

Sketch

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Article 1

Continuum

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Abstract

STUBBLE LITTERED the rows where corn had grown sharp green and spiky last spring when Marlyss had gone up the hill to pick the raspberries that grew along the fence beyond. She'd gone there every year since they'd moved on to the place, enjoying a private sense of kinship with the women who had left her the juicy berries as a rich legacy from an earlier time when a house had stood there.

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by

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Distributed Studies 3

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Marlyss was thinking of her now as she climbed, stopping occasionally to pick up a stone. She wondered if she'd been happy there in her cabin on the hill.

The rough field made for hard walking and Marlyss' long dark hair, whipped by rough dusty gusts, flapped across her eyes; but she didn't mind. She'd been sure, when she'd gone away angry and bitter in early summer, that she would never walk this field again, and she'd taken a grim satisfaction in that. But now, as she stood at the crest of the slope, with the fall-chilled wind whipping against her thin jacket, she realized she'd missed this place; that she had never thought of the apartment as home.

She stooped to pick up a smooth grey stone. As she turned it in her hand she faintly heard her name called from the distance behind her, but she did not turn. She slipped the stone into her pocket where it clicked pleasantly against the others as she walked faster now. Her mother had never understood her daughter's fascination for stones. Neither did Marlyss.

She heard her name again, clearly now. She took quicker steps, stumbling over the stubble in her haste. There was no one she wanted to see, least of all Evan. She ignored a stone she would have liked to have picked up. If it were Evan, he wouldn't follow her very far. He wasn't one for walking anymore. In another time, they'd walked long

together, never minding the distance. A heavy somberness fell over her with the remembering and the missing of a man who was gone now. Changed.

“Yoo hoo. Marlyss.” The voice was closer now and she knew with certainty it was Adelaide Shadday who followed her up the hill, but she kept walking, pretending she hadn’t heard though she knew Adelaide would catch up with her shortly. Adelaide was an old woman, but she was used to hard work and was stronger than her thin body suggested. Without looking back, Marlyss could see her striding with broad steps up the hill. She’d have her grey lumpy cardigan clutched around her stringy body, held together by her hand because she never took time to sew on buttons. She’d have her frayed red bandanna skinned around her head.

Marlyss liked the woman in spite of her habit of watching the house with binoculars. Adelaide had been frank about it from the beginning and somehow managed to make it seem a proper and neighborly thing to do by reporting to Marlyss the moment the calves slipped through the fence. One winter she’d carried a newborn calf up to the barn in the midst of a snowstorm. “Saw it through the binoculars,” she said. “Would have died out there.”

Adelaide was always straightforward and plain; not like the showy women who’d been stopping by Marlyss’ house on tenuous, flimsy excuses since she’d come back. They had come, each different yet alike, prim in their old women’s dresses and thick shoes, sitting neatly on the edge of Marlyss’ sofa, their knees properly together. There would be embarrassed little coughs followed by inconsequential comments about the fine fall weather this year and then, to the point, “We hear you’ve been ill.”

The question scratched against Marlyss’ nerves and she wanted to scream at them, “It’s Evan’s lie. I wasn’t sick. I was tired of his rages and his jealousy and I left, never intending to come back, except there was the child. He was going to fight me for Michael.”

Intuitively, she felt if she told the truth, they would fly up like startled pheasant hens, so she grimly played her role. "Yes. I'm better now. It's good to be home."

"Marlyss. Yoo hoo. Wait up." Adelaide's voice was too close now for Marlyss to pretend she hadn't heard. She stopped and turned, waiting for the woman to catch up.

"How long have you been following me?" Marlyss said, hoping Adelaide's sharp ears would not catch the lie in her voice.

"Not long. You're a fast walker, you are. Can tell you were brought up on a farm."

"Well, it's a nice day and I felt like getting out of the house."

"I know. I used to walk like that when things weren't going to suit me. It's cheaper walking than going to a psychiatrist and it does you a lot more good." Adelaide chuckled. "I walked off many an argument with my old man out on these hills, let me tell you. I had a regular path wore up a hill in Kansas where we lived when the kids were small."

Marlyss felt her face turn hot and red at the woman's frankness, and she was grateful Adelaide had her eyes fixed to the ground ahead of their footsteps. Pride urged her to say, "That's not why I walk," but the lie seemed a shabby offering to the straight old woman. Instead, Marlyss stopped abruptly and picked up a stone in which she had no particular interest. Adelaide stopped too and watched as Marlyss turned the stone in the palm of her hand.

"I had three little ones and Ed would come home Friday nights drunk and broke. Those were hard times."

Marlyss looked up, surprised. "Ed? I never thought . . ."

"Oh, I know it's hard to believe now with him all crippled up like he is. Rheumatism's settled him down, but there was a time."

"Why did you put up with it?"

“Lots of times I thought about leavin’ him and starting over again. Maybe finding someone else. But I didn’t and looking back now I don’t suppose it would have made much difference anyhow.” She started to walk again. “Seems like no matter who you are or who you marry, it all ends up the same. Pretty soon all that hot passion and romance gets cold and there’s not much left but just livin’ from day to day.”

Marlyss picked up another stone.

“I used to read the movie magazines, you know. Remember Ingrid Bergman? All that scandal, and when it was all over and that hot passion was all burned out the only ones benefitted was the lawyers. And Elizabeth Taylor. I could just go on and on. It’s just natural is what I’m thinking. It’s just natural.”

“But it doesn’t seem right. We were so happy. . .”

“Sure you were. And you’re not unhappy all the time are ya?”

“No, but. . .”

“Just accept it and it won’t be so bad. Take up a hobby for in between times to take your mind off the hurt.”

They walked quiet for a time, the only sound the rustle of the stalks under their steps. Adelaide smiled. “Who knows. Things may change for the better. Granted, Ed and me ain’t no Duke and Duchess of Windsor, but we’ve had our good times, and I’d miss him if he weren’t around.”

Marlyss made no reply. They walked on together, past the dried raspberry canes. Were the raspberries the hobby of the woman who had lived here, Marlyss wondered. Was she happy?

Adelaide stooped over, catching up a clear, glassy rock. “Here’s a nice one for your collection.”

Marlyss accepted it, turned it over in the palm of her hand, admiring the clearness of the stone, and then slipped it into her pocket along with the others which clicked pleasantly as she walked.