Rodeo summer

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Rodeo summer

by

Carolyn Jean Kelly

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1999
“Fear of death reaches much deeper into our lives than our conscious minds are willing to concede. As David Viscott wrote, ‘When you say you fear death you are really saying that you fear you have not lived your true life. This fear cloaks the world in silent suffering’”

--Deepak Chopra
People thought I would lose my mind when Timmy died. Resting at home in southeast California for a while, my family hovered around in the evenings, the men standing with their hands in their jeans’ pockets, the women cluttering up the tiny kitchen area, and the children playing quietly, voiceless in the presence of my loss.

Eventually the children’s silence drove me from the ranch and back out on the road. Always before when Tim and I visited, or before Tim, I was the fun aunt/cousin who came home excited about places beyond the mountains with which we were so familiar. I played pool and card games, roped calves, drank a lot of beer, and sang loud in church just to bother the young pastor. But after Tim died, the first time I laughed out loud just like when he was still alive, even my little cousin June, the girl who admired me most gave me that look, a glance that seemed to imply “Annie-go-gladly, what on earth is wrong with you? Timmy’s dead!” When Tim was alive I didn’t feel like the odd woman out, but with him gone, I was as alone as I had ever been only now I knew that there was a better
state of being—something I had once had, that was now lost. So I pulled out packets of maps and PRCA schedules and hit the road again. Honestly, now that time has passed, I lay here alone at night drawing great breaths of relief. I wait for the room to grow ice cold from windows I can leave open without him here, and to lull myself to sleep I do lifeline math in my head: add a Dutch great-grandfather who lived to age ninety-nine to two obese, diabetic grandmothers who died in their late eighties. . . subtract the grandfather who died from alcohol related heart disease in his fifties. . . I multiply by all the fun and risks I've survived (before Tim), the car wrecks and drugs, the easy, laughing sex with strangers, and then I divide by mistakes and grief (not meeting Tim sooner?). I factor in social fear, jungle spawned bacteriological nightmare diseases, and personal anxieties. The sum total is averaged with a secret Pi-like number only I and my mother know, a digit representing an idiosyncratic sense of grace and fidelity, and the result is always the same—a number too low for comfort. I can't escape the feeling that whatever is left of my life isn't enough time now that I've finally climbed out of the very pretty box that I lived in and helped maintain while I was Tim's wife—“Annie-go-gladly.”
I loved Tim Riley. We were married only two years and he’s been dead now for three, but I still think of him daily. Most people who knew Tim recall him frequently, and admire my managing to “go on” without him. He was handsome, fun, and generous. He smiled often, laughed freely, kept promises, and made women envy me my good fortune. He wore his jeans tight in the thigh. I learned a lot from Tim when we were together as a couple and now that I no longer have him around, I am learning even more. I am learning that for the first time in my life, I’m finally tired of driving.

With worn roadmaps spread over the hood of the pickup, I now hesitate when scanning for shorter routes, for quiet roads that will lead me past historic markers, or for more interesting stopovers in towns with names which eventually might mean something to me. I no longer trust in the implied fortune of towns like Hopeful, North Dakota, Heavenly View, Oklahoma, or Great News, New Mexico. I’ve tried them all, their most endearing little local roadside motels for at least one night, and my dreams on those nights are no more illuminating than the dreams that arrive the nights I sleep in meaner lodgings in plainer towns like Brownsville, Missouri, Edward, Iowa, or Red City, Michigan. Sometimes the dreams I have on nights I sleep in dull towns have
a solid quality from which I wish not to awaken. Writing them down doesn’t help like everyone says. I write them down as quickly as I can turn three barrels on a 1500 lb. horse—sixteen seconds—but I can’t catch the images, they slip away as easily as Tim did in the end, nothing to catch hold of, no horns or hooves that a rope can snug.

Maybe I’m like my father and I’m slowing down now that I’m in my mid-thirties; my ambitions are cooling. He grew so much calmer than when he was younger. His anger rose more slowly, his voice quieted much sooner, and he consciously bit his tongue, holding back criticism that used to force itself out unrestrained. Rarely have I heard a man curse “sonuahbitch” as explosively as did my dad. During the years my father grew quieter, I grew more vocal, less prone to act rashly, more ready to stand steady and resist any direction other than the one I fully chose. The direction I have grown fond of now more closely resembles wider highways with reliable shoulders and regular fuel stops. People think Tim’s death weighs on me and that is why I have grown sober and concerned and no longer join bar hopping groups, loud, music-ridden barbecues, or the gay, sweaty dances following the rodeos on Friday and Saturday nights.
People say that women get stronger through aging, that we take the energy once needed for raising our children and for the first time we lavish that affection and attentive caring on our own lives. But Tim and I never had children, so my nurturing skills, honed by caring for uncomplaining livestock, while competent, still leave some kind of gentleness to be desired. I'm pretty certain, short of a miracle, love and motherhood passed away with Tim and are as surely buried in California's deep desert. So, while I may be growing quieter like my father, who lies buried next to Tim, I'm hoping to build unexpected muscles to counter the onslaught of graying hairs.

Womanly experts, the Oprah Winfreys, Harriet Goldhor Lerners, Alice Walkers, and Joyce Brothers of modern print and screen tell us all the time that we can be anything we want to be. They lecture the rest of us normal, tired women to rise above our struggles, reject bitterness, and speak gently from places of humility and crone blessed wisdom. If we get in touch with our anger, grieve our losses, plant gardens, and share our needs directly, then everything will be all right. Our relationships will glow with health like our skin once did the first time we were pregnant. Our clothes will hanger looser on tighter bodies and our
husbands will come home early from work to worship our competence. Our bosses will rename us as mid-level managers or else watch us walk out the door confidently moving on to a larger, brighter cubicle, one with our name mounted in larger letters.

But on a morning like this when my horse is restlessly stomping in the trailer, rocking us about, my truck has a rear flat, and a helpful cowboy is nowhere in sight, that stack of self-help books I drag around the circuit with me seems immediately less entertaining, and pretty poor comfort in general. On a morning like this when the next rodeo is 357 high plains miles away and my buffer of extra time is dwindling faster than a hot young barrel racer charging the arena gates, those books serve less to build courage than to hold my hot coffee thermos upright. Well, hell, at least the coffee is fresh, black, and hot. The coffee is hot enough to burn going down and strong enough to peel enamel off my teeth. My grandfather drank coffee that way. He always said, “Why waste time drinking two cups when you can get it in one . . .” He wouldn’t encourage me to sit around waiting for someone else to come along and change the flat either. “Git it and hit it.” I crawl into the bed of the pickup hunting the tire iron. I’m tired of driving but Tim isn’t
coming back, and I know in the darkness of my heart that I'm relieved he's gone. I have one more summer of rodeoing to go before I retire from the circuit and enter the next performance arena of my life: law school in Kansas. Git it and hit it.

Unfortunately, on a day like today, the wait for help on N 6/34 in southern Nebraska could be long, much longer than the methodical, practiced tire changing process I completed before anyone drove by to help. Breaking down on rural highways is not like blowing a gasket on the interstates, where before the smoke had cleared the tailpipe half a dozen yuppies or college kids have blown by waving their cellulars over their car roofs to indicate they had already called for help to be sent. Those drivers rarely stop to actually lift a tire or look under the hood, but at least they interrupt chattering with roommates and childcare providers to tap out a 911 on the little portable keypads. They seldom recognize the mile markers standing narrow, stark, and green at the roadside, but usually orient the rescue according to the "antiques for sale" bill boards. "Yes officer, I'm sure they are in the westbound lane just past the advertisement for the turnoff to Granny's Genuine Turn-of-the-Century Wares in Paxico... Why, no officer, I don't
think anyone was in physical distress, but who could really tell at eighty-five miles an hour. . .what officer? Why of course I know the speed limit is 75, but you all give us ten miles leeway don’t you?"

