to drive me to work between his classes.

Every night, I ask Scott if he's heard anything. The answer is always, "Not yet."

Then, one day in late March, he's waiting for me when I get home.

"What's the matter?"

"The southern border," he says.

"What?"

"I heard from Customs. Apparently all new hires have to start on the southern border now. After two years we can put in for a transfer."

"Why?"

"Because no one wants to work down there, that's why. They need more employees, so it's just what they're doing." He looks defeated.

"Well don't accept it, then."

"What?" He looks surprised, as though that never occurred to him.

"You're not going to accept what you don't want, are you?"

"I don't know," he says.

"Let's find another opportunity."

"What, though?"

"Could be anything." My heart's beating faster. "It's up to us. We can go wherever we want."

"So, I shouldn't accept the Customs job?"

"Do you want to? Does it feel right?"

He stares at me. "No."

"Then don't."

"Really? Just like that? Just turn it down?"

"Yeah. It's just a job."

He's quiet for a minute. I watch his face, his expression turning from doubt to acceptance to happiness. "You're right," he says. "It's not what we want. I'm going to turn it down."

“Good.”

So, it’s decided. Simple as that.

Everything blurs for us then into shifting plans and whirling ideas. We don’t know what to do, but we know we’re going to leave. Scott finishes school, we give our notice, and I pick up as many shifts as I can to save up money. We both call our parents.

“Scott’s decided not to take a job with Customs,” I tell my dad.

“You’re okay with that?”

“I’m the one who suggested it.”

“Why?”

“Because it didn’t feel right,” I say.

“What’re you going to do?”

“We’re leaving Moorhead.”

“Where are you going?”

“We don’t know.”

All I know is that the wait is over. The days are turning warmer and the snow is starting to recede. Patches of grass emerge from under the whiteness. We spend our free time packing our things and sorting out what we’ll bring and what we’ll leave behind. There’s no room in the Grand Am for our dresser, of course, or our bed, or a bunch of boxes. Scott asks a friend to come over with a pick-up truck, and they move the stuff into a self-storage unit, where it’ll stay until we’re settled somewhere and can come back for it. I get ready for my last waitressing shift and wait outside for Joyce to pick me up.

That night, Scott has a bottle of champagne waiting for me when I get home. We sit cross-legged on the blanket Scott spread over the brown carpet, and we toast to this year finally being over.

“I can’t believe I made it!” I tell him.

“Was it really that bad?”

“Yes. It was. You owe me. We have to go have extra fun now to make up for it.” I can feel myself grinning as I tell him this. I can’t seem to stop smiling. The wait is over. In the morning, we load the last things into our Grand Am and head west.

On the Road

All these roads are new to me. I've traveled the Trans-Canada Highway several times. I've slept outside in the Land of the Midnight Sun, covering my face with my sleeping bag to block out the light. I've walked through orchards in bloom on Prince Edward Island, like those described in Anne of Green Gables. I could give anyone directions to any place on Vancouver Island without looking at a map. But I have never been on the back roads of South Dakota. I have never crisscrossed through these wheat fields that stretch as far as the eye can see, every once in a while passing a rusted-out tractor or an old house or a caved-in barn.

"They used to give away hundred and sixty-acre chunks of land," Scott says. "These roads go between the parcels."

"Who gave it away?"

"The government. Back when they were trying to settle the West. They offered the land for free. All you had to do was live on it. And farm it, I think."

I'm quiet, looking at the land, imagining living out here.

"I wish they were doing that now," Scott says.

We come to an intersection and I consult the map. "That way." I point away from the interstate. Back roads are the only way to really experience things, I think. You can't get an accurate sense of a place by just zooming by, stopping at truck stops.

There's a town up ahead. We see it in the distance, sticking out on the horizon, long before we reach it. It's only a block long, with a couple residential roads branching off the main street. The gas station is also the general store, and a woman I assume to be the owner sits behind the counter. I smile politely as I walk past to the back, into the single washroom. When I come out, Scott has already paid and is chatting with the woman about the storm they had last week that tore some shingles off her roof. She pronounces it "ruff."

"You headed to the Black Hills?"

"We're not sure," Scott says. "Why?"

She shrugs. "Don't see many visitors, but those who come through are all on their way to see Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills. Never been myself. Keep thinkin' I should get over there."

"Yeah," I say. "The Black Hills is where we're going. We'll let you know what they're like if we pass through this way again."

When we're back in the car, Scott asks if I really want to go there.

"Have you ever seen Mount Rushmore?"

"No," he admits.

"Then why not?"

It's too far to make it today, even if we jumped on the interstate. Besides, I remind Scott, we're not in a rush. So we stay on the back roads that run through fields, past marshes, into towns. We drive down main streets with post offices and general stores. We drive past schools and through neighborhoods with American flags sticking out of mailboxes. We pass a diner with a hand-written sign that says "Breakfast served all day," and we stop for lunch.

The waitress hands us two laminated, greasy menus and tells us to sit anywhere. "You want coffee?"

We nod and take a table by the window. We're the only ones in here. One side of the menu lists breakfast items: bacon and eggs, biscuits and gravy, pancakes. The other side lists burgers and sandwiches: BLT, Reuben. I'll just have a plate of fries.

The waitress comes over with our coffees. "Where you from?"

"Moorhead," Scott tells her.

"What brings you here?"

"We're just passing through. Checking things out."

She laughs. "Nothing to check out here! You better keep moving if you want to check anything out." She reminds me of a waitress in a movie who saves up for a bus ticket out of her small hometown.

I glance out the window, imagining what it's like to live here. This is the center of the country. The Heartland, with farmhouses and men in pickup trucks and women in sundresses with boots and braided hair.

"What's there to do here?" I ask.

"Nothin'," she says, straight-faced.

"What do the people who live here do?" I push.

"Nothin'. I'm telling ya."

While we eat, she comes over about ten times, asking questions and walking our answers back to the kitchen to share with the cook, who peeks out at us through the order window. She wants to know why we left Moorhead.

"Because there was nothing holding us there," I tell her.

She wants to know where we're going, and we tell her we don't know.

"If I was you," she says, "I'd go to California."

We leave her a big tip, to help with her bus ticket out of here, and get back in the car. Soon, the town's behind us. I take off my shoes and put my feet up on the dash. I almost feel bad, leaving that waitress behind. "We should've asked her to come along," I tell Scott. "Who knows, maybe she just needed an invitation. Maybe she's been waiting her whole life for someone to invite her to leave."

"Naw. She had a wedding ring. She's married. Probably has kids." Scott's way more observant than I am. I hadn't noticed the ring.

We drive past fields and farms, and I gaze at the magnificent sky, with its cloud formations as beautiful as any Monet painting. I put my Simon and Garfunkel tape on and sing along to "Mrs. Robinson" and "Homeward Bound."

Scott's quiet, staring ahead. Then he turns the music down. "We're going to need to figure out where we're going, beyond the Black Hills," he says. "Our money's going to run out fast."

"Okay."

He stares ahead.

"We made the right decision," I tell him. "Really, we did. It was just a job. And we wouldn't have been happy with it. Giving up a little bit of security in order to pursue happiness is worth it any day. We're going to go build our own life together, on our terms, okay?"

He nods.

"So enjoy the ride!" I turn the music back up and sing along as we roll down the back roads of South Dakota, past fields and meadows with horses running wild.

At the next gas station, we switch places so Scott can rest. I get behind the wheel and turn back on to the open road.

"Where should we spend the night?" Scott wonders, the map spread out on his lap.

“I don’t know. Are there any little camping symbols nearby?”

“No. We’d have to backtrack and go south. Or go way up to Pierre. We might just have to find a hotel.”

The sun starts to set, dimming the enormous sky. The highway brings us into a town, but there’s no hotel that we can see. Then we’re past it, on to the next town. I flip the headlights on. Tall grass and small, rolling hills spread out on either side. Little roads branch off and seem to lead to nowhere. I pull off on to one of them.

Scott looks up from the map. “What’re you doing?”

I answer him by pulling over and turning off the car. Outside, everything is still. The daylight is nearly gone, but enough remains for me to make my way down a little bank to a dried up river bed. There’s a smooth, level spot that would be perfect for our sleeping bags.

I smile. “Let’s spend the night here, under the stars.”

“There’s rattlesnakes here! I’m not sleeping on the ground.”

“Well, let’s put up the tent, then.”

He looks around. “I don’t think we’re supposed to.”

“Says who? Nobody’s around! Come on.”

So we pull out our tent, our sleeping bags and pillows, and our cooler that has nothing in it but cheese and beer. At least we have crackers to go with the cheese.

The stars appear, one by one, surrounding the three-quarter moon with flickering light. It’s like we’re in a planetarium, the gigantic sky surrounding us.

“See?” I say, as we sit together, my Mexican blanket over our shoulders and our arms around each other’s waists as we watch for falling stars. “Isn’t this better than a hotel?”

“Doesn’t even compare.”

We fall asleep in our tent, small and alone under the sky, with the wide, empty land stretched out around us. In the morning, I shake Scott awake. The temperature dropped overnight, and I’m shivering in my sleeping bag.

“Let’s get going,” I say. “Let’s try to find coffee somewhere.”

Scott drives, and as he pulls out of the little dirt road I followed in last night, we pass a “No Trespassing” sign. Scott looks at me and sighs.

“I didn’t see that last night!” I say.

He doesn’t say anything, but he smiles.

It takes almost an hour for us to find a gas station. I bring my toiletry bag into the washroom to brush my teeth in the grimy sink, and then I go find the coffee pot. They only have styrofoam cups and little packets of powdered creamer, but I pour three cups anyway. Scott’s waiting at the counter.

“Who’s the third one for?” he asks.

“I want two.”

He pays for the gas, coffee, and donuts, and pulls out the map in the car. “Let’s take the interstate into the Black Hills,” he says. “I’m not in the mood to take these slow back roads today.”

We hit the Black Hills around noon. The interstate takes us past Rapid City and up to the turnoff, and then we follow tour busses down the narrow road that winds through hills covered in dark green trees. When we reach Deadwood, we’re ready for lunch. We pay five dollars to park in a ramp and walk the main street in search of a place to eat. The restaurants all look the same, swarming with people taking pictures. We settle on a place at the far end of the main drag, its

front made out of aged wood and the inside a replica of an old saloon. One side opens up to a room filled with slot machines, like all the other places in town.

“What do you want to do in the Black Hills, exactly?” Scott asks after the waitress takes our order.

“I don’t know. Just check it out, I guess.”

“It’ll take us all day to go through. Is there something specific you want to do here, or do you just want to drive through?”

I shrug. The tree-covered hills don’t seem as interesting now as I thought they’d be. “I suppose we should see Mount Rushmore.”

“It’s just going to be a big tourist trap.”

“Don’t you want to at least see it?”

“To tell you the truth,” he says, “I don’t really have much interest in it. It’s just some presidents’ heads carved into a hill.”

I laugh. “I guess you’re right.”

“Besides, I sort of want to figure out where we’re going. All the people here are tourists. They’re here on vacation. They have money to burn. To be honest, we don’t really have the money to be spending in tourist restaurants. We need our money for rent and groceries.”

The waitress appears, drops off our plates, and rushes off. She doesn’t show any interest in us.

“All I know,” Scott continues, “is that we need to figure out where we want to go.”

“Okay, well, what do you think? I still have that list of all the places where we thought we’d like to move.”

“Those are all border towns,” Scott says. “No point moving to one of those if I’m not going to work at the border. We’d be better off in a big city where there’s lots of jobs.”

“San Francisco?”

“Too expensive. How ‘bout Seattle? It’s close to where you’re from.”

“Why don’t we cross the border into B.C. then? There’s Salt Spring. I know people we can stay with. My mom’s in Victoria; we could stay with her for a while.”

“They won’t let me move to Canada without applying for residency first, and that’ll take time and money.”

“Seattle’s fine, then,” I say.

So we have a plan. We sip our coffee and talk about how we’ll walk down to the fish market for our meat and cheeses, and how we’ll smell the salty ocean air every time we step outside. We’ll hang out at community coffee shops in the afternoon and check out the music scene in the bars at night. We’ll take the ferry over to Victoria when we have some extra cash, and Scott can meet all my old friends.

We finish our lunch and drive out of South Dakota, passing briefly through Wyoming, then crossing into Montana. Now that we have a plan, there’s no more messing around. Scott takes advantage of the speed limit sign, “Reasonable and prudent,” by kicking it down to seventy and flying down the interstate.

The landscape is a lot less interesting now that we’re just trying to get through it, with fields and hills and forests rushing past. We stop only for gas, grabbing snacks to tide us over. We’re going to drive through the night. At some point while I’m sleeping we pass into Idaho and then into Washington. Some time before dawn, Scott pulls into a Perkins, with its gigantic American flag flying next to the freeway.

“We’re just a few hours away,” Scott says. “Let’s get something to eat.”

The lobby is bright, a stark contrast to the dark road. Seattle and Portland newspapers are for sale in boxes next to the counter. I run back out to the car to get some quarters and plug in enough to get a Seattle Times and an Oregonian. With the newspapers underarm, I join Scott at our table, where he's already ordered me a coffee. He's counting the cash in his wallet, trying to be discreet with it on his lap.

"What?" I ask.

"We have less than I thought."

"How much?"

"Like less than twelve hundred bucks."

"That's all we have left?" We had over two thousand saved up when we left Moorhead.

"Well, it all adds up," Scott says. "The gas and restaurants and liquor store."

"What are we going to do?" We don't have enough left for first and last month's rent, even.

"We're going to get there," Scott says, "and find jobs as quick as we can."

I open the Seattle Times to the classifieds and start looking through, skimming the apartments for rent. They're all eight hundred a month, at least. I flip to the help wanted section and start circling the waitressing openings. Scott opens up the Oregonian. We sip our coffee.

"Maybe we should go to Portland instead," Scott says. "There's a bunch of apartment manager positions, and they all say that you can live on-site. That way we won't have to pay rent."

I look up from the Seattle Times and nod.

"I bet we could get one of those jobs," he continues. "I have a college degree, and we both have customer service experience."

"Alright. Let's go to Portland."

Portland

We're driving into Portland with a thousand dollars and nothing else. No jobs, no friends, no plan. "Well," I say, the city silhouetted against the sky ahead of us, "Helen Keller said life is a fearless adventure or nothing."

The city sprawls ahead of us. Four lane streets with fast food joints and bus stops and the downtown skyline in the distance. Apartment buildings have "Now Renting" banners. One says, "If you lived here, you'd be home now." Our windshield wipers beat away the falling rain.

"Let's find a motel," Scott says. "We can make some calls from there."

We rent a cheap motel room and bring our newspaper and clothes bags in. I leave Scott to call about the apartment manager jobs and head into the bathroom for a long, hot shower. When I come out, Scott's smiling. He called a place that's hiring immediately, and they said they want us to go look at it.

"They gave me the address to drive by," he says. "We're supposed to call back if we're still interested."

"If we're still interested? Why, is it in the ghetto or something?"

"Let's go see."

"It doesn't look that bad," I say when we pull up. It's just a plain beige complex, a lot like our apartment building in Moorhead. The parking lot has some garbage and broken glass in it, but that can happen anywhere, especially when there's no managers to clean it up. We call back and tell them yes, we're interested, and they invite us for an interview. I pull my hair back in a tight braid, and Scott puts on his Dockers.

The property management building is a half hour drive out of the downtown core. We take the highway over the bridge and down the four-lane road, matching the speed of the cars around us. Our exit brings us through neighborhoods and business districts, past strip malls with realtors, insurance agents, and property management companies. The street numbers get closer and closer to what we have scrawled on a piece of paper.

"There it is," I point to a glass door with the company's name written in black letters.

We enter into a small reception area with two gray chairs, a coffee table with People magazines on it, and a large reception desk. A pretty blond woman smiles from behind the desk and asks if we're Scott and Melanie.

"Yes."

She picks up the phone. "They're here."

Another woman emerges a moment later and extends her hand. "I'm Daphne. Thanks for coming by." She's wearing a business skirt and high heels. Her hair is done up in a high bun, with wisps falling down around her ears. Her make-up looks pasty under the florescent lights.

We follow them both into a conference room at the end of the hall. The receptionist has a cute, nervous giggle, which we hear several times before we're seated around the oval table. She sits back and lets Daphne take the lead.

"We'll be honest with you," Daphne says. "We really want to hire you. But we have to interview you officially and write your answers down."

The receptionist hands her the sheet of questions and Daphne poises her pen.

“What’s your best quality?” She asks us both. Scott says his are friendliness and problem-solving skills. I say mine are organizational skills and a good work ethic.

Daphne: “Scott, what would you do if someone pounded on your door and said they moved out two months ago and haven’t received their damage deposit refund, and they demand that you give it to them?”

Scott: “I would take down their name and number and tell them that I’ll look into it for them. Then, I’d contact you about it in the morning.”

Daphne: “Good. Melanie, what would you do if Scott wasn’t home and you heard yelling coming from the parking lot? You look out the window and see a group of men standing around. One of them has a knife, pointed at another man. You hear something about a gun.”

I glance at Scott, who raises his eyebrows at that question. These are hypothetical, I hope, and not based on past experience. Scott gives a slight nod, and I know he’s thinking that we need this job. I clear my throat. “Uh, I’d call the police.”

Daphne: “Good. That’s the right answer!”

They offer us the job. We start tomorrow, so we’ll only have to pay for one more night in a motel. The manager’s apartment is unfurnished, though, and we only have what would fit into the Grand Am: our clothes, a coffee maker, and a couple boxes of pictures and memories. We’ll need to buy some stuff before we move in. Luckily we won’t have to pay rent, so we have some cash. We find a furniture store and pick out a queen-sized mattress and a plush couch, which they’ll deliver for us. Next we go to Wal-Mart and pick out dishes, silverware, glasses, cups, one cooking pot, two towels, facecloths, tea towels, dish soap, hand soap, and a sheet set. This’ll get us by until payday. Last stop is a grocery store, Fred Meyer, which is actually like a grocery store and a box store in one. “One-stop shopping,” Scott says. We spend seventy-five dollars of our remaining two hundred on groceries and a house plant.

They have just re-done the manager’s apartment. It’s a two-bedroom on the ground floor with brand new carpets, tiled kitchen, all new appliances, a new bathroom, and freshly painted walls. It’s plain, but it seems decent enough. There’s even a patio door leading into a tiny backyard with a privacy fence. We don’t want to live here forever, but it’s okay for a start.

Scott goes out to meet the furniture delivery guy, who’s alone and needs Scott to grab one end of the couch. I start unpacking our stuff, putting the bags on the kitchen counter and flipping on the light. Out of the corner of my eye I see something scurry out of sight. I open the cupboard and there’s another one. Cockroaches. Oh my god, cockroaches.

Scott comes in with the couch and finds me standing in the middle of the living room. “What’s the matter?”

“Cockroaches.”

“What?”

The delivery guy, who’s about our age and wearing a Metallica t-shirt, nods his head. “Oh yeah,” he says, “I’m sure.” He offers a sympathetic look. “Good luck you guys,” he says, and then leaves.

We sit on the couch, the only thing in our living room, and Scott tries to comfort me. “I can’t live with cockroaches,” I tell him. “I’d be fine with spiders or ants, but cockroaches are just too much.”

“I don’t know what else we can do. We’ve spent all our money. We literally have a hundred bucks.”

I have my thousand dollar bond that I could cash in, but that wouldn’t even get us into an apartment because they all require first and last month’s rent. And so we decide, out of necessity,

to stick it out until we get our first paycheck and then find another (cockroach-free) place to live. In the meantime, though, we're going to see if the property managers can do anything.

Scott calls Daphne about the situation. "There's cockroaches!" Silence as he listens. His eyebrows raise. "You knew about them? Why didn't you tell us?"

Scott hangs up, furious. "She says it didn't come up. That's why she didn't tell us." He throws his hands up in the air. "Well, we have no choice now. We have to stay, at least for a while. We have nowhere else to go!"

"Can't they at least have pest control come and fumigate or something?"

"Apparently they just did."

So our plan is to leave as soon as we can, but in the meantime, we have to get to work so we'll get paid. We go through the stack of paperwork Daphne left for us inside the door: folders containing each resident's information, past-due rent notices, lists of policies, and application forms in case anyone wants to rent either of the two vacant apartments. She also left a stack of letters introducing us as the new managers, which we're supposed to take around to each apartment.

As we step out, the door across from ours swings open, and there stands a little old lady in her bathrobe. "Are you the new managers?" she asks.

"Yes we are." I smile and introduce us by name.

"Come in, come in," she says. She steps back into her apartment and holds the door open.

"I should go distribute these," Scott says, holding the notices. He walks away and I step into the woman's apartment. The place is dark and dank, and all the furnishings are seventies. Not cool and trendy seventies, but worn and tacky seventies. I sit on her plastic-covered couch, and she tells me about her son, the doctor, who comes to see her every week and who's going to move in with her soon. He's a surgeon, and he's very busy. He's also very popular, and very well-respected. She tells me about the amazing operations he's performed. I listen, and for a while I forget about the cockroaches in my place. But I remember soon enough when one crawls across the wall in front of us.

I can't help but gasp. "A cockroach!"

The woman nods. "I ignore them," she tells me, keeping her eyes on me.

At home, they're on my mind constantly. I'm on edge, expecting to find one in every cupboard, behind every corner. When I do see one, somehow I'm still surprised, jumping back in horror and running from the room, yelling for Scott to go take care of it. By the time he gets there, it's usually gone.

After a few days, I receive a call from the little old lady's case worker. "Evelyn told me you're the new apartment manager," she says.

"That's right."

"So you've met Evelyn?"

"Yes."

"Did she tell you about her son?" she asks.

"The doctor?"

"There isn't really a son."

"Oh. Okay. So, what can I do for you?"

"I'm hoping you'll help me out," she says. "You see, Evelyn should really be in a care facility. Not for any reason except that she has a hard time keeping reality straight. But there's no money for a care facility, see, so she's on her own. I try to look out for her, but I can't always

know what's going on because I'm not there. So, if you could just keep an eye on her, it would help a lot. I'll give you my number so you can call if you ever need to."

"Do you know that this building is infested with cockroaches? That Evelyn's apartment is infested?"

There's a long silence. Then, "Yes. We were hoping that the fumigation would help."

"She'd be better off in a care facility."

"I know, but there's no money for that. There isn't even funding for me to look out for her. I do that on my own."

I tell the case worker that I'll do my best. I can check in on her from time to time. But, I have to be honest and tell her that we're not planning on being around for long.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she says.

I'm not. I can't wait to get out of here. I can barely stand it.

The next day, I stop by Evelyn's and visit for a few minutes. The day after that, our sixth day on the job, we go around and hand out late notices to everyone who hasn't paid rent, which is about half the complex. Scott and I divide the notices up and start knocking on doors, since according to the rules we need to hand them directly to the renter. Everyone has a reason for not paying: they're getting paid soon, they lost their job, they forgot but will have it tomorrow. Unfortunately, it's not our choice. The late notices have already been issued by the management company, meaning that they have already charged each late-payer a fifty dollar fee. That fee has already been applied, and we're just handing out the notices to inform people of it. If it were up to me, I would give these folks extra time. What good does it do to charge them extra money, anyway, if they're already having trouble paying? But that's up to the management company, and we're just the middlemen. We explain that, but it doesn't stop people from trying to convince us to give them one more day.

One woman tells me that she didn't pay because her stove is broken and has been for three months. She keeps complaining about it but nothing ever gets done, so she's not paying rent until it does.

"Come see," she tells me, and I follow her in.

I'm not prepared for what I find. The floors are covered with empty pop bottles and chip bags and dirty rolled up diapers; a baby is sitting on the floor with a pacifier in its mouth, and dirty dishes and garbage are piled up all around it. Cockroaches are crawling all over the walls and the floor and the coffee table. I'm in shock.

"Come on," the woman demands, and I follow her into the kitchen, where dishes and dirty ashtrays and grease-filled frying pans cover the counters. She grabs one of the frying pans from the counter and smashes a cockroach on the wall.

"You—ah—" I stammer.

"So look." She shows me the element on her stove, which does not heat up when she turns it on.

"Okay, I'll tell them that's why you didn't pay," I say, backing up for the door. "I'm sure they'll understand and have it fixed right away for you."

"I won't hold my breath," she calls after me.

I practically run home to find Scott, but he's not back yet. I go looking for him and find him at the other end of the complex, talking to a guy fixing his car out in the parking lot.

"Scott, I need to talk to you!" I call out. I feel hysterical. He comes over and I tell him I can't do it. I cannot stay here. I cannot live here until we get paid.

He wraps his arms around me. "Okay."

The one idea we come up with to get out of this situation, our one chance, is to get a loan to pay first and last month's rent on an apartment. We look in the phone book, find a personal loan company, and call to make an appointment. On the way we go over our story: we just moved here and have jobs as off-site apartment managers (little white lie) and we will earn enough to pay off the loan (another white lie) within a month. We just need two thousand dollars to get by until then.

We're approved, at a twenty-nine percent interest rate, and they cut us a check right there. We don't have a bank account yet, so we have to cash it at Money Mart, which takes ten percent. But it's okay. We still have enough. We buy a newspaper, go back to the cockroach apartment, and start calling about the places that sound good.

We line up four places to see this afternoon. Two apartments, one townhouse, and one small house. They're all fine, but I like the house best. I'd love to have a house of our own.

"Are there any cockroaches or other infestations?" I ask the property manager. I've already learned that if a renter asks a question, the owner/manager needs to answer truthfully. If they aren't asked, however, they aren't required to offer the information.

"No," the manager says.

"We'll take it."

"We just have to run background and credit checks. We'll get back to you in the morning."

So it's one more night I have to endure. I tell myself over and over, "you can do it." And I do. I wake up the next morning and sit by the phone until ten o'clock, until I can't stand it any longer and must call.

"We were just about to call you," they say. "You've been approved. Swing by and get the keys."

Finally, something works out. "Our big break," I say to Scott.

I pack our things, obsessively certain that there's no cockroaches in the boxes, and place them in our car. We call the management office and tell them we're leaving, effective immediately, because we can't work under these conditions. We leave the paperwork in the file cabinet in the entryway, and lock the door behind us. Scott waits for me in the car as I knock on Evelyn's door. She answers in her bathrobe.

"Hello, dear. Come in!"

"I'm sorry, I can't. I just want to tell you we're leaving. We won't be the managers anymore. But you have your case worker's phone number. Call her if you need anything, okay?"

A flicker of panic flashes across her face, and then it's gone. "That's okay, dear. My son's coming tomorrow. He's a doctor, you know."

I give her a smile, and then walk to the car. I don't look back as Scott drives away.

We drive through town, passing side streets, one after another. Apartment buildings and townhomes. What's going on inside them? Are they infested with cockroaches, too? Are they occupied by little old delusional ladies who are alone and forgotten? Some of the apartment buildings we pass look just as bad as the one we just left. I wonder how many more people are living like that. How many more people have fallen through the cracks?

I try to push the memories from my mind. I need to look forward instead of back, I remind myself. I take a few deep breaths, and that helps. I feel better with each passing moment.

After we sign our new lease and get the keys, Scott pulls into a liquor store and comes out with a bottle of sparkling wine. That night, in our new cockroach-free home, we make a toast to the future.

Year Two

Working

We need to get some money coming in. We used our whole loan, practically, for our deposit, rent, and getting our phone hooked up. Rent will be due again in a month, and we have to get utilities switched over. Then there's food, and gas, and the things that always come up. We need jobs now.

The phone company promised to have our phone connected by the end of the day. We go to a print shop and rent some computer time to draft résumés, and we print ten copies each. Then, we drive each other around and apply at the places we have circled in the classified section.

We go out again the next day, and on the third day I land a job waitressing at a family Italian place. They have me go through four days of training before they let me take my own tables and keep the tips. Thirty-two dollars the first lunch shift, which is very low considering I was there for seven hours, preparing beforehand and doing sidework afterwards. But it's been so long since we've had any extra cash that I'm happy with the thirty-two bucks.

Scott gets a job as a security officer at the Marriott hotel in the heart of downtown. He works over-nights and spends his time walking the halls in case something happens. He doesn't mind it, except for having to stay up all night. He crawls into bed just as I'm getting up in the morning and sleeps while I'm at work.

A week before rent's due, Scott gets his first paycheck. Even with my saved-up tip money, we're two hundred short. After work, I go hand out more résumés and pick up a second job working the dinner shift at a fancy steakhouse downtown.

Here, the stress is heavy but the tips are a hundred bucks a night. We work in teams of two. One of us rolls out a cart loaded with raw steaks and a live lobster and does a menu presentation, a four-minute scripted speech that describes the menu. Meanwhile, the other partner fetches drinks and tends to the other tables in the section. The assigned partners need to decide between themselves who is going to fill which role. I prefer not to do the menu presentations, as that involves picking up the lobster and holding it up to impress the customers. The claws are bound, of course, and the lobsters are pretty docile since they're kept in the cooler until it's time to place them on the cart, but I just feel so sorry for them. It's one thing to hold up a piece of dead meat, but a living creature is something else. My co-workers say I look into it way too deeply, but it just seems barbaric, using these living creatures as props.

It's even worse when I have to go into the cooler to grab something. There they are, in their bin with a towel over them, their claws pushing the towel up as they try, unsuccessfully, to climb out. If one were to climb out, it would just be thrown back in the bin, which makes their efforts even more pitiful. The whole thing seems very inhumane to me, and I can't understand why no one else seems to have a problem with it.

Is it worth quitting over? No, I need the money. In fact, I pick up shifts. Pretty much every day off I end up working and bringing home another hundred bucks. We're able to pay our rent and our other basic bills, but the trade-off is that we barely ever see each other. By the time I get home Scott has left for work, and by the time I get up in the morning, he has just fallen asleep. Weeks go by where we literally only see each other for fifteen or twenty minutes at a time, in passing. Some days, we don't see each other at all.

Then one night in the fall, we miraculously have a night off together. We stay home, listening to music and talking.

“Do you want another glass of wine?” Scott asks, heading into the kitchen.

I laugh. “I’m a closet white zin drinker!”

“What do you mean?” He refills my glass.

“All the servers I work with make fun of people who order white zin because they say it’s not a ripe grape. It’s made from un-mature red grapes, so it’s for un-mature tastes.”

“That’s snobby.”

“Yup. Is your job snobby, too?” I imagine the five-star hotel might be.

“Probably, but I don’t see much of that because I work overnights. The only one I see all the time is Eduardo, the concierge, and he’s stuck up. He has a problem with me for some reason.”

“Probably has a problem with authority.”

“Well that’s funny,” Scott says, “because I have a problem with authority too. I’m not some big power-tripper security guard. I’m just trying to pay my bills.”

I suggest that he tell Eduardo that. But of course he never would.

“Do you like your job okay, though?” I’m almost afraid to ask: “Better than Customs?”

He thinks about it for a minute. “I don’t like it any worse,” he says, “but what I don’t like is how much more we’re struggling than we would be if I worked for Customs. I’d be earning more than we’re earning together now. And we’d see each other more.”

