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Elizabeth Wetmore

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ELIZABETH WETMORE

VALENTINE, 1976

Gloria
Begins out there in the oil patch, a few minutes before dawn, with a young roughneck stretched out and sleeping hard in his pickup truck. Shoulders pressed against the door, boots propped up on the dashboard, his hat pulled down far enough that the girl who sits less than ten feet away can see only the left side of his jaw. It is bone sharp, freckled, and nearly hairless, a chin that will never need a daily shave, not really, no matter how old he might live to be, but she is hoping he will die young.

Gloria sits perfectly still—she is a mesquite branch, a half-buried stone—and she imagines the roughneck facedown in the sand, as she has been these past few hours, lips and cheeks scoured, teeth shaky. The roughneck jerks, then shifts roughly against the truck's door, and she can see his jaw clenching, the muscles working, bone on bone. The sight of him is a torment, and she hopes again that he will die before his time. Gloria keeps her eyes on the pickup truck while the sky lights itself up, turning blue-black, then blue, then old-bucket slate. On this morning the sky is the same as it always is, stretched tight above the earth's perfectly straight seam, gray and unending. It is a sky that won't quit, and it is the best thing about the place, when you can remember to look at it. Gloria will miss it when she goes. Can't stay here. Not after this.

The fingers on her right hand begin to count. They keep track of the numbers by pressing themselves gently against the sand. They are trying to keep Gloria from making any sudden moves, to keep her from giving herself away, to keep her among the living for another day, and she understands that the only reason the roughneck hasn't gone ahead and killed her is that he passed out before he could get around to it. Or maybe he only pretends to sleep. Maybe he is waiting for her to make a move. Gloria can't know for sure, so she keeps her eyes on his jaw and she sits in the dirt, still as a carcass, save for the fingers pushing against the sand, counting. *One, two, three, four, five, six—*

When she reaches a thousand, Gloria tells herself, she will move. Because how long can a man pretend, just to catch a girl when she tries to run? So she watches his jaw move and the sun, that small, regular mercy, heaves itself over the earth's straight edge, and her fingers keep on.

Out there the land goes on forever and then some. Daylight reveals miles of pumpjacks and oilfield litter. Barbwire and jackrabbits. Diamondbacks and copperheads, denned up for winter. When morning has come all the way in, Gloria perceives a road and behind that, a farmhouse. Maybe it is close enough to walk to. Hard to say. Out there one mile can look like ten, ten could be twenty, twenty might be two, and Gloria knows only that this body—yesterday she would have called it *mine*—sits in a pile of sand, somewhere in the oil patch. Her eyes scan a row of derricks to the south. She thinks her hometown may be over there, but she cannot see the cooling towers at the plant where her mother works. Did he drive them as far as Notrees? Kermit? Loving County?

And while there might be only one thing in this world that Gloria knows for sure on this awful morning, it is that she does not want to die.

Twenty thousand square miles of the same old, same old. She could be anywhere. And because the oil patch is mostly quiet on a Sunday morning, even during one of biggest oil booms in history, Gloria hears only the roughneck's occasional sighs, his teeth grinding, and the intermittent cries of a winter songbird somewhere out in the fields. She looks again at the farmhouse. The narrow dirt road will lead her to the front porch. Nice people there. A woman, maybe. When her fingers push the last number into the sand, a shaky one thousand, and she is as sure as she ever will be that the roughneck is not going to wake up and kill her, Gloria starts to move. She looks for all her pieces and parts. Yesterday, she would have called them *mine,* but this morning she knows it is her silence as much as anything else that's keeping her alive, so she mutely names the pieces as they appear to her. Arm. Here is an arm. A foot. *Foot bone's connected to the anklebone.* Over there, scattered across an old drilling platform, liver, heart, stomach. She gathers the body,

then covers it with the clothes that are torn and strewn around the site, as if these garments are trash, or throwaways from a man's lunch, and not her favorite black T-shirt, the blue jeans she received for Christmas, the matching bra and panties she lifted from Montgomery Ward.

She knows she ought not to do it, but when it is time to go, Gloria cannot help looking at the roughneck. Standing now, she observes thin wisps of blond hair crawling out from under the felt edge of his cowboy hat. Skinny and gristle tough, he is maybe eighteen or nineteen, only a few years older than Gloria, but to her he is a colossus. And even though his chest rises and falls just like anybody else's, he is still. Still asleep. Or still pretending, maybe. Her mind skitters into the thought like a horse into a hidden skein of barbwire. Her mouth falls open, then jerks itself closed. She is oxygen starved and gasping. She is a fish rent from a lake. She is so afraid.