I looked over my shoulder and pulled cautiously onto open highway, mindlessly shifting through gears, gradually gaining motion in a smooth arc up to traveling speed. The small highways I prefer traveling keep my speed down to around fifty with the gooseneck behind, but I like it that way. Traveling slower is easier. I have time to gawk about, to make mental notes on wildlife and livestock, and new aluminum siding on old clapboard houses. I note “For Sale”: rust bitten vehicles, big, brown, free range eggs, sun warmed Beefmaster tomatoes, and double wedding ring quilts airing under elm trees. Wildflowers blooming and migrating butterflies lead the necessary signals of seasons moving on, of life passing in a consistent fashion. I have always yearned towards blue highways, the lonelier paths of the mid-west and otherwise rural America. Yet the demands of this lifestyle have left me dependent for intimacy upon the waves and nods of other drivers passing by three feet away, almost always going in the opposite direction.
I have to be in Cheyenne, Wyoming by first call for the barrel racers at 7:30 this evening. Without Tim to share the driving, I build pauses in my schedule with plenty of time for coffee and peeing. I also had planned to let my horse out to stretch his legs and stroll along the edge of the Niobrara late in the afternoon. He runs better for me when he has some free grazing time away from the noise and tension of the rodeo grounds. He is in great condition currently and, at seven, is just now maturing into a steady performer. After all the years I've worked with high strung, over bred, under-trained nags, I finally own a horse up to my standards. Now that my horse is finally up to the task, and Tim and I aren't squabbling over where to go when, I'm ready to quit the circuit.

A red Dodge pickup with the Calvin cartoon character pissing on a Ford emblem streams past. The voices of two young cowboys spill back, laughing and loud in the slipstream, their cream-colored hats filling the rear window, brown arms hanging out both sides of the truck, biceps stretching out the short sleeves of their white tee shirts. Their bumper sticker reads "Goat ropers do it faster." I wonder about young men who advertise "doing it" in less than 15 seconds. The truck looks familiar, but lately all the
boys look the same: too young, too tense, and too hungry. After
the arena lights go out at night, even in the dark of the bedding
grounds with tethered horses shifting and settling, the eyes of
these young men send the same message—gotta have what they
want now. Ambition barely hooded by lowered dark eyes was the
same look Tim fastened on me when I first met him years ago in
Texas, long before we finally married.

I roll head and neck back over the edge of the seat of the
cab. My muscles ache, and again I recognize that my career on the
circuit is coming to a timely end. The money is good right now. The
effort is worthwhile, but I no longer have the necessary body
stamina or the disciplined whip hand. The younger girls are
tougher and sleeker, and current sponsors want these agreeably
aggressive spokes-model types who squeeze into leopard spot lycra
riding gear. Even the barrels seem to willfully fall when I pound by,
boot tips negligently brushing the white paint striping each black
rubber barrel. The red barrels with the Winston logo are gone from
the arena. Political correctness and lung cancer litigation knocked
down more barrels than I ever tipped in my fifteen year career,
even during the few years I rode a flashy part-Arab hardhead with
a sloppy gait and no willingness to tighten up when I rapped his flank for attention. That gelding had been beautiful though—a walleyed blue roan with full white points. And I looked fine riding him. That was when I had been young, thin, excited, and usually far from home. If lycra had been in then, my whole wardrobe would have been the same leopard spots worn by today’s young riders, and mine would have been accented with sequins and tiny star shaped mirrors. Years ago when I entered an arena on my roan I wanted everything flashing, especially all the cameras in the crowd.

Until I met Tim, the greatest desire I ever acknowledged was running horses, subtly weaving them around barrels, and delivering myself home faster than whatever string of similar women paced aboard similar horses just beyond the fence, waiting in the dark for their turn. A couple of those women were my friends, but most hated me. Money prizes for women are simply too few and too tight to afford companionship dulling the plan to win. Besides, they thought I had almost everything they wanted. My marrying Tim only added to the misconception.
All couples have pet names, “our song,” wedding colors, and sex life anecdotes. Tim and I thought our life together was like the movie, “Three Weddings and a Funeral,” because we first met, and then again, at similar ceremonies of big life passages. More funerals than weddings though. Actually, I see now the pattern is fully reversed; our life would be “Three Funerals and a Wedding.” No doubt others would say that my script doesn’t get the happy ending of the movie either. No doubt others don’t always know what lies inside of another’s outside.

I met Tim in Texas many years ago at the funeral of one of his younger sisters that was a friend of my own sister, Marla. She lives in the hill country of central Texas, just west of a small town, Maddy Bay. Marla retired from the army at Fort Hood and, for lack of direction or purpose or job opportunities, stays in this dry, dust-choked, poverty ridden region. Job competition from Mexican illegals and service dependents makes it hard for her, and she goes hungry some nights. But Marla doesn’t listen to me, she is hardheaded and proud of it, and she isn’t moving anywhere. When she was younger I admired her determination, but now that we are closing in on our forties, I worry that too much alcohol and
isolation affects her thinking and that she will die young. I have already reconsidered my lifeline math formulaic and am developing theorems that adjust for an almost fraternal twin sibling dying prematurely. Marla and I are nine months apart in age and as close as two women split out of the same egg. Intimacy of that nature is something Marla has always struggled against, whereas I generally ignore it. As a child she was consumed with getting out of the bed we shared, the bedroom we shared, out of my sight on the schoolbus, out of the state we shared. Being the younger of the two, I just kept tagging along—I admired her so.

I think Marla’s stand in those vast hills is personal. She likes how easy it is to fade into and stay lost among the sumac and scrub filled draws that pull the hills together. She finds immense arid beauty there and says they remind her of home. The semi-desert aridity is similar, but Texas, like all the plains, relies on sky much more than the area of south eastern California where Marla and I were born and first learned to ride horses, muster cattle, and drive full ton work trucks with great, grinding standard transmissions.
Massive brown mounds nestle up to Marla’s home, dry and baking even in winter, and covered with stunted versions of plants that grow lush and green the farther north one drives. Cactus sprawl over what Marla would name lawn; what I would name anything-but-lawn. My sister and I rarely see things the same, nor even similarly. Where I see gray concrete, she sees pink shadows, she says. I don’t know why I doubt her, but I can’t see the pink, and she stumbles and falls on the concrete.

Close to the army base, virtually pinning down its corners, are small towns suffering erratic bursts of growth usually resulting in mostly empty strip malls, dance clubs leased for six months and overrun by underage GIs, and corner lots of repossessed sports cars. But where my sister’s trailer sits near Maddy Bay, there is only stillness, a dead railroad track and a distant super highway assuring the redirection of traffic that might otherwise occasionally liven the town. Marla needs the quietude. As surely as I needed competition, bright lights, raucous crowds, and ever changing, ever loving arms, Marla didn’t.

She had some tough teen years. Marla was the oldest and needed to live up to something that the rest of us either ignored or slipped past in an awkward, undignified, yet effective fashion.
Marla couldn’t back down from anything, she had to rush forward, headfirst, propelled by... 

