

## Green River

She decided to go out into the world so as to leave the world behind. She considered Mexico or even Europe, but she wanted to be understood, that would be important, so she piled raw belongings loose on the Camry's back seat and locked the house and made her exit at 7 p.m., when she wouldn't be observed, when the air smelled like hot wax, just when the hollow light made a tunnel. East or west? She chose the rungs of dusk descending so softly she could hear them humming. She opened the window. Vespers.

Three hours into the dark, she stopped at a Motel 6. "Fill this in," the woman said. She looked as if she'd been hung up in a smoke shed for the past twenty years. "License plate here."

Who would she be? Betsy, Betsy, that woman was back in a locked house with her unclipped newspapers on the kitchen table. Her cell phone waited beside the newspapers for its battery to die.

"ID," smoke woman said, and "How you paying?" so she couldn't help but be Elizabeth Katsina. She was barely out of the world, or into the world. How could she be anything other than this woman who needed a haircut that would fluff her flat dark hair, this sniffing woman ready to cast stones at a smoker. When. When she herself.

In the morning, she drove an hour and then stopped at the outskirts of a city in Kansas. Autoplex. "I'm Reggie," the lively man greeted her. Way too much pep. "And how can I assist you, young lady?"

He was years her junior, a broad-faced, loose-jointed black man. *Young lady*. Would you like to be my son? she wanted to say.

"I want to trade down," she told him.

"Well," he said.

"Do you have children?" she asked.

"Oh, you bet I do," he said and unfurled a plastic roll of babies. "Tonya. Lewis. The new one's Pauley. My rug rats."

"Adorable," she said. "Lovely." Could they be my grandchildren? she wanted to say. Wrong color, but oh well.

She swapped the Camry for an old brown hatchback Colt and some cash.

"I guess you know what you're doing, Eliza," Reggie said.

That's what she told him, Eliza, an old-fashioned mother's name.

"Take care of those sweet babies," she told him.

The Colt was a stick, but it was time to refresh old skills, and she jerked and stalled it out of town. Kansas. Fields and silos and big flat sky. Nowhere to hide. In the first Colorado town, though it still looked like Kansas, she stopped at a convenience store, Kum 'n Go, for real, and bought a tuna sandwich and a Diet Pepsi. She gassed up and drove on, eating and dropping tuna clumps on her lap. Some laundry would have to be done before stray cats started following her.

Nobody would be missing her back home. They'd be talking, they'd be going online and following the case, they'd be saying *Oh that poor Betsy* while they were thinking *I'd like to know what went on in that house—she must have really fucked him up*. If they were missing her, it was merely for entertainment. And maybe disappearing herself even gave added value.

Denver was a big place. A body could get lost there. She took a random exit. Colfax's blighted seediness was just the place. The strip would be wicked if it weren't so weary. She pulled into a motel, the Wrangl-In. Everything was big-time Western: neon lariats, cowboy-boot planters, three oil paintings of ten-gallon hats in the check-in office. The man behind the desk was Indian. But not as in *Cowboys And*. She signed in, still Elizabeth, with the Colt's temporary license-plate number. Eventually they'd be able to track her from the credit-card charges. Whoever they might be.

"Can you tell me where I might find a bookstore?" she asked.

"Book—store?" he said, as if nobody in his tenure at the Wrangl-In had ever asked such a thing. No doubt that was true. But there she went, judging. As if. When she herself.

But she had an idea. She carried the suitcase to her room, took a pee, checked the phone directory, and headed out.

At the Tattered Cover, she found just the thing, a book called *From Birth to Ten*. Photos and developmental stages and commentary. She bought it and the current issue of *Parents* magazine, featuring First Smiles, Words, and Steps. As if, after all the years, she remembered the first smile, word, step. But her memory might be jogged. Something might light up. The fuck-up might show up in neon.

She knew Jackie had given her grandchildren. Though that

wasn't quite the way to say it: given. At least two. But he hadn't claimed them or allowed her to. They'd be three and one now. She kept track of these things. She supposed the mothers didn't know about each other. Perhaps she had grandchildren strewn from California back to Indiana. She supposed she should pray for recessive Jackie-genes. She'd given him those genes, though, half of them.