Maybe all the pieces she has gathered up will fall away, for good this time. She imagines her own limbs fleeing into the desert, dry bones picked clean by coyotes, worn smooth by the wind—*them bones, them bones gonna walk around*—and this makes her want to shriek, to open her mouth and howl. But Gloria swallows hard. She must not panic. To panic will be the worst possible thing, so she sits back down in the sand and closes her eyes for a few seconds, shuts them tight against both the roughneck and the sun brightening, the interminable sky. Let her mind flail wildly for something to hang onto. Let it claw at thin air.

Mercifully, let memory grab onto a little bit of solid earth: her favorite uncle, back home safe after being overseas for four years. When Tío tells a war story—and every story Tío tells is a war story—he always starts the same: Know what you call a soldier who panics, Gloria? KIA, that's what. He always ends his stories the same way, too. Listen, *mi sobrina,* an army grunt never panics. Don't you ever panic, Gloria. You panic and—he makes his index finger into a pistol and presses it against his own heart, pulls the trigger—*bang.* And while there might be only one thing in this world that Gloria knows for sure on this awful morning, it is that she does not want to die, so she jams two fists hard against her mouth and she tells herself to move. Move, Gloria. Try not to make a sound.

Then Gloria Ramírez—in years to come her story will hover

over the heads of the other local girls like a swarm of yellow jackets—lifts herself back up from the sand and walks toward the farmhouse. There might be a woman there. It might not be too far away. Gloria can't know for sure, but she's going to find out. She does not go back for her shoes, when she thinks of them, or the letterman's jacket she had worn the night before when the roughneck pulled his truck up next to where she stood, his forearm resting on the open window. Sparse freckles and gold hair glimmered beneath the drive-in's fluorescent lights. The glistering of him, the way he shone, reminded her of the glitter she used for art projects, back when she was a little girl. His eyes were sky blue, the color of marbles you fought to keep, and when he spoke he let his chin fall to his collarbone.

Hey there, Valentine.

His words took the ugly out of the drive-in, which was dead as hell this Valentine's night, and Gloria's mouth went dry as a stick of chalk. She bit down on the straw of her limeade. Even from outside the pickup, she could smell the oilfields on him.

He said, What's your name?

None of your damned beeswax.

The words were out before she could think about them, how they would make her sound like a little girl and not the tough young lady she was trying hard to be. Like Shirley Temple, when she was going for Patti Smith. But he leaned on the open window and looked at her real puppydog-like, his eyes bloodshot and shadow circled. She stared at those eyes for a few seconds, the shifting colors, pale blue to gray, gray to the wispy green of mesquite leaves, and she thought they might be the color of an ocean somewhere. But Gloria wouldn't know the sea from a buffalo wallow, and this was part of the problem. Maybe he had seen the ocean, sometime. Maybe this would be the start of something good, and after a few months together maybe they would drive down to the coast. So she told him her name. Gloria.

The man laughed a little and sang her name back to her as he turned up the volume on his radio, proving the coincidence—Patti Smith singing "Gloria" on the junior college radio station just as Gloria was introducing herself to him.

Real smart, she said. I ain't never heard that one before.

But it thrilled her that he knew the song. She had been singing it for months, waiting for KOCV to play it, then listening

to her mother have a conniption fit every time Gloria sang, *Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine.* And now here she was, hanging around on a Friday night, doing absolutely nothing except drinking limeades and begging smokes, always waiting for something happen, which it never did, not in this pissant town. Gloria looked around the Sonic parking lot and all she saw was a big bunch of nothing to lose. So she climbed in—why the hell not—and the cab was warm as a kitchen, with the same faintly ammoniac smell of the cleaner her mother used to mop the floor. The young roughneck turned up the music and handed her a can of beer, cracking it open with one large hand while the other rested on the steering wheel. Well, what do you know, he said. Gloria, I think I love you. And she jerked the heavy door closed.

The sun is lingering just above the truck's wheels when she walks away from him. She does not look behind her. If he is going to wake up and shoot her, she does not want to see it coming. Let the bastard shoot her in the back. Let him also be known as a coward. Let him also go down in local history as a cold-blooded killer. She thinks all these things and also this: that she will never again call herself by the name she was given, the name he called her. *Gloria*. From now on and forever, she is Glory.

Glory makes her way across the oil patch—walking, stumbling, and falling past pumpjacks and mesquite scrub. Her bare feet pass by a den where several diamondbacks lie clustered together, some with their bellies already full of young. They can feel the heat from her, smell the size of her. When she crawls under a hole in the barbwire and wanders through an abandoned drilling site, awkwardly written signs gaze flat-faced down upon her. They warn of poisonous gasses or the consequences of trespassing. YOU WILL BE SHOT.

When a mesquite thorn or stray piece of barbwire pierces her bare foot, Glory watches the blood gather on the tough, impermeable ground. That's mine, she thinks, and she swats at the black flies that have begun to follow her.