With every passing week, we see each other less and less. As the new millennium approaches, Scott’s hotel has everyone working overtime to prepare for the unknown. He’s a security guard at one of the largest hotels in downtown Portland, and the place is booked solid for New Year’s Eve. It’ll be a party; it’ll be wild. And, potentially, it’ll be dangerous. With Y2K, no one knows what’s going to happen. The city could go completely dark. There could be looting and injury with no way to get help. Security needs to be prepared. In addition to his overnight shifts, he has to sit through meetings that go over different scenarios and try to anticipate anything that could possibly go wrong at midnight 2000.

All I have to worry about on New Year’s Eve is how to provide great service to six tables that are seated at each of the five, seven, nine and eleven o’clock seatings. It goes smoothly, for the most part, because tonight, for once, people seem to be thinking beyond themselves, even if just a little. They’re patient and forgiving, appreciative of the good time out. And they’re generous. They leave twenty-five, thirty, and even forty percent tips, perhaps just in case the world actually does end at midnight. Then, before we know it, midnight is almost here. The mood is positive, the energy level is high, and there’s excitement in the air. No one, not the rich or the famous or the beautiful, knows exactly what will happen at midnight.

When it comes, when ‘99 rolls into ‘00, it turns out to be nothing. No lights go off. There’s no explosions or mayhem. Nothing happens. Nothing, save for cheers and laughter, and a glass of champagne for each of us on the house. It was just a bunch of hype for nothing. So a new millennium starts and is marked not by what it brings, but by what it doesn’t bring: nothing different, nothing new.

I start the New Year by working twelve days in a row. I quit the daytime Italian restaurant job because I make triple the tips at the steakhouse, and this frees me to pick up even more shifts. Every afternoon I go in and set up with the other servers, placing starched white tablecloths and fresh roses on the tables. We have a meeting and a wine tasting before we open, so we can describe the wines to our guests in detail and make recommendations for food pairings. The

other servers love this time, swishing the wines around, describing the nuances, and naming the vineyard in Italy where the grapes were grown.

“This one is from the Province of Vicenza,” the head server says to place the Merlot we’re tasting. “It’s less than an hour from Verona, in the Colli Berici Hills.”

The other servers nod knowingly, as though they have toured the region extensively and are familiar with these hills.

“I enjoy wines from the province of Piedmont,” another server says. “The tannins are more polished.”

I smile to myself. It feels like we’re in training to interact with the upper middle class, and these servers are playing the part very well. They talk about exotic vacation destinations, appreciate gourmet food, and buy designer clothes to show off to each other outside of work. In the kitchen and service areas they whisper to each other, making fun of the people who “obviously can’t afford this place, you can tell just by looking at them.” And it’s true, sometimes you can tell. But sometimes you can’t, and I find it funny that the servers here think they have it all figured out.

I’m one of the only ones who seems to be aware of the fact that we might be serving the rich and the upper middle class, but that doesn’t make us rich or part of the upper middle class. The expensive wine we’re drinking is their wine; the money we’re bringing home is their pocket change. I’m distinctly aware of it, and although I play along with my fellow servers, tasting the wines and talking about the fantastic places I’d like to visit, I’m under no grand illusions. Maybe it’s because of the incredible wealth I see flaunted around me that I’m so aware of it, like the people who come in and ask for “the best bottle of champagne you have,” no matter the price. The restaurant intentionally has a six hundred dollar bottle for just these occasions, because no one’s going to impress their table by ordering “the second best bottle of champagne.” If they did, they’d save themselves four hundred bucks. But it’s their choice. So I pour the expensive bottles and serve the extravagant food and listen to the conversations taking place, but I don’t feel a part of it at all.

I’m not the only one who’s aware of our rank here. Dan, a server who’s been here for four years, is also very conscious of his position. Every night he mutters under his breath while fetching drinks or grabbing a dessert, and he complains back in the kitchen about the incredible unfairness of the whole thing.

“Did you see that lucky bastard at table fifteen,” he says, “see his suit and that fat wallet?” A game a lot of rich people play is to pull out their wallets and take a long time to put them away. “Tell him he can send some of that cash my way.”

Dan’s real problem with it, as I’ve pieced together, is that he thinks he should be rich, so he begrudges those who are. He literally can’t understand why they have money when he doesn’t. He’s good-looking, smart, hard-working, charismatic. Everything that should spell success. He should be waited on, not the other way around.

I tease him one night, when he walks up and tells me that the bitch at my table doesn’t deserve that diamond necklace.

“I’m sure you’ll get one of your own if you work long and hard,” I say, giving him a playful pat on the arm. “It’s the Land of Opportunity, after all.”

My joke sets him off. “What opportunity? I’ve busted my ass my whole life. You saying those rich bastards work harder than me?”

“That’s not what I meant. There’s supposed to be equal opportunity here, though, right? Anyone can make it?”

“Yeah, in the movies,” he says, giving me a disgusted look and rushing off to bring bread to a table.

It’s after midnight when I finish my clean-up, take off my apron, and walk out the back door. I’m parked three blocks away in one of downtown Portland’s garages. Other restaurants and pubs are still open, throwing light and laughter out on to the street, advertising that this is a great city for socializing with friends, if you have any time or money to do so. Some of my fellow servers head out after work, but I turn down the invitations to go along, telling them that I need my tips for bills. I’m not here to party or to fantasize or to make believe I’m part of the lifestyle of the rich and famous. And they are. These are professional servers. At this level, only one out of sixteen is enrolled in school, as opposed to over fifty percent back in Moorhead. People typically don’t build the skills to serve at this level if they’re just doing it as a part-time college job.

So I guess I’ve left the realm of doing something just to get by, and I’ve entered the realm of career job. If I’m not careful, this is the life I’ll commit myself to. If I allow it, I could spend the rest of my days living off of others’ change and drinking their leftover wine. These servers have developed the fine art of making it look glamorous, but it’s not. It’s not what I think of when I envision the American Dream, that’s for sure. If I’m not careful, a year will go by, and then another, and this will be it.

When I get to my car I sit for a minute before starting the engine. The florescent lighting in the car ramp is bright and cold around me, but I’m alone in here. I take deep breaths, battling to keep control, and then I just let go. I feel tears rising and then streaming down my cheeks, and I start to sob, bringing my hands up over my face, even though there’s no one here to see me. As the tears are released, however, I can feel a strength rising up, replacing the tears. It’s a strength of knowing, of feeling, that I want more than this. It’s a strength that comes, simply, from telling myself to be strong. I repeat it over and over to myself: “Be strong. Be strong. Be strong.” Then I wipe the tears and start the car.

The next morning is Saturday, and I sit alone in the living room drinking coffee. Scott’s sleeping off another night shift. After an hour of silence, the phone rings, loud and piercing in the stillness.

“Hello?”

My mom’s cheerful voice comes in. “I’m glad I caught you at home for once.”

“Me too! How are you? How’s Victoria?”

She tells me about her Women Studies classes and about how she’d love for us to come visit.

“Mom,” I ask after a while, changing the subject, “do you think we made a mistake, Scott not taking that Customs job?”

“No, why?”

“I don’t know. It would’ve given us some security, at least. Maybe we wouldn’t be struggling so much.”

“Well, it’s always better to struggle to be free than to live complacently, trapped in what you don’t want.”

“Thank you! That’s what I think, too.” Having received the validation I was looking for, I feel a bit better. But still, it bothers me. Things should be going better for us. We should be happier.

Later, I bring Scott some coffee and sit on the edge of the bed while he wakes up. I have to go to work soon. Another night. When I get home, Scott will be at work, and I’ll sleep alone again.

“Why are you so quiet?” Scott asks.

“I’m thinking. I want to do something. I want to get out of the city.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s go to Salt Spring. We’re so close. I want you to see it. I want to see my friends again. And my mom’s in Victoria.”

“Okay. Let’s save up and we’ll plan a trip. I want to meet everyone.”

“And I still have some boxes stored at my mom’s.” I can’t even remember what’s in them, but I know it was stuff that seemed important enough for me to box up and store when I went to Fort Frances for the summer. I know my stained glass butterfly’s in there, and I think my fleece blanket might be in there, too.

I can picture us on the ferry, gliding through the islands and docking on Salt Spring. Sophie would come to meet us and bring us back to her place. I wonder if she’s still with George, and if her parents are living in the house, or if it’s filled with Sophie’s friends again. People were always moving in and out of the old five-bedroom place. Always cool people. I loved it when someone moved in who could play guitar, and we’d sing along to Grateful Dead tunes while we drank and smoked and laughed.

I pick up extra shifts and slip twenty dollar bills into my top dresser drawer. After weeks of squirreling money away every night, I count the twenties and figure we have enough for the trip. I tell Scott to book the time off and I’ll call my mom and try to get a hold of Sophie.

“The most I can get off is two days in a row,” Scott tells me after checking with his boss. “And it can’t be a weekend.”

“That’s not enough. We can’t go all the way to Victoria and Salt Spring and back in two days.”

“You can go without me,” he offers. “Or we can wait. They’re going to hire another security officer in a few months and then I’ll be able to get more time off.”

So we wait. We go to work opposite each other, day after day, and wait to get out of the city.

Opportunity

In March, a light rain falls for six days straight. Water streams from the awning and splatters my jacket when I step outside. But I grew up in this climate, and I won't let a little rain stop me. I feel like walking, so I'll walk, rain or no rain.

I go left, away from the main road, and make my way through the neighborhood. Yard after yard is filled with leaves, sopping wet and decaying, leftover from fall. No kids play outside, and BBQs haven't been brought out of garages yet. The only sign of life is the cars that go splashing by without slowing down, spraying up water as they pass.

My coat is soaked through when I turn around, and by the time I step back inside our rented house, I'm chilled. I put on a fresh pot of coffee and do up the dishes while it brews. Fresh cup in hand, I go into the living room to watch TV, and I find the answering machine light blinking. I expect it to be one of my fellow servers asking me to pick up a shift, but it's our property manager. She needs us to call her right away.

I sit down and dial the number she left, sipping my coffee while I wait for her to answer.

"Thanks for calling back," she says. Her tone is cool. "The owner of the house you're renting has decided to sell and is breaking your lease."

I put my coffee down. "Excuse me? I don't think you can just break our lease."

"We understand the inconvenience this places on you, so we'll be compensating you for it. We'll give you two months rent-free. Plus we'll give you your full damage deposit back and even double it. Acceptable?"

"Yes."

Scott's still sleeping, but I can't wait to tell him. I pour a cup of coffee and go wake him up to relay what the property manager told me.

"Wow," he says when he's awake enough for the news to register.

"Now we can finally get over to Salt Spring."

"You know," he says, sipping his coffee, "this is a real opportunity. If we put aside the money we would have paid in rent for the next two months, and put aside the deposit and bonus they give us, we'll have like three thousand dollars. When else are we going to have that kind of cash to do whatever we want?"

He's right. We never have that kind of money. It would take us a year, or more, of picking up extra shifts and stashing twenties away to save up that kind of cash. "What should we do with it?"

"Let's use it to move to where we really want to be. This is our chance to make it happen."

"Why don't we move to Victoria?" I suggest. "Or Salt Spring? We can stay with my mom or Sophie until I find a job. You can apply for your work permit when we get there."

"Don't you want to go back to school, though? We have to go somewhere where I can work if you want to go to school."

"Well where do you want to go?" I pushed him back in Moorhead to turn down that Customs job and for us to leave without a plan. Now it's his turn to make the decision. "Your choice," I say.

He smiles, and his eyes shine. "Let's move back to Minnesota."

Returning

Two and a half months later, we're sitting in a U-Haul heading east out of the city. We're not sorry to be leaving. Even though we spent a year of our lives here, we have no loyalty to Portland. In fact, we both feel like this city took from us a lot more than it gave, and we're happy to be distancing ourselves from it.

We're headed for Duluth, on the tip of Lake Superior in eastern Minnesota. It's only three hours from International Falls, where Scott grew up. He used to go shopping for school clothes at the mall, and when he was a teenager, he'd go there with friends.

"It's a nice size," he tells me. "It's big enough to have lots of job opportunities, and it's smaller than Portland, so we won't have to struggle as much. Plus," he adds, "there's three colleges. I know you want to go back to school. Here's your chance."

Yes, it's my chance. And I'm going to take it. I don't have a specific career or major in mind, but I know that it's one of the steps people take to be successful. It's too hard, I realize now, to find happiness and fulfillment when we're just struggling to get by. The servers I've worked with who were students had so much more hope than those who weren't. They were working toward something, pursuing something greater. That's what I want for us.

Outside the Grand Am, billboards and exit signs are flashing by. I guess we're sticking to the interstate. I should suggest that we get off and take the back roads, but I just want to get there, and this is the fastest way. Adventures and experiences used to mean so much to me, but now, more than anything, I just want to get to where we're going and start working toward what we want.

So instead of looking out the window at the changing landscape around me, I focus my attention on the big plastic jar of jelly beans we bought for the trip at a food warehouse outlet. There must be a thousand jelly beans in here. I open and test each of the twenty different flavors, and as we drive through the mountains, I prepare little recipes. My favorite is the berry smoothie, with one strawberry daiquiri, one raspberry and one blueberry. Scott likes the tiramisu recipe, which calls for two cappuccinos, one cream soda, and one chocolate pudding. The next day, when we hit the prairies, we put the jelly beans away, but soon they're back out and we're both popping our favorites. By the time we hit North Dakota, only the cantaloupe, banana and buttered popcorn flavors are left, and when we stop at the next gas station, I throw the rest away in disgust. I don't ever want to see a jelly bean again.

We stay on the interstate and head into Fargo. The self-storage is up ahead on the right. Scott pulls the U-Haul in and parks in front of our unit.

"It'll be nice to not have to pay rent on this anymore," Scott says, unlocking the unit with the key he's carried around for the past year. He slides the rolling door up and reveals the remnants of our lives in Moorhead. Boxes stacked between an old bed and a kitchen table. We load it all into our U-Haul, which has enough room for everything except the dresser and one box. I put the box at my feet in the front cab and we leave the dresser in the parking lot with a "FREE" sign on it.

Duluth

We hit the Duluth outskirts at ten o'clock. There's a nice motel right off the highway, and while we could go looking for a cheaper place, neither of us feel like driving around, pulling a trailer in the dark. Besides, this hotel has a steakhouse attached to it, and we're starving. We check in, freshen up, and head to the restaurant, where we're seated at a small booth.

"Well," I say, holding up my hard lemonade for a toast, "Here's to us."

Scott raises his margarita. "Yes."

"I mean, at least we're doing stuff, you know?"

Scott agrees. "I don't know anyone who moves halfway across the country twice in one year."

"Because we have to follow our hearts, right? We have to do what's right for us. It wasn't working out, so we left. We're not going to sit back and complacently accept unhappiness. We're in charge of our fate."

"Yeah, but I don't think we should tempt fate like that again."

I smile. "We won't. We're going to do things right. I'm going to go to school and find something that I love, and then we'll have real opportunities."

The excitement I have about the future is paired with a confidence that we can do anything we set our minds to. If we just moved to Portland with nothing, survived, and made it back alive, then we can do anything! That night, we fall asleep with smiles on our faces, happy to have one adventure over with and excited for the next one to begin.

In the morning, we move to a cheaper motel and walk over to the Embers restaurant next door for breakfast. Scott lays a Duluth News Tribune on the table and we scan the classifieds, circling all the possible places to live. We'd like a two-bedroom so that we can have a computer/guestroom, but other than that we're pretty open. We just need it to be affordable. Most of the two-bedrooms are around the same price, and the descriptions all sound alike: "two bedroom apartment, off-street parking, utilities included." Scott goes into the restaurant's entryway to make some calls and comes back to the table with a list of appointments.

The first place is downtown, in a row house. Two women are sitting out on the front porch with a big yellow lab when we arrive. One of them forces a smile and gets up reluctantly. She walks us through the place and tells us that the neighborhood is being fixed up. Scott shoots me a look. We both know that "being fixed up" is code for "bad."

The next place is fine. Nothing special, but the kind of place that could be fine if it had to be. Until we get to the kitchen. "This," the manager tells us, "will all be fixed." He's referring to the torn-up kitchen floor, with pipes exposed under the sink. "You could move in, no problem. This'll be fixed within a couple days."

"No way!" Scott whispers to me as we follow the manager down the hall. There's no way we're going to trust him. We thank him for his time and rush back to the car.

The next place is only a few blocks from our motel in West Duluth. Not the most picturesque area of town, but better than the downtown core. We pull up to a plain gray house, and the owner meets us at the door. He's friendly enough, in a business sort of way. He shakes our hands and leads us inside, telling us that he just finished fixing the place up. It used to be a single family house, he says, but he converted it to a duplex.

I literally hold back a gasp when he opens the door to the upstairs apartment, and I walk through in amazement. It has hardwood floors throughout, even in the kitchen, and the bathroom has old-school marble floors and a claw-foot tub. There are built-in bookshelves and little nooks and crannies throughout. It reminds me of the house I lived in back on Salt Spring. It has charm and character.

“We’ll take it,” Scott tells the owner after a walk through.

“Why don’t you spend a few more minutes looking around? I’ll wait downstairs.”

We oblige for the sake of politeness, but we don’t need to be convinced. We want it. We’ll make the small bedroom into our computer room. Our baker’s rack will look great in the dining room. I can picture us here, walking around, cooking dinner.

We sit on the stairs and fill out a rental application and return to the motel to wait for references to be checked. It isn’t until the next day, just before check-out time, that the owner finally calls.

“Sorry it took so long to get back to you,” he tells me, “but it was a bit of a challenge to reach some of your references.”

“That’s okay.” I hold my breath for his decision.

“Your references were all good, so I’m approving your application.”

“That’s great! When can we move in?”

“It’s ready now, so as soon as you’d like.”

“We’ll be right over!”

We check out of the motel and drive the three blocks to our new home. The street is quiet and lined with trees that are just starting to bud. Old houses that have seen better days sit behind the tree limbs. Ours is the biggest house on the block, and its siding has been painted recently. We walk up to the front door and ring the doorbell. The owner appears and leads us through the apartment, noting the condition of each room. The wood floors have some gouges, one window has a small crack, and the doorknob leading to the attic stairs is loose. Otherwise, the place is in perfect condition.

One last thing: “There’s no bugs or infestations in here, is there?” I ask.

“Of course not!”

“Sorry. Just had to make sure.”

After signing the lease, the owner hands us the keys and lets himself out. Scott and I grin at each other and head back out to start unloading our stuff. An hour later, everything is piled in the entryway. We spend the evening unpacking, listening to music, arranging our things, drinking beer, and simply appreciating the fresh start we’ve just created for ourselves.

The next day we start looking for work, and I land an interview for a serving position at a local burger and steak restaurant chain. The manager’s just a couple years older than me, and we sit in an empty booth to go over my application. I watch his eyes skim over my carefully handwritten words, crammed into the boxes on the photocopied page. His hair is gelled or hair-sprayed off to one side, and wisps of bangs fall over his eyes.

“Looks like you have great experience,” he says. “Are you looking for a family restaurant, or would you rather hold out for a fancier place?”

“I’d really like to work in a restaurant like this,” I tell him with a smile. “I think it’ll be perfect for me.”

“What’s your availability?”

“I can work any shifts right now. But I’m starting school in the fall, so I’ll need to work around that.”

He nods, his hair-sprayed bangs bouncing up and down. "We have lots of students working here. It's a good fit."

"Perfect."

He brings me into the office to schedule my training dates and fill out my tax information.

"Can I see your driver's license and social security card?" he asks. I hand them to him, along with my permanent resident card, which he'll need for the paperwork.

"Oh! You're," he looks at the card, "Canadian!"

I nod.

He recovers from his surprise and carries on, photocopying my cards and handing them back to me one by one. "Let's have you come in to start training tomorrow," he says. "Be here at nine."

"I will. Thanks." This'll be a fine place to work. Not the greatest, but fine. It's not my main focus now anyway. It's just a part-time gig to help pay the bills and give us some spending money above and beyond my student loans, when they come in.

I go back to the apartment and tell Scott about the restaurant and how accommodating they'll be when I start school.

"That's great for you," he says. "I didn't find anything."

"Any prospects? Anything look good?"

"There's quite a few jobs in the paper," he says, "but they want a degree or experience I don't have."

"Why don't you go back to school with me?" I suggest. "That'd be fun."

"For what?"

"Well, you already have a degree, so it probably wouldn't take much to get another one that you're more interested in."

"I don't know what I'm interested in, though. There isn't some great job out there that I want to work toward. No job sounds great or enjoyable to me. It's work. That's why they call it work."

He's decided that for him, jobs are just a price he has to pay for living in modern society. In exchange for a roof over his head and food to eat, he has to sacrifice forty hours of his life every week to "the man." And that's fine, he says. He doesn't expect to like what he does. He just wants to find something tolerable, put in his time, and focus his attention on life outside of work.

But it's not easy to find a "tolerable" job. He says telemarketing is out of the question, restaurants are too stressful, and hotel front desk positions are all overnight shifts. After three weeks of interviews and two failed attempts at starting a new job, I catch him looking in the Law Enforcement section of the classifieds.

"Why don't you find something different?" I ask. "You don't want to be in that field, do you?"

"It's the only thing I'm qualified for."

So he interviews for a loss prevention officer position at a box store, and he gets it on the spot. At least he doesn't have to wear a uniform, he says. He can wear plain clothes so that he looks like a shopper. His job is to profile people: determine from appearance who might likely shoplift, then follow them around, careful not to get caught watching them. If he sees someone conceal something and then walk out the door without paying, his job is to stop them and ask them to come back inside. He can't force them, but they always cooperate because they assume he has more authority than he does.

He does the job. He's good at it. But he doesn't want to do it. He doesn't want to profile people or follow them around, spying on them, and then confront them. He doesn't want to make

teenage girls cry when he busts them stealing make-up, and he doesn't want to call the police and have them arrested for it. I try to convince him to find something else. He's not even making good money, so why do something he hates? But he's familiar with this work, and he's able to do it. That compels him to stay.

An unanticipated side-effect of his job is that after a couple weeks of spending eight hours a day walking through the aisles and aisles of stuff, Scott starts to notice all the things we don't have. He decides that we need a new computer because his old one from college is just too slow to play any of the new games that are coming out. So he applies for credit and charges one, complete with monitor, speakers, and sound card. He also charges a computer desk to go along with it, a comfortable computer chair, and computer games. He's thrilled. "This is totally worth it," he calls from under the desk as he connects wires.

Soon, a credit card offer arrives in the mail. Then another one. Before we know it, we have four cards and three lines of credit. Thousands of dollars we haven't worked for yet are at our disposal. We go out to eat whenever we want, we go to the mall and buy ourselves new clothes, and Scott calls me from work regularly, telling me about a great price on a new TV, a stereo, a dehydrator, video games. We don't have money in the bank for stuff like this, so we put it all on the cards.

My favorites are the catalogues. They're little magazine-type mail-order catalogues filled with beautiful house decor, clothing and gifts. Once I buy something from one of them, I start getting a new one in the mail every few days, from different companies that must have purchased my information. I'd complain, except that I like getting them. Plus, a couple of them say I'm pre-approved for credit, so I can charge what I want. I go through and pick out the coolest framed picture that'll look great in the entryway, the most beautiful area rug that'll really spruce up our bedroom, and the perfect window covering for the spare room. It's a fun way to relax and unwind, to sit on the couch drinking coffee and look through the catalogues, picking out the perfect things.

Our apartment is filling up with cool stuff. All our old things seem shabby in comparison, so we replace the mix-matched dishes and buy sets of spices and expensive frames to display our pictures. For the first time ever, I have brand new fluffy pillows and a down comforter. Our glasses are from a full set, and our linen closet holds a stack of plush bath towels. Little by little our old stuff is boxed, bagged, and stored up in the attic in case we need it someday.

By the time I start school at the end of August, our place is nice and comfy. Our spare room is all set up with our new computer, tall bookshelves for my textbooks, and a cushy chair so I can sit and do homework for hours on end. We're all set.

Year Three

School

School is easier than I thought it'd be. I arrive early to all my classes, find a seat near the front, and listen carefully to the professors' welcome statements. My heart races when I have to introduce myself, but I get through it and sound just fine. A guy near the back flushes and stammers when he introduces himself, and it makes me feel better to see that others are nervous too.

"If you come to class," one of my professors says, "and do your assignments, you'll do just fine."

That turns out to be true. Even subjects I hated in high school are easy when I follow that advice. Each class builds off the last one, so if I attend and listen and understand the material, the assignments are just extra practice and the next class is manageable. It's those who miss classes that have trouble. Heather sits next to me in math, and the first time she misses a class I help her out during group time. The next week she misses two out of three classes, and even though I help her review what she missed, she doesn't have enough time to absorb it, and she's overwhelmed by the new concepts. By October, she stops coming to class altogether. Others follow suit. Around the drop deadline, when students can withdraw from classes without getting a W on their transcripts, a third of the class has dropped out. That's the case in most of my classes. I even notice a difference walking through the halls. There's far fewer people than when the semester started.

Scott says it was the same for him when he was in school. "Some people just have a hard time dedicating themselves," he says.

"They'll probably come back after they try making it out in the real world without a degree."

Scott shrugs. "Even with a degree, you don't necessarily get a good job anymore. Look at me."

He's right. A college degree is like the new high school diploma. It's not a guarantee of a job at all, never mind a good, rewarding job. I'll need to get a master's degree if I really want to make something of myself. A master's degree is still prestigious.

I can see myself as a graduate student, actually, all serious and absorbed in study. Already I find myself reading passages from my homework out loud to Scott and relaying things I've read to my co-workers. I had no idea that America had been so active in the African slave trade, for instance, and I describe scenes from *The African* to my co-workers as we tray up our food in the kitchen. "These people were stolen and loaded into ships!"

"I know, it's awful," one of the other servers agrees before heading back into the dining room to bring drinks to her table.

Worse than awful! I picture those poor people, brought over here to do the country's dirty work. And there's the whole business of what was done to the people who already lived here, whose land was stolen and who were abused and degraded. There were so many terrible things done, with the smallpox-infested blankets and all that. I knew history wasn't pretty, but I didn't know the extent of it. I write a passionate paper about the need to learn from the past and make things better for tomorrow, and I turn it in for extra credit. I'm determined to get all A's.

“Excellent work, Melanie,” my professors tell me. “Good job!” They count on me to know the answers to their questions and to always turn in my work on time. My dedication is rewarded with their praises, written in marker at the bottom of my assignments: “Perfect!” and “Another excellent piece of writing!”

I’m working harder, I realize, than I need to. I only need ninety-two percent for an A, and I’m getting close to a hundred in all my classes. Scott says I should relax a little bit and not put so much pressure on myself. But I like doing my best and impressing my professors. It makes me feel like I have what it takes to be successful.

Christmas

“Now that we’re back in Minnesota,” Scott says in December, “my mom expects us to come for Christmas.”

“Did she invite us?”

“Of course. We’re always invited.”

“Do you think she’s over it?” She hadn’t been very happy with us, the way Scott and I had gotten married in the basement of the justice of the peace’s house.

“Of course she’s over it. Come on, it’ll be good to be around family for Christmas.”

So after I finish up my assignments and turn in my last paper, I dig out the one cookbook I have from my past, a dog-eared Laura Secord that’s just like the one we had when I was growing up, the one we used to pull off the shelf every holiday and special occasion. I turn to the desserts section and scan the recipes: peanut butter cookies, pumpkin pie, fudge, Nanaimo Bars. They’re all associated with memories, and I can almost feel myself surrounded by family and friends again. Nanaimo bars in particular used to be my mom’s favorite, and I remember carrying plates of them over to people’s houses holiday after holiday, year after year.

I write a list of ingredients, make a special trip to the grocery store, and spend hours in the kitchen. When they’re finally ready, I transfer them on to a Christmas plate and hold them on my lap for the whole three hours up to International Falls.

On the edge of town, Scott says that things look the same as always. “This place never changes,” he says. “Stores open and close, but it’s always the same old Falls.”

His mom’s street is ablaze with Christmas lights. Every house has eaves and trees covered, and each has its own little theme going on. One is a Santa and sleigh theme, with mechanical reindeer moving their heads, spread across the front yard. The next is a nativity scene, with a lighted manger and a life-size Joseph and Mary and a sign that says “Jesus is the reason for the season.” The next is a garden of enormous plastic candy canes. Then his mom’s place, which has about two dozen potted Christmas trees, still in their pots, placed around the yard and adorned with hundreds of glittering white lights and dozens of bright red bows. We pull into the driveway and make our way to the door, carrying the tray of bars out in front of us.

Everyone tries one, later, when the stockings have been hung and the food is prepared for tomorrow’s Christmas breakfast. Scott’s mom hands out Tom and Jerry’s mixed drinks and sets a platter of baking on the coffee table. She’s the first to try a Nanaimo bar.

“They’re good,” she says.

Scott tries one next. “They’re really sweet!”

I take a bite. He’s right, they’re sweeter than I remember.

Christmas morning is a flurry of activity. More presents have been put out since last night and are now halfway up the tree and piled out at least four feet. My sense of proportion tells me this will take at least four to five hours to get through, so we grab some coffee as Scott’s mom hands us our stockings.

It takes less than an hour. Gifts are coming at us from every direction; thank you’s are being called out all over the place. Wrapping paper and tissue paper and empty boxes are flying around the room.

When it's over, I look at our stack. Scott and I have received so much stuff, it's overwhelming. Tupperware, picture frames, pajamas, a garlic press, a hand-held veggie chopper, a set of flashlights, a basket of bath products, cookbooks, a set of twenty-four drinking glasses, four sets of towels, candle holders, jumper cables, two sleeping bags, and decorative food trays, including a three-tier tray shaped like a Christmas tree. I arrange it all in the corner, as out of the way as it can be. For the grand finale, Scott's mom hands us each another gift.

"Last one," she says.

Scott unwraps his first. It's a digital camera, just what he wanted. Mine is a twelve-place setting of stoneware dishes that look like real pottery. Nice.

After brunch, family starts to arrive: aunts, uncles, cousins who I can't remember and can't keep straight. I smile politely and make small-talk and answer questions.

"Yes, I'm in my first year," I tell one of Scott's aunts. "Yes, I like it very much."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Well, I'm actually thinking about going on for my master's," I say.

"Oh! In what?"

"I haven't decided yet. I still have a while before I need to decide."

Then it's time to put out the snack food. Football will be starting soon. I help arrange cheese and cracker trays, a vegetable tray, and a cookie tray.

"Did you make these bars, Mel?" an uncle asks.

"Yes."

"They're a Canadian recipe," Scott's mom tells him. "They're from near where Mel's from. Nanaimo, right Mel? Nanaimo bars?"

"Yes."

"They're good," the uncle says. "Different, but good."

When the game starts, Scott comes over and asks if I want to take a drive. I nod and we slip out, warming the Grand Am before taking off down the festive street. The steam from the town's paper mill billows down with the wind, enveloping main street in puffs of white, and covering the bare trees with ice crystals. The huge flag is ahead on the left, and beyond it, the international bridge.

"Remember crossing there?" Scott asks.