*What? I still don’t know and I was there for all of it. I know the look that would grow in her eyes, water filled and angry. I intimately knew the sound of her voice—louder than necessary, brutally ugly words, stilted, pressured burst of words that pushed away family and the very few friends she had, made my mother cry, and drew my father into horrible, wall pounding fights. And lies. Blank words to most of us most of the time, and even more empty, hollow words to herself. “I got a job over at Randy Affleck’s. Yeah, he paid me fifty bucks to move a lot of tires.” No. No job at Affleck’s. She stole that money from somewhere.*

But even my father knew that Marla couldn’t stop herself. So she enlisted in the army and was sent around the world to get away from herself.

“The papers were signed a long time ago,” she said, “I’m nineteen, so it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks.”

“Like it ever mattered what any of us wanted,” my little brother countered, with you going away and Anne going to college,
who’s left here with me, I’ll be left alone with them.” Being alone with our parents didn’t appeal to any of us.

“It’s not my problem.”

That was when I got really angry, “You shit,” but before I could add, “because you never own any of the stress you add around here,” she slug me. Full out, from the shoulder, built by weightlifting, she tried to pound me into silence. She believed in the righteousness of her position, of her leaving, and physically punished me for assaulting that self-concept. But I was used to it and she knew I would eventually shut up, but not before she felt more guilt than I felt pain. I carried the bruises she mottled me with as proudly and upright as stood the American flag behind her head in the formal uniformed portrait taken and sent to us when she graduated from boot camp in Georgia.

Our mother, hearing the familiar popping sound of her fist on my shoulder, called out, “Okay you two...” her shrill preoccupied voice dropping into an unintelligible self-consultation. We knew what she meant. Okay you two, fight it out, but do it silently so I don’t have to stop what I’m doing, and interrupt what interests me. Okay you two, stop the noise so I don’t have to run
the risk of stopping your father from knocking the shit out of both of you—besides, now you’re both old enough to take your share of the pounding if you can’t avoid aggravating him.

I love my sister, but it is a wary love, an eyes open love fully cognizant of how much damage intimacy and close proximity can allow. A dirty undercut is usually dirty because the fighters are locked in each other’s arms.

*Loving Marla probably taught me the how to shore up the openings I needed to accept Tim so deeply. No one but me would ever look and Marla and Tim and see similar resemblances, but I knew them best, loved them best, and bore the pain their closeness had to offer.*

When Marla settled in Maddy Bay, her letters came rarely and revealed little detail about who she had matured into or who she might eventually become. Instead, through a few short letters, random Christmas cards, and sporadic postcards, I grow versed in snippets of hill country weather: dry, dry, hot and drier. I know how she bought five acres through the Texas Homestead Act, and
how little cash is needed to buy a trailer in dire need of repair—handiwork that Marla can do.

I have learned the true color of bluebonnets, and the rapid growth cycle of determined native grasses has dominated the scant pages she has mailed to me while I traveled the circuit. She has little to say to me about the meaning of her life but somehow she always knows where I am and when I will be in the next little town for a one, two, or three-night rodeo. We speak on the phone rarely, but when we do the rain and snow prevalent to the places I prefer—Iowa, Michigan, the Dakotas, Wyoming and Montana, fascinate her. Her vocabulary lacks terms for lush vegetation, excessive moisture, and abundant refreshing fluids. Her only awareness of the possibility of life-giving water is when tremendous thunder-packed gullywashers blow in from the gulf, the water scouring the hills and causing close to rape-like damage.

She chose her acreage where there was only one other neighbor, Daniel and Susan Riley, Tim’s parents. Across the road and down two miles, west of a geographically significant crest, this couple ranches several hundred acres of land held by generations of Rileys. Marla began writing letters more frequently after meeting
one of their younger daughters, who became a real favorite of my sister.

Josey arrived on Marla’s square of packed dirt the morning after Marla threw her three duffel bags in the unlockable front door, one of the many broken details, of her trailer. Early Saturday, a dust cloud poured down the road, up the drive, sliding to a gravel slinging stop next to Marla’s feet where she lay under her primer gray GMC half-ton pickup, wiring up the exhaust pipe. She rolled out spitting sand, “What the hell is the matter with you?” She was quick to duck the mincing hooves of a spotted pony. The ten-year-old handling the pony demanded,

“Who are you? I’m Josephine Pamela Riley, but everyone calls me Josey, and I actually know who you are, you’re the new mechanic at Clark’s on West, my dad saw you there yesterday, and my mother says that if the army used you as a mechanic, then, by God, Maddy Bay better let you be a mechanic too. What are you fixing on your truck? Can I help?”
I had a hard time imagining Marla’s face during this conversation. Rarely is she taken in by the same approaches most of the rest of us find appealing—childlike ingenuousness. But what I could see clearly was that Marla’s letters came more frequently after Josey pushed into my sister’s gray space. The black ink on blue lined, three-holed notebook paper described red roper boots, saddles with silver conches, a German Shepherd mixed breed pup named Maxwell, flying dismounts, and mail delivered by saddle bag every afternoon. Marla’s work hours and Josey’s school hours began and ended at the same time and afternoon cookie breaks became the first domestic ritual in which Marla ever participated.

*I was so painfully jealous. I took all the lumps my big sister ever had to give and some little mouthy stranger got all the sugar. I wanted to remind Marla that she hated baking cookies, that she had never even liked horses, never loved them like I had, like I do.*

I know a lot about why Marla and Josey paired off so completely. Josey exuded the same kind of defiance that has always driven Marla. Driven her from our home under the Chocolate
Mountains in California, driven her from being able to speak in a civil fashion to her father, driven her from a successful military career, driven her from satisfying closeness with other adults, or with her siblings.

When Josey and her father, Dan Riley, fought over practicing the banjo, what feed ration best boosted egg production in Josey’s Red Rock hens, how long her stirrups had to be, how dyed her hair couldn’t be, and what horse to ride, I know Marla was right there on the edges, probably wondering if things would go better for Josey. I believe my sister prayed for Josey in ways she could never pray for herself. I believe Marla prayed for that child in the same ways I prayed for my sister—

Grant her peace, in silence come to her and let her know comfort, dampen the fire yet sustain the warmth, protect her because she won’t, and, fuck, I can’t.

Marla watched Josey fight for and win the very same square half-inches of growing room that Marla had also demanded and forcefully taken. She said,
“Josey, does it really matter if your dad puts them up a notch? Can’t you just ride behind the barn and drop them without it being a scene?”

I heard my sister repeat to Josey the same admonitions I had offered her, and Josey ignored her also in the same way I had been ignored. Seldom did Marla openly share her concerns for Josey with me. But gradually, watching Marla watch Josey, I learned that every punch Marla had landed on my body was the exclamation point letting me know that she really had heard every word I said. Years later, adding wisdom and maturation to understanding, the pounding still hurts. I understand her more, but I don’t truly forgive her for punishing me so thoroughly.

Josey argued with Marla, practicing for confrontations with Dan, “YOU know it matters, it matters so much, it matters now because it will matter even more later, and you know it best.” Her riding crop slapped the side view mirror on Marla’s truck, right across where Marla’s still face gazed out. Josey spent the slow, warm evenings of her teenage years riding away into acquiescent pastures, moving cattle from crest to valley, and from dried ponds
to slow pumping windmill-fed tanks. Marla helped her with her banjo lessons and Josey reminded Marla of how fun it is to ride horses. Marla seldom rode with me in California, and I was grateful for that. Competition marred most horseback outings we shared. I was the prize-winning barrel racer and Marla gradually grew indifferent to riding, preferring to gun down dusty roads in trucks to meet older guys who bought her green bottles of malt liquor and taught her early how to clean up after drunks.