Hours later, when she loses her balance and falls hard into a pile of limestone and caliche, Glory sits down and picks the gravel out of her hands. She stares at her palms for a few seconds, *Them bones, them bones gonna walk around,* then she looks behind her. She is closer to the farmhouse than she is to

the truck and for the first time she notes the absence of wind, the strangeness of that. The wind almost always blows in West Texas, especially in the spring, but on this morning the air is unmoving, quiet. Even the mesquite branches, thin and pliant as they are, hold themselves still. The wind will not carry her voice back to the roughneck. If she speaks, he will not hear. He cannot possibly hear.

So Glory turns her mouth toward the place where she has been. She takes in as much air as she can hold. For the first time in hours, she means to say something out loud, though what that might be or how it might sound is a mystery. For several long seconds, she struggles to find some words, but there aren't any—there are no words for any of this, and the best she can manage is a small cry. The sound comes forth briefly, pierces the quiet and then disappears.

Testify

When my time comes and I am called up to take the stand, I will testify that I was the first to see Glory Ramírez alive. That poor little girl, I will say. Don't know how a child comes back from something like this. But the defense attorney objects, and then the judge tells me I ought to stick to my story, it would be best for everybody if I stick to my story. And I say, yes sir, but you know it's hard to talk about one awful thing without talking about other awful things. They become fastened together, like crochet stitches on a baby blanket. And he says, I know it, Mrs. Whitehead, but you go ahead and try now.

The trial will not be until August, but memory serves, and I will tell all those men the same thing I will tell you girls, when I think you are old enough to hear it: that it had been a bad year for our family, even before the day in question, and we understood that we might be living in the poorhouse if not for the acres we'd leased to Gulf Oil. Maybe those men on the jury won't be too interested to hear me talk about how the price of cattle seemed to fall by the minute that February. They already know it. Or that it was so dry, a few of the pregnant Holsteins had started to root around in the scrub searching for licorice root. Or that Robert spent most of every day driving around the ranch with the only two cowhands who hadn't left us for more money in the oil patch. They threw extra feed from the back of the truck, pulled half-dead cows out of the scrub and barbwire,

fought the screwworms when they settled into the wounds. They did it all day every day, even Sunday, because a cow can die just as easily on the Sabbath as any other day of the week. I will testify that I hardly ever saw my husband, save for the fifteen minutes it took him to choke down a half pound of pot roast—you spend half the day cooking it and they eat it in less than five minutes—save for the time it took Robert to say, What we need is a tougher brand of cow, Mary Rose. Some Polled Herefords or Red Brangus. To which I always said, I want to move to town, Robert. I'm sick and tired of living out here all by ourselves. When I think back on that day and finding Glory Ramírez on my front porch, all these memories are stitched together, and I expect it will always be so. Here is what I remember:

When I think back on that day and finding Glory Ramírez on my front porch, all these memories are stitched together, and I expect it will always be so.

I was twenty-six years old and eight months pregnant with my second baby. I felt big as a Buick, heavy as one too. With the second one, you always get bigger, faster. You girls remember that. And I had been lonely enough that winter that I sometimes kept Aimee Jo home from school just to have a little company. First we would think up some awful symptom, then I would call the school secretary, Mrs. Lee, and give her the gory details. When I hung up the phone, Aimee Jo would start mimicking the look on Mrs. Lee's crabby old face. People say she's a direct descendent, and I don't believe that for a second, but if it is true she sure didn't inherit the general's good looks. Must have got her nose from the Custis side of the family, bless her heart. Aimee Jo squinched up her face and pretended to hold the school's phone to her ear. Well! Thank you for calling, Mrs. Whitehead, but I do not think I care to know the details about Miss Aimee Jo's BM. Tell her we all hope she feels better real soon.

The two of us laughed so hard we nearly peed ourselves, and then we made some yeast rolls to eat with butter and sugar. It was such a small thing, me and my daughter standing together in the kitchen, waiting for the dough to rise and laughing at her impression of Mrs. Lee, but I sometimes think that when I am

on my deathbed, those mornings with my daughter will be some of my happiest memories. Real lifesavers, you know.

Because I have sworn to do it, when I am called to testify I will tell that roomful of men and Mrs. J. L. Henderson, the stenotype operator, that on the morning in question, a Sunday, me and Aimee Jo were listening to church services on the radio while we played gin rummy. I was beating her badly and trying to figure out how to throw the game without her catching on. Back then I did not believe it was good for a child's spirit to lose at cards too often, especially if it was a little girl.