"Seems like a long time ago."

"It was."

"Do you think your family ever thought we'd make it this long?"

"No."

We laugh, and he reaches under the seat and pulls out another gift.

"I wanted to give this to you alone," he says.

I know what it is before I open it. A new journal, hardbound with thick, lined pages. The cover is silver with an abstract fairy painting. I run my fingers over it and realize that I've already filled several journals since I left Salt Spring. So much time has passed. It has been years since Scott and I drove down these streets on our way to Rainy Lake, where he proposed.

Every street in town is lit up and decorated with nativity scenes and mechanical reindeer and hundreds and hundreds of lights. We drive around until we've been gone long enough.

"We should probably head back," Scott says.

I don't say anything.

The game's still on when we return and Scott sits down to watch the final quarter with his family. I go into the kitchen to see if anything needs doing, and find it all clean and taken care of.

Trays of cookies and bars are replenished and displayed on the counter. I try one of the chocolate-covered pretzels and a popcorn ball. Scott's mom comes in and asks if I'm finding everything okay.

"Yeah, thanks. For those pretzels, do you just melt white chocolate and dip regular pretzels in it?"

"It's that candy coating stuff," she says. "Yeah, you just melt it in a double boiler and dip pretzels in, one at a time, and lay them to set on wax paper."

"Mmm. I'm going to try making some." I don't know if I really will or not, but it seems like a nice thing to say.

She smiles. "I make them every year. I also want the recipe for those bars."

"The Nanaimo bars?"

"Yes. I really like them."

"Okay, I'll send it to you."

"Come on in and watch the rest of the game with us," she says.

I don't know if she really likes the Nanaimo bars or if she really wants the recipe, but I smile and follow her into the living room to watch the last few minutes of the game because it sure was nice of her to ask.

It's actually fun, in a way, watching football with them. And sitting around afterward is okay, too. I only have to remind myself once to relax and enjoy myself.

The day after Christmas is Boxing Day, a holiday in Canada, and Scott and I cross the border to visit my dad and Pat in Fort Frances. I drive us across, and tell the Canadian Customs officer that we'll just be spending one night in the country.

"Any alcohol or tobacco on board?" he asks.

"No."

"Any gifts or anything else you'll be leaving?"

"A few Christmas presents."

"Total value?"

It flashes through my mind to tell him the total value is a hundred thousand dollars. I could say it with a straight face, I bet. But, of course, I don't. "Less than a hundred dollars."

He returns our IDs. "Welcome back to Canada."

I smile as I pull away from the border and drive us through town. There's the Red Dog, where we first met. It looks the same. Except, I note, there's a Canadian flag flying in front.

"Was that flag always there?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I remember looking at the maple leaf."

"I never noticed it before."

I turn right and pull into my dad and Pat's driveway. They come out to greet us and help carry our things inside. We spend the day exchanging presents and eating appetizers, which Pat lays out on the counter. They ask about school and I tell them about the books I'm reading and the essays I'm writing.

"I'm getting straight A's," I tell them, and they both nod in approval.

"Well, good for you," my dad says. "Who would have thought you'd ever be a straight-A student?"

I could be insulted by his statement, but I'm not. Three years ago I wouldn't have thought I'd be a straight-A student either. I used to be too wrapped up in traveling and experiencing to care

about studying. When I met Scott I was registered at the University of Victoria, but I doubt that I would have taken it seriously if I'd gone then. I wouldn't have gotten straight A's, that's for sure.

We leave in the morning, our car packed with gifts. Scott drives us across the toll bridge and pulls in line for Customs. We inch our way forward toward the booth, with the officer standing there in his uniform, checking each car, one by one.

My palms are sweating. I take a deep breath as Scott rolls up to the booth.

"Citizenships?"

"I'm American and my wife's Canadian."

"IDs."

Scott hands our passports and my permanent resident card over. The officer doesn't recognize Scott, and runs through all the questions. Where do we live, how long were we in Canada, what are we bringing back? Then he hands our IDs back and Scott puts the Grand Am in drive and rolls into the country, under the waving American flag.

Routine

When we get home, we spend the afternoon putting our new stuff away. Some of it replaces old things, but a lot of it goes directly into the attic because our apartment is simply getting too full to hold it all. Closets are overflowing and bookshelves are jammed. There's simply no more space.

When I bring home my books for the spring semester, I end up stacking them on the computer desk because there's nowhere else to store them. It's okay, I suppose, because I use them every day. Before class, between classes, and late at night while Scott plays computer games, I read and review and consult my books.

My class schedule is the same as last semester: day classes Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and evening classes Tuesdays and Thursdays. I work the opposite: evenings on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and during the day Tuesdays and Thursdays. Every week is the same, a series of routines. I used to promise myself that I'd never let that happen because I thought routines trapped people in complacency. But now I realize they can save time and energy, so I might as well make use of them. Routines, I find, just make things easier. All I have to do is wake up and remember what day it is and the rest is already set up and planned out for me: go to class, study, go to work, study, go to bed. Tomorrow I'll go to work, go to class, study, go to bed. Simple.

Year Four

Changes

In flies by in a blur of waitressing shifts, and in September school becomes my main focus again. Work is pushed again to the back burner, something I do just to get by. I go in, serve my tables, collect my tips, and get out as soon as I can. I'm always rushing in after my day classes or rushing out in order to make it home in time to shower before my evening classes.

The second Tuesday after the new school year begins, I show up for my regular day shift. I park in the back alley and go in through the service door. Today, the kitchen is strangely quiet. There's only one cook, and he doesn't look up from the cutting board. In the dining room, the music that's usually pumped out of the stereo system has been turned down, and the few guests are talking in hushed voices. Servers walk slowly, with their heads down. The bar side is almost empty, and three servers are gathered around the big screen in the corner.

"Hi Mel," one of them says as I walk up.

"What's going on?"

"We've been attacked."

She points to the screen, and I stand and watch as the Twin Towers collapse before my eyes. I stare, in shock, as CNN replays it: the plane, the contact, the smoke, the collapse. I'm dumbfounded. With my hand over my mouth, I watch the towers collapse over and over and over again.

"I can't believe it."

"I know," a server says, brushing past me to the kitchen. I pick up my section and greet a new table in a friendly yet appropriately subdued voice. They are on their way back to Minneapolis, they tell me. They were going to go up to Grand Marais, a small arts village a couple hours north of Duluth, but they've decided that under the circumstances they wouldn't feel right vacationing and having a nice time.

"I understand," I say, nodding respectfully. It's like they're telling me their mother died or something. I almost say, "I'm sorry for your loss," but I hold back.

I only have two more tables over lunch. All the customers are distraught, in shock. Everyone keeps saying, "Can you believe it?" The manager considers closing the restaurant for the day, but he doesn't get the okay from corporate, so he keeps it open.

When I get home, I turn on CNN and watch the images of the planes hitting the towers and the towers collapsing and the smoke billowing. Each time the image repeats, I'm overwhelmed by the same terrible hopelessness and sadness.

I'm glued to CNN for the entire week following 9/11. Like many of my peers in school and at work, I can't turn it off. It's giving us all something, tying us together in some way. It's giving all of us, who have no idea what to do, something to do. It's keeping us informed of every new tidbit of information and allowing us to talk a common language amongst ourselves about those poor people, how terrifying! It could have been us, everyone decides. It could have happened to any of us, anywhere in the country. Imagine if the brave passengers hadn't thwarted the efforts of the terrorists in the other plane; it could have been even worse!

It's almost a relief when CNN presents George W. Bush's public address in which he encourages all Americans to shop in order to help keep the economy strong in these uncertain

times. Finally, something to do besides watching CNN's repeating images. "I've been wanting some new clothes anyway," a classmate says. Scott's mom tells us that she's buying herself that new washer and dryer she's been wanting. "Might as well do it now!" she says. Everyone wants to help, to do something beyond themselves. So they do. CNN reports that the citizens are doing a great job, spending madly and keeping the country strong.

To help us do our part, we receive two new credit card offers in the mail. One has the credit card right in the envelope. All we have to do to accept the offer is call the toll-free number on the sticker across the card and enter our social security numbers. In less than five minutes, we have another thousand dollars at our disposal.

Scott and I head up to Sam's Club, the bulk members-only warehouse by the mall. We'll put the membership dues on our credit card, along with the case of Chunky soup, variety pack of granola bars, two-pound container of peanut butter, and box of frozen pizzas. We also find a good deal on Mr. Clean, garbage bags, and a new cordless phone, which will be great.

"What do you think of this, Mel?" Scott asks, calling me over to the appliances section.

"What is it?"

"An air purifier. It'd be nice to have. Make the air nice and clean."

I shrug. I never thought the air quality was particularly bad in our apartment, but I suppose it wouldn't hurt to have something that makes sure the air's clean and pure. Get the dust out, and whatnot. "Sure," I say. "If you want it, go for it."

He lifts it into the cart, and we make our way to the front. There are huge lines, and it takes us over twenty minutes to check out. By the time we get through, my feet hurt and my head's starting to throb.

Our next stop is Wal-Mart, where we can buy things in smaller quantity. Scott pushes the cart through the crowded aisles, and I load stuff in. Face creams, shampoos, new sheets and towels, a table runner, a framed picture of birch trees. They all seem nice and important when I put them in the cart, but when we get back into the Grand Am and I add up our receipts, I realize that we've spent almost half of our new credit card's thousand dollar limit on our new credit card, and I don't know if it was worth it. Sure, the stuff is fine and will work and all that, but I don't think any of it's worth an extra four hundred bucks in debt. I'll have to work hard for six or seven waitressing shifts to earn that much. And when the twenty-nine percent interest gets added on to it, it'll be even more. I brood silently all the way home.

We have to make three trips from the car and back to get everything inside. When I finally go into the living room, I find the answering machine light blinking. It's my mom, asking me to call her right away.

She answers on the second ring, out of breath. "Guess what? I have some news. I'm moving to England next month."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really!"

"Why?"

"Because I want to. I have for a long time. I'm finally doing it."

"Wow," is all I can say.

"So I'm wondering," she says, "what would you like me to do with your boxes?"

"What boxes?"

"The boxes you left here when you went to Fort Frances for the summer. They've been in my basement all these years."

"I don't even remember what's in them," I admit. "Are they heavy?"

“Yes, they’re big and heavy. If they were light, I’d just mail them to you. But these would cost a fortune to mail.”

“I can’t afford to pay for you to ship them right now,” I tell her. We have less than six hundred dollars left on our credit card balance, and I don’t want to use that to ship boxes I haven’t seen in years.

“Don’t you still have that thousand dollar bond?”

Oh yeah, the bond. I’d almost forgotten about that. “Yeah, I have it, but I don’t want to use it. I’ve had it since high school, and I don’t want to cash it in unless I really need it for something. Once I cash it, I know it’ll be spent. It’ll be used on bills and stuff.”

“Haven’t you guys been able to build up any savings?”

“Are you kidding? We live paycheck to paycheck.”

She’s quiet.

“Can you open the boxes for me?” I ask. “Open them all up and tell me what’s in them, and I’ll tell you what I want.”

I wait while she opens each box and names off the contents, piece by piece. Trinket boxes, candle holders, photo albums, books, clothes, a stained glass butterfly, old schoolwork from high school, a fleece blanket.

“Can you pack up the stained glass butterfly, the photo albums, and the Catcher in the Rye and send them to me?” I ask. “Send it C.O.D., and I’ll pay for the shipping when it arrives.”

She says she will, and she’ll give the rest of the stuff to the Salvation Army before she leaves for England.

“Well,” I tell Scott when I hang up, “my mom’s more adventurous than I am these days.”

It’s true. Somehow, I’ve gone from living with a bunch of people in an old farmhouse on Salt Spring Island and traveling around the country to being a full-time straight-A student in Duluth, Minnesota. I can barely imagine taking off like I used to, shirking all responsibility in pursuit of new experiences. I can hardly remember what it felt like to be so carefree.

“It’s because you’re in pursuit of something different now,” Scott says.

He’s right. I’m not just trying to experience things anymore. Now, I’m looking to make something out of myself. There’s opportunity here, and I want to rise up to meet it.

So, as the country buzzes on around me, obsessed with terrorism and war and the economy, I invest everything I have in my personal path. It takes discipline, I must admit. It’s hard to tune it all out and remain focused, opting for my assigned reading instead of TV. But it’ll be worth it in the end. It’s the only way I’ll make something of myself. Hard work and dedication is the American Way. It’s the way things are accomplished and achieved here. This hard work, I remind myself, will pay off someday.

But in the meantime, we struggle. We get money back from our taxes and have to put it all toward paying off the loan we took out in Portland, which is still accumulating interest at the rate of twenty-nine percent and which we haven’t been able to pay down. We simply aren’t making enough to pay all the bills we have. Our credit cards are maxed out, we can’t afford the minimum payments, and collectors have started calling, asking when we’re going to pay.

“Don’t worry about it,” Scott tells me. “It’ll work out.”

I try not to let it get to me. But it’s hard when I go to meet Scott after work and I use the rest of my tip money to take us out to eat, and then we spend the entire time talking about how we can’t pay our bills. We stop at the bank machine on our way home and take out a two hundred dollar cash advance on our credit card, the only one with anything left on it, in order to make the

minimum payments on our other cards. When we get home we find another stack of bills in our mailbox, including one for the computer, which has charged us a thirty dollar late fee.

“But I paid that!” I complain.

“I guess they didn’t get it in time.”

I call the customer service number listed in fine print on the bill and make my way through the choices in the automated system. After a few minutes, I’ve discovered that the late charge was applied on the sixth, and our payment was received on the seventh. One day. I press the number to be connected with a representative and wait for twenty minutes before someone asks if they can help me. I explain what happened, but I’m told that nothing can be done about it. The late fee has already been applied, and it’s non-reversible.

I hang up. They don’t need that extra thirty dollars, yet they’re going out of their way to squeeze it out of us. It’s all about profit. They don’t care that I have to work hard for thirty dollars and that we could really use that money. They can charge it, so they do. More for them.

“You know what?” Scott says, holding the bill in his hand, “Screw them. Seriously. I want them out of our lives. I don’t ever want to use them again.”

“What, credit cards? You don’t ever want to use credit cards again?” I think he’s joking.

“Right. I hate them. I want them out of our lives.” He’s dead serious.

“But we need them.”

“No we don’t.”

“We use them all the time.”

“So, we’ll stop using them all the time.”

“But we’ll default on our minimum payments,” I point out.

“Then we’ll default. Better than just sinking ourselves in deeper and deeper.”

“We’d have a lot less spending money.”

“Credit is not our money. It’s credit, money lent to us that we have to pay back, with interest. It’s money that’s making money for other people. Not us.”

I reach over and hand him the scissors, calling his bluff. “Alright, cut the cards up, then.”

“Okay, I will.”

We both collect our cards and drop them on the table. “You really want to do this?” I ask.

“We’ll keep one for emergencies,” Scott says, and cuts the rest in half.

We stand still, staring at each other after it’s done. We can barely believe what we just did. It was amazingly easy, yet strangely difficult at the same time. I’ve become so used to having them, counting on them, knowing they’re there. But they didn’t do us any good. We’ve never had an emergency that we couldn’t have gotten through without them. Besides, we have five thousand dollars in credit card debt, which will take us years to pay off, and what do we even have to show for it? I can’t even really remember what we bought. In the end, it was always our money that bought what we charged. Credit cards were merely taking advantage of our desire for instant gratification. Well we’re not working to support them anymore. We’re not investing all this energy and hard work so that we can increase their earnings! They have enough money. We need to support ourselves and each other.

Year Five

Education

I don't remember where I heard it. Maybe in a movie. Or maybe I read it somewhere. At any rate, it sticks with me: "Discover what you love to do, and then find a way to make a living at it." It takes hold and becomes my mantra. Discover what you love, discover what you love, discover what you love.

Most people do it the other way. They do what will make them money, and then try to figure out how to get happiness from it. If I were to do that I would choose to major in engineering or biology. But I won't, because I'm in pursuit of what I love. How can I expect to ever find fulfillment and happiness otherwise? I must stay true to my heart. And the subject I love the most, the one that I feel will bring me happiness, is English. I love it! I love reading, I love analyzing, and I even love writing essays.

"Then you should definitely major in English," Scott says. He doesn't know anyone who actually loves writing essays.

So in my third year, I declare English as my major. I go to see Dr. Pratt, my advisor, to help submit the official forms. I've made an appointment, but I end up waiting ten minutes because he's busy talking with someone about camera techniques in *Citizen Kane*.

"Did you ever see that film?" he asks me when he finally shifts his attention to me.

"No."

"Oh, you really should."

Dr. Pratt used to be a tenured professor at an Ivy League college, but he gave it up, taking a huge pay-cut and a major drop in prestige, to come work at a small liberal arts college. At the Ivy League college, he never got to teach. He basically had no interaction with his students. His classes were taught by teaching assistants, and he was locked away in his office, writing academic papers for publication. Why? Because the college cared more about their reputation than the education of its students.

"I became a professor to teach," he tells me. "I want to interact with my students. A university should be a place where academic discourse occurs, where ideas flow, and where minds are challenged. It's a place where people grow and develop and learn to be intellectually-contributing members of society. That's what it's about. That's why I'm choosing to be here instead of locked up in an Ivy League office writing papers."

Here, at this small college, the professors also need to serve as advisors, helping their assigned students fill out forms and ensure they're on track for graduation. Dr. Pratt doesn't say whether or not he likes that part of working here. But nevertheless, here we are. He pulls up a chair and offers me some tea.

"No thanks. I just want to declare my major, and I need the paperwork for that. I've decided to major in English."

"You like to read?"

"Yes. And I'm thinking about going on for my master's."

"Then you must really like to read." He pulls the Major Declaration form out of a file cabinet and hands it to me. "It's pretty competitive to get into grad school these days. You have good grades, though, don't you?"

“Straight A’s.”

“Think about doing more for your résumé. Something that really sets you apart.”

When I get home, I ask Scott for advice on what to do to really stand out as a stellar student.

“I guess perfect grades aren’t enough anymore,” I tell him. “If there’s something else I can do to take it a bit further, I think it’s worth it.”

“Don’t ask me,” Scott says. “You’re way more dedicated than I ever was. For me, school was just something you do. You graduate from high school, take out student loans, and spend four years in college. While you’re there, you show up and do what you’re told, and you get through. That’s just how it goes.”

I sigh. “You’re no help.”

“Look on the school’s website. They probably have an honors club or something.”

He’s right, they do have an honor’s club. There’s also something called the McNair Scholar’s Program, a graduate school preparation program for ambitious, talented students who intend to go on to graduate school. It helps prepare students for the entrance exams and provides practice at writing an academic article. It’s well-known and well-respected by graduate schools. Perfect. I fill out the application and submit it along with three glowing letters of recommendation.

Later that week, the McNair director calls me in for an interview. I dress up in black pants and a black business jacket over a white cotton shirt. I walk in clutching a fake-leather folder with a copy of my application and some blank paper. There’s a pen in my purse in case I need to take notes.

The director’s friendly, but formal. Her hair’s pulled back in a tight ponytail, and the only make-up she’s wearing is lip gloss. She sits down across from me at a round conference table and asks me about my past academic performance and my goals.

“Are you willing to give up some of your free time to dedicate to this program?” she asks.

“Yes, I am.”

“It’s a commitment. It’s hard work. We provide a small stipend, but that doesn’t come close to covering all the time you’ll invest. It’s every Wednesday night, and some weekends.”

“Okay.”

She says she’ll let me know. When I leave, I realize I’m shaking and my heart’s fluttering.

“Well, of course,” Scott says when I tell him how nervous I was. “It’s a big deal.”

“It’s a lot of work.”

“Most things are,” he says.

When I get home from school the next day, there’s a message on our machine from the director. “We just think you’re a fabulous student,” her message says. “We would love to have you join the program.”

It starts on Wednesday night, and I have to give up my serving shift to go. The tables are arranged in a square, and the florescent lights are humming overhead. I take a seat with the other seven participants, fill out a nametag, and introduce myself. The director stand before us, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail again.

“Nice to meet you all,” she says when we’ve gone around the room. “Welcome. You are all here because you are excellent students. You probably realize that higher education is the access point to your personal success. You may also know that if you succeed academically, you can create a better life for yourself. It will pull you out of poverty, it will increase your social standing, and you will discover your talents and strengths so that you can be your personal best. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of higher education! Set your goal as earning a PhD, everyone. By walking this road, you’ll gain access to the good life.” She pauses, taking a long

look at each of us. “You all have what it takes,” she says, “that’s why you’re here. And McNair is here to help you. Through this program, you’ll earn the key that will unlock the door to your personal best.”

Perfect. Her words inspire and thrill me. I know this country has a lot to offer. I’ve heard of it, and I’ve caught glimpses of it, but I’ve never before found access to it. Now, here, finally, is an access point. On the other side of this hard work and effort is the good life: personal happiness, success, fulfillment.

My first step is to set up a meeting with my McNair mentor, an English professor who will be paid by the program to help guide me and mentor me on the academic ins and outs. She has agreed to help me choose a research paper topic, show me how to conduct the necessary research, help me form my argument, and proofread my paper for me. In exchange, the McNair Scholars Program will pay her a thousand dollars.

I write her three e-mails and leave two messages before she gets back to me, and then I have to drop a serving shift to meet with her because the only time she can meet, apparently, is five o’clock on Monday. But I don’t hold it against her. I arrive on time, knock on her office door, and wait. Then I knock again and wait some more. A few minutes later, I’m ready to walk away when she comes rushing around the corner, her arms loaded with folders. She fumbles with her keys to unlock the door. She barely looks at me.

“Are you Melanie?”

“Yes.”

“Here, have a seat.” She moves some books off a chair and shuffles papers around while explaining that she’s willing to answer any questions I may have, and she will proofread my paper once it’s written, but beyond that, I’m on my own. “I’m just really busy,” she says.

“Okay. That’s fine.” What else can I say? I could complain and get a different mentor, I suppose, but I don’t want to cause any trouble.

“Good.” She looks relieved, or maybe a bit guilty. “You don’t have any questions yet, then?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you know what you’re going to write about?”

“Not yet.”

“Start,” she tells me, “by choosing a writer you really like and then read what others say about them.”

So as I go through my English classes, I pay close attention to which writers I like. There are so many. So many amazing minds, so many glorious works. Then, a month into British Lit, we’re assigned Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. It’s brilliant, radical, and moving, and it hits me as the work I need to focus on. I go to the library and ask the reference librarian to help me find some discussion on the text, and she teaches me to use the database to find literary criticism. I sit and read it for hours on end. One of my English professors comes by and sees me reading away and stops to tell me how wonderful it is to see such dedication.

“I’m sure you will go far, Melanie,” she says, patting my arm.

I smile up at her. “I hope so.”

Soon after, as a little gift for my dedication, I come across a piece written back in 1929, the year *A Room of One’s Own* was published, that criticizes Woolf for making a grammatical error. I stop. An error? What was it? The article doesn’t say. It only gives the page number. So I look up the page number, as it would have been in the original publication, and can find no error. But I read it again, and notice that she says, “nobody in their senses.” ‘Nobody’ is singular, and ‘their’ is plural. What should she have said? I put the book down. She should have said, “nobody

in his senses.” I check on it and, yes, that was the grammatical rule at the time. That rule was a creation of the patriarchal society that Woolf passionately opposed. She was an avid supporter of equal rights, and it makes perfect sense that she would buck that sexist grammatical rule in her writing. So, in fact, it wasn’t an error at all, but rather a statement.

I work on my argument after I get home from waitressing, and after my other school work is done. Every Wednesday, I go to the McNair classes, practice for the graduate records exam, and give updates on my research paper.

“It’s going well,” I tell them. “I think I have a good argument.”

After months of drafting and supporting and revising, my paper’s finally done. I put it away for a couple weeks, like my McNair mentor says I should, and then I pull it out and read it again from a reader’s perspective. A few more days of polishing it, and I’m done. I show it to my McNair mentor and she says it’s great.

“Unique. Well-supported. Now you should publish it.”

“Really?”

“It’ll look great on your grad school application,” she tells me.

“Who should I submit it to?”

“Start with the most prestigious. Then if they turn you down, submit it to the next in line.”

I thank her and walk away, straight to the library. But it’s not the most prestigious journal that I gravitate to. I pick up the one I found the most interesting when researching my paper. *Feminisimos* is out of Spain and publishes a range of international voices on a variety of topics. And, it just so happens to openly call for submissions right on the inside cover. I spend the next week formatting the paper according to their requirements, and I send it in.

Idea

Scott's loss prevention job is getting worse. He managed to get by for quite a while without busting anyone, mainly by focusing on other ways that the store could save money like ensuring that product pricing rings up properly on registers and that store conditions are safe so that there aren't any employee accidents. But management is starting to pressure him to increase his apprehension numbers. They know people are shoplifting, and they want Scott to bust them. And that's where the conflict lies, because Scott doesn't want to bust them.

He figures out how many people he needs to apprehend in order to keep management off his back, and that's what he does. It's about one per week, give or take. So he selects who he's going to bust out of the many that he could bust. One week it's a tough guy who's being a jerk to his girlfriend; another week it's two cocky teenagers. He lets all the moms with kids go. Apparently, women with children are the most common shoplifters, at his store at least. Or maybe they're just the ones who are the most obvious about it. At any rate, Scott is limping along like this, doing everything he can to walk the line of doing a good enough job so that nobody pressures him, and doing a bad enough job so that he's not busting people left and right. It's really not a nice situation to be in.

I wish it were better. I wish I could tell him it's just temporary, like mine. A year from now, I'll be a graduate student. I'm sure I'll get a full fellowship, so I won't need to waitress anymore. It's the light at the end of the tunnel for me. This stage of my life is coming to a close. I'm moving forward. But Scott doesn't have that same hope to look forward to. His job is indefinite.

One afternoon near the end of summer I'm at the laundromat, loading the industrial-sized washing machines, and I find a sheet of paper folded in his jeans pocket. I unfold it and find, in tiny letters, "I HATE MY JOB" written over and over and over again across the sheet, reminiscent of the scene in *The Shining* where Jack has written "All work and no play" over and over. Not quite as creepy, but still a little unsettling. I stand there, staring at it. It must have taken him an hour to write this.

I sit down on a plastic chair and stare at the paper. This isn't right. It's completely unacceptable that anyone should have to endure something they dislike this much. I confront him on it that night, and he just shrugs.

"Why are you surprised?" he asks. "You know I hate my job."

"Yeah, but I didn't know you hated it that much."

He shrugs again. "Well, I do. What can I say?"

"You can say you'll find something else. Find something you like."

"There is nothing, Mel. I'm not like you. I don't enjoy work. To me, it's just something that has to be done. So I do it. One job's just as bad as the next. It doesn't matter."

But it does matter! Happiness matters. "What would make you happy?" I ask. "What is it you want?"

"I don't know." We both fall silent. Then he blurts, "It's just that it's like everything's on hold. You're working toward your big goal, and that's great, but it's so far off. It's going to be another five years before you're done with your PhD, and that's a long time to wait to get on

with our lives, to start a family and stuff. I'm tired of everything being on hold. I don't want to always be waiting for the future."

I listen and consider what he says. It's true that I'm working toward a goal, but that doesn't mean our lives are on hold. I want us to work toward our ultimate happiness and fulfillment, but I also want us to be happy now. We need to enjoy ourselves along the way.

If there's a way to make ourselves happier now, I'm all for it. If Scott wants to try something else, he should. We can get on with other parts of our lives if we want to. School isn't everything. Besides, I have it all under control. I've proven that I can handle school and anything else I decide to take on.

That gives me an idea. "How about this?" I ask him. "What do you think about being a stay-at-home dad?"

He stares at me, not understanding. This is coming from out of the blue. We've talked about having a baby, but it was always in the distant, abstract context, not the real, now, let's actually do it kind of way.

"What if I got pregnant?" I say. "What if we had a baby before I start grad school, and I could go to school and you could stay home with the baby?"

"What?"

Yes, this could work. In a year I'll be going to grad school, where I'm sure I'll have full scholarships. Then I'll be at a point where I can take care of us. I'm sure I can more than handle it.

"Think about it," I say, "if I get pregnant in the next two months, we can have the baby right when I graduate. I'll have the summer to stay home, and then I'll start grad school, and you can stay home." My mind's racing, making sense of it, mapping it out: the baby will be two when I graduate with my master's. We can move for my PhD, and I'll graduate with my doctorate when the child's four. I'll have a year to find my dream job and get settled in our new lives before the child starts kindergarten. It's perfect.

Scott's thinking it through.

"Seriously," I push, "this could be our one chance to do this because once I start grad school, I'm going to be too busy to be pregnant. So, it's either now or it's in five years when I finish my PhD. Why not now? We can do it, I'm telling you."

"Okay," Scott says. "Let's do it! Let's have a baby!"

Year Six

Pregnancy

According to the home pregnancy test I just took, the fifth one this week, I'm pregnant! Scott runs to the drug store and buys another test, just to be sure. It's positive. We can hardly believe it. One minute, it's just an idea, and the next, it's real. It's actually happening!

As soon as I know there's a life growing inside me, I feel different. Now everything I do, every breath I take, and every decision I make affects another person. Should I have chips or carrot sticks? Should I read one more chapter before bed or get extra sleep? The answers are the opposite of what I'd normally choose, but it's not all about me now. I walk through the grocery store and feel different than everyone else; I walk through campus to classes and I feel more special than I used to. I have a secret that no one else knows about yet.

After a week, I decide to try it out and see what it's like to share my news. We have a doctor's appointment this afternoon and it's feeling so real that I whisper to Carrie, sitting next to me in Early British Literature, "Guess what! I'm pregnant."

"Wow!" she whispers back, "Are you dropping out of school?"

"What? Of course not!"

"What about grad school?"

"What about it?" I wonder whatever happened to "Congratulations" or "I'm so happy for you!" I decide not to tell anyone else for a while.

Scott comes with me to the doctor and we wait together, me reading Jane Eyre and Scott reading a Minnesota Outdoors magazine. Finally, they call my name and we walk into a small room, sit in plastic chairs, and answer a long list of questions: birth date? any medications? are you a smoker? do you have a cat? and about a hundred more. Scott's eyes are glazing over by the time the nurse hands me a copy of What to Expect When You're Expecting and tells us to go back to the waiting room until the doctor's ready for me.

We sit and wait for another hour before we're called into the exam room, and then we wait for another twenty minutes for the doctor to arrive. She knocks and steps in, walking straight to the computer to read my information. She doesn't smile or make eye contact. She runs through a list of questions and directives, then tells me to go schedule my next appointment at the nurse's station. That's it. She walks out, having spent less than ten minutes with us, and she didn't even ask us if we have any questions. It's all routine for her, I suppose. The questions, the procedure: she probably runs through it a hundred times a week.

But still, I'm struck by her lack of enthusiasm. She wasn't mean, exactly; she didn't do anything wrong, per se. I guess I had just expected more, some sort of excitement. I remember when my mom was pregnant with my little brother. I was seven and I clearly remember walking in stores with her, her big belly sticking out and people stopping to congratulate her and ask when the baby was due. It was as though she brought happiness to others just by being pregnant. That was twenty years ago, though, and it was in Canada, where the population is much smaller than in the U.S. Maybe that's the difference. There are four million babies born in this country every year, so each individual case might not seem very special, I suppose.