Jackie in the sandbox under the grapevines, moving sand with a yellow Tonka dump truck. Jackie in the sea-monster Halloween costume he drew and she executed. Oh, don't say executed. Jackie swinging a bat, digging a hole, trying to locate the rubber knife in his Casca sheet to stab Julius Caesar, chasing the dog, coloring, and cannonballing into a pool, and sleeping in yellow PJs with the cat on his pillow, and showing off his biceps, and flinging a newspaper for the Carrier-of-the-Week photo, and stop stop. One of the things, among the horrible things, was that all she could really remember were the pictures in the photo albums. She'd maintained them all his life, or the first twenty years of it, and who was she trying to fool?

You are escaping, she reminded herself, that is why you are out here in the western world, and she went to the bookstore's fiction section where, she saw, any combination could be found of You-Made-Me-Do-It (*it* being infidelity, insanity, murder, escape; *you* being spouse, lover, father, mother), and those were your choices if you didn't get to the supernatural shelf. She gave up and bought an old Jean Auel, as if things were actually different at the beginning of human history, sex and love and rivalry and hierarchy, but maybe she could pretend, or maybe basic nature, uncontrollable basic nature, would explain it all. You should read her, people used to say, years ago, she really knows her stuff.

If you were going to try to figure things out, go for fiction.

The second night at the Wrangl-In, the police showed up. Lots of lights, big sirens, swarming cops. They weren't after her, but she pulled the curtain and double-locked the door and turned out the light. When she slept, she dreamed of cavemen pushing yellow Tonka trucks.

From Idaho Springs to Grand Junction, the radio wouldn't pick up much of anything, and she drove in high silence through the canyons between the cut-away mountains. Into, out of, into,

out of. Hush. Please hush.

At Green River, it felt like time to go south. She didn't know why. She wasn't planning. If she knew anything about planning, she'd have considered every word and touch, from fetus to whenever he was lost, whatever precise moment that might have been. The book-cliff mountains, the elemental tan, the towns—with their turquoise and moccasin shops and absofuckinglutely-nothing-to-do that no doubt the young could simply not wait to escape—were the places where other mothers read to other sons and encouraged baseball and Narnia and insisted on prom picture. Who knew that every word and motion had weight? You never knew that until the weight had sunk six feet under.

She had grandchildren. Grandbabies, as the goombas liked to say it. But she didn't even have the chance to do it again, better, right. Didn't everyone else mess up their kids? Wasn't all forgiven? Didn't everyone get the chance to indulge the children without consideration of consequence, wasn't everything allowed to be unconditional?

She stopped in Moab for the night. She thought she'd try being a Beth. She checked into her own private little Red Rock Cabins cabin as legal Elizabeth, but she told the woman behind the counter that she could call her Beth. "That's what my grandbabies call me," she told her. "Grammy Beth. Like it's one word: Grammybeth."

"Sweet. I'm just Granny. But it's our joke: Don't call me granny, I say. I'm not that old. So of course they go crazy with granny, granny, granny. My daughters say it's my own fault, but, yeah, everybody knows I love it. I have five girls, can you believe that? And they all have scads of babies."

"I just have the one son," she said. "But I'm counting on him to be prolific. And so far he's coming through."

In her cabin number seven, she spiffed up Beth's hair and put a twenty in her pocket. She walked up the main street to a little restaurant where she had a Dos Equis with her cheese enchiladas. "Hi, I'm Beth," she told her waitress. "I'll be your customer tonight." Blank blank look. And then it was on to the drugstore, where she purchased a Grandma's Brag Book and a pair of first-grader's blunt scissors. What in the devil was that Beth up to?

In her cabin, she turned on the television and couldn't bear

late-breaking news and turned it off and turned it on and couldn't bear racing or Humphrey Bogart or Robin Williams or cooking or switch switch switch a windswept woman singing or a hooded man or fishing and turned it off. She took out her *From Birth to Ten* book. Maybe the idea had been to figure out what went wrong with Jackie. But this Beth she was inside of noticed that the same sets of babies grew up as the book progressed, and she decided to clip. After all, why had she known to buy the scissors? And the Grandma's Brag Book? First there were a doctor's hands easing the dark little face from the mother, then the puzzled baby with his mother and father, and the baby sucking and gripping and reaching and crying and folding into the old fetal position and taking the fencer's position and raising his head and grasping a rattle and sitting and pre-crawling.