But with Josey instructing, Marla regained her seat and confidence. “Your ride with your legs, Marla, not your butt. Pick your hands up, let go of the pommel. . .move with him, WITH him, that old nag won’t take you anywhere that Skunk and I can’t bring you back from. “Josey’s mount, Skunk, was evidence of Marla and Josey working together in defiance of Dan Riley’s plans for directing his daughter’s life. Josey outgrew her pinto pony right about the time that Dan wanted to introduce new bloodlines to his roping quarterhorse breeding program. For Josey’s thirteenth birthday gift, he had traveled throughout Texas, eventually,
thoughtfully, critically choosing a stunning sorrel mare from a big name El Paso breeding ranch.

Susan had tried to warn him, “Dan, I know you think this is the perfect horse for Josey. That mare is a beauty and any girl would love her. You are being very generous, but honey, Josey isn’t any girl. You should know by now that the harder you work to please her, the harder she goes in the other direction.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Susan, Josey is a little girl and she will ride what I give her.”

“Dan, she’s not a little girl anymore, she has her own ideas.”

While this argument circled in Dan and Susan’s kitchen, Josey and Marla initiated other plans to get Josey the horse she really wanted. I’m not sure what part Marla actually played in the subterfuge, and sometimes I think she was just the woman who drove the truck. Either way, just before Dan’s big family presentation of the perfect horse for his prize daughter, Marla and Josey arrived at the Liberty Hill mustang relocation center. They had been visiting and getting an off color, throwback-marked young mustang stud accustomed to Josey enough to get him loaded in a trailer. When she was ready to bring him home safely, Josey started pleading with her father. She pleaded, begged, and
cried for three days. While accustomed to arguing, Dan surrendered when Josey abandoned all tactics but tears. After much muttering and pacing, he finally uttered one last, “Goddamn it,” and accompanied them to the relocation center after setting one condition—Josey had to bridle the stud colt alone. Marla never even dropped her eyes when Josey stopped crying instantly, laughed in her father’s face, and hollered, “Get the trailer.” As angry as he was, Dan could only grit his teeth in respect when Josey brought that colt to hand.

Skunk, a high color horse showing Spanish ancestry with a black dorsal line and black points, had been shipped in from the ranges of north central Wyoming. Free-range mustangs are as similar to ranch bred quarter horses as coyotes are to Labrador Retrievers. Not mean, but generations tough and feral. Months passed and Dan watched Josey work her horse for hours under punishing sun and through morose winter rains. Josey trained Skunk daily, kept her grades up, managed her chickens and her dog, and actually started getting along better in general with her father. She was different than Marla in that respect. Marla and Dad never got along, even when we all pointed out that they were
just like one another, they never managed to work out whatever it was that stood between them.

Josey was seventeen when Dan Riley finally admitted,

“Well, looks like that’s the perfect horse for you.” He was trying to set up friendly ground on a new battlefront he and Josey were just engaging. Dan had put a deposit down on his daughter’s college education at Texas A&M, where he planned for her to study business management and accounting. Josey was tentatively planning a move to Austin to play bluegrass music for “just a couple of years, dad, please!” She hadn’t been able to cry her way into this desire.

“What in hell is that supposed to mean, a couple of years?”

“I don’t know, I can’t put a definite time to it, I just want to take a little time to play music and see where I can go.”

“Who’s going to help your mom around here, you know you’re the only one left to do—“

She interrupted his litany, “To do what? To do chores! Follow your plans. Settle for mother’s life. Be good at anybody’s business and life except my own. I’m not saying I won’t help you out, I just want to play a little music for a little while.”
“And who is supposed to support you and that damn mustang while you ‘do music?’ Nobody can ride him except you, I can’t afford to have him standing in the lot eating his head off while you run around Austin all night, every night, wasting time with that banjo. I’m telling you Josey, if you go to Austin, I’ll sell that nag off, and we both know only Kent’s dogfood plant will buy his sorry ass. I will, Josey, I swear.”

“Stop it! Stop it! That’s not true, you’re just threatening me to get me to do what you want—“

When Josey reached the screaming level, Susan waded into the fight, “Both of you stop it, you two! Dan, you’re not selling Skunk to pay back Josey for being exactly like you-determined, stubborn! And Josey, you’re not heading to Austin just yet.” No solution developed and over the following weeks the fighting moved to a deeper, more silent level that excluded Susan.

*Marla’s letters had been getting longer and looser about the time Josey and Dan were fighting through her passage into young adulthood. I never would have guessed Marla could even write with depth. Sometimes between the lines I tried to read my sister’s regrets and guess at what words she would have changed if she*
had a chance to do her teenage years over again. Sometimes I imagined Marla in her trailer at night reworking the script from Josey, Dan and Susan, and making everything turn out better for them than it had for our family. I am sure Marla would have Dan and Josey still speaking to one another, daily family conversations, comfortable and bonded with intimate silences, rather than peering at each other across a thousand miles of desert with lips sealed shut so that leaking hearts wouldn’t betray them. My sister missed my dad, he missed his firstborn, but both of them insisted the other call first. Now he’s dead and it is too late, despite what Hallmark cards declare about love never being too late. But that story is the second funeral.

Late spring, Josey, Skunk, and Maxwell went out to gather the cattle. It was 7:00 p.m. on a blue, empty, cloud-covered evening when kildeer calls echoed for a mile. Marla heard her laughing across the hills as Josey rode up to the high ridge west of the trailer. An abandoned quarry sank into the bitten spine of the crest like an abscess. This was Josey’s meditation hideaway—her cooling spot where she sat and collected herself every evening before driving the cattle down to water. The huge hole was strewn
with discarded blocks of granite, bigger than hen houses, where crumbling, caving edges slid tons of shale down to shallow, stretching pools of water lined with cattails, willows, and sprouting cottonwoods. Owls lived here. Josey wrote music lyrics and took afternoon naps here, dreaming.

Josey died here. A sudden squall shoved up over the crest like only thunderstorms can arrive over open prairie: wicked fast and immense with pent-up energy. Small raindrops woke her from the bed of red Burma grass she lay curled upon. Skunk lifted his head, peering up over the west wall of the quarry watching the flocks of wildly scurrying shapes only mustangs, coyotes, and cats can see. Maxwell was whining, but Skunk stood rock steady when thunder came pounding and lightning traced untrue pathways through the darkening and disappearing landscape.

Skunk gave Josey everything she called for. She pushed him to run through the punishing force of the storm, and she yelled for more when he would have instinctively slowed to measure his footing. Her legs and hands drove him on until he flattened out into the streak she knew he could be from all the dry, pale, thin afternoons she had raced him down sedate country roadsides. He
hit slick shale and crashed down sideways on his right shoulder, flipping three times, crushing Josey on the first blow.

It took them all night into the next morning to find her. Marla helped. Josey's favorite brother, Tim, sped up from Houston when his mother called after they found the dead girl. I hauled ass down country as fast as the cover of night, open highway, and pulling a four-horse trailer would allow. Marla had never before called me for help, and never since.