"Don't let it get to you," Scott says as we drive home. "We can't expect her to be excited about it. It's not her baby."

He's right. We can only control our own attitudes. It's up to us to make sure this baby is appreciated and loved, taken care of, and given every opportunity. We can't count on anyone else to do it.

I examine my profile in the bathroom mirror when we get home, trying to imagine my flat stomach bulging out. I look up and catch my eyes in the reflection, shining and sparkling. My skin is glowing and I have a radiant smile on my face. I look happy and content, and I guess I am. We're doing everything right. When this child is born, I know we're going to have a wonderful life together, the three of us.

Baby

I didn't count on how tired I was going to be. No amount of sleep is ever enough and it's all I can do, it seems, just to make it through my day. When there's any sort of substantial break in between classes, I sneak home for a nap. I put off writing my papers in order to get a long night's sleep, but I'm still tired in the morning.

Soon it's time to pick which graduate schools I'm going to apply to. I drive to the University of Minnesota-Duluth, the only university in the area that offers a master's in English, and I tour the department. But I'm so exhausted, not to mention nauseous, that it's pure torture to walk around with the department head for forty-five minutes. I thank him and leave at the first opportunity, drive myself home, and fall asleep for two hours. I barely remember the visit, I'm in such a daze.

The thought of visiting any other schools exhausts me. The University of Minnesota-Duluth is fine. I'll just go there.

As I'm putting together my application packet, I receive a letter in the mail that the article I submitted to *Feminisimos* is going to be published. If I wasn't pregnant, we'd go out to celebrate or, at the very least, share a bottle of champagne. But instead, I just mention it to Scott in passing and include the information in my grad school application packet.

When my second trimester rolls around, thankfully, the tiredness starts to subside. But as one thing fades, another takes its place: now I have medical appointment after medical appointment. Every other week, I go up to the sixth floor of the clinic downtown, check in, and take a seat with about ten other pregnant women. It always seems to be a different nurse that calls my name, and when the doctor finally comes in, she's very obviously in a rush. She runs through the list of questions she needs to ask and things she needs to look for based on the number of weeks I'm along, and she does that efficiently. Then I leave.

As I ride the elevator back down with a bunch of strangers, I can't help but wonder if any of the staff actually cares how I'm doing. It sure doesn't seem like it. I feel more like a number than a pregnant woman.

Some would say that I shouldn't complain because at least it's paid for. Beggars can't be choosers, and all that. And that's true: it is being paid for. Because Scott and I don't earn very much money, and we don't have medical insurance offered through our jobs, we have health insurance through the state. I show my card every time I check in for my appointments, and half the time the clerk behind the desk pulls an attitude over it, rolling her eyes and raising her nose. I hold my ground, though, and refuse to feel embarrassed. Maybe it's because I feel that health coverage is a right. Besides, I've worked hard in this country, and continue to work hard, and I feel like it's not really my fault that medical insurance isn't offered in some other way. Through the state is the only way that it's available to me, so that's how I get it.

I remind myself not to let it get to me, and I try to push it from my mind as I drive home. I take a deep breath and turn into a grocery store to grab some snacks for while I work on my essay later. I know I'll be hungry. That's another thing about the second trimester: my appetite is going crazy. Now, instead of being tired all the time, I'm hungry all the time.

Every day between classes, I drag my classmate Carrie with me to the Burger King on the edge of campus, where I religiously order four things from their dollar menu: a salad, onion rings, french fries, and a pie. As I pack it down, we talk about parenthood and what kind of mother I'm going to be. I will not put my child in daycare, I tell her. Never. My child is not going to be shoved off on to someone else to look after. My baby will be the most important thing in our lives.

"That's awesome!" Carrie says. She tells me about a friend who worked in a daycare and took care of little three-month-old babies. "There was never enough time, you know, to give them all the attention they needed, so basically they just sat there hanging out, nobody paying any attention to them unless they cried."

"How terrible!" I say, because it seems to me like there's something wrong with a system that devalues babies like that. I'm so glad Scott and I have planned it so that one of us will always be at home with our child. I'll have our baby right after school ends, and I'll have the whole summer at home.

But there's a lot to do before then. I start going through our stuff, thinning out, making lists of things we need: crib, blankets, mobile, lamp, rocking chair, baby books, picture frames. Scott starts clearing out the spare room, placing our computer in the corner of the entryway, moving our spare bed up to the attic, making room for a crib. He wonders if our landlord will let us paint the walls.

"I'll give him a call later this week," Scott says. "I need to remind him that it's time to renew our lease anyway. I'll ask him about painting. What do you think, should we go with a light green?"

"I think a pastel yellow would be cool. Why don't you grab some paint color samples from work and we'll pick a color together?"

Later that week, Scott meets me at the door when I come home from school. "Bad news," he says.

"What?"

"We have to move."

My first thought is that he must be kidding. But of course he wouldn't joke about something like that, so my disbelief is quickly replaced with a wave of panic. I don't want to move. We're comfortable here. The baby's going to be here in four months. I don't want to have to look for a new place to live, and pack. "Why?" I demand.

It turns out that our landlord wants to get rid of the separate apartments and rent the whole house to a bunch of college students. He can get more than he's making now if he rents it to a group of college students for three hundred each. It's not personal, he said. It's business.

"But we're good tenants," I say. "And I'm pregnant! I understand he wants to make money, but he can have some decency."

"I know."

"So where does that leave us?"

"Well, I have an idea," Scott says. "I'm going to go talk to the bank and see if we can get a mortgage. We'll buy our own place and not have to worry about landlords and rent and all that."

A house. We refuse to have credit cards but now we're talking about a mortgage. "I thought we were done with credit."

"This is different. We're done with credit cards. I'm talking about buying a house. A place of our own to raise our child. I'm willing to owe money for that."

I shake my head. “There’s no way we’ll get a mortgage. We have terrible credit from all that debt we racked up, and then we were late on payments all those months before we finally got it under control. Plus neither of us have the greatest job. We don’t even have a down payment or anything.”

“Let’s just go see,” Scott says. “What do we have to lose? The worst they can do is turn us down.”

So Scott makes an appointment with someone who’s recommended to us as being good with first time homebuyers, and we go in with our pay stubs and social security cards. The loan officer beams, so happy to meet us. She must see a hundred people a week, yet she treats us like we’re her only clients. Come to think of it, she treats us better than my doctor does. She’s just so incredibly excited for us, she says, and wants to do everything in her power to make it all work out.

She looks at our material and asks where I’m from. My social security card says, “Eligible for employment only with INS authorization” on it, giving away the fact that I’m an immigrant.

“I moved here from Canada,” I tell her. “Does that matter for getting a mortgage?”

“No! No, I was just curious. Okay, let’s get started then.” She swivels her chair to face her computer screen and starts typing, posing questions every few seconds and typing in our responses: “Melanie, employer? Number of years there? Scott, employer? Number of years there?”

After twenty minutes, her smile widens and she announces that we are indeed eligible for a home mortgage. They’ll even lend us the down-payment and closing costs, so we don’t have to come up with a single cent up front. Unbelievable. She prints a pre-approval letter, gives us the number of a great real estate agent, and that’s that. We’re free to make an offer on a house.

We drive home in silence, walk upstairs, sit down at our kitchen table, and stare at each other, wide eyed.

“Wow,” I say at last. “So now what?”

“Let’s call the real estate agent and start looking for houses.”

Scott calls the number on the card the loan officer gave us, and the next day we’re driving around with her, looking at houses she has picked out in our price range. Apparently she couldn’t find any that meets all of our criteria (three bedrooms, nice yard, good neighborhood), but if we’re willing to make a few compromises, we’ll find a house that’s perfect for us.

She brings us to a place in a nice neighborhood with a big yard, but the house only has two tiny bedrooms. Another place is really run down and doesn’t have a yard. The third place is a three-bedroom that needs painting but is otherwise in good condition. It doesn’t have a yard at all, but it has a beautiful old maple tree in the front yard. The neighborhood isn’t the greatest, but it’s getting cleaned up.

“See?” the agent says, driving past a huge empty lot just a couple blocks from the house. “They’re building luxury condos here. This will be a very desirable neighborhood when these are finished.”

A big billboard displays the plans. It does look nice, the picture for a complex with a waterfall fountain in the front entrance.

“What was there before?” I wonder.

“I think it was a little grocery store,” the agent says. “A mom and pop place that went out of business. The developer bought it, along with the rest of the block. They’re getting ready to start construction. The whole neighborhood will benefit from this improvement. Property values will

go up. You're actually getting in at a good time, and it's a great price for that house, with that gorgeous tree. It's a good investment for a young family."

The next six weeks are a blur. We put in an offer, it's accepted, we pack, we take possession, and my dad and Pat come down to help us move. They won't let me do any lifting, so I watch as the three of them trek up and down the stairs, carrying box after box of our old things down from the attic and taking trip after trip to our new house. Boxes line the walls in all the rooms, and the stuff from the apartment attic gets stacked in our basement for us to go through later, when we have the time.

The baby's room is a nice size, and the window has a view of the beautiful maple tree. I'll be able to sit in here and watch the leaves transform into a blaze of red before they fall off for the long winter. This will be a nice room for the baby.

We spend the next week decorating and making things perfect. Nursery rhyme books are stacked neatly on the bookshelf, stuffed animals sit on the dresser, and an alphabet quilt is displayed on the wall. Everything's ready. The room is done, the rest of the house is unpacked, and my major school assignments for the year are complete and turned in.

That night, right on cue, my water breaks. Scott grabs the hospital bag we pre-packed, and I turn on the computer to send my professors a quick e-mail to let them know I won't be in class tomorrow.

"What're you doing?" Scott demands. When I tell him I'm e-mailing my professors, he laughs and says I'm way too dedicated. "Who else but you would be thinking about school at a time like this?"

We go into the hospital at midnight. They assign me a bed and hook me up to monitors. Doctors stroll in and out, sometimes there when I need them and sometimes not. They don't seem very familiar with my medical history or very concerned with my needs. They come in and check on me, but after twenty-six hours, I have to practically beg for a c-section just to put an end to the whole thing.

As I lie on the operating table and they stitch me back up, I silently take back all the times I ever complained about being tired. I didn't know what tired was until this moment.

But then Scott brings a tiny, perfect person over to meet me. I reach out my hand, she takes hold of my finger, and I'm flooded with such love that I cannot believe I haven't known and loved her my whole life. I silently promise her that I will do my very best to give her a good life, filled with happiness. Then I close my eyes again and know that everything is alright. All that matters is this moment, and everything that lies ahead.

The next two days are a blur of visitors, feedings, and help out of bed. By the time we're ready to go home, the room is filled with flowers and gifts. Clothes and jewelry for Morgen and books and picture frames for me. My work sent flowers and a poem about how they miss me, my mom sent a potted weeping willow tree that we can take home and plant outside, and Scott's mom poured hours of time and energy into a special recipe card box filled with hand-written recipes she has collected over the years. She hands it to me when she drives down to meet her new granddaughter and tells me that she had wanted to do this as a wedding present but didn't have time, so she waited for the next big milestone.

One last gift is from my dad and Pat, who drive down separately and hand me the keys to their five-year-old jeep.

"You'll need a family car now," my dad says.

"Really? Seriously? You're giving us your jeep?"

"Yes. You can sell your Grand Am to pay for the title transfer and registration."

“Thank you,” I say. Scott looks as shocked as I feel. They follow Scott to our house, where he parks the Grand Am, and then Scott drives the jeep back to the hospital. When I’m released, he packs all the gifts and flowers into the jeep and heads to the home we’ve prepared for our daughter’s arrival. The fresh paint, the nursery, and the sweet decorations are all for her, to make her feel loved and welcome.

I spend the first two weeks in bed, sleeping, recovering, and spending time with our little Morgen. When I’m finally able to get up and move around, I venture out of the house and sit with her on my lap on the front steps, gazing across the street at a house that looks just like ours, but with newer siding. Another week and I’m able to buckle her into the stroller and walk the paved sidewalks. First three blocks, then four, and soon I’m winding us through the neighborhood. The sidewalks are rough and uneven, heaving in places from years of frost and neglect. I have to push the stroller out on to the street in several places, but there’s not much traffic on these roads. I recite poetry as we walk, and I point out the beautiful trees and the fluffy clouds floating by.

We make our walks a daily ritual, sometimes taking even two or three a day. Scott is working full-time, and not complaining about it, while I recuperate. Next month, we’ll be switching roles. He’ll quit his job and stay home full-time, and I’ll go to grad school full-time. I have a fellowship at the university, so my tuition is paid for, and I’ll get a small stipend. The rest of our expenses will be covered by student loans. It’ll be tight for a while, but it’s worth it. I’d rather my daughter have a parent home with her than have both of us working. This is an invaluable gift we’re giving her: the gift of time and love and attention. It’s all good. It’ll all be fine. I’ll get my master’s, and then we’ll start the next chapter in our lives. I’m not sure what that will be exactly. Oh yeah, my PhD. But, I’ll think about that later.

For now, I just want to focus on Morgen. For the remainder of the summer, I want the rest of the world to fade away and let me focus on being a mom. I just want to sleep when she sleeps and be with her when she’s awake. She’s up every two hours in the night, screaming in her crib until I pick her up. Then, she looks at me, wide eyed and alert, and even before she’s supposed to be able to smile, I swear I can detect happiness in her face. All she wants is my time and attention. Just by being with her, I’m making her feel loved and cherished. I’m showing her that she’s all that matters. For now, she is my whole world.

Year Seven

Grad School

If you want to succeed in grad school, you need to work hard, and you need to make sure everyone sees you working hard. That's what my Critical Theory professor tells us during our first class, a three-hour marathon on Thursday night.

There are nine of us in the room, including the professor. We're all seated around a conference table in one of the private library spaces, and every once in a while Dr. Terrill gets up and goes to the white board to write something meaningful. Her long skirt swooshes as she glides across the floor in her high-heeled shoes.

"Dedication," she writes with a squeaky blue dry-erase marker. She draws a line under it for emphasis, and then writes "ambition" underneath.

"Everything you've done up to now," she says, retaking her place at the table, "is no longer enough. This is a whole new ball game."

The grad students, all of us in our twenties, give her our undivided attention. The one identified as "Rachel" on her nametag nods her head.

"Of course you must attend every class," Dr. Terrill says. "And it goes without saying that you'll turn in every assignment on time. Class schedules may be convenient or inconvenient, it doesn't matter. You're expected to come to class prepared, contribute thoughtfully, and enjoy doing it."

She looks at each of us in turn, staring at me just long enough to make me feel uncomfortable, and then goes to the white board again. "Talent," she writes.

"You're all talented enough to have gotten into the program, but now you need to prove yourselves all over again. What you did before you got here doesn't matter. What you do here is what'll set you apart and set you up for your career. You all want to be successful, right?" She waits for us to nod. "Then you need to go above and beyond. Arrive early and stay late. Do research beyond what's assigned. Organize study groups. It's those extras that'll distinguish you."

I'm fine with most of it: the attendance, the assignments, and the extra reading. But my free time is already spoken for. Unlike the other grad students, I have a newborn daughter at home who needs me. Study groups and spending extra time at school won't work for me.

I make it work my own way. I do the extras from home while Morgen's napping, after she goes to bed, and even, more often than I'd like, before she wakes up. Five or six times in the first two months, I stay up until midnight and then set my alarm for four in the morning to give myself an hour or two to work on papers before she wakes up. I'm sleep deprived, I'm stressed, but I'm doing it.

Of course, I'm not the only one who's doing it. Grad school is full of dedicated people. Most of my peers are fulfilling what's expected, and several are going above and beyond. Rachel, for instance, is always well-prepared and is forever ready to join a group or stay late to work on assignments. Every morning when I arrive at seven-thirty, she's already sitting at her desk in our graduate student shared office space. She always smiles and says good morning, and she always seems genuinely interested in how I'm doing. She follows that with some sort of small-talk question about my interpretation of Descartes, or something of the sort. She never seems tired or

annoyed. She's the perfect example of the engaged student who has embraced her role and is dedicating herself to fulfilling it. She isn't just any grad student. She is, through and through, a serious grad student. She is, I think, how I would be if I didn't have Scott and Morgen at home depending on me and needing my time and attention.

But I'm holding my own, despite my sleep deprivation and my inability to find even thirty seconds for myself. In fact, I even have a good shot at the extra graduate fellowship that's announced in November, a five thousand dollar cash award to the most promising grad student entering second year. We have until the beginning of February to submit an application packet that includes grades from the first semester, three letters of recommendation, and a writing sample.

In some ways, it's just another thing to do. It's another project that keeps me up after Scott's asleep, and it's another distraction that occupies my mind when I'm playing with Morgen. But it's worth it, I tell Scott. This is what I've been working for. This will be recognition and compensation for my hard work, and it will help support us as I pursue this path. So, I gather my straight-A transcripts, my glowing letters of recommendation, and the article I had published in *Feminisimos*. Then, on the last day of January, I submit my application.

"Of course you're going to get it," Scott assures me. "You've been published! No other graduate students have had their articles published."

But the announcement comes via e-mail in late February. This is all it says: "Rachel wins. Thanks to everyone who entered. Please join us in congratulating Rachel."

That's it. No explanation, no feedback. I'm shocked. I read it again, actually expecting the words to change, really believing that I misread. Then, without stopping to think, I hit reply, and I type: "Will you please send some more details regarding the selection process?"

That evening, when I check my e-mail from home, there's a reply from Dr. Terrill. It states, simply, "Melanie: Rachel was selected because the committee decided that she is the most academic overall."

I hold myself back from hitting reply because I know the worst thing you can do is send an email when you're upset, especially to the head of the graduate department. So I hold back, but the words roll over in my mind. The most academic. The most academic.

What does that mean, the most academic? I mean, I am academic, so how are they defining that, exactly? I've been published in an academic journal. Obviously I was academic enough for that. I attend every class, turn in every assignment, and participate in every discussion. I think deeply and critically, I get straight-A's, and I integrate academic discourse into my writing. I'm academic.

It just doesn't make sense to me until a few weeks later when I have to run up to school at ten o'clock to grab a book I forgot. Our house is twenty minutes from campus, a rough drive on snowy nights like this. Tonight the lot is practically empty and I'm able to pull up next to the English Department. I pull my jacket closed, bracing myself from the wind and snow, and I make my way to the door. All is quiet inside. The graduate student office is the third door in, and it's open. I step in and (I should have known) there's Rachel sitting at her computer.

She looks over with a big smile and greets me with her "radio voice," which she developed while working for a radio station in southern Minnesota. It's clear and confident, hearty and even. We all notice it when she reads her papers to the class. She stands up tall, lifts her chin, and smiles as she reads using all the right inflections and pauses. Everyone pays just as much attention to how she reads as to what she reads. One time, as we were all applauding, Dr. Terrill commented that Rachel must have been great on the radio.

After class I asked her about her experience and she told me it was wonderful. She met so many community members through that job, and the work was so real, so important, and so homegrown.

“There aren’t many places,” she told me, “where you can do honest work and build community at the same time.”

“Why’d you leave?” I asked.

“I wanted to push myself. Everyone said I could go far, so I thought I’d give grad school a try. See if I could do it.”

“Are you going to go back to work at the radio station when you’re done?”

“Of course not!” She was surprised. “I’ll get something better. At least I hope I will.”

So here she is now, sitting alone in front of a computer screen in a florescent-lit office space at ten-thirty at night. Is she better off than she was at the radio station, building community? Who knows. Maybe proving something to herself is worth it to her.

“What are you doing here so late?” I ask.

“Just finishing up a couple things. How ‘bout you?”

“Forgot something.” I walk over to my desk and grab my book. “I need to read a few chapters for tomorrow. See you bright and early!”

As I walk down the hall on my way out, I run into Dr. Terrill coming out of her office. She greets me with surprise and I explain that I’m just picking something up. As I close my jacket and prepare to walk outside, I hear her exclaim behind me, “Rachel! You’re working late again! I should have known you’d still be here, working hard, far into the night!”

I stop dead in my tracks and turn around. From my vantage point I can see Dr. Terrill standing in the doorway to the student office space, beaming at Rachel. Then, it hits me. I suddenly understand what they meant when they said that Rachel was the most academic. When we were told that to succeed in grad school we had to work hard and let them see us working hard, I didn’t realize how literally they meant it. I work hard, but I do so on my own terms, in my own time, and I fulfill my other obligations in between. This, I realize now, is simply not the approved, preferred method for getting through graduate school. Rachel’s is. She is totally focused and completely committed to being a student. She doesn’t have anything distracting her. This is her whole life. I get it.

I push open the door and walk out into the night. There’s a system at work here, one that we’re expected to learn and embrace. That’s what they meant by being academic: how well we’re able to adapt to the academic system. It has less to do with intelligence or critical thinking skills, and has more to do with the ability to conform.

Year Eight

Rushing

My professors aren't as impressed as I'd like them to be. I got straight A's the whole first year, and I'm sure I'll do it again, but my professors aren't showering me with praises. Even when I stay late, telling Scott to go ahead and eat without me because I have to stick around school, no one seems to notice. If they do notice, they don't seem to care. I'm starting to get the feeling that they're disappointed in me somehow. Or maybe they don't think I have what it takes, or that I'm not good enough. It's like the breakup line, "I love you, but I'm not in love with you." That's how this feels: they love me, but they're not in love with me.

And I don't know how to fix that. I don't know how I can possibly give any more.

I start to have wild, frightening dreams where I'm inside my house and I know something's wrong, so I look out the window and there's a gigantic tornado coming straight toward me. My heart almost pounds out of my chest, and I wake up shaking and sweating. The further into the semester I go, the worse the dreams get. The week before Christmas break, I have one where the tornado gets so close that I actually brace for impact, and when I wake up, I'm sitting straight up in bed, shaking in the darkness.

Morgen's crying. I pull the covers back and rush to get her, gathering her in my arms and settling into the rocking chair. I take deep, even breaths and wait for my heartbeat to slow back down. Scott's snoring in our bedroom, unaware that we're up. I'll be getting up for school in a couple hours, and a whole new hectic day will be starting. But for now, I'm here. Morgen looks up at me and I smile, knowing the best gift I can give her at this moment is my love. I sing "Rock-a-bye baby," changing the last line, as I always do, to "mommy will catch you," instead of "down will come baby." She's quiet and still, but her eyes are wide open, so I sing the song again. And again. I rock gently back and forth and hold her close, and slowly her eyes begin to close.

I feel like I have just crawled back into bed when my alarm goes off two hours later. I hit the snooze button and groan that I don't want to get up.

"Stay home," Scott says, rolling over. "I'm taking Morgen to the park today to shoot some winter pictures. Come with us."

"I can't. I have a million things to do." It's the last day before Christmas break, and I have two essays and another assignment due. "Starting tomorrow, I'll be able to relax."

But the next morning I wake up at six, as always, even though I'm on break. I roll over and close my eyes, but I can't fall back asleep. When I push the covers back to get up, Scott asks what on earth I'm doing.

"I don't know. I guess I have to unwind a bit before I can sleep in."

I head downstairs and find my Laura Secord cookbook and lay it out to look through after I do the dishes. The living room also needs to be picked up, and the floors need to be swept. Then Morgen's awake. I bring her downstairs with me and set her up with measuring spoons to play with while I finish sweeping.

I wonder how I did on my final papers. Dr. Terrill, especially, has me worried. I'm sitting at a ninety-four percent in her class, and if I don't get at least an eighty on the final paper, I could actually get a B overall in her class. I'm in my last year, and I've gotten straight A's all the way

though. It would be a disgrace to get a B now. She'd be just the one to give it to me, too. She's always acting like I should be giving more of myself.

Morgen giggles and shakes the spoons, and I snap myself out of my thoughts. I'm on break. I need to stop thinking about school and worrying about my grades. I did the best I could, and now I have to let it go.

But I can't. I catch myself over and over fretting and replaying scenes from the semester in my mind.

"You're letting it get to you way too much," Scott says when I wake up from another nightmare. "You just have one more semester and then you're done with your master's. You're doing great. Just get through this semester, and then you're on to your PhD."

I take a deep breath. "Okay." I can do it.

When my break's over, I'm once again thrown into the craziness of demands, pressures, and deadlines. I'm still plagued by the restless sleep and disturbing dreams, and I wake up in the morning feeling exhausted. My tiredness lasts throughout the day, day after day, until I practically feel like a walking zombie from sleep deprivation and stress. As the semester goes on, the pressures only increase. Now, in addition to my classes and my family, I also have to prepare for my final exams. And, to top it off, it's time to apply for PhD programs. I need to talk with my professors and ask them to write letters of recommendation.

But for some reason, I don't. I put it off, and then the application deadlines are next week, and I still haven't asked. I guess I just don't want to. I'm too tired. I'm tired of the pressure and I'm tired of the stress, and I'm very, very tired of never having enough time.

So I let the application deadlines pass, and I just focus on finishing the year. Then, before I know it, graduation is almost here. I submit all my assignments and take my final exams. Then, I breathe the first real sigh of relief in two years because I'm done with grad school. And, yes, I graduate with a perfect grade point average.

Salt Spring Remembered

I still dream of Salt Spring. In the long, empty days after grad school's over, I take Morgen for walks in her stroller and let memories of Salt Spring flow through my mind. I remember the wildflower-lined lanes and the old wooden church that had been converted into a movie house, and I remember, most of all, the people. The owner of the roadside stand where we bought our eggs, the guy behind the counter at the coffee shop bakery, the librarian, the woman who organized the Christmas craft sale at the community center. I remember them all.

I would love to live among those people again and be a part of their community. It would be a great place to raise Morgen. After I put her to bed, I fire up the computer and search for jobs on Salt Spring. Nothing but a housekeeper at a local resort and a live-in caretaker for an elderly woman. No professional jobs; nothing that would warrant moving all the way out there. I'll keep looking, I decide. It's a small island and there aren't many opportunities for professional positions, but maybe something will come up.

In the meantime, I need to apply for jobs around here. Scott's picked up an overnight front desk position, but that's just temporary. It'll buy groceries and pay our mortgage, but it won't pay all our bills or my student loan payments when they come due. Armed with copies of my perfect transcripts, strong letters of recommendation, and a polished résumé, I apply for college-level teaching jobs. Two are in Duluth, one in Superior, and two within an hour's drive.

I don't get called for any of them. June rolls into July and then into August. School will be starting soon, and I don't have a job offer. I start looking beyond the area, sending applications to North and South Dakota.

Then, in the middle of August, I get an e-mail from Dr. Terrill. They're adding sections of Composition to meet new enrollment demand. They need another instructor on a contract basis to teach five or maybe six sections. Am I interested?

Yes, I am. It's just a contract, so there's no medical coverage or any other benefits, but it's better than nothing. The next day, I head in to pick up the course materials. The office is empty, but there's a packet waiting for me in the little teacher mailbox.

"Hey Mel!"

I spin around. Rachel's standing there with a stack of papers to copy.

"I heard you're going to be teaching," she says.

"Yes. You too?"

She nods. "I've known for a while. They offered me a position right after graduation."

"See you around then." I head back out to the jeep and start flipping through the materials. The course has already been designed, and instructors are asked to stick to the outline. I'll be teaching six sessions, for a total of a hundred and eighty students. I'll have an office of my own. There will be monthly department meetings to attend. And, we need to make sure that we sign up in order to use the copy machine.

I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Here we go. The craziness is about to begin.

But that night, as I sit with Morgen in the rocking chair in her room singing the alphabet song, I think again of Salt Spring. There, work isn't everything. There, life is filled with so much more. On Salt Spring, there's balance.

Morgen's beautiful face shines in the glow of the night-light; her sweet blue eyes look up at me. She smiles and giggles as we make up a silly song about farm animals. This is what matters. I have to remember that. I must remain focused on what matters. "It's going to be okay," I whisper, more to myself than to her. I'll make sure of it. No matter how stressful it gets, I promise that I'll maintain some balance in my life. I promise that I'll keep a piece of Salt Spring.

Year Nine

Teaching

All my fears and doubts about being able to maintain balance in my life, it turns out, were well-founded. For one thing, I'm teaching six classes. The mere task of trying to learn a hundred and eighty names so that I can call on my students properly instead of, "you, the boy in the blue shirt" is difficult. Some seasoned teachers have techniques for this challenge. One takes pictures of students, in groups of five, prints them, labels them, and takes them home to study. Another teacher has each student create a name card, and for the first two weeks she walks around the room and says each student's name while studying their faces. Another teacher has assigned seating and strictly enforces it for the first few weeks, as it helps with name recognition to identify a person with their location in the room.

None of these techniques feels right for me, so I opt to leave my memory to its own devices. These are people, after all, each one unique and distinct. Surely I'll be able to learn their first names. However, when the fourth week rolls around and I only know about a third of my students by name, I realize that good intentions are not enough. I should have followed a tried and true strategy. I consider implementing one, but it's too late for that now. I can't very well ask to take pictures or have my students create nametags now. The name thing is a lost cause for this semester.

So, instead of calling on students by name, I ask questions in general and then nod in the direction of the student with the raised hand.

"What makes a good research topic?" I ask. I'm standing in front of the class, facing the desks they've moved into groups of four. I wait for a response. "Can anyone name one quality of a good research topic? The ones we went over on Monday?"

I wait. Two hands go up half-way. I nod toward the male student with the UMD sweatshirt on. He's always wearing that sweatshirt and I can always count on him to give me a straight answer. "Yes? What's one quality?"

"Are there enough sources available on the topic?"

"Yes! Great." I write his answer on the board. "Did you have another one?" I ask, directing my gaze to the girl on the other side of the room who had also raised her hand.

"Me? Oh, yes. That we're interested in it."

"Good!" I write her answer on the board. "That you find the topic interesting and want to research it. What's another criteria for a good research topic?"

The girl in the floppy hat at the back of the room sighs loudly and turns her chair forty-five degrees so she's facing the window instead of the front. Her sleek brown hair falls down her back from under her hat and her black eyes squint down at the book she holds in her lap. I know she's upset because she doesn't think she should be in this class. She came to talk with me on the first day of class and said she knew all this material already. But the university's policy is for all freshmen to enroll in Freshman Comp. It's not up to me. "Besides," I told her, "a little extra practice never hurt anyone. Pick a research topic that interests you, and you'll enjoy the class."

But apparently she's determined not to. If I could remember her name, I'd call on her right now, as the rest of the students are looking to me to see what I'll do about her turning her chair

away. I should ask her what another criteria is. What's her name? It might be Becky, but I can't be sure.

So, I ignore her actions and address the class in general. "I expect everyone to come to the next class with a research topic that meets all the criteria." There's an edge to my voice now, letting them know I mean business. "If you're uncertain about any of the criteria or have questions, then I expect you to come see me during office hours."

No one comes. I'm sure some of them have questions, but they don't take the initiative to find answers. I sit through my office hours, fuming, and I decide that Monday's class will be a lecture on critical thinking. I spend the weekend preparing for it, and I give the same lecture to all six of my classes.