She cut out several photos of one Kenny, as he progressed from open-mouthed newborn surrounded by stuffed animals to a first-stepping one-year-old in striped overalls to tricycle-riding three-year-old. Then she cut out three more, now of a dark-haired baby in pink, swaddled and, later, kimonoed and then sitting up by herself in a ruffly thing. So-called Sara. Were these the kids' real names? Were they going to sue their parents someday for publishing their every developmental stage in full color?

She laid the cardboard template from a photo sleeve in the brag book over each photo and cropped it. She fitted the pictures into the sleeves, taking Kenny up to two and then alternating him with Sara. She left several sleeves empty. More to come, folks!

She couldn't throw the cut-up book in the cabin's trash and be found out.

She sat on the edge of the bed, sick, waiting to see if she needed to go sit on the floor beside the toilet and be ready.

What the hell was she doing? She had given herself a pair of grandchildren. Who did she think was going to see them? On whom was she planning to foist them? She was disgusted. Once a baby had been born to a foolish girl and the boyfriend who cut his losses after a couple years. The child's pictures filled an album a year. The mud, the Christmas trees, the kitten, the snow, the pumpkins, the tents, the soccer balls. How could it be that the boy had shot and decapitated one Roger and carried away that head to a dumpster three miles from the murder motel. *Jackie, did you do*

*it?* she'd asked him. *I don't know, Ma*, he said, prison-sober. *I don't know. I was pretty fucked up at the time.*

She took up her purse and the mutilated birth-to-ten book. She drove to the City Market, where you could buy Sleepinal softgels but no alcohol. The state package store was closed. Fall Asleep Fast was the promise. She lifted the top off the trash barrel outside the store and shoved the book, with its missing babies, down deep.

In high school, she was a good girl who admittedly went bad once a year—goodness sustained turned a girl into a Miss Priss—but she wasn't hoody, a little on the queer side, though, back when queer meant nerdy, and good girls did volunteer work. She'd wanted to do her volunteer work with retarded children, but the service bulletin listed no such opportunity, and crazy people were a close second. Volunteer needed: music therapy at the state hospital.

She'd been in orchestra for years, her knee had a permanent bruise from the French horn case, and she'd taken piano lessons since she was six. She used to rewrite her recital pieces to give them crashing grand endings, but then she grew into Beethoven.

Music therapy. She would cure insane people with music.

Insanity appealed to her. She'd done a research paper already on insanity. Insane people always had a reason for their horrible hair-ripping-out, obscenity-screaming, or comatose behavior—insane people were interesting. All you had to do was find out what sent the person into insanity, and you could cure it.

She started thinking of the piano-bench discussions she'd have, how maybe certain notes or rhythms would trigger memories.

Once a week her mother drove her to the state hospital. "I'm proud of my little do-gooder," she said. She read in the car until the little do-gooder returned from her hour on the second floor.

Her parents were fine. As parents. Her father worked in the den after dinner, mowed the grass on the weekend, gave her an allowance. Her mother took her shopping, left her sufficiently alone, pep-talked her. There was plenty to be angry about, she supposed, if she were looking for reasons.

Music therapy, it turned out, was putting a Mitch Miller record on the turntable and trying to get the Annients to sing

along. The women sat lined up on both sides of the hallway in robes and housedresses, blank and rocking in straight chairs. It was drugs that would cure them, she concluded, rather than getting to the heart of the illness: the cause. The women were insane for no reason. As children they had probably not been beaten or abandoned or badly used. Maybe they'd been insane as babies.

For six months' of Saturdays, she walked up and down the hallway singing along, air-conducting, gesturing to join in, join in!, ashamed to tell her mother or anyone. The fool.