She told me that Dan came to her door late at night crying. The storm blew out as fast as it had risen overhead, and under a waxing moon she went with them on horseback to search the pastures. Maxwell wasn't any help, he went straight into his dog coop during the storm and wouldn't come out even when Susan pulled Dan off and he was no longer kicking and yelling. Marla was in the lead when the three of them rode up to the knoll, but Dan first spotted the still breathing hulk that was Skunk collapsed on the ground. Marla thinks Dan said, "How stupid," but so softly she wasn't sure. He fired one round into the horse with the broken back and rode away. Susan and Marla had to struggle to pull Josey free, careful in handling her smashed face.
I worry about Marla. I didn’t know the full answer to the question she asked as soon as were alone, “Have you ever seen our dad cry?” Concretely? No, I haven’t seen him cry. Yes, I know he misses you. No I don’t know why he doesn’t send you a birthday card, do you know why you don’t send him one? Of course it not too late to change, its never too late, is it? Just call him, the number’s the same its always been, just say hi, tell him you just got home from a funeral. Now we know what we didn’t know then, that Marla would be too late in calling our dad, and I’m sorry that things worked out that way for her. But I don’t know what else I could do. Marla lost something huge when Josey was buried. And I met the love of my life, her brother, Tim Riley.
“If logic tells us that life is a meaningless accident, says Ecclesiastes at the end of his journey, don’t give up on life, give up on logic... If logic tells you that in the long run, nothing makes a difference because we all die and disappear, than don’t live in the long run.”

--Harold Kushman
I was in eastern Iowa when Marla found me via the telephone. Very early in the morning in the motel room the phone started ringing and I was sure it was my mother, the only person who called whenever she liked regardless of sunrise, how late the party ran the night before, or who else might be sharing the room. My mother thought that bearing children constituted unlimited access to our lives. She asserted this opinion in many ways including choosing our clothing even up through high school. I remember she told the hairdresser to cut off my long hair when I was fifteen because she thought it was cuter short. I went in for a trim not knowing my mother had called ahead, and I left with hair six inches shorter and the stunned feeling of someone who had done something wrong but really wouldn’t have if only anyone would have explained the rules ahead of time. However, knowing the rules ahead of time in this situation wouldn’t have helped, for my mother is quick footed and flexible and changes the rules fast enough to always win. She can at times be a clever bitch.

My mother often calls me, asserts a few pithy observations, “Anne, you’re gaining too much weight again, your butt looked really big in that last photo you sent,” then rapidly has to go to “take care of business.” I have learned to not interrupt her flow with realistic responses like, “Uh, gee, I get the big butt from your side of the family.”
Her business used to be only taking care of my dad, but since he died, she really does have a business to take care of, the ranch, our Silver Belle. I often think that ranching would absorb all her energy, but maybe telling a grown daughter how to wear makeup and what kind of underwear to buy, as well as sending coupons and recipes ahead of me on the circuit, is her leisure time hobby. The announcers and wives of the stock company owners laugh when I roll in and they deliver my mail. I open little yellow or green envelopes with smiling raccoon stickers on the outside, and the only contents are coupons for Playtex tampons, Seven Seas Light salad dressing, Fresh Cut, salt-free canned vegetables, and Blue Bonnet margarine. She knows I don’t cook when I’m on the road, but Timmy always did and I think that sometimes she sends recipes and coupons because she can’t talk directly about missing him. I retaliate with postcards from trucker’s restaurants. The last postcard I sent was a photo of an Idaho truck stop, the “Baked Potato” which had a huge concrete spud imbedded in front of the doorway. The designer of this seven-foot, half-ton potato had included curved spots like eyes forming. The snow collected atop looks like a huge dollop of sour cream. I wrote on the back of the card, “Dear Mother, Roads clear and sun warm—but wind holding me back from making time. Had cherry pie with melting vanilla ice cream here and
met some big old guy who wanted me to shack up on the spot. Gave him your number, don’t give him my name. Hah! Love, Anne.”

I always have to write “Hahl” so she knows I’m only kidding. You would think she would know by now that I did eat the pie and meet the guy, but that I can’t remember her phone number to give out anyway. Hah. But, the phone ringing wasn’t mother. If she had called she would have impersonally insulted me, hung up and then called right back with just “one more little thing.” Go to the dentist. Look at the bull at Prasil Angus in Roland, Iowa. Write to my great aunt, Alta. Pay my Discover card on time.

But the phone ringing was Marla calling and all she said was, “Yeah, its me. Yeah, you know that Josey? The little neighbor girl—well she had an accident and we’re burying her in a couple days—you coming this way maybe?”


I-35 is a good route to Texas. Rolling south through north west Missouri is pretty clear until around Kansas City. Passing through eastern Kansas, the highway flows around reserviors, hits moderately open prairie covered with sunflowers and orange butterfly weed.
Black-eyed Susans and white oxtail daisies still mark the westward migration of the Sante Fe trail. There is another slow down around Wichita, then Tulsa, and Dallas clogs up everything. But, I went down as fast as I could. Marla has never asked me for anything.

*Even when we were children and it would have been easy to ask for something she wanted from me; she could not say “give me” the red crayon, half your slice of watermelon, help me write this paper so I can pass out of high school, loan me a pair of pantyhose, I need a Kleenex, I want a sister who adores me for no reason other than because I am Marla and you are my little sister, Anne. Sometimes I think the reason she could ask nothing of me when we were young was because I was always ready to give so much. I wanted to be Marla and she rejected me just as wholly because she must have known she could barely take care of herself, let alone be responsible for a little sister. I don’t know. Maybe I now give Marla too much credit for knowing, just like I did when we were very young.*

A tall, wide shouldered young man came down the steps of Marla’s trailer. She had built an expanded porch skirting the entire front end of the trailer, taking the most advantage of a stand of native
locust trees looming and rustling as abundantly as any green thing can in the sweltering heart of Texas hill country. If I said I noticed the great porch before I noticed the great looking guy I’d be a liar. But he and I eventually sat there in the shade for so long that I now probably know the dimensions of the porch inch by inch.

“You must be Anne, Marla asked me to wait here for you, I’m Tim Riley, Josey’s brother.”

Ga Ga. No, I didn’t actually say that, I choked it back just in time.

“Yes, I’m Anne and I’m sorry to hear about your sister.” I stopped there because I didn’t know the details yet and even in the heat of mild, instant lust, or maybe just Texas heat stroke, I could see this man’s genuine sadness. My brother would not look that sad if either Marla or I died. He would look angry and he would scorn us for carelessness or stupidity or some personal fault that made us guilty for our death, but he would never let his face look as open, worn, and grief stricken as this stranger standing in front of me. I wanted to hear his story but was afraid to ask.

My horse called out and the interruption helped move Tim and I past the first few moments when strangers size one another up and
check dimensions against memories of others to see if a pleasant association will occur or a hostile threat will be recognized.

I said, “Can you help me unload Saber?” He handled my gelding surely and I caught myself watching him closely; I was absorbed enough to almost start flirting, but remembered just in time why I was in Texas. After staking out the horse in back with water, we moved into the shade covering Marla’s porch and he told me what had happened to Josey. When not driving, riding, or screwing around, I am usually uncomfortable in a vague kind of way, so while Tim talked, I smiled or frowned as needed, nodded occasionally, locked my hands in my lap, and started counting things.

Seventeen large locust trees line the west side of Marla’s yard. Fifty-two, stunted scrub trees of various types create a half circle behind Tim’s head. Sixteen wide planks make up the main section of the porch with seven shallow steps leading down to the ground and two up to her door. The west side of the trailer has six windows. Each window is divided into three horizontal sections. Tim’s white linen shirt has seven buttons. The inseam of his jeans is thirty-eight inches—I’m certain. The sole of his right boot, propped up on a concrete block, has one hundred, seven stitches. Three clouds cruised by slowly while Tim talked. Not even one car rolled by. Twenty-one
crows stopped in the trees nearby. Another kind of bird, something on
the ground, called from the ditch twelve times, and it sounded as if it
were saying, “Now, do it, do it, do it. Now, do it, do it, do it.” Later,
after the funeral, and after Tim and I had connected in a physically
intimate fashion, I asked him what kind of bird makes that call and
he said he had heard any birds calling. He hadn’t seen any crows or
clouds, didn’t remember if Marla even had a porch or that we had
staked my horse out back to graze. Tim said that the only thing he
remembered was how closely I listened to him and how the sun was
shining behind my head that whole afternoon, turning my brown hair
red like fire and blackening out the rest of my features like I was a
church icon. I guess he didn’t recognize me for a rather taller than
average, mildly horny barrel racer. I asked Tim what kind of church
has pictures of women with blank features and fiery halos and he
said, “Maybe something Catholic like, a big, quiet church, very old
and dark, where the only light comes in through thick, colored
windows and a man can only enter if a woman will personally open
the door.”