So I passed cards, waited for my Aimee Jo to draw the four of hearts, and hoped she knew that was the card she needed. I dropped hints, saying: Won't you be my Valentine? Won't you be my heart? Or, Oh, my beating heart! I can hear it, one, two, three, *four* times, Aimee Jo. And so forth. It was nonsense, just a game we played to pass the time while we listened to Sunday services on the radio. The time was eleven o'clock. I am sure of this because the preacher—I've never caught his name, but he is a Baptist—was giving the sending prayer, and this always happens at eleven on the nose. After eleven, it's the oil reports, then the cattle markets. That year, you listened to oil reports if you wanted to hear the good news. If you wanted to sit down in your recliner and have yourself a good cry, you listened to the cattle markets. I don't suppose a Baptist would think too kindly about us listening to him on the radio during a card game, but that's how it was. It's the truth and I swore to tell it. Laid my hand on the Good Book and promised to tell nothing but the whole truth. Besides, I will say with a wink at those men on the jury, no money changed hands.

I will testify that Glory, who was then a stranger, knocked twice on our brand-new mahogany door. Just two weeks earlier, Robert had it shipped down from Lubbock, a peace offering after we'd had the same old argument about whether it was time to buy a house in town. It was an old argument, sure it was, but this one got ugly and we said some things. Threats, I guess you could say. And then I socked him right in the mouth, which I had never done before, but Jesus, I had just had it up to here with living out there, watching the flatbeds tear up the access road, smelling unrefined oil day and night. Robert couldn't hit me back because I was pregnant, but he sure could throw a fist into our front door three, four times. He sure could find

something to yell at Aimee Jo about. Now I had this pretty new front door. Aimee Jo got a new bicycle, a little Huffy with pink streamers and the sweetest little basket.

When I heard the two light raps, I looked at my daughter, just to be sure I had even heard anything, and when she said, Who's that, Mama, I hauled myself out of the recliner. We were not expecting company. Nobody comes out this far without calling first, not even the Witnesses. There had been no sound of a truck coming up the road. I picked up the Louisville Slugger we kept next to the television. You stay put, I said. I'll be right back.

My daughter was nine years old, just four years younger than the stranger I was about to find standing on my front porch, her injured body shifting and sighing against a capful of wind that came up while she waited for me to answer the door, to pull open that heavy door, to help. It will be my testimony that I did this—helped, the best I could, under the circumstances. I opened the door and my gorge rose and I said, *Christ almighty.* The wind picked up, and this disturbed the black flies that had settled in her hair, on her face, in the wounds on her hands and feet. I looked up the dirt road that led from our house to the ranch road, but it was quiet, save for a noisy flock of sandhill cranes that were wintering in a field of wheat stubble.

In August, when I tell my story to the court, the prosecution will try to give me a little lesson on Texas infrastructure. Ranch road, he says. Huh. Don't you mean the Farm to Market 181, Mrs. Whitehead?

Yes sir, that is what I meant.

I thought so. He tosses a look at the jury, like they have just shared a little inside joke, and my pantyhose suddenly feel real tight against my belly, still loose from my pregnancy. I think about Aimee Jo and my new son, barely three months old, both of them at home with Mrs. Shepherd so I can come do my civic duty, talk about this awfulness. I didn't ask for this trouble. It came to me. I didn't go looking for it. Then my breasts begin to itch and burn because I have been away from the baby for nearly four hours, and I start to worry that I might be shamed in front of these men if my milk should leak through the Kleenex I tucked into my bra and, for some reason, I don't know why, this makes me mad, so I tell the prosecution that *Farm to Market* wasn't what I meant to say at all. Everybody knows you call it

the ranch road, unless you've been off to school or you come from someplace else, which I guess he has, and the jury starts laughing at *him* then, and I remind them all that *I* was the first to see Glory Ramírez alive that Sunday morning.

She stood on my front porch tottering like a skinny drunk. Looking for all the world as if she had just crawled down from the screen of a horror movie out at the drive-in theater. Both her eyes were blackened, one swollen nearly shut. Her cheeks, forehead, and elbows were scraped raw, and her palms bled. Her feet were so torn up they looked like ground beef, the kind you buy and stir into macaroni when money's tight. I snugged my fingers tighter around the baseball bat, then shouted back at my daughter. Aimee Jo Whitehead! Run to my bedroom and get my rifle out of the cabinet. Bring it here right now. Hurry! But don't run with it.

I stepped a little further out onto the porch. I couldn't see anybody who might want to hurt us, but I also couldn't see anybody who might want to help us.

There was some noise as my daughter moved through the house, and I remember yelling again that she was not to run with that gun in her hands. Keeping my belly between my child and the stranger on the porch, I reached behind me and took the rifle from my daughter's small hand. And when she asked, What is it, Mama, rattlesnake? I told her to hush up, run to the kitchen, and call the sheriff's office.