She woke to knocking on the cabin door. She'd slept until 11, and housekeeping was throwing her out. "Beth? I hate to do it to anybody whose babies call her Grammybeth." It was the woman from the office. "But all these cabins are reserved today. You okay?"

She was sick and ashamed. Fall Asleep Fast? Try Fall Asleep Long.

"Give me ten minutes, and I'm gone," she said. "Granny."

She dressed with the nastiness of the slur infecting the formerly sweet cabin.

South hadn't been right after all. She gassed up, bought a water, a Diet Pepsi, and a bag of corn chips at the station's little shop. No Kum 'n Go in this state. Back at I-70, she turned west. Wasn't that what people did? For fresh starts?

It was easy for a life to become unblest. Somewhere past Green River, escaping Nowhere, Indiana, nearing Nowhere, Utah, Betsy's traded junk car stalled. Her foot pushed the accelerator down all the way as the car slowed. She steered, powerless, onto the shoulder. What was the choice, to sit dead in the right lane of I-70? She rolled down the window. The unblesting wasn't an event, some instance she failed Jackie with such high horrible drama that it became the continental divide of his life. She put her head on the steering wheel. The failures too minor to matter dusted her until she was camouflaged in the hot brown car.

An eighteen-wheeler blew past every few minutes. She stepped out and scuttled around the car and stood in the tan grass in her disguise. The high sun melted it off her. A truck with horses' heads protruding from stalls blew past. She held out her hands, and

without her disguise she could see the tan burnt grasses through them.

Now what?

She'd let the car cool down. She'd let it rest.

She sat down in the dirt on the passenger's side with her back against the front wheel. She didn't want to be out in the open. She didn't want to be seen.

What came out in court was a meth lab explosion and a girlfriend's leg blown off. Later a hotel room, a deal, a gun—what would be in a movie evidence laid out and documented, estrangement, arms in a suitcase, a torso in a trash bag at a scenic overlook, a head found in a dumpster. Torso. Such a newspaper word. Dismemberment was another one. The trial was one state over. She'd stayed at a motel and sat in the back of the courtroom, unknown and unidentified unless her stare gave her away. Her eyes couldn't see judge, jury, lawyers, flag, witnesses, or photographs—only the back of Jackie.

She waited thirty minutes against the tire, punishing herself with dust and heat, and then she got back into the car. "Please," she said. "Please." The engine caught but died when she tried to put the car in gear. Three times it caught and then it ceased.

She supposed she needed further punishment.

She used to watch Jackie from inside the house. He skated in the cul-de-sac, popped wheelies, wrestled on the grass with other kids. When he was 13, she couldn't stop watching him. He didn't notice, but one time at the open window she heard one of his friends say, "How come your mom's always watching?"

Nobody stopped to help her. But then, she was on the ground facing the hazy desert that stretched far to hazy brown mountains. Those mountains would be nothing but rock.

After another half hour, she tried the car again. Poor Betsy, sitting behind the wheel of her dead car, sweating and estranged. She drank the hot dregs of the Pepsi, saving the water until she was desperate.

The psychiatric evaluation said he was angry at her. They'd moved too many times. He hadn't been able to make friends. She'd been imAnient with him when she wasn't neglecting him. After the conviction, he gave her a note, one line: *It wasn't your fault.* That was all.

She dropped her wet face to the steering wheel. When she was a little kid, she'd had a Betsy Wetsy doll who peed into a diaper when fed a bottle, an unfortunate toy for a child named Betsy. She decided to be Liz for her next encounter. Perhaps someone in a passing car would see her slumped and stop to help. Or seeing a body, drive on.

A semi blew its air horn, two quick blasts as it passed her, and she jerked up. It was white with green letters—Apple something. What if it had crashed into her? There'd be no surviving that. With luck she wouldn't even know she'd been hit. Just gone. Cops would retrieve her driver's license and eventually Jackie in his cell—from which he would, some year after the appeals, be gone—Jackie would be notified and after that there could be no forgiveness.

She took Grandma's Brag Book from her purse and looked at Kenny and Sara. The boy was really kind of funny looking but didn't know it yet, and you had to love that. The girl was still on the generic side. Hard to predict. They were in her brag book, and they'd always know they were loved, no matter what. She might try for a reunion—not that there'd been a union—of Jackie's girlfriends and her grandchildren, perhaps post-execution, though by then the kids would be used to not knowing her.