I end the lecture with a summary of the importance of it. "Critical thinking skills enable you to go below the surface," I tell the last class. "You won't blindly accept what you're told. You'll analyze information and come to your own conclusions. You'll think more deeply and clearly about things. You'll think for yourselves. That is very important."

The class stares back at me. The girl whose name I think is Becky keeps her chair turned away.

"Do any of you agree? Is it important to think critically?" I wait. The guy in the UMD sweatshirt shrugs. I wait some more. No one says a thing. "Anyone? Isn't critical thinking what college is about? Isn't that why you're here?"

Silence. I sigh and look around the room at all the diverted eyes. No one wants to participate in this discussion. So I wait, letting them think about it, hoping that a light bulb or two will go off. Nothing.

Finally, I ask, "Do any of you actually want to be here? That's something to think critically about."

They're all silent. Some of them look around at each other.

"Really," I repeat, "I want to know if any of you want to be here."

A minute passes. I just get blank stares in return. Finally, straight faced, the guy in the UMD sweatshirt says, "Not really."

I hand out sheets of blank paper and tell each of them to hand-write their reason for being here if they don't want to be here.

"I'll be interested to know why each of you is somewhere you don't want to be."

But in truth, I already know why. Scott told me how it is: school's just what you do. You graduate from high school, take out student loans, and spend four years in college. It's just part of the path that has already been laid out for you. And somehow, after all these years and all my efforts, I've ended up a part of all this. I cancel the rest of my classes for the day and go home to spend time with Scott and Morgen. It's a wonderful temporary solution.

The weeks roll by and things remain the same. The girl's name is Becky, I discover, but knowing her name doesn't do much good. She keeps her chair pointed away and reads a book rather than participate in class, and I don't do anything about it. As the semester winds down, I stay late grading papers and come home after Morgen's already in bed.

One night, Scott's waiting for me. "My old supervisor called," he says. "They're hiring at Customs again. They want to know if I'm interested."

"No way!"

"It pays well," he says. "The starting wage is more than what we're making now, and it has full benefits and constant raises."

“Yeah, so? It paid well when you finished college, too. We didn’t accept it then. Why would we accept it now?”

“Because it would make things so much easier.”

And that’s the draw. That’s what makes it so tempting: how much easier things would be. But just because it would be easier doesn’t make it right. And frankly I don’t appreciate being called up after all these years and after all our efforts to be offered what we already turned down.

“If you take the job,” I tell Scott, “then everything that has happened—the struggles, the hard work, the effort—all of it will have been for nothing.”

“But maybe we made a mistake all those years ago.”

“It’s never a mistake to follow your heart and refuse to conform. As long as we keep trying instead of giving in, we’re on the right path.”

“Okay,” he says, and drops it. And the next day he calls his old supervisor and tells him, like he did so many years ago, that he doesn’t want to work for Customs. I listen to him on the phone, and for the first time in a long time, I’m positive that it’s the right thing. If we knowingly accept something we don’t want, something that feels wrong, then we’ll never achieve what we want. What we don’t want will become our life. I see it all around me: people who take things “in the meantime” and never leave because nothing better ever comes along. Everywhere I look, I see people who are playing the game but not getting the payoff.

The same thing is happening to me. I’m just doing what’s expected, accepting my best option, but it’s not what I actually want. I’m telling Scott that he needs to be free; well so do I!

So I complete the academic year, but when they ask if I’ll come back next year and teach more sections on a contract basis, I turn them down. I e-mail Dr. Terrill and say thank you, but I’m pursuing another path. She writes back to say that they’re sorry to hear that, but I’m not. I love to hear myself say that! I may not know exactly what I want, but I know I don’t want unhappiness. I want happiness! I want fulfillment!

I explain myself to Rachel at a good-bye lunch she insists I join her for. It’s amazing how circumstances can bring people together. This is the first time we’ve had lunch.

“What are you going to do?” she asks me.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll find something.”

“Why don’t you stay on for another year, and give yourself more time to figure things out?”

She doesn’t understand. I want to explain it to her, but every explanation that pops into my head sounds like a criticism, and I don’t want to insult her. So, instead of explaining myself, I say, “It’s not too late, you know. You can turn down your job and be unemployed like me.”

I’m joking, of course. It’s no use being serious. She wouldn’t give up what she has. She’s worked hard and this is her payoff: a secure, respected job. She doesn’t understand me, and I just have to leave it at that. I know she’s feeling sorry for me, and that’s okay, because I’m feeling sorry for her, too.

Dropping Out

I realize that turning down a job, any job, when you have a family and a mortgage and student loan payments is one of the most irresponsible things a person can do. Scott and I defend my decision over and over on the phone to family. “She was asked to stay on, but she decided not to,” I hear Scott say. “Of course I support her decision.”

“I haven’t decided what I’m going to do yet,” I tell my dad.

“Was it really that bad?” he asks.

“It wasn’t what I wanted.”

I know there’s a difference. It wasn’t terrible or intolerable, but it wasn’t making me happy. I always promised myself that I wouldn’t let myself get trapped, and I’m keeping that promise.

“You understand, don’t you?” I ask Scott after Morgen’s in bed. We’re sitting in our living room, the baby monitor beside us and a bottle of wine on the table between us.

“Of course.”

“No one else understands.”

“No, they don’t,” Scott agrees. “They think we’re crazy.”

We laugh at this. We don’t think it’s crazy at all.

Scott refills our glasses and lifts his. “Well, here’s to us,” he says.

“And to happiness,” I add, touching my glass to his.

Scott puts James Blunt on in the background, low enough so we can still hear the baby monitor, and together we finish the bottle of wine.

In the morning I decide that, for now, I’m going to go be a waitress again. For one thing, I have experience and I’m positive I’ll get hired. But more than that, what better way to make a statement? What better way to rebel than to simply walk away and say, “I would rather be a waitress than be a part of your system; I would rather return to square one than embrace what you’re offering.” It’s the best statement I can make, and it’s the only power I have. I can’t wait for the opportunity to tell people and watch their surprised faces and hear their shocked voices when I say, “Yes, I was a college professor but it really isn’t what it seems, and I’m choosing not to be a part of it.” At least, I hope it makes a statement.

I try it out during my first shift. I ask a table of four how they’re doing tonight and they say great, they’re having a good time. They just went to a movie.

“Oh yes,” I say, “I love watching movies. Almost as much as reading books. I taught English Composition at the university, so I read a lot.”

They stare at me and nod. Two of them look down at their menus and flip them over to find the list of drinks.

“What kind of beer do you have on tap?”

I don’t have the beer list memorized yet. I rush off to the bar, and return with the information. Meanwhile, two more tables have been seated in my section. No time to tell my story. I start running and I don’t stop for four hours. By the time my last table pays, I’m exhausted. The job’s a lot harder than I remember.

Over the next couple shifts, luckily, little tricks I learned over the years of waitressing come back to me, and it gets easier. It’s like riding a bike, I guess. Once a server, always a server.

Within a week I'm right back where I left off. Almost. There's one slightly large difference. Whereas I used to be great with the guests, I'm now having a bit of trouble tolerating people. I don't think it's them. They're the same as they've always been: rude, demanding, condescending. That's just how they are, and I used to let their rudeness and ignorance slide right off me.

But now it irritates me when I'm treated like a servant, even though I am there to serve people. It bothers me when I overhear conversations between people who don't know what they're talking about. It infuriates me when people act like they're better than others simply because they have money. I see the latter a lot. People go out of their way to make sure that the servers, bussers, and even management know that they can afford whatever they want. One customer actually opens his wallet when I greet the table and shows me a stack of hundred dollar bills.

"See this?" he asks.

"Yes."

Then he sort of nods, as though some important information has been communicated here. I just raise my eyebrows. Does he expect me to be impressed by that? Does he think that the forty dollars he's going to spend here is somehow better than the forty dollars a working class family is going to spend on the same meal?

I roll my eyes and mutter under my breath as I walk away, and after a few weeks I start talking back. Just little jabs here and there when they're really deserved.

After a long, busy week, one of the cooks comes in for dinner with his three children. This is our hard-working, loyal cook who slaves under extreme temperatures night after night, never complains, and is always pleasant and helpful. This is a special outing for his kids, and they really want to order burgers. But the cook whispers that he can't afford that, so they order three plates of fries and one burger to share. I take the order and then go into the kitchen to find Mike, the manager-on-duty, and tell him the story.

"Can we can order the burgers and put them on the house?" I ask.

"We can't start comp-ing meals for employees, or everyone will expect it."

"Come on," I push. "Just a couple burgers."

"Sorry. Corporate policy."

And that's that. Corporate policy. So I go to the server station and order three burgers on a separate account, which I'll pay for out of my own tips at the end of the night. I bring a burger and fries for each of them a few minutes later, and tell them that they're on the house. "Just a little thank you for all you do," I whisper.

At the end of the night, I have to close out the tab with my own tips, and I resent it to no end that the restaurant wouldn't pay for it. It was a nice thing to do, the right thing, and they wouldn't do it. It just shows their values, or lack thereof.

That's how it starts.

It ends a few weeks later when a man who works for the Pepsi Corporation comes in and sits in my section. He orders a Pepsi, and I tell him (nicely) that we serve Coke products. He says he knows that, but if I want a tip I need to serve him a Pepsi. He has one in the car that he'll bring in, he says, and he wants me to bring a glass with ice and he'll pour the Pepsi into the glass.

"I'm not doing that," I tell him. "Would you like to order a beverage from the restaurant? If so, I'll be happy to get one for you."

No, he wants to talk to a manager. I go into the kitchen and find Mike in the little office and tell him the story. "This guy's crazy, right?"

“Yeah,” Mike agrees. “What table’s he at?”

I start traying up food for another table. Mike comes back in and tells me to go ahead and bring the customer a glass with ice so he can drink his Pepsi.

“What? Are you serious? Did he bribe you or something?”

Mike doesn’t answer. When I go to the table the guy is smiling—gloating really— with his can of Pepsi in front of him, and he tells me to bring him a glass with ice. I stare at him. There’s something about this that just isn’t right. It’s beyond rudeness or ignorance. This is some sort of weird display of power or something, and I really don’t want to be a part of it.

“Why are you doing this, exactly?” I ask him.

“Huh?”

“Are you expecting the whole restaurant to sit and watch you drink your can of Pepsi, like it’s a big deal or something? Are you hoping that everyone else will want one too? What exactly is your purpose here?”

“I want the restaurant to switch to Pepsi products. That’s what I want.”

And so he feels he has the right to drag me into this personal goal of his, his mission to advance his career. He’s willing to embarrass and degrade me for his own gain. I’m so angry, I can’t even speak. I turn around, walk into the kitchen, and go over to the little office where Mike is sitting again.

“This is unacceptable,” I say, so low I can barely hear myself. Mike doesn’t look up. He hasn’t heard me. I clear my throat. “I’m giving my notice,” I say, louder, my voice quivering.

Mike looks up now, shocked. “Over a glass of ice?”

“No. Not just that.”

“If it means that much to you, I’ll have Kim take over the table.”

“No. Forget it,” I tell him, but I don’t know what else to say. I don’t know how to explain that it’s more than that, so much more. I can’t articulate that I’m beginning to realize that there’s something wrong here. It’s subtle, but it’s there. And I’m starting to understand that the problem is much bigger than I’ve thought before. I’ve been searching for something, working toward something, for years. But what is it that I’ve been trying to access? Not greed or selfishness. Not ignorance or apathy. I want to walk away from that, not toward it.

So I turn away and walk out the door. I leave the tables sitting out in the dining room, some waiting for their food, some waiting to order. I leave them all, and the thought of them sitting there wondering where I went makes me smile.

Every step I take away is a step of liberation. By the time I get home I’m practically singing with joy at the opportunity to start something new.

What that will be, I don’t know. I don’t know if Scott will go back to work or if I will, or how we’ll meet our needs. I don’t know what questions to ask or where to look to find the answers. There must be a right move, but I don’t know what that is.

I immerse myself in little house projects and wait for an answer to come to me. I wake up early with Morgen and set her up with toys and books while I clean out closets and organize bookshelves. The cupboards are jammed and dressers are overflowing. There’s stuff everywhere. While I was preoccupied with school and work, our house somehow got filled with piles and piles of stuff. It came in from everywhere: gifts, mail orders, online shopping, department stores. There were always more things that we could have, that would supposedly make our lives better in one way or another. Dishes and tupperware, pots and jars, quilts and towels, board games and books, chairs, an electric can opener, a fondue set. We don’t even use this stuff. We certainly

don't need it. It's not making us more comfortable, or happy, or fulfilled. We're getting rid of it. We're thinning out.

The next day, Scott takes out an ad in the Duluth News Tribune: "Huge garage sale this Saturday 320 West 25th St. 9-3." We work for the next two nights after Morgen's in bed, going through our stuff and picking out everything we don't need, pricing it, and moving it to the backyard. On Thursday we have stacks of stuff back there, and our house feels so much better.

"What do you think?" Scott asks.

"Let's keep going," I say. "Let's go through the house again!"

This time, instead of looking for stuff to get rid of, we're picking out things not to get rid of. "There has to be a good reason to keep it," I tell Scott. If there isn't one, it goes. Good reasons can be practical or sentimental, so there's lots of opportunity to hold on to stuff. But it just changes the whole perspective. Instead of keeping everything except for chosen items, we're getting rid of everything except for chosen items. And then, all we'll have left are things we have deliberately chosen, for one reason or another, to keep.

Scott's all for it, and we spend the next day going through boxes and cupboards and shelves, saying, "I'll keep this and that, and everything else can go." We get rid of perfectly good dishes, a spare set of pots and pans, and a patchwork quilt that I got for Christmas and never used. It's nice, but I don't need it. I'll let somebody else have it, and maybe it'll help keep them out of Wal-Mart for a while.

"This is liberating!" I say when we're done. "Everyone should do this. They should try letting go of what they don't need."

"The problem," Scott says, "is that people think they need their stuff. Most people aren't able to let go like we are."

"Good point. Others are working toward what we're giving up."

Road Trip

We use the money from our garage sale to take a road trip. We ask my dad and Pat to come stay with Morgen, and we pull out the map. There are so many places we haven't been, so many places I'd love to discover. But we only have a few days, not to mention very limited funds, so that limits how far we can go. Most places are too far: Salt Spring, New Orleans, The Smokey Mountains, Maine. Where can we go that's only a day's drive from Duluth?

Scott thinks of it first: South Dakota, where we drove when we first left Moorhead.

"Remember that place where we camped outside, under the stars?" he asks.

"Where was that?"

"By Pierre, wasn't it? Before that, maybe?"

"Let's just head in that direction," I say, smiling. The thought of taking off somewhere, heading out for a new experience, fills me with an excitement I haven't felt in a long time. It's a welcome feeling.

My dad and Pat arrive before dinner, their arms filled with bags and presents for Morgen. She squeals in delight when she sees them, and she takes them by the hand and leads them to her room to show them the drawings hanging on the walls. I follow to the entryway and stand and watch them make their way around the room. "Look!" Morgen says as she points to each one, and my dad and Pat praise each picture as though it's the best piece of art they have ever seen. I know they'll be fine while we're gone, but I still feel a twinge of nervousness. Morgen's only three, and being left without us for six days is a long time.

"She'll be fine," my dad assures me after Morgen's in bed. "Don't worry."

"What happened to all your stuff?" Pat wants to know. "The place looks so much more bare since we were here last."

"We thinned out," Scott says with a smile.

We take off early the next morning. I grab a coffee at the gas station and sip it as the Minnesota landscape rolls by. Early afternoon, the forests and lakes are replaced with rolling pasture, which then flattens out into prairie field. Then, we're entering Moorhead, where we lived so long ago. There's the motel where Scott worked.

"Do you want to call up any old friends?" I ask.

"Naw. They're probably all gone by now."

We drive by our old apartment, next to the railroad tracks, where I spent so many lonely hours. I don't remember it looking so run-down. "Do you think it looked that bad when we lived here and we just didn't notice, or do you think it's gotten worse?"

"Probably a bit of both," Scott says.

We consider going to the mall, maybe eating at the restaurant where I used to work, but decide against it. We'd rather keep going.

South of Fargo, we turn off the freeway and on to a secondary highway. Back on the back roads. We pass through fields and little towns, each with a population of less than a thousand, and one with some sort of processing plant that fills the air with a nauseating stench. We wonder how anyone could possibly get used to a smell like that. But they do. People have homes and families and some probably live out their whole lives here.

Soon, we come to a lush green valley, strange and out of place in this wide, bare land. It must have looked like an oasis to the settlers who crossed this land in covered wagons. We glide down a rolling hill where cows graze next to the road. At the base is a sign for Little Yellowstone Park.

“Pull in,” I say. “Let’s check it out.”

Scott turns the jeep around and backtracks to the entrance. We fill out the form at the self-sign-in station, drive into the park, and peer in to each campsite.

“There’s hardly anyone here,” Scott says.

“There’s somebody.”

An older man and woman stand next to a beat-up camper. They stare at us as we pass.

The next three sites are empty, and then there’s one with a small grassy meadow next to the fire pit. “This one looks good,” Scott says, pulling in.

No sooner do we have the tent set up than we hear a “hello there!” behind us. It’s the man and woman we passed on our way in.

“Hi.” I turn and give them a smile.

“Welcome!”

“Thanks. Are you the campsite managers?”

“Oh no,” the woman says, “we’re just here a lot.”

“Every summer,” the man adds. “We come every summer.”

They introduce themselves as the Johnsons. They’re from Jamestown, and they’re here for a week. It’s supposed to be a family reunion, but they’re the only ones who showed up.

“Ten years ago,” Mr. Johnson says, “this whole place was filled with us. Kids and grandkids. Then they all stopped coming. Say they’re too busy.”

“Why don’t you two join us for dinner?” Mrs. Johnson offers. “We’ve got plenty of food.”

Scott and I look at each other. It would be nice to have a meal that someone else prepared. It’ll beat cheese and crackers.

We follow them back to their site and accept the two chairs they pull from underneath the camper. Mr. Johnson grabs steaks from the cooler and places them on the grill over the fire. Mrs. Johnson disappears into the camper and reemerges with gin and tonics with lime for everyone.

“So what’re you two doing out on the road?” Mr. Johnson asks.

“Just taking a break,” I tell him.

“From what?”

“Life, I guess.”

He chuckles. “Life sure does get crazy, don’t it? So crazy that pretty soon no one even takes time for reunions anymore.”

“Were you expecting people to show up?” I ask.

“Well, yeah.”

Mrs. Johnson speaks up. “Well, not for sure. Mary said she hoped to come, but that don’t mean the same thing as a promise. I’m sure she wanted to. She’s just too busy, with her job and kids.”

“We offered to pay her gas money,” Mr. Johnson says.

A short silence falls. We sip our drinks. Ice clanks against the side of glasses and wind rustles through trees.

Then Mr. Johnson pulls the steaks off the grill. “Take your pick, Scott,” he says.

Scott chooses a steak, and we all fill our plates with the prepared salads Mrs. Johnson pulls from the camper’s fridge. Coleslaw, jello salad, taco dip. I smile, realizing the chunks of fruit in the jello salad are distinguishable only by their color. I leave most of it on my plate, untouched.

After dinner Mrs. Johnson offers to refill our drinks. My glass is empty, but I hesitate to accept. I don't want to take advantage of these people, having just met them and all. I suggest that maybe Scott and I should go back to our tent site.

"Nonsense!" Mrs. Johnson says. "We like the company. Come on and help me with the drinks."

I follow her up the rusty camper steps and hold the glasses while she pours the gin.

"So where you from?" She asks, getting the tonic out of the fridge.

"The West Coast."

"Whereabouts?" She starts cutting a lime.

I tell her about Salt Spring and Sophie's house and how I left for the summer and never returned.

"You miss it?"

"Yes. A lot. I always meant to go back."

"Why don't you?"

I sigh. "I don't know." I follow her back out to the fire, where Scott's listening to Mr. Johnson talk about his grandchildren. We sip our drinks and accept another refill and tell them about Morgen and my education and our jobs. We tell them about our longing to be fulfilled and our dissatisfaction at the way things are.

"Well, what is it you want?" Mr. Johnson asks.

"That's just it," Scott says. "We don't need a lot. We don't need a lot of money or a big, fancy house. We just want to be happy."

"And you're not?"

"We are with each other," Scott says, "but not with our circumstances."

"So what would make you happy?" Mr. Johnson pushes.

"We don't know," I say. "That's why we're here. We're trying to figure things out."

They glance at each other. "If you're looking to figure things out," Mrs. Johnson says, "you should go to Bear Butte. We just came from there. It's really a special place."

"Where's that?"

"You know the Black Hills? South Dakota? It's next to that. By Sturgis. Only a day's drive from here."

"We've been to the Black Hills," I tell them.

"It wasn't our thing," Scott adds. "Too touristy."

Mr. Johnson shakes his head. "Bear Butte isn't in the Black Hills, it's just nearby. If you haven't been there, you should go. It'll help you."

Mrs. Johnson nods, smiling. "Here's the thing," she says in a whisper, leaning in closer to the fire. "It's a hike up that mountain. On your way up, have an open mind. On the way down, figure it all out."

Bear Butte

Change of plans. We're no longer looking for the place where we spent the night under the stars on our way out to Portland. Now we're headed north of the Black Hills to a mountain that an elderly couple just told us to climb. It's further than we planned to go on this trip, but it's still doable.

We stick to the interstate to make good time. I turn on the radio and run through the dial, settling on a public radio station out of South Dakota somewhere that's playing decent music. And no commercials. We turn up the good songs and roll the windows down, driving past the waves of billboards under the gigantic sky.

We reach Sturgis at sunset, with just enough light left to find a campsite and set up. There's a spot at the base of the mountain next to a small lake. We drop the fee in the registration box, set up our tent, and spend the night with the lake on one side, a pasture of cows on the other, and Bear Butte standing over us in the background.

In the morning, we drive to the mountain's entrance. The woman behind the desk at the park's headquarters tells us to stick to the summit trail, leave prayer offerings undisturbed, and beware of rattlesnakes. "They're out right now," she says.

We agree to the terms and head off up the trail, past trees that have hundreds of prayer cloths tied to their branches. It'd make a good picture, but Scott doesn't photograph them out of respect.

I'm already thirsty, but I hold off. We only have one bottle of water.

We pause. I sit on a rock on the path's edge, close my eyes, and try to clear my mind. I think of Mrs. Johnson's advice to have an open mind on the way up.

We climb. I take everything in: the steep trail, the rock formations jutting out, the little cloths. I'm out of breath, but I push myself forward. There's the sound of my heartbeat and my footsteps, soft and even.

Scott sits down on a rock ledge for a break, but I push myself on, just like I have for all these years in school and then teaching, never resting. My heart is racing, my throat is parched, but still I step forward.

And then I stop. I don't consciously tell myself to, I just do. There's a rock on the side of the trail, so I sit on it to catch my breath. I close my eyes and feel the wind on my face and the rock under me. Scott catches up, hands me the water bottle, and sits down next to me in silence. I'm glad he stopped. There's no hurry, there's no reason not to take our time and enjoy ourselves along the way.

After a few minutes, we rise and keep going. This time I fall behind, and I start thinking about how the beauty and the wonder of this mountain aren't just at the top; they're here, right now, around me. Have an open mind on the way up. That's where the experience is. My whole focus for years and years now has been on a goal, on reaching and achieving. And that goal, no matter how hard I work or how far I go, is always further on. It's almost like the goal is a mirage, always on the horizon, just out of reach.

I can see Scott up ahead, stopped, waiting for me. I catch up, and we walk on together. We climb the wooden steps to the summit and lean against the railing. There's a bench, an overflowing garbage can, and a view of the Black Hills in the distance. I look out and around and

take it all in. A prayer cloth dangles from a low tree branch off the mountain's side. Someone had to walk to the ledge and lean over to hang it there. I wonder if that person figured it out. I wonder if I will. Here's my chance.

We head back down, winding around and around. I focus on Mrs. Johnson's words.

Figure it out. Okay. Well, let's see. I'll start with what I know: I've quit my job and sold almost all our stuff. What I don't know is what to do now. I sit down on the same rock ledge as on the way up and close my eyes.

We're not the first people to be going through this. I remember talking with an old hippie on Salt Spring once, who told me about how in the sixties they left everything, just simply rejected it and walked away. What else did he say? I focus, trying to remember. He told me that a lot of people couldn't handle it because they had to give everything up. They went from suburbs to no structure, from meatloaf to no meat, from having everything to having no possessions. They could only handle it for a while, he told me, and then they simply got tired of all the lack. So, they ended up rejoining the system to get it all back.

My eyes pop open. There was something else he said to me, all those many, many years ago. I can't believe I remember, but I do, clearly. "What they didn't realize," he said, "was that they weren't giving up, they were gaining; they weren't forfeiting, they were accessing."

So leaving the system wasn't their mistake. The mistake was that they didn't build up the outside. They left the structure and just stood there, empty handed, in a void. They should have taken it to the next level. They needed to reject and embrace. Find what's true and right and build on that.

I think these last words as I catch up with Scott. Together, we walk down, around, and under an overhanging branch, covered with prayer cloths. Then, we're done. It's over. We've completed what we came here to do.

It's mid afternoon. If we drive straight through, we'll be home by morning. We take turns driving while the other sleeps, and we stop only for food and bathroom breaks. As we roll through the countryside, words I thought on the mountain repeat over and over in my mind. It's clear what I need to do now: Find what's true and right and build on that.

We arrive home a day earlier than expected, and Morgen squeals in delight when she sees us. I gather her in my arms and spin her around and feel, for the first time in her short little life, that I'm clear and sure of what we're going to do. I can picture it, suddenly: a small, comfortable house with apple trees and a vegetable garden that grows our food. We're surrounded by good friends and neighbors, and we have bonfires at night around the big fire pit in the backyard while someone plays guitar and we all laugh and talk and sing.

That night, after saying goodbye to my dad and Pat, I put Morgen to bed. I rock her to sleep, singing softly and smiling down into her bright, deep eyes. Finally, her eyelids start to droop, and then her eyes close. I keep rocking gently, back and forth. When I'm sure she's asleep, I join Scott downstairs and tell him about my vision for our new lives together.

"Let's go create it," I say. "Let's leave the whole system behind, once and for all. Let's walk away and go create the life we really want."

"Okay."

"Okay? You're willing to move?"

"Of course. You know I want us to be happy. If moving will make us happy, we should do it. But we have to do it right," he adds. "We have Morgen now. We can't do what we did in Portland."

“Well, that was stupid. We should’ve moved somewhere where we knew people. We should’ve gone to Salt Spring instead of Portland. We should go to Salt Spring.”

Scott shakes his head. “That’s way too big a move. It’s two thousand miles away, and I couldn’t work there. We can do what you’re talking about without moving so far. I want to stay in Minnesota if we can. We have family here. We know it here.”

So that night, when Scott puts on a movie, I go load up the internet and look for opportunities in Minnesota. An opportunity for something new, something fulfilling.

I type “Minnesota non-profit jobs” into a search engine and click on the Minnesota Counsel of Nonprofits website, then on the “jobs” link. I scroll through a list of positions around the state, eliminate all the ones based in Minneapolis and Moorhead, and I’m left with a couple interesting ones: Program Director at the YMCA in Duluth and Development Director at a radio station in Grand Marais.

I remember how my old school friend Rachel used to work for a radio station before she went to grad school. She said it was real, community-based work. She gave it up because she wanted something more prestigious. Well, I want something real.

It doesn’t pay much, but money’s not what it’s about. It’s about following my heart. It’s about being on the right side, contributing positively, making a difference.

I read through the job description. Main duties are writing grants and developing partnerships. I’d be good at that. I open a Word document, create a résumé tailored to the desired qualifications, and send it to the e-mail address listed in the “How to Apply” section. Then I shut the computer off and crawl in to bed to finish the movie with Scott.

The next morning, there’s an e-mail from the station manager asking me to give her a call. I send Scott out to the store with Morgen, pull up my résumé for reference, and call the number.

“Hi, this is Melanie Steele calling.”

There’s a pause. Then, “Hello, Melanie. Hang on a sec, okay? I want to put you on speaker phone so you can talk with me and the interim Development Director.”

I wait while she puts me on hold, and when she comes back she sounds far away. She asks if I can hear her.

“Yes, can you hear me?”

“Yes, just speak up a little.”

We talk for forty-five minutes, them firing questions at me and me yelling my answers into the phone. They want to meet me. Can I drive up tomorrow? We have a couple hundred bucks left from our garage sale earnings, so yes I can. I’ll be there by eleven o’clock.

The drive takes longer than I expect because I get behind a camper-trailer that’s driving under the speed limit on the single-lane highway. There’s literally no opportunity to pass. I make it just in time, running up to the entrance and taking a deep breath before I step in.

No one’s there. There’s three desks set up in a large room, and two of the computers are on. I stand there watching the clock on the wall for five minutes. Six, seven. Then the door opens and a woman walks through.

“I know who you are!” she says. “You’re Melanie!”

“Yes, Joan?” I extend my hand.

“No, Joan had to run out. She said to tell you she’d be right back. You drove up from Duluth, right? How do you like it there?”

“There’s some great things about it,” I tell her, making an effort to be positive. “But it’s a bit big in some ways.”

“I know what you mean. Folks around here avoid the city. We only go to stock up and then we get out of there as quick as possible. Down and back in one day, usually.”

“Stock up? What do you mean? Like at Wal-Mart or something?”

She shakes her head. “No. No one here shops at Wal-Mart. It’s against our religion.”

“Oh, really?” I let a smile spread across my face. This is the place for me.

Grand Marais

When something feels this right, I decide, I should probably roll with it. So I do. I accept the position on the spot and head down to the gas station to buy a local newspaper. There are two places for rent, and I call about them both. One's an apartment in town with a view of the harbor. The other's a small cabin on the outskirts of town. I make an appointment to see them both this afternoon.

I go to the cabin first. It's hidden from the road by a grove of trees. The long driveway winds around to reveal it, nestled in among the pines. It's small. Very small. Everything about it seems miniature, from the door, to the yard, to the woodpile, to the cabin itself. It's all minimal and quaint. The rental agent is there, showing it on behalf of the owner who lives in Arizona.

"She and her husband built it as a Y2K cabin," she tells me. "Then never used it."

"What's a Y2K cabin?"

"They thought the world was going to end in 2000, so this cabin was their escape plan. They could live in it if the world went to hell. It's off the grid, has its own well. You can be completely self-sufficient in here."

She unlocks the door and stands aside, allowing me to go in first. We step into a sixteen by twenty-four room with built-in bookshelves and an old solid-wood table. Next to the kitchen entrance is a bathroom door, and next to the bathroom is an eight by ten bedroom. The ceiling over the main area is tall, and over the kitchen, bathroom and bedroom, there's a loft, accessible by ladder. I climb up and peek at the space, six feet tall in the center and sloped on the sides. A mattress could go on the floor in the center, and the sides, three feet tall at the edges, could fit short tables or store boxes, if needed.