Right *now,* I said. Tell them to call for an ambulance, too.

And Aimee Jo, I said without taking my eyes off the child in front of me, you stay away from that window or I will beat you to within an inch of your life.

Not once have I beaten my daughter, not one time. But that morning, when I said I would beat her, I meant it. I looked again at the child faltering on my porch, then glanced away for long enough to search the horizon. It's flat enough out there that nobody can sneak up on you, flat enough you can see your husband's pickup truck parked next to a water tank and know he's still too far away to hear you shouting for him. You could drive for hours out here without the road turning or lifting, not even a little bit. I stepped a little further out onto the porch.

I couldn't see anybody who might want to hurt us, but I also couldn't see anybody who might want to help us. And I will testify that I was tired.

How come? What was I so tired of?

You name it. The loneliness. The quiet. Being pregnant. Being mostly alone every day in a dusty old farmhouse with nothing but a little girl for company. I was tired of keeping an eye out for sandstorms and twisters, tired of shooting coyotes that drug half-dead chickens through the yard, sick to death of taking the garden hoe to rattlesnakes that had curled up under the clothesline or next to Aimee Jo's little bicycle. Daily, it seemed, I was shooting something or chopping it to pieces or dumping poison down its burrow. I felt like I was always either killing something or getting ready to kill something, and I was tired of disposing of the bodies.

Sometimes I wished I were the kind of woman who could take my daughter and leave. Other women had certainly done it. Some of them for good. Two years earlier, Marsha McKnight went all the way to Australia. She took half the family savings, two suitcases, and her ten-year-old son. The two of them flew from Midland to Dallas to Atlanta to Los Angeles to Melbourne. All those layovers! Just to get away from West Texas. Just imagine, I will tell the court before the judge asks me to please, please get on with it.

Just imagine me standing on my porch with one hand on my belly, the other leveraging myself against the rifle while I try to remember what I had for breakfast—cup of Folgers, piece of cold bacon, the cigarette I snuck when I went out to the barn to gather the day's eggs. Imagine my stomach turning itself inside out when I bend down to face the stranger on my porch, when I swallow hard and say: Honey, where are you from? Odessa?

Imagine that my voice is potent, like a kind of magic, and hearing the name of her hometown breaks whatever fearsome spell the child has suffered. She rubs at her eye and winces, and when she begins to speak the words come easy, like grains of sand blown through an old screen door.

Can I have a glass of water, ma'am? My name is Gloria. No, Glory. *Glory.* I live in the Desert Oasis apartments on Ector County Road, but my mother will not be home today. Sundays, she cleans offices at the chemical plant. Her name is Alma. When you call the man, tell him that's her name. Can I have

some water? I want my mom. I am thirsty. She will be so worried. I want my mom.

Imagine that she might as well be asking after my okra patch, calm as she seems, remote, and it is this horror hiding behind indifference that finally causes something to tear loose, to break apart from the rest of me. In a few years, when I think you are all old enough to hear it, I will tell you girls that my lower belly cramped and went cold as a block of ice. A steady hum started in my ears, faint but getting louder, and I remembered a few lines of rhyme, something I had read years earlier, maybe back in high school. *I heard a fly buzz—when I died*. For a few cramping, cold, and miserable seconds, until I felt the unmistakable kick, I thought I had begun to miscarry. My vision dimmed a little more, and I remembered a few other lines of verse, stray and unconnected to anything. How strange it was to be thinking of a poem now, of all times, when I had not given it so much as a passing thought, these years since I became a grown woman, a wife, a mother. But now I recalled: *This is the Hour of Lead—Remembered, if outlived*.

I was still bent before this child, but now I stood up straight and shook my head gently, as if doing so might let me clear away all that was happening right in front of me, as if I could clear away the terrible fact of this stranger and whatever recent hell she had endured, as if I could step back into my living room and tell my daughter, It's just the wind, honey. How about another game of gin? You ready to learn how to play rummy?

Instead, I leaned heavily on the rifle and rested my other hand on my belly. I am going to get you a glass of water. Then we'll call your mama.

I turned to put the rifle down and the girl gently shifted from side to side. A halo of sand and dirt rose up around her face and hair. For a few seconds, she was a dust cloud—a sandstorm that had asked for my help or the wind begging a little mercy. One hand reached out to her, as the other stretched behind me to set the rifle against the doorframe. In those seconds, I was nothing if not reaching. When I turned back to hold her—to save her from falling off the porch or maybe I was just trying to keep myself upright, I will never be able to say for sure—Glory bent down slightly and the earth-made halo filled the sky behind her.