I’ve heard some good lines before, some poetic, some even
philosophic, and most earnest, and I wanted to laugh. But his tone
made me pause and wonder if he was being thoughtful. How odd.
The funeral was mercifully short. Dan Riley stood surrounded by six other children and Susan, but he looked terribly alone regardless. He couldn’t stand up straight and pull his shoulders back and he kept grimacing as if his lips wouldn’t stay pulled over his teeth. Only Marla looked more alone than Dan and that was with me standing within inches of her the whole time. Tim and I had talked on her porch for about three hours before Marla finally arrived home. She never said where she had been and I decided that her unexplained absence was just one of those propitious moments we enter when we are fated to meet the needed person or opportunity that moves our life ahead into the next major piece of our existence.

We all dropped handfuls of Texas sand onto Josey’s casket. It shooshed in and swirled up and back out again, the wind refusing final rest for our metaphoric gesture. I recognized the tension building in Marla’s shoulders and stepped out of reach. I know the length from her shoulder to her wrist and automatically add six inches, while keeping a close eye on in which direction her pelvis tilts. I wished for a shovel and for everyone to leave so Marla could fill in the hole herself. But I knew that the presiding priest wouldn’t allow a disruption of his control over one of the few occasions he had this little flock member
engaged. Only in death would Josey have stayed around to listen to him, and he was probably the only person there who didn’t know that.

Tim stepped up to me, his suit hanging nicely, and I wanted to lean into his soft voice and wet eyes. He asked me to get a drink with him and we both knew we needed some kind of fluid that would defeat the parched out feeling left by the graveside service. Sex has always been that kind of water for me. Sex has always been fun and easy, and the only way I know of making the counting stop in my head. I took Tim to my traveling rig and we squeezed into my narrow bunk and drank each other up. Later Tim told me that he was thinking scotch when he mentioned thirst, but wasn’t going to turn down my alternative once I had started unbuttoning my silk blouse. When my breasts hung free Tim decided whatever I was serving he would take straight up, no rocks.

First time sex with Tim, cramped into a hot bunk wasn’t great but it was good enough. I didn’t expect great physical harmony and I don’t think Tim cared either. We both were out for a short, calm ride that would momentarily erase the picture of Josey buried so young. The casket was closed due to the shape her face was in and I still wonder what it takes to erase the memory of her damage from the
minds of Susan and Marla. Dan was smart to ride away and preserve for his last look at her the face angrily fighting with him—maybe.

So sex with Tim was pretty normal, but afterwards he wanted to talk. At first I didn’t recognize those cues. When he started rustling around, I practiced a seasoned door-opening line, “Hey, it’s really hot in here, put on your pants and I’ll open the door.” That was usually enough of a hint for the men I was involved with to accept the chance to dress and leave easily, both of us knowing that all was okay on both sides of the matter. Sometimes I had to roll a few mildly unwilling drunks out the door, but usually I chose more wisely and seldom was stuck with guys that wanted to hang around. Talkers were even more rare. Tim reached for his shirt, but only to pull out a short newspaper clipping. The two and a half column inches, including headline, of Josey’s obituary was solemn and bare. Tim read it to me,

“Fall From Horse is Fatal for Woman. A eighteen year old woman died after she fell from a horse and struck her head. Josephine Riley, of Maddy Bay, was rounding up cattle about 7:30 p.m. Friday in a pasture when her horse slipped during a sudden rainstorm and fell on her, according to a Lampasas County Sheriff’s
Department report. Searchers found her body early the next morning after the storm had stopped. Donations can be made in her name to the Liberty Hill Mustang Relocation Center.” I didn’t understand why Tim came to me for sex for a fix then had to read the clipping.

He said, “How can three sentences tell Josey’s story? Are they thinking that everyone knew her, so we’ll all just fill in the details and that’s the end?”

Tim had more short, blunt questions. This was the first time I noticed he was like Marla. If a person has the ability to shape the heart of the matter into such a direct question, surely they have a strong semblance for the answer as well, don’t they? But Marla and Tim could never carry their insight to any kind of logical conclusions. Answers always seemed easier to me—because that’s the way it is. In my opinion, wanting something to be different has little effect on life. Things just are. I didn’t tell Tim any of my own thoughts, like, shut up, she’s dead and maybe better off for it. I couldn’t explain how I could be sad for her dying young, yet relieved her struggle was over early. So I revert to my favorite answer, because that’s the way it is.

When Tim died and I distributed his belongings, I found that same clipping, now yellowed, in the inside breast pocket of the lovely gray suit I had peeled off of him after the funeral. Years after we had met,
that suit still fit him as well as it had at Josey’s funeral. He looked fine buried in gray.

I liked Tim, but I was just figuring to add him to my list as number fifty-eight. True, we laughed together easily and his hands were as gentle and sure with me as they were with my horse, but I was satisfied with rodeoing and he was desk jockeying in Houston—accounting or something like that. Apparently Tim had gotten the degree that Dan Riley wanted for Josey, but then refused to stay on their ranch, instead moving to the gulf and leading an urbanized life that included sailing on weekends and a couple of blond lawyers with long legs and no knowledge of how to gather eggs. Tim and I spent two nights jammed into my dropdown bunk, and when I said goodbye to Marla and pulled out heading for New Mexico, I left him standing by his Ford Probe. I planned on quickly finding a few good cowboys to wash away the sensation of Tim’s closeness. He was really good looking and funny, but I never would have guessed that he was The One for me.

The first thing Marla had said to me when I arrived was “Have you ever seen our dad cry?” The last thing she said while I loaded Saber and Tim moved out of earshot was, “Anne, you’re going to make
him cry,” and, annoyed, I thought she was still pressuring me to explain dad. Maybe I misheard her like she misheard Dan Riley say “How stupid.”

*Anne, you’re going to make Tim cry.*
"I am satisfied with the mystery of life
and with the awareness and a glimpse of the marvelous structure
of the existing world,
together with the devoted striving to comprehend a portion,
be it ever so tiny, of the Reason that manifests itself in nature."
--Albert Einstein
Yes, like other men I have been involved with, I did eventually make Tim cry. But that makes our relationship exactly like any other couple’s—at least of those who stay together. The only defense I offer is that I never made him cry by lying to him. I was always up front with Tim about what I wanted and how I wanted to go about getting my needs met. I wanted to rodeo. I didn’t want children then, if ever. I wanted to spend my money on boots, horses, my truck and rig, and I wasn’t interested in buying any hot, dry land in central Texas. I had no interest in living in Texas at any point. Also, Tim knew from day one that eventually I wanted more education, to go on from my bachelor’s in animal sciences. Sometimes, when I remember what it felt like to dance close in Tim’s arms, I have an idea about why Tim never heard me say these things as directly as I believe I said them. Because when we were close and happy, which really was most of the time we were together, we spent little time thinking. Our minutes, hours, and weeks together were spent satisfying skin hunger. Now, without Tim’s long back to rest against at night, I’m back in that place where I can’t stop the thinking, and sex with strangers simply doesn’t shut off the obsessing like it used to do for me.
In New Mexico I won a big prize that carried me to Las Vegas in time for National Finals. I had been winning fairly regularly and had some money saved up so I could rest Saber and myself for a few days before the events began. Not knowing Josey that well, I wasted little time trying to puzzle out any meaning from the erratic, wasteful death of a young rider and a fine mustang. Even when my best friend Rose came to town I didn’t tell her about Josey. I mentioned I had swung through Texas and she was surprised that I had visited Marla, but she knew not to ask for the details. Everyone knows I like to party, dance, and talk a lot, but few recognize that I seldom actually talk about myself.