I climb back down the ladder, and the agent explains the details. "It was built as a survival cabin, so it's pretty basic. There's electricity, but it's off the grid." She looks at me. "That means that the electricity comes from solar panels. And they aren't very big. So, it's like, you can run three things at once. You want to turn a light on, you have to turn another one off. There's a propane tank for the fridge and stove, which I insisted they get in order to rent the place out." She laughs, remembering. "No one would rent it without a fridge and stove! But the heat's wood."

"A wood stove? That stove? That heats the whole cabin?" A free-standing stove sits in the corner, and we both stare at it.

"Yes."

"Has anyone lived in here over the winter before? Do you know for sure that it's warm in here?"

"Oh yes, nice and toasty."

I look around the small space and try to picture us living here. We cleaned out and got rid of most of our stuff during our massive garage sale, but even what we have left is too much to fit in here. We'll have to go through our stuff again and just pack the essentials. But I guess that's how it should be anyway. If it's not essential, we shouldn't lug it around. And really, this place has everything we need. It has heat, two sleeping areas, and a kitchen with a fridge and stove. We don't need more than the simple comforts this place offers.

“I’ll take it,” I tell her. She has me fill out a one-year lease agreement, and I write her six post-dated checks for the damage deposit, broken out into seventy-five dollars per month, which she agrees to do “in order to get a good family in here.”

On the way back down Highway 61, with Lake Superior crashing madly on the shore beside the road, I wonder if I should have waited and talked to Scott first before signing the lease. Most couples would probably be furious with each other for making a huge decision like this without consulting the other. But this is the right move, I’m sure of it. And I’m sure Scott will think so too. That’s one of the reasons we’ve stayed together all these years, I bet. It certainly wasn’t because everything has worked out for us or because we ever achieved the happiness and fulfillment we set out to achieve. No, the reason we’ve made it through together is that when it comes down to it we both know and we both trust that we’re on the same side. And sometimes, there’s nothing better than knowing that there’s someone else in the world who’s there next to you.

Sure enough, Scott thinks I did the right thing. He’s happy, in fact, that we don’t have to make a special trip up to look for a place.

“Besides,” I tell him, “it’s not like there was much choice. There were only two places available. And it’s really cute. You’ll love it! We just need to be careful about what we bring. There’s not much room.”

That night we make a list of everything we need to do before we leave: pack our stuff, sell our house, cancel our accounts. We share a bottle of champagne and talk about how great it’ll be, working for a community service organization that’s making a difference, away from the city, and around like-minded people who are working together to create positive change. We toast to the future, and to the pursuit of our own path, following what feels right for us.

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Scott excited. He’s been to Grand Marais many times, and he loved it. It’s perhaps the most wonderful town he’s ever been to, he tells me. I remember Salt Spring Island, and I know what he means. Grand Marais is his version of Salt Spring. It’s small, safe, close-knit, progressive, beautiful. There’s no McDonalds or a jungle of highway billboard signs because people don’t want them. People know each other and talk to each other. It will be a great place to raise Morgen.

Compared to where we are, it sounds like heaven. Our house here is ten feet from the next house, yet we’ve never met our neighbors. At night the neighborhood is filled with sounds of dogs barking and people swearing. Even when it’s hot, I’ve stopped opening the windows. I take Morgen to the park nearby and I have to clean up broken bottles and watch little seven-year-olds play-fight and swear at each other, their parents nowhere in sight.

Maybe that’s why we have very little loyalty to this place, and why it’s so easy to leave. We’ve lived in Duluth longer than any other place, our daughter was born here, and we own a house here. We should want to stay. We should feel attached. But we don’t.

We feel no regret when we walk out of our house for the last time and close the door behind us. It hasn’t sold yet, but the realtor will show it for us, and she’s sure it will have no trouble selling at the price we’re asking, just enough to repay the bank what we owe. I feel a slight twinge of nostalgia because this is the house where Morgen came into our lives, but beyond that, I feel nothing for it. It’s part of a chapter of our lives that has come to a close.

And a new one—an exciting one, a meaningful one—is beginning.

Year Ten

Three Things

The first night in our little cabin on the edge of Grand Marais I notice, above all else, three things: the air, the quiet, and the stars. I must admit that air is something I never expected to notice. But when I step outside after unpacking a kitchen box, I'm struck immediately by the crispness of it. I stand on the front steps, close my eyes, and breathe it in, savoring it.

My eyes are closed for several minutes before I realize that the whole time I've been outside I haven't heard a single car. Our cabin is just off of the main road into town, and it's only ten o'clock; it's hard to believe there's no traffic. I listen. And I realize that the quiet runs even deeper than that. There are no sirens wailing in the distance, no hum of industry in the background. It's simply peaceful.

I open my eyes then and look around. It's dark, and the line of trees that surrounds the house is even darker. But the sky is alive with shining, twinkling stars. I had forgotten about stars! It's a casualty of light pollution that in a city, they disappear. Every once in a while we'd catch a glimpse of one, twinkling faintly, but never like this. How wonderful that we've brought Morgen to a place where she will experience them.

I promise myself at that moment, standing on the stairs in front of the little cabin on the edge of this little town, that I will never forget to appreciate these things that have hit me tonight. No matter how busy I get or how many years we live here, I will always appreciate the clean air, the peaceful quiet, and the stars in the night sky. Always.

The Greater Good

I wake up to my obnoxious alarm clock, beeping so loud and out of place in the peacefulness that for a moment I don't know where I am. Then, I remember. I'm in our new life.

I turn the alarm off, hoping it didn't wake Scott, but he opens his eyes.

"Good morning," he says with a smile. "Do you want me to make coffee?"

"Yes, please."

He climbs down the loft ladder, and I lie back down in the middle of the double mattress and stare up at the ceiling. It's only a few feet above me at its highest peak, and it angles down toward the sides, where our clothes are stacked in neat piles on the floor. It was a chore getting the mattress up here. It must have looked hilarious, Scott and I balancing it, heaving it up. It fits, but barely. It takes up most of the space up here. But it works, and it's cozy. There's a tiny window at the head of the bed where my stained glass butterfly fits perfectly.

I sit up and crawl over to my clothes, choose what I'm going to wear, and bring it back over to the mattress so I can dress without banging my head. Scott appears at the top of the ladder, holding the rail with one hand and a cup of steaming coffee in the other.

I lean forward and take the cup from him. "Thank you."

"Morgen's up," he says. We can hear her stirring in her little room. I pull the blanket over the mattress to keep the loft looking tidy and crawl down the ladder into the main room. Sun pours in through the tall windows and the smell of fresh, strong coffee fills the air.

As I do my hair and put on my make-up, Morgen buzzes around the cabin, setting up her little toys in corners of the living room. She has chosen to wear all pink again today, my least favorite color. Her pants are an inch too short on her long legs, I note, but they fit around her tiny waist. We can check out the thrift store sometime this week and see if there are any clothes that fit her better. Maybe Scott can take her while I'm at work.

She spreads out her coloring supplies on the table. "I'm making a picture for you to take to work, Mommy."

"Thank you! I'll put it at my desk, so I can look at it all day and think of you and Daddy at home."

I feel good about leaving them here, in this little cottage in the woods. They're safe and cozy, and they have the woods out back to explore. I take Morgen's picture and the lunch Scott packed for me, and I go start up the jeep. They wave from the window as I drive away.

No one's around when I arrive at the radio station's office, so I stand and wait, and wait, and wander around the office, looking at pictures and paraphernalia scattered about. There are antique record players atop file cabinets, pictures of festivals, and paintings of musicians. Then the door opens and Joan appears, a huge smile on her face.

"You're here!" she says.

She shows me my desk and the files in the folders and how to access the database. She says she'll give me a while to browse around and look things over, and then she can answer questions and give me some training on specifics.

My training, I find out, is a mixture of sorting through piles of information and tasks, trying to train myself on station procedures and regulations, and driving around with Joan to meet dozens of people, from the station's volunteers to business sponsors to individual members.

I have no idea how I'm going to remember everyone's name, and after the thirtieth person or so, I stop trying. I shake their hands and smile and say, "nice to meet you!" and think to myself that I'll remember their name the next time we meet. They ask me where I'm from, I ask them where they're from, and we exchange stories about why we moved here. Only a few of the people I meet are actually from Grand Marais. Most have moved here at some point over the past twenty years, and almost all of them moved up from Minneapolis. I actually joke with someone that it's like a Little Minneapolis here.

"Yup," he says, "we all come up on vacation and don't want to leave. But," he adds, "it's only the lucky few who can actually call this place home."

Then I guess we're some of the lucky ones. I don't know how much luck had to do with it, though. It seems to me that it was a lot of sacrifice and hard choices that brought us to this point, not luck.

Scott and Morgen are waiting for me when I get home. They present me with a vase filled with wildflowers they picked on their walk.

"We had a great day," Scott says. "We explored the back woods and unpacked the rest of the boxes. See?" He opens the kitchen cupboards and shows off the organized shelves.

"Good job you guys," I tell them. "I love how few things we have now. It all fits in this little house."

"Yeah, we used to have three times as much space."

"And ten times as much stuff!"

We laugh and sit down at the table to color with Morgen. She's drawing some of the animals that might live in the forest around the cabin. I draw trees. Scott draws himself and Morgen on a walk.

"Tomorrow we want to explore the town a bit," Scott says. "We're going to drive you to work and keep the jeep."

"Yes! Definitely. Go explore. Check out the library. This is our new home, so get to know it."

Over the next couple weeks, Scott and Morgen drop me off and pick me up every day. While I'm at work they go to the library and the beach, the playgrounds and the whole foods co-op. When they pick me up, Morgen's filled with stories to tell about the nice lady at the library, the seagulls at the beach, and the sucker she got at the co-op. She's all smiles, and she looks forward to each day with her dad.

"It's the perfect community," Scott says after a few days. "It's small enough that everyone knows each other. And it has everything we need: a library, grocery stores, good school."

"We'll still have to go to Duluth to shop and stuff. There's not much selection here."

"Just go to the Ben Franklin," he says. "They have kitchen stuff, toys, clothes. If they don't have it here, we don't need it. Seriously. There's no reason to ever leave the community."

On the weekends, they show me some of the places they discovered during the week. Mostly, though, I let them do the exploring, and I learn about the area through their stories.

I also learn about the community through the radio station. There's a lot going on below the surface here. Different personalities, issues, concerns, and differences in opinion about how to deal with things.

The radio station's position is to be a positive, neutral source of connection, so every staff member needs to understand the issues affecting and dividing the community. We need to

realize, for example, that while some community members see tourism as a positive economic driver, others see it as a threat to the natural environment. And, while many of the newcomers to the community have a lot of money and are here for the natural beauty and small-town charm, there are those who are struggling just to get by here.

“We need to address these issues,” Joan says. “Let’s all think of some ways we can help our community move forward together.”

“It’s actually cool,” I tell Scott after Morgen’s in bed. “I’m working for an organization that’s trying to make a difference and actually cares about the greater good.”

I sign up for an online grant-writing webinar, and the presenter echoes Joan’s words. “You’re doing important, critical work,” he says. “A lot of people believe that it’s the work of non-profits that’s holding this country together right now. You’re on the ground, doing what needs to be done, filling needs that need to be met, providing services that are essential to the fabric of a functioning society. Unfortunately, you’re doing it on a shoestring budget. That’s why grant writing is so important. Grant-writers are the unsung heroes. Without your efforts, many worthwhile, important, and essential things in this country wouldn’t happen.”

Inspired, I decide to take a stab at writing a grant. That evening, and the next, I tell Scott to go ahead and eat without me. I stay at work and, above and beyond my regular tasks, I work on a grant to produce an audio series that focuses on the economic reality of the area.

As the grant webinar recommends, I first search for foundations that provide funding to non-profit organizations in the area. There’s only a handful. I pull up each of their websites and read their funding priorities, noting which ones will give money to arts organizations. Then I read the submission guidelines for each of those, and I discover that only a couple will consider grant applications for the project I have in mind. I submit a letter of inquiry to both of them.

The next week, I get a letter back from both foundations. One isn’t interested, but the other is. It invites a full proposal for up to ten thousand dollars. My task now is to write a compelling argument as to why the radio station should receive these precious dollars. What can we do with the money that other organizations can’t? What difference will we make? I smile to myself as I open up a new Word document. I used to teach argumentative writing. My expertise is finally being put to use.

A month later, I receive word that the project has been funded. Joan calls a staff meeting, and I report that membership and business sponsorship have increased, and that I’ve gotten funding for a new project.

“Thank you,” Joan says. “We appreciate your hard work.”

“My pleasure,” I say. It really is. I’m happy to be doing something that contributes positively.

Experiencing

Winter is long. Scott takes Morgen ice fishing and for walks in the woods to shoot pictures, but I spend most of my winter going from our cabin to work and back to the cabin.

In March, Morgen tells me that she can't remember what it looks like outside without snow. I laugh and give her a hug. "I can't remember, either," I say. "But the snow will melt one day."

"When?"

"Soon."

We get a blizzard in April that dumps another six inches. The blizzard is followed by a week of freezing rain, and then, finally, the snow begins to melt. We barely notice it at first, but then we realize that we can see patches of brown, dead grass, which is a sure sign that winter will in fact go away and let life return. A few times a week, Morgen and I walk down the trail behind our cabin, muddy from the spring thaw, and look at the tree branch buds.

Then, almost overnight, green is all around us. The trees around our cabin are full and lush, and Morgen can run outside without having to bundle up. Scott and Morgen spend their days outside, fishing and searching for rocks on the beach.

"I wish you could hang out with us," Scott says.

"So do I."

Summer comes and the days fly by. Soon, it's half over and I haven't done a thing to enjoy it. Enjoy yourself along the way. I remember thinking those words as I climbed Bear Butte. So I jump on the opportunity when I see an ad posted on the local classified website from an area resort. Someone cancelled their reservation at the last minute and rather than let the cabin sit empty, the resort owner is offering the cabin to local residents for only fifty dollars a night. We can afford one night.

Scott packs his camera and his fishing rod, Morgen packs her toys, and I pack my old copy of *Catcher in the Rye*, hoping I'll have some time to read. We're ready to go by noon.

It's an hour drive up the Gunflint Trail to the lodge. The single-lane highway weaves through forests, beside lakes, around look-outs and a moose-viewing area.

The lodge is off the highway, on an undeveloped lake. We climb the steps and enter into an office/store. It's a good old-fashioned ma and pa place, with a wire brochure rack next to the desk, a cooler of pop and water against the wall, a row of convenience items down the center, and cabin-type gifts in the back.

The owner greets us from behind the front desk and hands us an old-fashioned key. "It's open," she tells us, "but here's the key in case you want to lock-up."

"Thanks for offering this overnight stay," I say. "It's really cool of you."

She smiles and nods. "Enjoy yourselves."

Our cabin is down the dirt road, to the right. It's a two-bedroom overlooking the lake, with all natural woodwork, its own dock, and a fire-ring off the deck. I unpack and make a snack while Scott gets the canoe ready, and then we all climb in and paddle around the lake. There's a bump on a fallen tree around the point, and we move in to investigate.

"What is it, Morgen?" I whisper.

"I don't know."

“It’s a turtle! See?”

She can barely sit still, she’s so excited. “Turtle!” she squeals.

When we’re a few yards from it, it plops into the water. We glide past, looking for other wildlife. Scott wants to see a wolf, and Morgen wants to see a moose. It’s funny, but I almost don’t even care if we see anything. I’m just happy that we’re in a place where we could see wildlife, where there is wildlife.

An eagle soars overhead, and Morgen and I lean back, watching it glide. Scott pushes us through the water, back to the dock. We climb out, and Morgen runs off the dock, up to the cabin and back, for no reason other than to express her happiness. She helps Scott gather twigs for the fire and watches as he lights it. I grab the sandwiches and potato salad from the fridge, and we eat at the picnic table as the fire burns and embers collect underneath.

“Perfect for marshmallow roasting,” I say, placing one on a stick for Morgen. She burns about a dozen of them before producing one that is somewhat edible. After about five of those, she’s had her fill, so she roasts some for us and we pretend to eat them while actually piling them under our folding chairs.

The sun sets, the stars come out, and we sit around the campfire until Morgen can’t keep her eyes open any longer. We move inside, and I tuck Morgen in under the patchwork quilt and sit by her side until she dozes off. Then Scott and I sit in the living room, next to the open window with a breeze off the lake, and empty a bottle of wine.

When I wake up, sunshine is pouring through the cabin windows. The lake, clear as glass, calls us for another canoe ride before it’s time to go. We glide across the water, the warm sun smiling on us. I look back at Scott, paddling us around the lake, pausing to shoot pictures every few minutes. I let myself smile, and it feels so good that I force myself to focus on it. I want to smile more often. I want to feel this simple contentment every day of my life.

Morgen wants to stay another night, but we’ve already spent more than we can afford on the cabin rental and the gas to get here. We have to just appreciate the experience for what it was. It’s time to check out.

The owner is sitting behind the desk of the quaint office/store. While Scott pays our bill, I wander over to the shelves to check out the jars of blueberry syrup, the homemade strawberry jam, and the natural handmade soaps. It reminds me of the stuff people used to sell at the Saturday Market on Salt Spring. I want to learn to make some of this stuff.

That thought, that desire to make things, sticks with me as we drive down the Gunflint Trail and pull into our driveway, and it flutters through my mind as I lie in bed that night, looking past the stained glass butterfly in my window, out at the night sky. Stars come into view and grow bright and brighter outside my window. There are so many things, I realize, that I don’t know how to do. Simple things, real things. I have never made jam or syrup. I have never grown or preserved food. I have never made soap, or anything else I use. Everything in my life, my whole life, has come from a store. Everything. I want to change that.

Year Eleven

Planning

After work I take Morgen to the library. I set her up in the children's area, and I go through the aisles, pulling books on gardening and preserving and soap making off the shelves. Within half an hour I have twelve books to check out, and they all look like they could be an introduction to a new fulfilling endeavor.

Anything you want, I muse, as I flip through the books, anything at all can be learned. If you have the interest and the time, there's enough information available on any subject to become an expert on it.

"Imagine growing our own food!" I say when Scott comes into the living room after tucking Morgen into bed. "Wouldn't that just be so cool?"

"A lot cheaper than buying it at the grocery store here. And fresher."

"But really, it's the lifestyle of it," I tell him. "That's what this book calls it: a lifestyle. It's about being grounded, and real, and about being self-sufficient. People are too dependent on the system to fill their needs. If you can fill your own needs, if you can sustain yourself, then you can be truly free."

"I love the idea of being self-sufficient."

There's something truly fulfilling and satisfying, I imagine, about the gardening process. It would require patience, hard-work, and diligence. But it would be worth it.

"Growing your own food is real," I say. "Same with preserving food. And baking bread. Anything where you're more connected to what you're consuming."

"Hunting?" Scott asks. He used to hunt before he met me, and I've always had a problem with it. But now, yes, I can see the parallel. If you eat meat, hunting is a way to connect with the reality of it.

"Yes. Even hunting."

Scott smiles.

"But I prefer baking!" So that's what I'll do. I picture it as I read about kneading and shaping the perfect loaves. I choose my recipes and make a list of the ingredients I'll need. I'm going to bake the best, most wholesome and satisfying bread we've ever tasted, I decide, and it will nourish us and fill our cabin with the smell of comfort. I'll be known around town as the woman who lives in the Y2K cabin and works at the radio station and bakes bread. When I get really good at it, I'll go talk to the whole foods co-op and see if they'll sell it for me. I'll charge a reasonable price so that it'll be both affordable and nourishing. A win-win.

On Sunday, I try my first loaf. I study the directions and meticulously measure each and every ingredient down to the grain. I knead the dough on the floured countertop, putting my whole body into the motions, giving it my all. I form the loaf, cover it with a fresh, old fashioned tea towel, and let it sit in the "warm place" I found on top of the fridge for the final step. As it bakes in the pre-heated oven, the sweet yeast aroma fills the whole cabin. I pull it out and turn it on to the cooling rack, admiring the golden brown crust.

But when we cut into it, it's dense and the center is doughy. The flavor is yeasty, and no one wants a second piece. It's hard not to be disappointed, even though all the baking books warn that it takes a few tries.

For me, it actually takes more than a few tries. I produce three more dense and doughy loaves, two that Scott compliments as “an improvement,” and then three that are less dense but still a bit yeasty. It isn’t until my umpteenth try that I bake the bread I’ve been hoping for: hearty, flavorful, light, and delicious. I don’t think I did anything different, but somehow I’ve mastered it. It seems almost like the failed attempts were somehow a test to see if I’m diligent enough to keep with it. Now I’ve passed the test. Now I can bake bread! I’ve always bought my bread, or used a bread machine. But this is real bread-baking, and I’m doing it. It’s a very satisfying feeling.

Scott makes soup to go along with it. He chops carrots and celery, zucchini and cauliflower, and then uses the scraps to boil into a stock. As it simmers, I walk through the cabin, straightening and contemplating. The living room is lightly decorated with books, candles, and Morgen’s hand-drawn pictures. I pull a photo album from the shelf and flip through the candid shots that tell the story of our years together: our marriage, Scott’s graduation, our different apartments and houses, my degrees, Morgen. The pictures capture moment after moment of Morgen’s happiness.

She has been happy, I realize, despite not having what many other children in this country have. Or perhaps because of it. She’s been happy without TV, or plastic dolls, or trips to Disneyland. She’s been happy with books and crayons and walks outside. She’s been happy with our love and our time, and I can’t imagine that TV or plastic Made in China toys would have improved anything. I smile to myself as I put the photo album back on the shelf.

The sun is setting and dinner is nearly ready. The aromas of bread and soup fill the cabin. I go around and twist the blinds closed to make it even cozier, and then I join Scott and Morgen at the table. We each have a bowl of steaming soup and a piece of fresh bread. As we eat, we go around the table and share our favorite part of the day. It’s a little tradition we started up a few weeks ago, a way of reflecting positively. Today, Morgen’s favorite part was playing on the slide. Scott’s was watching Morgen pet the dog at the park. Mine was when I discovered, at last, that I can bake bread.

Coming Along

By the time the first snow falls in November, I've gotten it down to where my bread turns out every time. Whole wheat loaves, cinnamon rolls, and sourdough bread are all beautiful and delicious. On Sundays, especially now that the weather's turned cold, I bake all day. On Monday, I bring the extra loaves into work with me.

The radio station has moved into a new building right on the highway on the outskirts of town. More space, better visibility, more production room. The only problem with the new location is that my desk is no longer in the same room as the others. Now, I have my own office, tucked away in the back of the station. I thought I'd love it. More privacy to make phone calls, more solitude to write grants. But I'm finding that there's almost too much solitude now. Everyone's in their own offices, and the on-air action happens at the other end of the building. Most of the time, I'm by myself for the whole day.

I come in the back door, walk into the kitchen, and drop the extra loaves of bread on the counter. I write a note to "Help Yourself" and retreat to my office to write another grant proposal. The economic series project is in full swing, and Joan wants to undertake more projects that address community issues. We've narrowed in on food availability and the need for local growing space, and I'm looking for a foundation that might possibly see the logic in granting money to a radio station to address this local issue. Not an easy feat.

But I'm confident I'll be able to do it. I'll find a few foundations that might consider our request, and then I'll submit a compelling, persuasive argument in the grant narrative. It'll be worth the extra effort in order to help make positive things happen.

I pull up the list of foundations on my computer, but just as I'm about to start my search, the phone rings. It's an old lady who tells me in a shaky voice that she was interviewed for the economic series feature we're airing, and she'd like a copy of it on CD.

"Of course," I tell her. "We'd be happy to make you a copy. Are you going to be coming by the station any time soon? Can you pick it up?"

"I don't get out much," she says. "Can you put it in the mail?"

"Certainly. What's your address?"

Her name is Mrs. McKinley, and she lives just past me, outside of town. I go into the production studio to burn a copy of the audio feature, and then I play it back to check that it recorded properly. The segment starts with music and the station's introduction, then rolls into the food shelf director, talking about the incredible, largely unknown need in the community. There are a lot of people suffering right in our backyard, she says. Then the audio jumps to Mrs. McKinley talking about her inability to make ends meet. She worked hard her whole life and she always had enough to get by, but the past few years things have been getting harder and harder. She doesn't get enough from the food shelf, so she just goes hungry a lot of the time.

Three of the four loaves of bread I brought into work are still on the counter. I grab one of them, and when I'm done with work I head out to the address I wrote down.

At the end of a long driveway through the woods sits her old wood house. It was nice once, I can tell. Nice and simple. It's two stories, nestled in a grove of evergreens, some of which have grown so large that their branches reach out to the roof of the house. The elements have taken

their toll on the paint. It used to be white, but is now a faded, dull gray, and is chipped and peeling all over.

I climb the sagging steps to the front door and knock. No answer. I knock again, louder. I hear movement, and then the door opens a crack and a lined, sweet face looks out at me.

“Hi, Mrs. McKinley. I’m Melanie, from the radio station. We spoke on the phone earlier.”

She smiles and opens the door a bit more, revealing her whole hunched frame, wrapped in a pink terrycloth robe. “Hello, dear. Come in.”

I follow her inside. The carpet is old and matted down and the walls are covered with faded wallpaper.

“I thought I’d just bring you the CD,” I tell her. “I live pretty close, so it wasn’t much out of my way. And my daughter and I made this bread. I had some extra so I thought I’d bring you a loaf.”

She takes the items from me and goes into the kitchen off the living room. “Have a seat on the couch, dear, I’ll be right out.”

When she comes back, she has some of my bread cut up on a plate. I take a small piece when she offers it.

“How old is your daughter?” she asks.

“Three and a half.”

“Oh, how precious! Make sure you cherish each moment. You think you have all the time in the world, but it goes by so quickly.”

I smile and nod. “That’s good advice. Thank you. And thank you for doing the interview for the radio station. You said some important things, some things the community needs to hear.”

“Thank you for caring enough to take this project on, and for letting people know my story. Sometimes I feel like I’m forgotten.”

I finish the piece of bread and stand to leave. “Are you okay out here?” I ask. I feel a bit weird about leaving her.

“Of course I’m okay. I’ve lived here for fifty years. I’m fine.”

She walks me to the door. “Please come back. Bring your daughter to visit. I love children.”

I tell her I will, and when Morgen’s in bed that night I tell Scott that I’d like to do as I promised. “Morgen would probably love to meet her,” I say. “She’s a sweet old lady. You know who she reminds me of? That little old lady who lived in the cockroach apartment building in Portland. Remember her?”

“I try not to remember that place.”

“I feel sorry for her, alone and struggling.”

“Bring her some more bread, then. You’re planning on making some more anyway, right?”

On Saturday, we do just that. We don’t have many ingredients, and we can’t afford to buy any more until my next payday, but we have everything for a loaf of banana bread. It’ll be good to use the over-ripe bananas anyway, so they don’t go to waste. I set Morgen up with her stepstool at the counter next to me, and she dumps the measured ingredients into the mixing bowl while I stir. She greases the loaf pan and I scrape the mixture into it and put it in the oven. While it bakes, Morgen gets dressed and sets herself up at the table to color an elaborate picture of squirrels in their forest homes with nuts stacked up around them. The banana bread is done before she is because she wants the picture to be perfect. I wait until she’s satisfied, and then we get into the jeep and drive out to Mrs. McKinley’s house.

“This is where she lives?” Morgen asks when we pull up.

“Yes, sweetie.”

Mrs. McKinley's thrilled to meet her, and hangs her picture on the fridge. Then she cuts up the banana bread and serves it to us in the living room. Morgen looks around, wide-eyed, at the old wallpaper and the shelves filled with knickknacks. Mrs. McKinley watches her with a smile, then leads her around, showing her different items and telling little stories about the special ones. The silver spoon is from her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. The vase she made in a pottery class many years ago.

"And what do you think of this little fellow?" she asks, taking a tiny ceramic owl from a high shelf.

"I like it!"

"Then you shall have it."

Morgen cups it and rushes to show me her gift.

"What do you say?" I ask.

"Thank you!"

We promise to come back soon and then head home, where Scott's outside working on the woodpile.

"Oh good, you're home," he says. "I want to go into town and hit the library before it closes to print off my résumé."

"What for?"

"There's two jobs in the paper today that I need to apply for."

Morgen runs around the yard, and I lean up against the side of the cabin, next to the dwindling wood pile.

"Why?"

"We're going to need to order more wood for the winter," Scott says. "And we can't afford it off your salary. We need more money coming in. There's two evening jobs in the paper, so I'm going to apply for them."

"Where?"

"The liquor store and a pub downtown are both hiring."

"You want us to work opposite each other again, like in Portland?"

"I don't want us to, but we need more money to pay our bills. At least if I work opposite you we won't have to put Morgen in daycare. One of us will always be home with her."

"But you and I'll never see each other. Remember how hard it was to work opposite each other? We became strangers."

He stops stacking wood then and softens his tone. "I'm sorry," he says, "but the radio station doesn't pay enough to cover our expenses. We need more wood, and you want to do all this baking. And Christmas is coming up."

He goes inside and puts on his Dockers, then heads out to the library to print his résumés and drop them off. Later that week, he gets a call from the liquor store for an interview. I take a lunch break to watch Morgen while he interviews, and on the following Monday he's offered the job.

"I start training on Wednesday," he says.

"Does it offer medical insurance?"

"No. And I already know I have to work Christmas. They told me that off the bat, like a condition of hire."

"The liquor store's open on Christmas?"

"No, but Christmas Eve and the morning after, and I'll work them both. I'm at the bottom of the ladder."

"So no going up to International Falls or Fort Frances to see family," I note.

“I won’t mind having a quiet Christmas, anyway. The three of us in our cabin. It’ll be nice. Besides,” he adds, “I don’t ever want to leave the area, remember? Everything I need is right here.”

I slap his arm playfully. “Get out. You can’t never leave!”

“Why not?”

We laugh and turn our attention to Morgen. We play hide-and-go-seek in our tiny cabin, which has about five places to hide, then we make dinner and color together as the day comes to an end.

That night, when Morgen’s in bed, Scott goes over our finances. “My paychecks will be for the extras,” he says. “The first one will be for Christmas presents, and the second will be for wood. Then we can start talking about gardening stuff. You want to garden, right?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Well, it’s going to be tight,” he says. “Even with my extra income, we won’t have much left over after bills. Everything’s just really expensive.”

“If we grow our own food, that’ll save us money on groceries.”

“Yeah, it’ll pay off in the long run. It’s just the short term I’m worried about.”

“We’re doing the best we can,” I say. I don’t know what else we can do. It’s not like we have any extravagant spending habits that we can cut back on. Everything’s already bare bones.

Christmas

Morgen and I are making a pound of homemade fudge for everyone on our Christmas list. I get the recipe from my Laura Secord cookbook, and Scott buys the ingredients with his first paycheck from the liquor store. We spend the weekend measuring, mixing, and wrapping each block in saran wrap and then placing them in little cardboard boxes. I mail one to my dad and Pat and one to Scott's family, and I cut blocks in half to give to my co-workers. We put a block away for ourselves, too, to enjoy on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

For a tree, we trek out into the woods behind the cabin and find a pine that has blown over. Scott takes his hand saw, cuts the fallen tree's top off, and drags it back. It stands eight feet tall. We don't put lights on it because we can't spare the electricity, but we string popcorn and hang a set of red bulbs we found at the thrift store. We eat a few pieces of fudge as we decorate, and we sing Christmas carols.