A pickup truck had turned off the ranch road and was starting toward our house. When it passed the mailbox, the

truck swerved a bit as if the driver had let himself get distracted. The pickup slid briefly toward the water tank and the sandhill cranes rose up, filling the sky with their gangling bodies and their ugly, familiar cries. The vehicle was still three miles off, but it rumbled forward steadily, kicking up dirt and ruddying the air. Whoever it was, he drove like he knew exactly where he was going and he was in no real hurry to get there.

For Chrissakes, I thought, who in the hell is this?

The Work of Mercy

Here's how I imagine it might have been for him, in the moments before he began the drive toward my farmhouse: The sun was already crawling toward high sky when he woke up, dicksore and dying of thirst. His jaw was locked in a familiar amphetamine clench, his mouth tasted like he had been sucking on the nozzle of a gas can. A bruise the size of a fist throbbed on his left thigh, maybe caused from the hours it had been pressed against the gearshift. Hard to say, but he knew one thing for sure. He felt like shit. Jesus Christ, he felt like shit. Like somebody had been beating the side of his head with a boot. And there was blood, too, on his shirt and boots and face, but hard as he looked he could not find any open wounds. He pressed his fingers against his eyes and the corners of his mouth. Turned his hands over and over, felt the sides of his head. Maybe he unzipped and examined himself, just to make sure everything was all right down there. His dick was sore as hell and there was some blood, but he couldn't find any obvious wounds. Maybe he unfolded himself from the front seat of the pickup truck and stood outside for a minute to let the sun and air warm his skin. Maybe he marveled at the day's unseasonable warmth, its unusual stillness, just as I had earlier that morning.

To me, the work of mercy means I have to try hard to see that young man rooting around in the bed of his truck for a jug of water. I have to imagine him standing out there in the oilfield, turning 365 degrees, slow as he can manage it, while he tries to account for the last fourteen hours. Maybe he doesn't even remember the girl until he sees her sneakers tumbled against the truck's tire, or the letterman's jacket lying in a heap next to the drilling platform, her name embroidered on its left breast. Gloria. I want to imagine him heartsick. *What have I done?*

It might have taken him a little longer to understand that he

had to find her, to make sure she was okay and see if she needed any money or a ride back to wherever he had picked her up. He would need to make sure they were clear on what had happened. The young roughneck sat on the tailgate, drinking musty water from his canteen and wishing he could remember the details of her face. He scuffed a boot against the ground and tried to bring the previous night into focus, looking again at the girl's shoes and jacket, then lifting his gaze to the oil derricks spread out across otherwise empty fields. He saw the ranch road, the scarce Sunday traffic and behind that, a farmhouse. My house.

He thought the house looked too far to walk, and you sure as shit couldn't do it without your shoes on. Still, you never knew. Those little gals were tough as nails. And one who was mad about how her Valentine's date had turned out? She might be able to walk barefoot through hell's fires, if she made up her mind to do it. He pushed himself off the tailgate and stood up. He squinted into the jug. There was just enough water to clean up a little.

When he was done, he bent down in front of the driver's window and ran some fingers through his hair. He made a plan. He would see if he could manage to take a piss, making sure to tuck his shirt in afterward, and then he would drive over to that farmhouse and have a little look-see. Maybe he'd get lucky and the place would be abandoned. Maybe he'd find his new girlfriend sitting out there on a dusty old front porch, thirsty as a peach tree in a windstorm and happy as hell to see him again.

Hour of Lead

These were my mistakes. When I saw the pickup truck coming, I did not allow the child to look behind her, so I could not ask: Do you know that truck? Have you ever seen that truck before? Instead, I scooted her inside and poured her a big glass of water. Drink slow, I told her, you don't want to make yourself sick. And when I saw my own daughter step into the kitchen, her eyes growing big as silver dollars at the girl who had begun quietly to chant *I want my mom, I want my mom,* I did not ask my daughter if she had phoned the sheriff. Instead, I swallowed a couple of saltine crackers and drank a glass of water. Then I bent over the kitchen sink and splashed water on my face for long enough that the pump switched on. I told the two girls,

Y'all stay right here. I've got to take care of something outside, then I'll come right back and we'll call your mama. The older girl cried, I want my mom *now,* and my anger was sudden and filled with a bile that burned my throat and shamed me. You hush up, I told her. I sat both girls down at the kitchen table so they could stare at each other. Y'all stay put. But I never asked if Aimee Jo had called the sheriff. That was my second mistake. And when I stepped outside and picked up my rifle, when I carried it to the edge of the porch and readied myself to meet whoever was coming up the road, I did not check to make sure it was loaded. My third mistake.