She said, “Anne, you’re kinda quiet lately. What’s up?” I just smiled and said,

“My new boots are too tight and Saber’s new shoes are too loose, same old story.” But Rose is too sharp for that patter. She is a tiny woman with long nails, a two pack a day habit, and big hair that sweeps down around her dried up, hawkish features. She says she is part Cherokee, but I think if that were true, she would be taller and her hair much darker. Besides, I know her mother’s family is from New York and I don’t think the Cherokee ever traveled that way. Although, some days she is such a better rider
than I am, and never trains at it, that I start to see why she would say “Yeah, Cherokee,” to spectators who linger around the trailers after her performance on the barrels. That still doesn’t make sense though because I don’t think Cherokee were plains natives, or even part of a horse owning culture until the Georgia government forced part of them to march to Oklahoma. When I first told Rose this, she laughed and said, “You think too much.” She reminds me of this on a regular basis and teases me about what good my college degree does me on Sunday mornings when the two of us split a “2 biscuits for 2 dollars” deal at Hardees because neither of us has won a pot for a while. But, all in all, a rodeo scholarship paid for my college degree, so I figure I’m not out much however if all turns out.

Rose smiles crookedly—it is her winning feature, hoists herself up onto a well wheel, lights a long Marlboro light and I know from her first deep inhale that I’m in for a grilling. That’s okay. Having friends like Rose is probably why I don’t end up as separate from society as Marla. She slides her words out pertly, layered in cooling blue smoke,

“Okay, who is he?”
I don’t waste time evading Rose. “Actually, no-one you know. I met him in Texas at Marla’s. He’s not on the circuit.”

“When will you see him again?”

“I won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Why should I?” Okay. I immediately broke the rule about evading Rose. “What makes you think this guy is someone I want to see again.” She draws smoke in slowly and tips her head to one side, chin up.

“I don’t know why you want to see him again, I just know that you have been vacant around here, not looking at the guys looking at you, not tying that gelding into knots in the training arena, and you’re not eating much lately.” Oh great, now Rose can join with my mother in commenting about my weight. Rose, who weighs all of eighty-eight pounds, watching what I eat?

“I don’t know what to tell you. I just met some guy--the brother of a friend of Marla’s. We slept together for a couple nights and I moved on to New Mexico, and as far as I know, he went back to business in Houston.” I don’t know why I didn’t tell Rose about Josey and how Tim had reacted so strongly to her death. Rose would have understood him better than I and probably would have
had something helpful to say. But, instead, I started creating that private space that only couples inhabit. Instead, I told Rose about the tight jeans and the gray suit and his dark hungry eyes, but I didn't tell her about the brief newspaper clipping he carried with him. How odd.

National Finals was a hoot and I made some money, enough to offset the expenses of a couple weeks in Las Vegas, and then continued on driving the circuit, heading north. Only on storming nights did I think much about Tim. When lightning rocked the KOA campgrounds I preferred staying in overnight, I would think just a little about Josey, and then welcome the memory of Tim as an alternative. If I couldn't find someone real and warm, that is.

Rose and I parted at Las Vegas without plans for the next time we would see each other. Rose was married to a man who had been fighting cancer for a long time, and she traveled more slowly and with more care than I. Keith was a good man and loved Rose as loyally as possible. But one look at the bones breaking through his skin at the pressure points and the lesions around his mouth and I can only say loyalty doesn't affect dying other than to slow it down and draw it out. I was uncomfortable around him most of the time. I
say that Keith’s painful condition was the reason I avoided Rose to convince myself that Rose couldn’t see the change in me that I hadn’t yet recognized. Falling in love as a concept was stupid in my opinion. People should plan. People are responsible and can make choices. So, I guess my choice was to not pay attention to myself. Denial is almost always a blatant invitation for fate to take control. I know better than to give fate an opening. In farming life, not taking control is the easiest and fastest way to lose a limb to grinding machinery, or a life to a livestock accident. Josey shouldn’t have ridden that mustang so hard. I avoid thinking about her because I can only conclude that Josey knew better than that.

The phone rang in the hotel room early in the evening this time. I was too tired to want to find a campground, so I rented a motel room and left my room number with the chamber of commerce man who was staging the Cottonwood Falls rodeo. I should have remembered that the last phone call I had received had been Marla calling me, and when the room echoed once again, I should have been more careful. I should have been more prepared to hear Marla’s voice over the phone again, only this time from California. “Anne. Come
home—now. Dad’s dead.” When the phone rang, I should have bolted out into the evening, down to the Red Wheel tavern to join Scott and James who both owed me beers.

I drove south, then west more slowly this time. I hoped I might arrive too late to endure wrangling about what songs to play at the church service or the wake. My aunt Mary insisted on *Home on the Range?* But, the same internal bond that lets Marla know wherever I am, is the same internal bond holding time still so that I arrived home just in time to join my family at graveside. Pulling slowly over the hill, in the distance I could see people drifting with the windblown sand, a tall man clasping his Stetson with both hands (*only Samuel could be that tall*), and two older women arm in arm wearing incongruous short, white gloves (*Mary and Sharon, thinking the gloves were delicate and classy*). The women pulled their skirts tight, slightly knotting at the knee the dark, printed polyester. A young couple followed them carrying toddlers (*Allan and Becky with Jill, Amy, and RuthAnn—all under the age of four. Still no son and no birth control*). She held a check scarf over her face and the face of the daughter clasped against her, while he carried the other two. He elbowed the little family towards where
several pickups parked in a crowd, noses out in all directions, quiet, yet ready to bolt from whatever moved in with the punishing wind. Here in the rain shadow of the Chocolate Mountains of southeastern California, katabatic winds rushed unfettered down the broken face of the mountain range and late fall dryness added dust from harvested soybeans, chaff from cut corn, and minute inorganic particles that gouged knicks and razored fine cuts on cheekbones, brows and soft lips. Head down, her back turned against glazed blue sky—a sky blown out with enamel crackling, Marla waited alone by the grave.

From hundreds of yards away I watched the pieces of my family break out into familiar patterns. The same people rode in the same vehicles in the same order of coming and going that had probably been established when the Clarkes first walked from the Appalachians through Kentucky and Missouri to join a Sante Fe trail wagon train jumping off in Kansas City. A whole branch of Clarke brothers, uncles and cousins, with a haphazard collection of Scotch Irish brides, and at least one young runaway, Sarai McLaughlin who couldn’t watch Jackson Mical Clarke walk away forever. The Clarkes left West Virginia with twenty-seven children under the age of seventeen and arrived in Arizona territory several
months later with only six children left. Many are buried in a group in a cholera cemetery marking a creek crossing in eastern Kansas. One child wandered off in the Oklahoma night, one tall young teenager drowned crossing a quicksand-laced river, and influenza took the rest. Standing at the edge of the family burying ground, gripping the iron fencing delineating this rectangle from the rest of the high desert grazing ground, I read the headstones for the hundredth time: Rachel, beloved dau, 1886-1888. The twins, sons of Frederick and Maylene, age 7. Rubicon June, Mother, 1811-1887. Ongelica, wife of Ramsey Clarke, 1863-1893. Bethene, second wife of Ramsey Clarke, 1893-1894.