For stockings, Scott and I set a twenty dollar limit, and we each go to the Ben Franklin and do what we can. For Scott I find socks, a deck of cards, chap stick, chocolates, and a new Stephen King novel. I go over the limit for Morgen, buying her a horse, a bead set, a candy cane, and a new scarf and mitt set. I also get her a coloring book, washable markers, and a cozy fleece bathrobe as gifts for under the tree.

Morgen wakes us up on Christmas morning, squealing in delight that "Santa came!" Scott makes us coffee on the stove and brings me a cup in bed before we climb down the ladder and gather around the tree. We each dig into our stockings and admire all the things. From mine I pull out hand lotion, gum, lip balm, fuzzy socks, and chocolate. Scott and I smile at each other and I whisper "Thank You" when I'm sure Morgen's not listening. Morgen shows us each item she pulls out as though it's the most precious thing in the world. We watch and revel in the joy and wonder we see on her face. Bright light streams in through the tall windows, casting a warm glow on the room. Snow falls gently down outside and our fire burns quietly, keeping us warm and cozy inside.

Morgen has gifts under the tree from family members, which have been arriving in parcels over the past few weeks. She opens gift after gift as I excuse myself to prepare a breakfast of fruit salad and the overnight blueberry French toast that I started last night. Morgen runs over to show me each new thing she unwraps.

"Wow!" I exclaim over each book, piece of clothing, doll, and stuffed animal. She giggles and runs back to the tree. She selects another gift for herself, opens it with Scott, and then runs back to show me.

Morgen also hands out gifts for me and Scott from our family, most of which we won't be able to keep because we simply don't have the room. We're excited about a portable DVD player, though, with a rechargeable battery, which I'll be able to plug in and recharge at work.

Scott gives me a journal, like always. I flip through the blank pages and wonder what I'll write in here. What will the upcoming year hold for us?

At last, Morgen's opening her last gift: a kid's gardening set.

"Wow!" I say, genuinely pleased. "Now you can garden with us!"

After brunch, we get into the jeep and drive out to Mrs. McKinley's house to bring her the last pound of fudge. She's alone, I explain to Morgen, and Christmas is about spreading happiness.

"We'll only stay an hour," I tell them. But that turns into two because Mrs. McKinley is so happy to see us and so loves the company that we decide to sing her some of the Christmas songs Morgen knows, filling her place with music.

When we get home, we all go for a walk in the woods, taking the little trail that winds into the forest behind the cabin. Evergreens surround us, their boughs heavy with snow. Scott points to a large circle, pressed down in the snow under a balsam.

"That's a deer bed," he says. "See Morgen? See the outline? A deer slept there."

"Wow!" She spots another one a few feet past the first.

"Deer herd together in the winter," he explains. He points out low-lying branches that have been stripped bare of bark by the hungry animals. Their tracks are all over back in here.

I lift Morgen over a fallen tree that crosses the path and place her back on the ground, where she sinks down to her calves. She's a trouper, though, lifting her feet in the deep snow and trudging through.

"Look!" Scott says. "Rabbit tracks." They cross the path and disappear into the woods.

"Where do they go?" I ask.

He steps under a branch to peer off through the woods, thinking I want him to show Morgen where the tracks lead. I put my finger up to my lips, signaling for Morgen to keep quiet, and I come up behind him and shake the branch. Snow drops on him and fills the air with a burst of white.

"Hey!"

Morgen and I burst out laughing. In a flash, I pick her up and take off as quickly as I can through the deep snow, retracing our footprints back to the cabin. A moment later I'm hit by a snowball in the back, so I put Morgen down and ball one up myself to throw back. Before I can act, Morgen's hit lightly in the leg. She laughs and bends down, gathering snow in her mittens. We throw snow at Scott, squealing and laughing and dodging his throws. Finally, we emerge from the woods and collapse together in a heap in the yard.

"Who wants hot cocoa?" I ask, when I've caught my breath.

"Me!" Morgen exclaims.

We shake the snow from our coats and hats before heading into the cabin. Scott re-starts the fire, I get the cocoa and start dinner, and Morgen explores her piles of new things. Then we all sit down to a meal of roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, carrots, corn, and, of course, bread. As we eat, we go around and each name three things we're grateful for. Morgen says the cabin, her family, and her Christmas presents. Scott and I both say the same things: this wonderful food, our cabin, and each other.

Gardening

Winter is long. Far past the calendar's declaration that spring has arrived, blizzards and freezing rain and driving winds keep us inside our cabin, dreaming and planning for summer. Each night after Morgen's asleep, we sit on the couch with a single light and a bottle of wine between us. We each have a stack of cooking and gardening books that we borrowed from the library. We flip through the pages and narrate the important passages.

"This one says to rotate crops," I say. "That helps replenish the soil."

"Yeah, I read that too. This one says corn really depletes the nutrients."

We teach ourselves all about raised beds and natural pesticides, about deer fencing and cold-climate seeds. We read about drying herbs and preserving produce. I picture how cool it will be to grow our own food. If we want a salad, we'll just go outside and pick the ingredients.

In mid April, I call the rental agent to let her know that we're planning a garden and ask if there's a particular spot we should put it.

"What sort of garden?" she asks. "There's already gardens on the property."

"I mean a vegetable garden. We're thinking of a twenty by twenty over by the fence."

She laughs. "I don't think so. The owner likes her lawn, and has carefully placed the gardens where she'd like them."

My heart sinks. "The gardens are flower gardens. We'd like to grow food."

She's quiet for a moment. "Let me look into it," she says. "I'll call you back."

Instead of calling, she drives out. She has a copy of our rental agreement in hand, and she's highlighted a passage that says no structural changes shall be made to the property.

"A garden plot would be considered a structural change," she says. "I'm sorry, but the owner's pretty adamant about the care of the property. I don't think she'd approve of it. She's very particular."

"Could we ask her?" I suggest.

"There's no need. She'd say no."

"What about a greenhouse?" Scott asks. "We could make one out of PVC and plastic. Lightweight. Easy to dismantle."

"I'm going to have to say no. A greenhouse might ruin the grass underneath."

Before she leaves she agrees to allow us to extend two of the perennial beds about four feet each, and to add in a rectangular one, eight feet by two feet, up against the driveway. That's it. That's all we have to work with.

It's better than nothing, I guess. We'll just make the most of it. We buy seedlings from the local greenhouse and plant them in rows as our books suggest. I also slip vegetable plants in among the perennial gardens, and I get planters from the thrift store and fill them with herbs and tomato plants, lining them up on the walkway and the driveway.

Every day we tend to the plants, watering, weeding, pruning, thinning. We observe their progress and clap our hands when we see tiny pea pods emerging from the plants' flowers.

"That will be food!" I tell Morgen. She's only four, but it's never too early to learn about where food comes from. She needs to make those connections.

Soon, there are flowers on the tomato plants. Then, tiny deep green bulbs appear at the flower's center. "Those are tomatoes!" I tell Morgen. She's delighted by their progress, and she wants to run out to check on them as soon as she wakes up. So, every morning, I brew myself coffee on the stove, pour myself a cup, and follow her out.

"Look!" Morgen says, "a new flower!"

"Yes, you're right!"

By mid-summer we're able to harvest some herbs, which I bake into my loaves of fresh bread and bring to Mrs. McKinley's.

"You should sell these for extra money," she tells me.

"I'd love to sell my bread at the co-op," I tell her, "but Scott looked into it, and in order to sell food, it has to be produced in a licensed commercial kitchen."

"What does that entail?"

"It has to be separate from your residential kitchen, and it needs specific equipment. It has to have three sinks, and a stainless steel counter, and all this stuff that would take a lot of money. And we'd have to pay an inspector to come out and approve it."

"Why not see if a local restaurant will let you use their kitchen at night?" she suggests. "I don't see why they wouldn't. That would solve your permit problem."

It's a great idea. I tell Scott about it, and while I'm at work he calls around to try to find a commercial kitchen that I could use.

"Tell them it would be a good thing for the town," I suggest, "having bread baked locally instead of trucked in."

But he doesn't have any luck. No one wants the hassle.

So, we focus instead on growing the vegetables in our little garden beds at the cabin. Our tomatoes are turning yellow, our zucchinis are ready, and our carrots are thinned and growing nicely. The peas are producing in abundance, and day after day I'm able to pick a bowl and have pea pods and bread for dinner. There's nothing like a vegetable that you have grown, picked fresh, and eaten the same day.

The tomatoes ripen, and they all seem to be ready at once. Scott doesn't like them raw, but he'll eat salsa, so I dice the fruit into pico de gallo, and we eat it with organic corn chips from the co-op. Morgen won't eat tomatoes, but she loves pulling tiny carrots from the ground and nibbling on them as she walks around.

Scott has built a bin out of wood pallets, hidden from view on the other side of the cabin, and there we drop all our compost. Scott turns it, lets it sit, then adds it to the gardens. Morgen helps spread it in around the plants with the child-sized garden tools she got for Christmas.

"Next year I'd love to preserve some of our produce," I tell Scott as he turns the compost. "I wish we could grow enough food to sustain ourselves for the winter."

"Yeah, that'd be nice. I wish we could buy a house of our own here, so we wouldn't have to ask anyone's permission to have a garden plot."

"Me too."

"I wonder if the bank would lend us the money for a little piece of land to farm on." Scott wonders. "We could build a little cabin on it, like this one."

He makes an appointment and later that week he goes to talk with the bank. He tells them that we only want to borrow enough for a small plot of land to grow food on. But the county has an ordinance that land parcels must be at least five acres, and the prices are out of our reach, even for raw land. They turn him down.

"What about if we lived on it?" he asks. "If we made it our homestead?"

“No,” they say. “Not while you owe on the house in Duluth.”

The house in Duluth hasn't sold, and we're several months behind on the mortgage.

“What if we get up to date on our payments?” Scott asks.

“That would be a good thing to do, but you still won't be approved for a new mortgage.”

So Scott feels like giving up on it. The little space we have at our rental is all we'll get. But I keep hoping that something will work out. It's not like we're asking for much, after all. I know that if Mrs. McKinley had any open areas, she'd let us garden on her land. Maybe there's someone else out there who'd be willing to do that. Maybe we just need to ask.

“I'm going to put out an ad,” I decide. “We'll see if the community will help us out.”

“How?”

“By lending us gardening space.”

“Should we wait until spring?”

“No. We should secure something now if we can.”

So I post an ad on Boreal, the local classified website, asking if anyone has a plot of land that they'd be willing to let us use. There's a lot of land in this area. Surely someone has a spot they're not using that we can grow some food on.

The next day, we receive a call from a woman named Pam who has a spot on her property that she might be willing to let us rent for next year.

“Rent? For how much?” I ask her.

“It would have to be a hundred dollars a month, at least, to make it worth my while. Otherwise, it's not worth the hassle.”

I wait for a couple days to see if anyone else responds to my ad, hoping someone will offer it for free, or in exchange for some produce, but no one else calls. So, on Saturday morning I call Pam back.

“Come on over and take a look and see if it'll be right for you,” she says.

Pam's paved driveway winds through groves of trees and patches of wildflowers. Her house sits in a clearing with a breathtaking view of the lake. It's about two thousand square feet, with cedar shake siding and stained glass windows. She comes to the door in jeans and a loose-fitting sweater, and she shakes all of our hands, even Morgen's. We follow her down a path through the forest and into a clearing about eighty by a hundred, surrounded by cedar trees. Pam walks to the center of the clearing, spins around, and announces that this is it.

Scott and I look around, trying to figure out the logistics.

“You can actually access this directly from the road,” she says. “No need to ever come up to the house. You can just park out there and walk the trail in.”

“Is there a water source?” Scott asks.

Pam shakes her head and shrugs. “I'm not sure what you'll do about that. Maybe you could set up a rain barrel.”

Morgen's playing among the trees on the edge of the grove, running from one cedar tree to another, her hair flying out behind her and a huge smile on her face. I walk over to her and kneel down.

“Do you like it here, honey?”

She nods.

“This lady says that we can use this space to grow a garden. We could have a pretty big garden here, couldn't we?”

She looks around the clearing. “What will we do with all the food?” she asks.

“We'll eat it, honey. And share it.”

“Okay.”

I return to Pam and Scott, who are discussing how we’d get a rototiller in here.

“The trail in from the road is wide enough,” Pam says. “You can just drive it in.”

“That’d be perfect.”

She hesitates. “Well, just make sure the ground is hard enough so you don’t leave big ruts in the path. I don’t want the path destroyed.”

“We will,” I promise. “Thanks for letting us do this. It’ll be so great to grow our own food.”

“You’re welcome,” she says, turning to leave.

“See you in the spring,” I call after her.

When we get back to the car, though, Scott says he’s not sure about this. He doesn’t know how we’ll get enough water, or how we’ll keep the deer out. “That’s a big area to fence.”

“It’s the only option we have.”

He doesn’t say anything, and he doesn’t start the jeep.

“What’s the matter?” I ask after a minute. “Don’t you want to do this?”

“I don’t want to invest a bunch of time and energy and hope into something that isn’t going to work out.”

“How do you know it won’t work?”

“A lot of times, things don’t,” he says. “There’s been many times we’ve invested a lot of ourselves and then been disappointed.”

“This isn’t like a big life-changing decision here. We’re just going to grow some vegetables. Besides, we won’t get anything if we don’t invest a bit. This is an opportunity.”

“Okay,” he says, but he still doesn’t smile.

I, on the other hand, can’t stop smiling. Now my dream of being self sufficient is within closer reach. From that plot of land, we’ll be able to grow enough food to preserve for ourselves to last for the whole winter, and we’ll have enough left over to share and sell. I can hardly wait.

Year Twelve

Waiting

In October, Morgen and I spend our Saturdays going for long walks on area trails and sitting on the shore of Lake Superior, collecting agates and polished beach glass. The whole landscape around us has been transformed over the past few weeks from green to deep, rich hues of gold and orange. As we sit on the beach, we marvel at the magnificence of the lake on one side and the fall colors on the other.

Soon, the colors are gone and the trees are bare. The first snowfall is gentle and beautiful, and we run outside to play in it, catching snowflakes on our tongues. After only fifteen minutes, though, we run inside, shivering, not yet used to the cold, and we warm ourselves with a cup of hot cocoa. We watch the snow falling outside the windows. The trees are dusted in white, and the whole outdoor landscape looks fresh and calm.

Christmas is nice and simple. I give Scott and Morgen each a handmade necklace, and they give me a handmade journal. The cover is made out of painted pieces of cardboard sewn together with blank paper in between.

“It’s just so beautiful and thoughtful,” I tell them. I can feel myself tearing up. I know exactly what I want to write on the pages. I want it to be my journal, like the other ones I’ve filled over the years, but I want this one to only contain the happiest of thoughts. It’s the perfect place to write about all the ways things are working out for us—sort of a detailed record of our creation of the good life. I won’t write anything unless it’s positive.

So for a while, through the short days of January and February, I don’t write anything at all. My dad and Pat come down to spend the weekend, and I pick up my pen to write about how excited Morgen is to see them, and how they shower her with love and attention. But I don’t have much else to say, so I don’t write anything.

Then, as one day rolls into the next and February turns to March and my journal sits empty, I decide that like the other journals, this one will be filled with life as it is. I’m not going to hold back or sugar-coat it. The truth is that it’s hard right now. Food prices have skyrocketed, and I have to stop baking extra bread because it’s too expensive to buy the ingredients. We also have to cut back on our visits out to Mrs. McKinley’s because the cost of gas is too high. We have to prioritize, and putting away enough money to buy seeds and rent the land from Pam is our priority.

But I can’t help resenting that we have to pinch our pennies so much. “You know,” I tell Scott one night after Morgen’s asleep, “I should be earning more than I am.”

“Yeah, you should.”

“I don’t expect to get rich working at a non-profit, but I’d like to be able to bake bread when I want to, you know?”

“Ask for a raise,” Scott says. “You won’t get one unless you ask for it.”

So I go into Joan’s office the next morning. “I know I accepted the position with this wage,” I tell her, “but the cost of living keeps increasing so much and it’s getting really hard to get by. Plus the station is bringing in so much more money now. We can afford to pay the staff a livable wage.”

I want to continue making my case, but she interrupts me. “The board of directors is already planning on giving everyone a dollar raise soon.”

“That’s nice,” I tell her, “but I’m talking about a real raise. I’m talking about the station re-thinking its whole wage philosophy. Not just for me, but for everyone, I’m thinking of an increase of like fifty percent. That wouldn’t even bring us up to the low end of any sort of corporate job’s salary.”

She laughs as though I’m kidding. “That’s not going to happen. We’re publicly funded.”

“Don’t you think the public wants us to be taken care of?”

Her brow is furrowed. “People expect that if you choose to work for a non-profit, you agree not to earn much money.”

“I don’t think that has to necessarily be the case. Just because we work for the public good doesn’t automatically mean that we have to struggle. Why not change that? Make a statement about valuing the people who work hard for the public good. Help turn things around by supporting those who dedicate themselves to making things better.”

“It’s not going to happen,” she says. “The board is already hesitant about the dollar raise. I had to push for you guys to get that, so be grateful for it.”

End of discussion, I guess. She turns toward her computer and I go back to my office in the back of the building. Be grateful. I am grateful. An extra dollar an hour will help. But it’s not going to change things. It’s not going to allow us to stop worrying about money, or for Scott to stay home with us in the evenings so we can have more family time.

I try to forget about it and get on with my work. I have a huge list to get through. I sit at my little desk and write grants and make phone calls all day. I present arguments for support and highlight all the ways we work to serve the overall well-being of the area. I tell everyone about how great the radio station is and how they should support it.

“It’s a great source of connection,” I say into the phone as I sit alone in my office at the back of the building. What I don’t tell them is that despite the station’s efforts, the issues are still there, unresolved. The community still needs local food production and livable wages, and I happen to know firsthand that people are still going hungry.

On Friday nights, when Scott’s at work, Morgen and I splurge and drive out to see Mrs. McKinley. We pack up a nice plate of left-overs and Morgen carries it on her lap the whole way.

“I was hoping you’d come!” Mrs. McKinley says, coming out to greet us.

“Of course! It’s our date night,” I joke, handing her the gift of food.

She always has a gift for Morgen, too: an old silver spoon, a faded postcard with a pretty picture, or an antique button. She always lets Morgen look around the living room first, and then she asks, “What do we have here?” as though she has just discovered it instead of having put it there before we arrived. Then she hands the item to Morgen and says, “Well, I think you should have this.” Morgen’s almost five, and I think she might know that the items have been placed there for her. But she doesn’t let on. It’s a special little game they play.

Then Mrs. McKinley and I sit on the ratty couch in the living room and talk. I tell her about my dreams of the spring and the garden, and all the produce we’ll have. We’re saving up the money to pay the rent on the land and the extra gas to go back and forth there every day in the summer. We’re going to make this happen.

“We’ll grow our own food and be self-sufficient!” I say. “Enough to eat all summer, and preserve for the winter.” I promise to share our harvest with her. “We’ll bring you fresh tomatoes and potatoes, and pumpkins when they’re ready.”

She smiles, genuinely pleased. “I’m so happy for you,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say, smiling. So am I.

That night, after I read Morgen a story and tuck her into bed, I open my journal. The blank page stares up at me. I take a deep breath and slowly, carefully write, “Waiting for Spring.”

Attempts

Scott is busy getting ready. He found a place to rent a rototiller, he ordered seeds, and he's looking for fencing to protect the garden we're going to plant. He brings Morgen to the library while I'm at work and researches products online. After weeks of looking, he narrows in on seven-foot plastic link fencing that he can attach to wooden posts and surround the garden. It's over three hundred dollars for what we need, but there's no cheaper way to keep the deer out.

The last week of March, he starts germinating seeds. Morgen helps him fill the containers with soil, and together they push the seeds down and cover them up.

"Now we need to keep them warm and moist," Scott says, arranging the trays on shelves in front of the windows.

When tiny shoots sprout up, Morgen gasps in delight. She checks on them every day, and when I get home from work she shows me the progress the little plants have made.

In early May, the ground is ready. Scott calls for the rototiller and plans to prepare the soil for planting. But when he picks me up from work the next day, he tells me the guys at the rental shop told him the rototiller won't break through sod. We'll have to have the ground ploughed first.

"How?"

"A local guy named Joe apparently has a plough. I gave him a call and he said he'd help us out. Said he's glad people want to grow food locally, and he wants to help us get started."

"How much is he going to charge?"

"I don't know. He said not to worry about it."

"That's nice of him," I say, touched that someone's willing to help us out.

As it turns out, though, it's not nice at all. The guy spends Thursday afternoon ploughing and then drops off a bill for six hundred dollars.

"Are you serious?" I demand.

Scott's furious. "If we'd known he was going to charge that much, we never would have done it. It'll take us a year to pay off."

But there's nothing we can do about it. The work's already been done. So we start making payments, digging into our garden fund. Now we don't have enough money left to buy the fencing. We'll have to take our chances with the deer.

"You don't know deer," Scott says.

"We don't have a choice. We'll buy the fencing when we can afford it."

When the first of June arrives, the threat of frost is finally pretty much gone. Scott takes Morgen out while I'm at work, and we all go together on the weekend. Morgen helps us dig the holes, and we remove each delicate plant from the tray, careful not to damage the roots. We place each one tenderly in the ground, pat it down, and move on to the next hole.

Next, we plant the beans and carrots, covering the seeds with soil and marking the rows. After a while, Morgen runs off to play on the garden's perimeter at the forest's edge. She picks wildflowers and collects fallen cedar boughs for a make-believe pie, an offering to the forest animals.

We finish planting at dusk. We're tired and hungry, but before we leave we take a long look around at all we've accomplished.

"All this work will be worth it," I tell Morgen. "We'll have food to eat and store away for the winter thanks to our hard work today."

The hard work continues. Scott brings Morgen back after dropping me off at work the next day, and the next. It becomes a routine: the two of them tend the garden while I work nine-hour days at the radio station, raising money to fill the station's ever-increasing needs. When I get home, I make dinner and clean up the small cabin that has dishes piled in the sink and dirt all over the floors from Scott and Morgen's boots and gloves. At night I listen to Morgen's stories of the bean plants' progress and the tiny flowers on the tomato plants.

On the weekends I see the garden's progress for myself. Scott parks the jeep along the road and we all walk down the path together, Morgen leading the way. The trees open up and the garden appears before us. Morgen leads me through the rows, showing me the vegetables growing and ripening. We find pea pods to pick and carrots to pull. I can hardly wait until everything's ready to harvest. I will make salsa again, and maybe sun-dry some tomatoes. We'll freeze carrots and green beans, and we'll have potatoes and pumpkins long into the fall.

It won't be long now. I go out every weekend, pull weeds, and beam at what our hard work is producing.

Then, one Saturday in early August we head out as usual. We park on the side of the dirt road, as always, and walk our worn path through the forest to the clearing. It's all as usual, except for this time, our garden is not as it should be. All over, plants are bent, drooping. There had been a sea of green only yesterday, but now there are big holes with dirt exposed.

"Oh no," Scott says. "Deer got in."

They didn't really "get in" because we had nothing to keep them out. But they came. Ate. Destroyed. We walk around the garden perimeter, assessing the damage. It's over a quarter ruined.

We take in the damage in shocked silence. It's not just vegetables that are destroyed in front of us. It's our plans and our hopes, and our hard work. Tears stream down my face, and when Morgen asks me what's wrong, I can't even bring myself to answer her.

"I'm just upset," I say.

"At who?"

"No one, honey. Just upset." I'd really love to have someone to be angry with right now. I'd love to have somebody to blame. It could be Pam, who charged us rent for this land when she really didn't need the extra money. She probably didn't even notice it. But it would have made a world of difference to us. Or I could blame Joe, who charged us an outrageous rate to come out and plough, even though he told us that he wanted to help us out.

"We should've had fencing," Scott says.

I don't say anything.

"We're going to have to buy some if we want to save the rest of the garden," he continues. "It's impossible to keep deer out without it."

But we both know that we don't have the money. We don't have credit, either. I have that thousand dollar bond, but that's it. We walk around, pulling destroyed plants and re-staking some of the toppled ones. I should offer to cash the bond. It's on the tip of my tongue to offer it, but for some reason, I don't.

"We'll just have to take our chances," I end up saying.

Our chances, it turns out, aren't great. The deer come back several times and take most of our produce. We end up with a basket of tomatoes and peas, a bunch of zucchini, about twenty-five pounds of potatoes, and a nice pumpkin patch. But the day I go to pick the pumpkins, I find that deer walked through and nibbled on them, too. Not just a few, but all of them. They're all ruined.

I sit down, right there in the middle of the pumpkin patch, and I search for a reason not to cry. We can try again next year. Maybe it will be easier because we'll have a ploughed area and the ploughing bill will be paid off. Then we can afford the fencing. I take a deep breath, trying to keep myself from getting angry. I never meant for this to be such a burden.

I go up to the house to tell Pam about what happened. She looks at me in surprise and then bursts out laughing. "Those darn deer!" she says.

Her laughter reaches into me and pulls up all the frustration I have bottled up. Every struggle, every injustice, every disappointment, is now here in front of me.

"I've just about had it!" I tell her.

"With what?"

"Everything. I just wanted to have a garden, to grow our food and share it with others. I'm just trying to do something good. Why does that have to be so hard?"

Pam stares at me. I can tell she doesn't get it.

Mrs. McKinley does, though. I bring her three large zucchinis and a loaf of zucchini bread, and tell her what happened.

"That's awful." She cuts up some zucchini bread and offers me a piece. "What people need to do these days just to get by," she says. "People think it was so much harder back in the day, but it wasn't. We didn't have all the modern conveniences, but we had so much more. Back then, we didn't have to scramble to figure out how to get a place to garden and all that. We just did it. Everyone did. And people helped each other. Not now. You're the only one who ever comes out here to see me, you know that? You're the only one who ever brings bread. Imagine! Of all the people I've known. Everyone's too busy and absorbed in their own lives. Why weren't there others out there gardening with you? There shoulda been."

"I don't know," I tell her, "but I'm about ready to just throw my hands up and walk away. I'm tired of it."

"Me too!" she agrees.

That makes me smile for some reason. Not because it's funny or because she's joking. I guess just because it's nice of her to empathize. It's neighborly.

Year Thirteen

Winter

For a small town, Grand Marais has a pretty decent library. We learned a lot from their gardening section before, and now we're using their movie section like crazy. They get new DVDs in all the time, and they allow us to keep them for a week. We take full advantage. As the weather turns cool outside, the leaves change and the snow starts to blow, Scott and I curl up on the couch each night after Morgen's asleep and watch a movie on our portable DVD player.

Every morning, I put the rechargeable battery in my bag and plug it in at work. It sits next to me on the floor, with its little red light blinking, while I write letters of inquiry for grants, print thank you letters, and organize fundraisers. I eat lunch alone in my office, working straight through. There's always another grant to write and more money that needs to be raised. There's always more work to do than there is time.

Three nights a week, Scott works and Morgen and I have a "girl's night." We eat dinner by candlelight, turn on a single lamp on the dining room table to play a board game, then turn on the living room light to read. I sit with her as she falls asleep, writing quietly in my journal with one hand and holding her hand with the other.

I wait up for Scott to watch a movie, or half a movie, which is more often the case because I'm too tired to stay up for the whole thing. Usually we just watch light romantic comedies because I just can't bring myself to watch anything upsetting right now.

One freezing Saturday afternoon we all cuddle up on the couch to watch three hours of Planet Earth together. We're blown away by what we see displayed before us: the incredible footage and the magnificent beauty of our planet. I mean, we already know it's beautiful. We live in one of the most serene places in the country, and we experience nature's beauty on a daily basis. But to see all of nature's magnificence laid out in front of our eyes, in one running narrative, blows us away.

After the movie we bundle up and go for a winter walk on the trails behind the cabin. We trudge single file, Morgen in the middle, down the path, under the snow-covered balsams. The sun is already setting when we head out, and by the time we turn around to head back, stars are starting to appear. Morgen and I make a wish on the first one we see, closing our eyes and taking a deep breath to send it out to the universe.

"Remember to always notice the stars," I tell her.

"I will," she promises. I smile and take her hand, and we run the rest of the way back to the cabin to make hot cocoa and warm up.

We get Morgen to bed early so she gets a good night sleep. "You have pre-school tomorrow," I tell her.

"One more story first."

I read her another book as she lays in bed, and then I write in my journal until she falls asleep. "Goodnight, sweet girl," I whisper, pulling the blanket up under her chin. It's getting colder out.

The next three weeks are bitterly cold. Morgen has to wrap a scarf around her face and put on a ski jacket, snow pants, hat and mitts before running out to the pre-warmed jeep to go to pre-school. Scott sets our alarm clock to go off in the middle of the night so we can get up and stoke the fire to keep the cabin warm. The windows are frosted, covered with ice crystals.

After a couple weeks, we're almost used to it. I watch from my office for Scott to pull up in the jeep. I pull my hood up and run outside.

"Hi sweetie," I call to Morgen, bundled in the backseat, as I shake off the cold.

"Hi mommy."

Scott's holding a letter. I take it and skim through. It's from the public health nurse, informing us that Morgen may have been exposed to whooping cough at pre-school. One of the other children has a confirmed case, and it's highly contagious.

"But she was immunized against that," I say.

"The letter says you can still get it, even if you've been immunized."

"What the hell good is that, then?"

"I don't know. We have to watch for signs of a mild cold."

The next morning, Morgen wakes up sniffing. She says she feels okay. It's just the sniffles.

"A mild cold," Scott says. He grabs the phone and calls the clinic to explain the situation. "The letter said we should have her tested if she shows any signs. Okay. Alright." He hangs up. "Ten o'clock."

"For what?"

"To have her tested. They said we need to."

"We don't have insurance," I remind him. With all the state cutbacks, we've been dropped from medical assistance. If we go to the doctor now, we'll have to pay the whole bill. We can barely afford our groceries.

"We have to get her tested," Scott insists. "For one thing, if they catch it early it isn't as severe. Plus it's the responsible thing to do. If she has it, we don't want her to spread it to others."

So I go to work and Scott brings Morgen into the doctor. They perform a nose swab by sticking a giant Q-tip up her nostril and then sending it away to be tested. Four days later we receive a letter that she tested negative, and a week after that we receive a bill for four hundred dollars. I can't believe they charged us that much.

I call the clinic and ask to talk to billing. "I'm calling about the invoice we received for a little test we had for our daughter. We just received a bill that we feel is very expensive, and that quite honestly, we can't afford."

"What test?"

"It was the whooping cough test. And the only reason we did it was because we were told that she may have caught it from a community member, and that if she had it she could pass it on to other community members. So we thought it was the responsible thing to do."

"Yes, it was."