Now. I stand at the edge of the porch as he drives slowly into the yard. He parks less than twenty feet from my front porch and comes from behind the steering wheel with a long, low whistle. The truck's door slams closed behind him and he leans against the hood, looking around as if he might like to buy the place. The sun and air pluck gently at him, lighting the freckles on his arms, rifling his sandy hair. Late-morning sunshine turns him gold as a topaz, but even from my distance I can see the bruises on his hands and face, the red borders around his pale blue eyes. He crosses his arms and shrugs, looking up and around with an easy smile, like the day has just become too good to believe. He is barely past being a boy.

Late-morning sunshine turns him gold as a topaz, but even from my distance I can see the bruises on his hands and face.

Morning! He glances at his watch. Or I guess it's afternoon, just about.

I stand there clutching the rifle stock like it is the hand of my dearest old friend. I do not know him, but I understand right away that he is too young to be one of the foremen who sometimes come out to make sure our access road is being kept open and clear, and he's too young to be a deputy volunteer, and then it occurs to me that I did not ask Aimee Jo if she called the sheriff's office.

What can I do for you?

You must be Mrs. Whitehead. This is a real pretty place y'all have out here.

I laugh, and it sounds bitter as juniper berries. Pretty! It's all right. Dusty this year.

But I am wondering how he knows my name.

He laughs a little. Yeah, I guess so. Good for my line of work, though. It's real easy to work a rig when Mother Nature keeps things nice and dry.

He stands up straight and takes one step forward, his palms facing up. His smile is steady as the needle on a cracked kitchen scale.

Listen, ma'am, I have had a little trouble this morning. I wonder if you will help me?

He steps toward the porch, and I watch his feet move closer, then look up to see he's holding his hands high above his head, as if he is a sinner and I am the preacher that's going to dunk him in the waters. The baby kicks me hard in the ribs and I lay a hand on my belly. Wish I could sit down. Two days ago I fired my gun at a coyote slinking through the yard. I missed the shot and then Aimee Jo started hollering about some fire ants, so I set the gun down and went to see. And now I cannot recall whether I replaced the cartridge. The rifle was a gift from my grandfather for my thirteenth birthday. It is a thing I have hung onto, even though Robert has pestered me for years to get a little pearl-handled ladies' revolver. Now, I smooth my thumb across the old wooden stock as if the gun might tell me, yes or no.

To the boy who is a barely a man, I say, Son, what do you want?

He looks fine standing out there in the sunlight, but his eyes narrow a little, like he is beginning to understand that I know something about him. I don't. He is good-looking and damaged and I do not know him.

Well, I'm real thirsty and I'd like to use your telephone to call—

He takes another step toward the house, then stops abruptly, as if he's just seen the gun. He can't possibly know, I tell myself, that it might not be loaded. I tap the barrel gently against the mesquite planking, one, two, three times, and the boy cocks his head, listening.

Mrs. Whitehead, is your husband at home?

Yes he is. Of course he is. But he's sleeping right now.

His smile gets a little wider, a little friendlier. A cattleman asleep at noon?

It's 11:30, I say. How stupid it sounds! How alone it makes me seem!

He giggles a little, real high-pitched, and my stomach roils at the sound. His laughter is a false cut.

Lord, Mrs. Whitehead, did your husband tie one on last night too?

No.

He sick?

He is not. I press one hand against my belly. Slow down, little baby. Quiet. To the boy I say, Can I help you with something?

I already told you. I've had a little trouble. Me and my girlfriend drove out last night for a little celebration, a surprise for my valentine. You know how it is.

I see.

But we had too much to drink and then we got into a scuffle. Guess she didn't like the candy I bought for her, and I think maybe I passed out—

Did you.

Guess you could say I lost my valentine. Shame on me, huh?

I don't say another word. Just watch him and hold on to that gun for dear life, but my throat feels like somebody just wrapped his hand around it and started to squeeze real slow.

The boy finishes up his little tale, still smiling, still shining. He stands less than ten feet from me now. If there is a shell in the chamber, I won't miss him.

When I woke up this morning, he tells me, she had hightailed it out of there. I'm afraid she might be walking around in the oil patch, lost. It ain't no place for a woman, as I'm sure you know.

I don't say a word. Listening is what I do now. It's what I am. I listen, but I don't hear a thing except for this man, talking. Even the sandhill cranes have settled back down and gone silent.

I hate to think of her running into an old copperhead out there, he says. Listen, I got an idea. Have you seen my girlfriend?

He lifts his right hand and holds it out to his side, palm down. Little Mexican girl? About yay high?

The hand on my throat squeezes. I swallow hard. Haven't seen her.

Can I come in and use your phone? Maybe she hitched a ride back to town.

I shake my head real slow, back and forth. No.

He pretends to look genuinely surprised. Well, why not?

Because I don't know you. I try to speak this lie as if I mean it. Because now I do know him, who he is and what he did.

Listen, Mrs. Whitehead—

I interrupt him here, shouting, How do you know my name? But he keeps on like I haven't said a word.