She heard a truck's horn, and then a white truck pulled onto the shoulder behind her. The front was choked with chrome. A man climbed out. She was saved, and with a full bottle of water still. She locked the doors and rolled the window up to within a couple inches.

"Ma'am? Looks like you might could use some roadside assistance here."

He was post-middle-aged and leathery, just what you'd expect. His cap was green with a pudgy humanoid creature in white above the bill and white letters. Applejack Chops. He swung the cap in a bow. "At your service."

Nothing made any sense.

"No, I'm okay." She stretched her neck to send the words through the open slit of the window. She reached back and Annted her purse. "My cell phone actually worked out here, you believe it? So help is already on the way."

"I should wait, though," he said. "Ma'am? Out here all alone?"

Oh. So she was afraid of him. That was it.

"No, no, I'm fine. My son's just on his way from Green River. You get back on the road. I'm sure you have miles to go before you sleep, and all that."

After the truck vanished in the highway's wavy heat, she drank the water, swig after swig, all of it, and flipped the empty bottle into the back seat.

She sat on the dirt beside the car until she was too hot, and then she rolled down the car windows and lay on the back seat, sweating, testing out dry sobs. In the dream, there was water, a pool of an odd shape, and he forgave her, and his wife said she had never meant any of those things, and the little girls knew her, and they sluiced down a slide into the strange pool.

She awoke drenched and thirsty. "Well, wasn't that subtle?" she said. Still, for a few minutes, she was cooler, lightened.

Liz, or whoever she was, sent two more good samaritan truckers on their way. Thank you, but her son was just coming from Green River. Just speaking the words cooled her: Green River.

Her stomach hurt in that hollow, sick way that meant the body was hungry, but didn't want to eat. She ate a few corn chips, if only to worsen her thirst.

Late afternoon, a blue van passed, stopped, and backed up to her. The rear of the van, just below the window, bore one of those fish symbols. No mocking evolutionary legs on this one. The woman who climbed out had deep red hair and a nicely lined face. She looked gaunt and ill but trying to fake it.

Betsy cranked her window back down. "Oh, thank you for stopping," she said. "My car died and I've been stranded out here all day and my water's gone."

Nothing had changed; she'd had no epiphany in the desert. Maybe she could let herself be rescued by a woman. Or maybe nothing was ever going to make sense anyway.

"I'm Ann." The woman reached her arm into the car.

"You don't want to shake hands," Betsy said. "I'm horribly sweaty."

"Do you have jumper cables? We could try to jump you. I know I don't have any. You don't want to hear that story."

Betsy pictured the Colt's hatchback with her piled up jeans and shirts. At the Autoplex in Kansas, the salesman had shown her the spare under the carpet. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm out here completely without resources."

"Grab your purse and your keys," Ann said. "Come on with me."

She locked the little brown car. Maybe she'd never see it again.

But then. The blue van had a bumper sticker she hadn't seen from inside the car. Black background, white letters, all caps: SOMEONE I LOVE WAS MURDERED.

She could hear the van ticking in this wilderness. No traffic passed by. The desert spread north to dim mountains.

"What?" the woman said. "That? I'll tell you about it on the way. What you think? Back or onwards?"

"No," Betsy said. "No."

"Yeah, there's really nothing ahead for a long ways. Let me take you back to Green River. I can spare the time."

Someone I love: present tense. Still loved. Was murdered: past tense. It was over.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"It's all right. It's the Christian thing to do."

So. This was the reason her car died. Why she couldn't go with the truckers. Why she waited in the dirt through the heat. Now the script required that she inform this woman: SOMEONE I LOVED IS A MURDERER. Were those tenses right? She had loved her boy—and she stopped herself, turning in a fury back toward her car, blotting her eyes on her arm to shut off the sentimental images—a brown-haired boy in footed pajamas, a kid skating a ramp and taking air—pure phony sap, the stasis that resided in photo albums.

"Hey," the woman who claimed she was Ann said, "you okay? We should get going."