"Well, I just feel like if she was exposed to something and we were just checking to make sure she wouldn't expose others, we shouldn't have to be stuck with a bill like this."

"You ordered the test. The test was for your daughter, right?"

"Yes, but what I mean is that we did it to be socially responsible, and it seems like we shouldn't be punished with a big bill like this."

"I don't know what you expect us to do."

"I don't know. It just doesn't seem right. We can't afford this!"

"Have you looked into the sliding fee scale?"

"Yes, I have." The sliding fee scale is set up to subsidize low-income households but, amazingly, we don't qualify. The figures they use to determine qualification don't reflect the actual cost of living here. I don't know how anyone could qualify and still survive here.

“Well, I can’t help you any more than that. Sorry.”

Maybe she is sorry, maybe not. Even if she is, there’s nothing she can, or will, do about it. I sit down, defeated, and let the bill fall from my hand.

Dreams

The is the fifth nightmare I've had this month. I'm outside planting flowers and I hear something in the distance. It gets louder and louder until it's almost unbearable. Then other people are around me, and I shout, "Why is it so loud?" but nobody can hear me. The noise is so loud by this time, and so close, that I have to stop what I'm doing and run for cover.

I wake up then, shaking and sweating. It takes me a while to unwind enough to fall back to sleep, and when I wake up in the morning, I feel un-rested. I have to drag myself out of bed and get ready for the day. It's Saturday, and Morgen wants to go to Mrs. McKinley's house. I throw on an extra sweater before I climb down the loft ladder. The cabin is freezing.

"It isn't right," I tell Scott. "It shouldn't be this cold in April."

"It's just another cold spell. It'll warm up soon."

I stoke the fire and go into the kitchen to get Morgen some cereal. "What should we bring for Mrs. McKinley today?" I ask.

"Bread," Morgen says.

"We haven't baked any. How about some of the leftover chili from last night?"

"Okay."

I dish up a tupperware container of the chili, which I was planning on having again for dinner tonight. We'll have to find something else for our meal, but I'll deal with that later. I don't want to go over to Mrs. McKinley's empty-handed. It's my little way of helping her out. I'd do a lot more, if I could.

We bundle up and head out into the cold. I buckle Morgen into the backseat and let the jeep run for a minute before putting it in drive and heading out of town. We drive up the long, lonely driveway and climb the steps of the run-down little house.

Mrs. McKinley is a long time coming to the door. She has a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and she's pale. Her face brightens, though, when she sees us. She invites us in and scrambles to straighten the magazines scattered on the coffee table in the living room. I take off my jacket, lay it on the couch, and immediately wish I hadn't because the place can't be more than fifty-five degrees.

Something in the kitchen catches my eye. Mrs. McKinley asks me something but my whole focus is on the oven, visible through the kitchen's entrance. The oven door is wide open. I rush in and find it blazing, the temperature set to five hundred degrees.

"What's going on?"

Mrs. McKinley comes in behind me and closes the oven door, her face bright red. "I was just trying to take the chill out of the air."

"With the oven? That's what your wood stove is for." I look back into the living room. I don't need to approach the wood stove to know it's cold. "You're out of wood, aren't you?" I say. It's more of a statement than a question.

Mrs. McKinley stares at me, her eyes wide, as though I've caught her doing something wrong. There's nothing I can do but go over and wrap my arms around her. Morgen stands and stares, and I have to fight back tears.

"Is there no more social assistance you can receive?" I ask.

She shakes her head, no.

“I’ll bring some wood over for you,” I say, trying to remember how much we have. I know there’s about a cord left, and if I have Scott bring over some of that, we should all be able to make it.

“Melanie,” she says, snapping me out of my thoughts. “I’m okay. The cold spell will only last a couple days, and then it’ll be spring and it’ll warm up. I’ll make it. It’s okay.”

I take a deep breath and sit down on her couch. Morgen sits next to me and looks at her book, her jacket still on.

“You’re the one we should be worried about,” Mrs. McKinley says.

I’m surprised by this. “Why?”

“You don’t look very good. Are you sleeping?”

“I’m fine. Yes, I’m fine.” I’m not the one using my oven to warm my house. I’m not the one who’s alone and forgotten.

“You don’t look fine,” she says. “You look stressed and tired.” She motions to Morgen. “You have a beautiful daughter and you need to think about her. Everything you do needs to be to make her life better. Her generation needs to be taken care of so they don’t end up like us.”

My heart is beating out of my chest. Everything I do is for Morgen. I’m trying to make a difference. I’m trying to help people and make things better. I want to tell her that I don’t know what else to do. But I don’t. Instead, I get my coat back on and tell her that we’ll be back with some wood.

I put on a CD in the car for Morgen to sing along to, and I drive in silence. I think of the webinar I attended when I first started at the radio station, how inspired I had been to work extra hard to get funding for special projects. That work was supposed to make a difference. But what good has it done? What difference has it made? Mrs. McKinley isn’t any better off.

At home I cook dinner while Morgen colors, the lamp on the table casting enough light into the kitchen for me to cook by. When we’re done we run a load of wood and a plate of food up to Mrs. McKinley’s.

“We’ll bring some more tomorrow,” I promise.

When Scott gets home that night I put on my jacket and tell him I have things to do at work. I’ll be back in an hour.

I drive to the station, go in the back door, and turn on the lights in my office. When my computer’s powered up, I load a search engine and type in “Salt Spring Island.” There’s pictures on websites of various places around the island: Beddis Beach with its white shell pieces, Ruckle Park with its dramatic coastline and views of the ferry sauntering by, and the quaint village of Ganges with its organic restaurants, coffee houses, and locally-owned shops.

I remember these places as I scroll through a list of jobs available in the area, clicking on each one. I remember how I used to feel, walking among the wildflowers that lined Sophie’s driveway. It was hard not to feel at peace there. Stress and negativity were so out of place that there was almost no choice but to leave them behind.

The island is gearing up for the busy summer season. There’s a job posted for a waitress, a housekeeper, a construction worker, and here’s one: “Manager wanted for Salt Spring Island Resort. Please send résumé and letter of introduction to info@SaltSpringResort.com.”

I pull up my old résumé, archived in my Hotmail account. I make a few adjustments and attach it to an e-mail. I find myself writing that I’m very interested in the position, and that I love Salt Spring Island.

I click send, and the e-mail disappears. The screen says: "Your e-mail has been sent." There's no going back. I turn everything off and head back home, where Scott's waiting for me. I tell him about Mrs. McKinley and the wood he needs to bring for her tomorrow. I don't tell him about the ad I saw or the e-mail I sent. I keep them to myself, and they drift through my mind as I fall asleep.

Sunday morning I read books to Morgen and sip my coffee, and I wonder if there's an e-mail reply waiting for me. I resist the urge to drive to the station to check, and I focus my attention instead on the day. Morgen and I bring Scott some coffee, and we sit in bed and chat until he gets up. We color pictures and play a board game, and that evening when we sit down to a meal of mashed potatoes and canned corn, we go around the table to share what we're grateful for.

"I'm grateful for my family," Morgen says.

"Me too," Scott and I both agree.

Monday morning I find an e-mail message waiting for me. I click on it, certain it'll say thanks for the inquiry, we'll be reviewing applications shortly. But instead the e-mail is from a woman named Kayla who's very interested in meeting me and wants to know if I have plans to visit the West Coast over the next couple weeks. I hit reply and tell her I'll be there next week.

The rest of the day drags by, and when Scott gets home that night, I have a glass of wine already poured for him.

"Okay, listen," I say, handing him the glass. "I know you aren't crazy about moving, and I'm not saying we have to, but there's an opportunity that I think we should at least look into, okay?"

"What is it?" His tone is tentative, but not exactly disapproving.

"A resort. On Salt Spring. They're hiring a manager and I sent them my résumé and they want to meet me." I'm careful not to let my voice get too excited.

"Salt Spring?"

"Yes. I'd make enough to support us all."

"That's a big move."

I take a long, slow breath, trying to figure out what to say next. I know how he feels. It is a big move. We're settled here. It seems crazy to want to uproot and move two thousand miles away. But it's an opportunity to access the life I've been dreaming of and searching for all these years.

"Will you at least give it a shot?" I ask. "Can we go check it out? I promise, if we go out there and you don't like it, we won't move there."

"We can't afford a trip out there. Flights and hotels."

"I have a thousand dollar bond," I tell him. "I'm going to cash it in."

"Are you sure you want to do that? You've been holding on to that bond forever. This is what you want to spend it on?"

"Yes."

"Okay. What's the website? I'll go to the library tomorrow and check it out."

I was hoping for an answer tonight, but I force myself to smile and write out the web address without pushing it more. The one last thing I permit myself to say is a little request for him to also Google Salt Spring and look at the pictures.

"You'll love it," I say. "It's so nice there!"

The next day I walk down to the credit union and present my Canada Savings Bond to the teller. "Can you cash this for me?" I ask.

"I'll have to check with the manager."

I wait, thinking about all the times I've thought about cashing this bond in. All the years, all the struggles. So many times I resisted cashing it in because it was my security, my fallback. Through it all, all these years, it has given me an option. And that option was hope. I'm so grateful for that. But now, it's time to use it. Now, faced with this opportunity, I know without a doubt that this is what I've been keeping it for.

The teller comes back and opens the cash drawer. "The manager said that we don't typically do this for international savings bonds, but because we know you we can do it this time."

The Canadian dollar is at a good rate now, and I deposit over a thousand dollars into our checking account. It's enough to pay for the trip. I'm anxious the rest of the day, watching the clock and waiting for Scott to pick me up.

When he does, he has a huge grin on his face.

"Well? What do you think?" I ask, slipping into the passenger seat.

"I think it looks cool."

"It is cool," I assure him. "There's a real sense of community. And it's full of people who care about the world around them and want to make a difference. Cool people, amazing neighbors. And the natural beauty. It's so gorgeous. There's quality education, and health care." I stop, watching his face as he drives us back to the little cabin.

He glances over at me and nods. "Yeah! Looks nice."

Opportunity

The first thing that hits me, before we even get off the plane, is how incredibly green everything is. There are leaves on the trees, and the grass is so much greener than in Grand Marais, where dull, dead patches are just starting to show through the snow. The airplane taxis to the terminal, where a Canadian flag comes into view and fills me with sentimental calm. I'm home! What a long, long time it's been. Thirteen years. Thirteen years of seeking and pursuing and stressing and trying, and here I am, back again.

The interview is in Victoria, just a short ferry ride from Salt Spring. I know my way around here, and I drive us in our rental car through the downtown core, pointing out landmarks that I used to know. It's all wonderfully familiar. A residential neighborhood near the pier has been converted into hotels and shops, and our hotel is among them. I could have looked up old friends and stayed with them, but we don't have the time this trip. There will be plenty of opportunities to track them down when we live out here again. We walk into the lobby holding hands and check into our room, which looks out over the parking lot.

In the morning, Scott comes with me downtown and walks around while I go in for my interview. I'm feeling great. Confident, hopeful, excited. I straighten my long black skirt, check my posture, and walk out of the elevator to meet Kayla and Ray, co-owners of the Salt Spring Resort. Kayla is not at all what I expected. I have an image in my mind of the Salt Spring residents all wearing Birkenstocks with long, flowing hair. But she's wearing four-inch heels and has her hair piled glamorously on top of her head. She greets me with a hug and welcomes me into a meeting room where her business partner, an older man in a gray suit, is seated at the end of a long polished table. He introduces himself and doesn't get up, but extends his hand in greeting, and I reach over the table to shake it.

Kayla takes a seat next to her partner and opens a folder. I recognize my résumé, with the blue spiral next to my name in the header. She scans it and asks me a few general questions. Then she nods, closes the folder, and leans back in her chair. "So, Melanie," she says, "tell us why you think you'd be perfect for this position."

I tell them about my experience working with people, my communications training, and my marketing qualifications. I tell them about my past and my love of Salt Spring and how I would like to return to the place where I spent many happy days. I'm putting my best foot forward, giving it my all, and being genuine at the same time. As I talk I imagine walking through the resort grounds, meeting and hanging out with all the cool people who come to stay in the rustic cottages. "I can see myself there," I tell them, "helping to make it a wonderful, important experience for visitors."

Kayla's beaming and her partner's nodding. After a few more standard questions, Kayla asks if I would mind waiting in the lobby for a moment. I walk out and shut the door behind me, and I take a seat in the leather chair. The position's mine. It's mine if I want it. I know it.

Two minutes later, the door opens and Kayla welcomes me back in.

"We would absolutely love, Melanie, to welcome you on board as our new manager. We're certain that you are the perfect person for this position."

I smile and tell them that I'm certain of it too, and we make arrangements to meet on Salt Spring tomorrow at one o'clock for a tour of the resort. I will then have three weeks to go back to Minnesota and pack my things. They'll pay to move us out, and they'll have on-site accommodations ready for us. It'll be a whirlwind move and a busy summer, but then fall will come and we'll be living on Salt Spring. I'll be part of the Salt Spring community again.

"Of course," I tell them, as I stand up to go, "I need to talk this over with my husband, Scott, and make sure it's right for him. I'll bring him with me to see our accommodations and the resort tomorrow. But I'm sure he'll love it."

Kayla smiles. "I'm sure, too."

Salt Spring Revisited

We go to bed early, and in the morning we head to the ferry. The long line actually brings a smile to my face. Normally, I despise lines, but this brings back memories. I used to take the ferry back and forth to the mainland all the time with my friends when I lived here. Sometimes we'd be in a hurry, rushing to get someplace or another, but we'd still have to sit in line and wait. There was nothing we could do about the pace. There's nothing to be done. The ferry takes as long as it takes.

Soon enough, the ferry loads and makes its way through the islands. I stand on the deck and take in the ocean water and the deep green trees of the islands as we wind our way through. Around the corner, Salt Spring comes into view. There it is. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and align myself with the feel of it. It's been a long time, and now after all these years, here it is.

The loudspeaker chimes to alert passengers to return to their vehicles. Scott and I walk to our rental car and wait to be instructed to drive off. I grip the wheel as we follow the cars ahead of us, across the ramp, on to the road, and up the hill.

"Look at that." Scott's pointing to the "Welcome to Salt Spring Island" sign. Someone has spray-painted in drippy black letters, "Death by Tourism."

I'm not surprised. Salt Spring residents stand up for what they believe in. "Tourism must be an issue here now."

I focus on the road ahead, narrow and winding. We roll over hills, through forests, and beside lakes. We go through the village of Ganges, with its organic restaurants, coffee houses, and locally-owned shops. It's all so familiar and wonderful. I used to walk through this town, past the stores, through the park. I'd always run into people I knew and end up going out for coffee, to a bonfire on the beach, or to a house party that was going on. There were always people to see and things to do.

The road winds out of Ganges, past the old church that's been converted into a movie theatre, where Fritz the cat lives. Or used to.

"Where are we going?" Scott asks.

"We have an hour before our meeting at the resort. I'm going to show you where I used to live." Sophie's old farmhouse is just ahead.

But as soon as we turn the corner, I can tell something's not right. I swear that's where her house should be, but it's not there. Instead of the little driveway leading to a big old farmhouse with wildflowers and apple trees, there's a condo. It looks a lot like the one that had been advertised on that billboard in the vacant lot in our old neighborhood in Duluth.

I pull up in front and turn off the car.

"Did they tear Sophie's house down?" Scott asks.

"I don't know. I can't believe it." The complex sprawls out in front of us. "Sophie's family never would have sold their place for development. They were so against that."

We're both quiet. I look at Scott, hoping for an explanation, and he offers a faint smile. "Maybe they sold it to someone, and then that person sold it for development," he says.

"Maybe." At any rate, it's gone. A wave of regret and guilt and disappointment rushes through me, tightening my chest. I left here thirteen years ago and never came back. I had

promised to return for visits and I swore I'd keep in touch, but I didn't. I got too busy and life got too crazy and suddenly so much time passed. Apparently life went on here, too. Things changed.

I start the car and head back to Ganges to grab a coffee before our meeting. At least I can show Scott the town, if not where I used to live. We park in the strip mall parking lot and walk past the new trendy Aveda hair salon and the line of stores.

Up ahead is the park where every Saturday people set up to sell their produce and crafts. What did they insist on, again? Oh yeah, everything has to be made, baked or grown on Salt Spring. I used to make necklaces, and sometimes I made my own beads, too. I set up a little table and laid the necklaces out, and Sophie would sit with me all morning to keep me company. Yes, I remember this. It's good to be back.

Across the street is the coffee shop with the hardwood floors and bar stools, where I first learned about the concepts of free range and free trade. Scott grabs the only open table and I wait in line for our drinks, a double latte and a single mocha. I walk back to the table, taking everything in. A girl on the couch in the corner is writing in a journal. A group of five people with long skirts and dreads are joking up by the counter, filling the place with laughter. I take a deep breath and hand Scott his mocha.

"Excuse me."

I flip around and there's a guy a bit younger than us with long hair, a Bob Marley shirt, and a friendly voice.

"Are you using this?" He's pointing to the extra chair at our table.

"No. Go for it."

"Thanks." He picks up the chair and starts to walk away.

"Hey," I call after him. He turns around. "Do you live here?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know Sophie MacDonald?"

"Sophie? Yeah."

"Really? Do you know where she is? I used to live with her, in her place up on North Island Road. I just went to see her, and her house is gone."

The guy rests the chair down and leans against its back. "Yeah, it got turned into vacation condos. Sad."

"Do you know where Sophie is now?"

He shakes his head. "She moved a couple years ago. About the time that place was built. I didn't know her very well." He looks at me a little closer. "You used to live here? When?"

"Thirteen years ago. We're moving back."

"Oh yeah?" He smiles at us. "Right on. What are you going to be doing?"

"I'm going to manage the Salt Spring Resort," I tell him.

He raises his eyebrows. "Oh." His tone is noticeably cooler.

Scott and I exchange a glance. "Why do you say it like that?" Scott asks.

"I just don't think that's very cool."

"Why not?" I ask. My heart's pounding. The group by the counter is laughing and joking back and forth.

"Ray Winter owns that place."

"Yeah, so?"

"Everyone knows Ray, and what he's doing to the island." He stops and gives me a strange look. "Have you met him? Do you know who he is?"

I shake my head and look at Scott. His brow's furrowed. "No. I mean, yes, I met him, but I don't know him. What's wrong with him? What's he doing to the island?"

The guy leans over and rests his arms on the back of the chair. He doesn't seem to be in a hurry. "It's not just Ray. It's guys like him, too. But Ray's probably the worst of them. They buy up all the land and small businesses and commercialize them. They push and take as much as they can. Break rules whenever they can. Ray bought a piece of land on St. Mary's Lake and turned it into a bunch of RV sites and sold them all off. The land can't handle that kind of population and the septic system wasn't up to code and it polluted the lake, and he knew about it, and didn't fix it. Stuff like that. He doesn't care."

My heart's sinking as he talks. I'm supposed to work for this guy.

"And Salt Spring Resort," the guy continues, "well, you must know if you lived here before, it was one of the coolest resorts on the island. A ma and pa place. Ray bought that last year and he's been tearing down all the rustic cabins and building these luxury places. That's not what this island's about. He's selling us out."

"I didn't realize he was tearing cabins down."

He nods. "He's the one who tore down Sophie's place, too, and built those vacation condos." He looks like he could go on, but he doesn't. My expression probably stops him. I can only imagine what my face looks like if it's even half as horrified as I'm feeling right now. He gives us a small, sympathetic smile, picks up the chair he came over to borrow, and joins his friends at a crowded table in the corner.

Scott and I finish our drinks in silence and walk out of the coffee shop, through the park, and back to our rental car. I climb in behind the wheel and shut the door, but I don't start the car.

"What do you think?" Scott says, softly, after a few minutes.

I turn the key and back out of the spot. "I don't know."

I drive out to the road and turn toward the resort, but I don't know if I can go. I don't think I can. But how can I not? This is our chance to live on Salt Spring. What else would we do?

The road is so familiar. I know exactly where the resort is. We pass where I used to live, Sophie's old farmhouse, which has been erased. Over the hill, around the corner, the resort is ahead on the left. A giant wooden sign welcomes us to Salt Spring Resort, "where your spirit soars." I pull in and park in front of the office.

"You ready?" Scott asks.

"This is our chance," I say, more to myself than to Scott. I step out of the car.

The office exterior could use some maintenance, I notice, like scraping the chipping paint from the intricate carvings on the doorframe and replacing the missing tiles in the mosaic walkway. They must be planning to replace it all, that's why they haven't bothered fixing these things. It's a shame, though, because the character really is worth preserving.

The girl behind the front desk looks up and smiles when we step in. "Hi there!" she calls out.

"They're with me." Ray says, stepping into view. "Come on back."

We walk around the side of the desk, and Ray launches immediately into a long complaint about the last managers, who did a terrible job running this place. He describes their customer service, or lack thereof, and how they actually yelled at one of the guests, "can you believe it?" Scott and I shake our heads.

"It'll be good to get you on board and start getting these numbers up," he tells me. "This resort used to make a lot of money."

"I'm sure it did." I smile and put my arm on Scott's shoulder. "Ray, this is Scott."

Ray nods in Scott's direction and launches into a description of how successful the resort is going to be. With Kayla on board as his business partner, along with a silent partner who we'll never meet, this will soon be a great place. The three of them are clearing out the run-down cabins and building luxury ones in their place to attract a better clientele.

"It's great that you'll be here for back-up to help during the summer," he says to Scott.

He must have the wrong idea. "You're just hiring me, right?" I ask. "The position is for one person?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, whatever it takes," he says. "I want this place to run in the black, and I don't care if it takes one person or ten people as long as it's meeting its potential." He pauses to give me the first smile I've seen from him. "Kayla's confident that you're the person to make this place profitable," he tells me. "Your charm and your American experience."

As though on cue, Kayla glides through the front door and announces her presence. We follow her out to the parking lot and agree to head down the hill to tour the cabins and boathouse.

"Shall we walk?" I suggest.

"Naw, we'll drive down," Ray says, "there's room for all of us."

We can see the beach house from where we're standing. It's a three minute walk, at most. "Seriously?" I ask.

He nods and opens the door to his shiny diesel truck, motioning for us to hop in.

"We're going to walk," I tell him. "We want to get a feel for the place. We'll meet you down there."

They take off, and Scott and I make our way down the dirt road that leads to a steep hill lined with cabins. The view takes our breath away. We stop for a moment to take it in, simply appreciating the beauty displayed before us. The trees, beach, and water beyond make a perfect postcard scene. I picture all the family vacations that have taken place here, with kids running around and playing in the water, and parents sitting back and relaxing. I imagine all the families like mine, coming here for a taste of the peace and balance that Salt Spring offers. I can almost hear the echoes of all the people this place has touched over the years.

Next to the beach sits the pool and beach house, with Ray's truck parked outside. Ray and Kayla are in the beach house, looking at the walls that need to be re-painted. They inform me that the painter is coming next week, and there will be new flooring installed by the time I start. This is the perfect location for weddings and family reunions, and I can book it for special functions, they say.

Ray leads us to several empty cabins. He walks up, opens the door, and stands aside so Scott and I can step in. They're all new and plush, with stone countertops and stainless steel appliances. We take a quick walk around each one, nodding our heads and offering polite comments: "beautiful," and "oh, nice."

There are fourteen cabins in all, and we view seven of them. "That should give you a good sense of what you'll be selling here," Ray says. "The rest of the cabins will be updated by next summer." He and Kayla walk back to the truck. "Come on, get in so we can speed this up," Ray says. This time we oblige.

Back up at the office, Ray asks us what we think.

"Are you going to show us the accommodations that go with the job?" I ask.

Kayla gives me an exaggerated apologetic look. "The old managers are still in there. But it will be all ready for you when you arrive, I promise."

Scott and I exchange a look. How could they expect us to move here without first checking out the accommodations to make sure they're suitable? "Could we explain to the people in there

that we've flown two thousand miles to visit, and we're only here for the afternoon? I'm sure they'd understand and let us take a peek."

"You want the job or not?" Ray barks. "We've gone out of our way for you already. We've got plenty other people wanting this job, so how 'bout we get on with it?"

His hostility hangs in the air. Kayla laughs nervously. I look at Scott and hope he's on the same page as me. I hope he's thinking, like I am, that this isn't right. I want to move back to Salt Spring, but I can't return after all these years to be a part of this. To live here, we'd need to be a part of the Salt Spring culture, not part of the destruction of it.

"Scott and I are going to discuss it, okay?" I say, my voice catching in my throat. I know I have to hold back the tears until we're in the car. I manage a smile and say we'll be back within a half hour. Kayla says okay and Ray grunts something as Scott and I walk back to the car.

I slip in behind the wheel and drive away from the resort. Tears are streaming down my face now. Scott's quiet. We drive down the narrow road, past St. Mary's Lake, then I turn toward Fernwood Dock. I used to come here, sometimes, on my long walks.

I pull over to the shoulder and turn off the car, and we walk in silence down the path to the public dock. Its bright red wooden planks stretch out into the ocean. Our footsteps echo, a hallow, empty sound. We pass a woman who's heading back to land, and she gives us a friendly smile. We reach the end and lean up against the ledge, peering over at the barnacles that cling to the posts in the low tide. I take a deep breath of the salty air. It's just as I remember it.

"Maybe there's another job you can get here," Scott offers after an eternity of silence.

I force a smile as I shake my head. There isn't. I've been watching the paper online for years. Waitress and housekeeping jobs are all there are. We'd have to live here to find something through word-of-mouth.

A minute passes, then another. I stare down into the water. My mind is swirling with thoughts, ideas, possibilities, and impossibilities. We could go back and grab Morgen and just move here anyway. Hope to find another job. But that's so uncertain. That would be like what we did in Portland, moving without any security. I can't do that to my family. I hear voices and turn to see a couple walking down the dock toward us. They look about our age and for a second I wonder if I might know them. But I don't. They're just two strangers.

I start back toward the car, silently saying goodbye to Fernwood Dock. Scott walks beside me and takes my hand in his. Together we step off the wooden planks and climb the path to the road. Goodbye, I think to myself, goodbye, goodbye. I start the car and head back down the narrow island road. Trees tower above us, St. Mary's Lake appears, and then Salt Spring Resort is up ahead on the right. I don't slow down.

Scott turns his head to watch the resort sign disappear behind us. Then we're driving through Ganges. We could stop and walk around, and maybe we could grab some food. But I keep going.

When the town's behind us, I pull over. "I need you to drive," I say. I can barely see through my tears.

"Where?"

"Just go straight. This road leads to the ferry."

I lie back in the passenger seat, close my eyes, and take deep, even breaths. I know the beautiful Salt Spring landscape is rushing past, but I can't bear to look at it. I know we're passing the wildflowers, the on-your-honor veggie stands, and the old homestead houses, but I'll only cry more if I see them. I keep my eyes closed and focus on my breathing.

After an eternity, we slow down and I hear Scott buy a ticket. He inches forward and turns off the car. "We're in line," he says.

I wipe away another tear from my cheek and keep my eyes closed. Only when we're parked on the ferry do I sit up and open my eyes. Passengers are getting out of their cars and making their way up to the observation deck to sit in the covered seating area. We follow them up the metal stairs and head over to the railing.

"Morgen will be happy to see us," Scott says.

"Yes."

Soon, the ferry rattles and pulls away from the island. I watch the distance between us grow, and I remember the last time I left this place, on my way to Fort Frances for the summer. I can picture myself back then, so full of hope. I was leaning against the railing then, too. The wind was blowing my hair, as it is now. I close my eyes, and images from the past thirteen years flash through my mind. All the dreams, the disappointments, and the stark realities are overwhelming.

When I open my eyes we're coming up on another island, and the ferry is turning to make its way around. We weave through the passage, the incredible landscape changing from swirling open ocean to the deep green trees lining the islands. I look back and watch Salt Spring disappear, inch by inch, behind us. Then, it's gone.

I stare for a moment at the spot where it had been. Then, with a deep breath, I turn to face forward, as one last single tear runs down my cheek and flies away behind me.

Butterfly

The next night, I lie in bed in the loft of our little cabin in the north woods, looking past the stained glass butterfly that hangs in the window by my head. Stars come into view and grow bright and brighter. I watch them flicker and shine, each one hinting at something more. My mind is heavy with memories and swirling thoughts, but I push them aside and keep my focus instead on the shimmering stars. I want them to be clear. Each one is important, it seems, deserving of attention. Each one is a possibility, and maybe if I look long enough, or in the right way, something will stand out, or start to make sense.

My eyelids grow heavy, but I fight against sleep. If I fall asleep now, I might lose the opportunity to make sense of things. All the stars will just blur into nothing.

So I look, my tired eyes skimming over each star shining past the butterfly. Then, gradually, my focus starts to shift. I begin to notice the graceful lines of the butterfly wings, and the way the colors weave together, illuminated by the starlight shining from so far away. I remember buying this butterfly on Salt Spring when I lived there. A woman at the Saturday market had made a bunch of them, and each one was different, unique. I picked this one out, carried it home, and hung it in Sophie's living room window for all to enjoy.

Now, this is all I have left of that place. I promised myself that I'd always keep a piece of Salt Spring, and this, I realize now, is it. This stained glass butterfly, hanging in a tiny window in the loft of a little cabin in the woods, is my piece of the Salt Spring I remember.

Minutes pass, the stars shimmer, and I look out at the night sky through my butterfly. Soon, I begin to notice that the stars look different now, somehow. Through the butterfly, the stars seem less distant, more a part of my surroundings. Yes, looking at it this way, I see that my butterfly brings the stars in closer, into here and now. I hold on to this realization and let sleep come, soft and welcome.

I wake up to the sound of laughter. Morgen is giggling about something. The sound drifts up into the loft and brings a smile to my face. I lean over the edge and peer down into the room below, where Morgen and Scott sit coloring at the table.

Scott senses my presence and looks up. "Good morning," he says with a smile. "I'll bring you some coffee."

"No," I reply. "I'll come down."

I crawl out of bed, reach over to the tiny window, and pull my stained glass butterfly off its hook. This, I decide, is going to hang in the main window. It's not going to be my own personal thing anymore. For thirteen years, this piece of my past has been in the background. Packed away, moved around, hung up as an afterthought, looked past. It's time to bring it out into our everyday lives, to see what shines through it.

I climb down the ladder with my butterfly in hand and then pull a chair over to the living room window. I reach up and hang the butterfly from a nail that protrudes from the window frame, almost out of reach, but not quite. I lean back slightly to make sure it's straight, and then I climb down, step back, and admire what I have carried with me all these years.

The beautiful butterfly sways in the window, filtering the bright sunlight and bringing colorful streams into our living room.

“That’s pretty,” Morgen says.

“Yes,” I agree, “and it’s so much more.”

About the Author

Melanie moved to the United States from Canada in 1998 and, after traveling and relocating several times, she settled in Minnesota to earn her master's degree in English. In her free time, which translates to the hours after she puts her daughter to bed each night—the hours that most people fill with watching TV or socializing with friends—she has written *13 Years in America*. You can e-mail her at Melsteele.writer@gmail.com. She'd love to hear from you.