I'm feeling real bad about what happened with my girlfriend. I'm real worried about her. She's a little crazy, you know how they get—hot-blooded. He peers at me intently. If you've seen her, you should tell me.

Abruptly, he stops talking and gazes past me toward the house. His face breaks into a broad grin and I imagine my daughter peeking out the window at him. Or worse, I imagine the other girl looking through the glass, her blackened eyes, her scraped face, and I do not know what to do, whether to keep my eyes on him every second or turn my head so I can see what he sees, know what he knows. So I stand there, me and my maybe loaded gun, and I try to listen.

I do not know what to do, whether to keep my eyes on him every second or turn my head so I can see what he sees, know what he knows.

I want you to stand back, I tell him after a full minute of quiet has passed. I want you to go stand over by the tailgate of your truck.

He stays put. And I told you that I want a drink of water.

No.

He looks up at the sky and lays his hands on the back of his neck, fingers threaded. He whistles a few bars of music and though the song is familiar, I can't name it. When he speaks, he is a man, not a boy.

I want you to give her to me. Okay?

I don't know what you are talking about. Why don't you go on back to town?

You go inside the house now, Mrs. Whitehead, and get my girl. Try not to wake your husband who is sleeping upstairs.

And suddenly my husband's face rises wraithlike before me, his voice a shriek. You did all this for a stranger, Mary Rose?

You risked your own daughter's life, our baby's life, your*self,* for a stranger? What the hell were you thinking?

And rightfully so. Because who is this child to me, anyway? Maybe she got into the truck willingly. I might have done the same ten years ago, especially for a man this good-looking.

Listen, lady. I don't know you. You don't know me. You don't know *Gloria*—

He's right. Lord, I don't even know for sure what her name is, what she is called.

Now I want you to be a good girl and go inside that house and bring her to me.

I feel the tears on my cheeks before I am even completely aware that I have begun to weep. There I stand, with my rifle, that useless piece of beautifully carved wood. And why should I not do as he asks? Who is she to me? She is not my child. Aimee Jo and this little one, whose feet hammer against my ribs, they are somebody to me. *They* are mine. Gloria is not mine.

When next he speaks, the man is no longer interested in asking questions. You listen to me, lady. You hear me now.

I listen for some other sound, something other than his voice. Even the sandhill cranes with their tuneless cries would be welcome noise, but there is nothing. It seems everything on this particular piece of flat and lonely earth has gone silent. His is the only voice I can hear, and it roars. You hear me? You hear me.

I am a rusted-out bucket, poured out and empty. Gently, I shake my head. No, I tell him. No, I can't hear you.

I pick up the rifle and set it on my shoulder, familiar, but now it feels like somebody poured lead into the barrel. I move slow as an old woman. Maybe it is loaded. I can't know, but I point it at that boy's pretty, golden face. He can't know either. I don't even have one word left in me. Even if I knew his name, I wouldn't be able to say it. I can't do anything but point the gun, so I click off the safety and site him through the aperture, my vision blurred by tears and the sorrow of knowing what I might say if he asks even one more time. Okay. All right. I'll go in and get her.

We see the trucks before we hear them, and we both stare. They are coming fast up the road, kicking up enough dust to choke a herd of cows. Just this side of the mailbox, the ambulance driver overcorrects and skitters off the road. The vehicle bounces off the barbwire fence and into the cranes. They rise up

accusing, a squawking hue and cry as they take flight, all noise and thin legs and thwapping disorder. The roughneck stands still as a frightened rabbit. His shoulders slump forward as he presses his hands against his face. Well shit, he says.

A lot of years will pass before I think you are able to hear it, but when I do, I will tell you girls that the last thing I remember seeing before I leaned back against the door frame and passed out cold on the front porch was two little girls, their faces pressed against the kitchen window, mouths agape, eyes wide open.

Glory

In truth, the morning had been still as a corpse. Almost no wind at all, and that was strange because there is almost always wind out there, somewhere. But in her remembrances, the wind will not leave Glory alone. It is unceasing and full of voices that say stand up, Glory—and she does. The wind shifts a bit. Newly torn from its roots, a tumbleweed throws itself across the land. Gather yourself, it says, and she collects her pieces and parts, scattered and bruised. A mesquite branch snaps beneath the weight of her bare foot and in the slight echo that follows, she hears her uncle's voice. Walk quiet, Glory. Real quiet. This is a war story.

And this sky stretched tight above the earth's seam? She will miss it when she goes. Can't stay. Not after this.

Out there the wind is always coming and going, losing ground, then gaining some. It carries the voices that tell stories—stories that get you away, or bring you through, or carry you across. And out there, a lot of the stories begin and end in the same way: *Listen. This is how you survive.* By September, she will be gone.