All the while, underneath the appearances, was the dreadful stirring.

"Who do you think you are, stopping here to rescue me with your bumper sticker and your Christianity?" she said.

"Hey—"

"And what's that about, plastering your self-pity onto your bumper like that? Oh poor me, you someone out there you killed

my son, poor poor me I raised a victim"

"My cousin—"

"Here's where that special moment is supposed to kick in."

The adagio would begin to swell. A cello. "Here's where I confess and you forgive and we fall into each other's arms weeping. Well, you can forget about that. Because I hate you. I purely purely hate you and—"

Ann was shaking her head. Ann was holding her palms out.

Ann was backing up. "Lady, lady, you're—"

The fragments were dropping back into place, coalescing into the form of Betsy.

"I am crazy," she said. "Just go away now."

Ann said, "Please, it's going to be all right, just—" and so she had to wave her arms around and yell, "I'm crazy, you're right, now get the hell away. Shoo!"

From the safety of her high front seat, the woman leaned out the window and called back, "I'll call for help. You sit tight," and jerked the van onto the highway.

In that hollow, satisfied feeling of convalescence, Betsy waited like a passenger in the back seat of the Colt. Help would come. There was no help. No one had planned for the bumper-sticker bearing van to stop before her. She was simply doing that human deal of cause and effect, pretending that things happened for reasons. As a fetus, was he his essential self? Was he preparing to shun her even then? What music should she have piped in, what had she eaten that she shouldn't have, that horseradish—the smell of which still made her sick? Wouldn't it be sweetly sad to see that when she'd rocked him, she'd sung the wrong songs. *Yesterday, yesterday, oh I believe in. . . .* When if it'd been "All the Pretty Little Horses," it might have turned a different way, and maybe later he'd have had a real yesterday, something hard like a hard rubber ball he could throw against a wall and catch.

In the early dusk, a police car pulled in behind her and flashed its lights, perhaps to alert the crazy woman.

Five days ago she'd left town at dusk, thinking Vespers. Even now she loved the sound of it, Vespertide, but this was what it came to, this dusk.

The officer was a young woman. “Say there,” she said, “isn’t somebody out past their curfew?”

Betsy sat up front in the police car, though she could have been caged in back. The officer gave her water and a sandwich and chatted softly: this heat, her husband who taught sixth grade, their little girl, and what about her, where was she from, did she have kids?

“I do,” she said. “I have one son. Jackie. He’s 34, so maybe it’s time to start calling him Jack.”

The officer gave a little laugh. “Our daughter is Sally. The day may come she wants to be Sal. But somehow I doubt it.”

“You got any more water I could have? It has been a long dry day.”

“Help yourself from the cooler. So, any grandkids?”

Betsy took out the little album. “This is Kenny, and this is Sara.”

Even in the small light from the dashboard, you could tell they weren’t real. She put them back in her purse and would dispose of them in the morning in Green River, in the irrational mercy of the world.

## Unchained

At the gym I recognize an earworm, the buildup to the crescendo of that Righteous Brothers’ tune. Seems an odd choice for workout fuel, until I listen closer and realize it’s a sped-up hip-hop riff: *When we sober up, will you still be mine?* Then, I’m eleven years old again, too tall, tight coils of hair, honking the tune on my alto saxophone, reading sheet music from the tilted metal music stand, in love with its drama, the audacity of the high notes. Over and over, trying to coax vibrato from the reed to heighten the theatrics until the insides of my lips are raw from pursing over the zippers of my braces. My poor parents. Mom fixing dinner after trying to teach eight-year-olds to divide, Dad drinking coffee, just waking up, on night shift at the mill. The song was everywhere, *Ghost* had come out, and though I eyerolled its romance, declared the pottery scene disgusting, the song made me swoon, wonder if another person would ever make me think of sighing rivers, if I would ever inspire someone to write a song with a high C held over eight long beats, if I’d ever get out of this room that I shared with my older brother with worn, forest green carpet and twin beds across from the WV state pen that inmates kept escaping from, that the state said would close down after the last riot, whose prisoners, hanging long-limbed out the barred windows, whistled as I walked to elementary school.