Ramsey lies buried between his two wives and I wonder if he ever bothered to try again. Losing two young wives in two years, or twins and all siblings but one in five years, or newborns, or strong, full grown daughters gives me a glimpse into why my mother, or all mothers, throttle their own children with control, rather than lose them to the strangers of disease, accident, laziness, or worse even, nothing but chance. I pull weeds up from the old stones, a task I chose when I was very young and continue to maintain whenever I visit home.
“Anne?” He spoke up shyly. I had miscounted the crowd while on the hilltop and missed the stranger among us. Tim Riley stood before me, one hand on Marla’s elbow, his other hand reaching for my waist. “I brought Marla home.”

Home? Like this uninformed man could bring my sister to a place she had never been to before—home? He drove her to southeastern California, but Marla has yet to find her home.

Aunt Emma pushed in between Tim and I. She didn’t know him and like the other fierce mothers of our clan, he wasn’t touching one of the Clarke children until she knew more about him. If she could have gracefully taken his hand from Marla’s elbow, she would have. As it was, Marla pulled loose from him and looked at me to see if I was reading her.

Okay, I know you will make him cry, but I brought him for you anyway. Marla needed his help finding her way back to Blythe about as much as I needed it.
"I was lucky to be in Maddy Bay when Marla was packing to go home. I was glad to help out. You and Marla were good to me when Josey died and I want to--"

I passed out. The last thing I remember was the sound of gulls screaming overhead. I know they come in from the ocean riding currents high over the mountains, but hearing the gulls, I suddenly felt as if I were stepping through white, wasteful froth and foam of spreading waters, regularly washing in and out again. The waves docilely murmured "Always the same, we are, we are always the same." For a moment I heeded the call of the ocean, a recruiting pledge promising depth and stability. Salt glanced across my wind-scored cheeks and the sting—was my brother Will slapping me awake and ranting. How comforting it was to me for someone to be acting completely in accord.

“What’s wrong with you? Get up off the ground and stop acting foolish.” If he knew all the foolish behaviors I practiced regularly, he probably would have left me lying facedown in the sand. But I knew he was concerned in his own way. Some people show concern by helping, others show concern by being angry, and I usually start counting things. Tim’s dark eyes have seven golden spots in them, more in the left eye than in the right. Gull screams
continued to rebound from flock of more than fifty circling a field of cabbages across the road from our grazing land. They were hard to count. Flopping down and shaking their wings in the mist of irrigation pipelines, they gleaned worms from the developing heads, and Tim placed a hand in the small of my back and began pushing me towards my truck. I could hear Emma talking about me wearing tight pants to my own father’s funeral, and then falling down. Clarke women don’t faint. We can be awkwardly clumsy, or exhausted, and fall flat on our asses, but we don’t swoon. Our brothers and fathers, uncles and cousins never take our elbows and escort us anywhere. Tim’s concern and gentle grip on me stood out in the harsh environment like an oasis. Part of me wanted to camel up on that man and drink deep.

But in the background ran the familiar gossiping sound of physically isolated women. I rarely relax around my family and couldn’t focus on what Tim was offering against the still circling hum of critical talk. I didn’t have to hear Emma’s exact words to know what was being said. My clothes. My hair. My makeup. My earrings. How I spend the money I make. How I don’t make as much money as it seems. How I don’t own my truck and rig, the bank does. . . I try not to take the talk personally. Everyone is
talked about equally. The difference is—it hurts me more. I don’t know why. I am tough and strong, but I can’t ignore criticism like Marla does. I can’t dish it out freely like Will does. I can stand back and recognize it is part of our family encoding, but I can’t embrace the system. Or won’t.

Emma loves me. I know that. But she can’t stop beating me up, beating me down, squashing the part of me that got me out of the area, a college education, and a life beyond the reach of Chocolate Mountain Clarke clan. Emma and my father, Kyle, were very close as sister and brother in the middle of a big set of siblings. Before Kyle there were three girls, and after Kyle there were six more girls, including Emma. Before Kyle. . .after Kyle. . .

The history and the function of the Silver Belle was pretty tightly organized around the one son of Jackson Riley, III and Angela Bell. Now with Kyle dead, and Will so unreasonable, the Silver Belle would change. The Silver Belle covered thousands of acres of privately owned and government leased land in the foothills of a branch of the tectonic uplift delineating the backbone of the high Sierras. Washed down metavolcanic metasediment over two thousand million years old grew the alfalfa that fed the Clarke cattle herd and also buried the family, illegal hispanic drovers, and
cattle dogs alike. My brother Will didn’t have the ability to nurture that was needed to hold the Belle together like the men before him had.

I tried to capsulize all this for Tim, but no drive was long enough to allow me to convey the layers of history that folded over our family the way weatherworn bluffs fold over the desolate, hidden valleys of our high country. He just listened and grunted occasionally as he drove my truck back to the ranch house. He took the keys naturally, reaching without asking. I guess my fall in the sand left me more dazed than I realized, enough to let someone else drive. How odd. He heard Emma talking about me and looked down at my pants when she said “tight,” but he didn’t complain about the fit over the rear. He eyed me pretty carefully when I brushed sand off my breasts while Emma commented that my heavy earrings probably threw me off balance. He smiled and said, “I like the earrings.” I believed him, for the moment, and handed him the truck keys as reward for creating a moment of faith with me.

I started the family story by naming the people present, then circling back among my father’s siblings through connections with my cousins, then just talked about my favorites, like my cousin
June, who was very young at that time. Tim figured out fairly soon that I couldn’t keep relationships very straight and mostly called them all cousins. He was better at the game than I. His training with his own large family left him particularly capable of defining and remembering lineage. His ability was openly evident and respected by dinnertime and Tim was making fast ground with the old people who were only too glad to fill in the gaps of discontinuity in my story telling. Great-aunt Betty slipped her purple veined forefinger through his belt-loop and pulled him close to her side to talk in his ear as if he were the deaf one rather than she. She was the first to call him “Timmy.”

Timmy. He was birthed into the Clarke clan through a diminutive. Less than a man because he was kind and gentle. Always known as Timmy because he played with the children, sang quietly to the old women who rested on the side porch through the heat of the day, but mostly because he chose to follow me in my life on the circuit rather than make me be the passive recipient of his determination. Great-aunt Betty recognized his willingness to consort me long before I did and was the first to call him Timmy. But I was the last, though, eventually, we all did it with full love. Timmy,
God bless and keep him, brought out the dormant tenderness in people, even the Clarkes.

Later in the evening, during the wake, Tim slid down onto the arm of an overstuffed chair I had retired to with sixth beer in hand and said, “Hey, you never said much about your mother.” I had been planning to lay him as quickly and quietly as I could once the light completely disappeared and coyotes started singing. As dark crept from the mountains towards the house and evening shades of blue filled all crevices around the outbuildings and cracks in the patio paving, the bawl of calves punctuated the cooling air, and I wanted comfort.

This work-in-progress pauses here. . .
“There are very few human beings who receive the truth, complete and staggering, by instant illumination. Most of them acquire it fragment by fragment, on a small scale, by successive developments, cellularly, like a laborious mosaic.”

--Anais Nin