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PERILOUS PILGRIMAGE:

A LADY'S FLIGHT INTO THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN WILDERNESS

by

Jane Koerner

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2010

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ABSTRACT

Perilous Pilgrimage:

A Lady's Flight into the Rocky Mountain Wilderness

by

Jane Koerner, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2010

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

"Perilous Pilgrimage: A Lady's Flight into the Rocky Mountain Wilderness" is comprised of four thematically linked essays set in the Colorado Rockies. In these essays I probe my fascination with masculinity at an early age, the impact of my rape at age twenty-two, the dependency and resentment that undermined my marriage after the rape, and my quest after my divorce fifteen years later to define myself on my own terms. The link joining these strands is the tension between my drive for independence and my disassociation from my mind and body as a result of the rape.

"Perilous Pilgrimage" revisits three pivotal stages of my life: childhood, young adulthood, and middle age. As a youngster vacationing with my family in Rocky Mountain National Park, I was drawn to men who rescued lost hikers and climbed mountains. Fred Bowen, the caretaker of our rented cabin in the park, and the two California school teachers who were the first to conquer the Diamond on Longs Peak, appeared to have more freedom than I did as a middle-class girl growing up in the 1950s.

That conviction was reinforced after I moved to Colorado at age seventeen. Four years later I graduated from college and began dating a man who introduced me to the thrill and terror of mountaineering. After leading me up numerous mountains, he became my husband, and we made our home in Manitou Springs, Colorado. Once married, I could no longer repress the unresolved issues of my rape and identity quest, and I revolted. At age thirty-nine, I embarked on a solo quest to reclaim that sense of wonder and independence I had felt as a child exploring Rocky Mountain National Park.

Included in my essays are references to historical figures with similar urges as mine, such as the 19th-century English explorer George Augustus Ruxton and English travel writer Isabella Bird. My search for refuge and redemption in the Colorado Rockies replicated a centuries-old pattern.

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CHAPTER I

CONTINENTAL DIVIDE

"Four hundred more miles," my sister and I shout in unison. We've been clocking the mileage since Topeka, Kansas, pleading for updates every ten minutes. The closer we get to the Colorado border, the more agitated the sea of wheat fields becomes in the face of a stiff wind. Sunlit stalks dip and rise in the amber waves that Katherine Lee Bates immortalized in her lyrics to "America the Beautiful," while we steady the swaying of our station wagon with our songs. Before the border crossing, we sing, *Home, home on the range, where the deer and the antelope play,* forgetful of their absence; and then, after a respectable rest, *Oh my darling, Oh my darling, Oh my darling, Clementine, you are lost and gone forever, dreadful sorry, my Clementine,* our hearts brimming rather than broken, the wind mills spinning as we fly past, the grain elevators nosing the sky like itchy rockets. Beyond Oakley, Kansas, Mother spots the real mountains—a streak of blue-bottomed cumulus on the horizon. Snow in August! It is 1958 and the sky hangs over us violet blue, undiluted by the smudge of burning coal that will fuel the expansion of cities once the rest of the heartland grows restive. Three hundred more miles. Jackrabbits spring out of the sagebrush and into the line of fire, sacrificing their carcasses to the vultures. Seventy-five more miles. The skyscrapers of Denver rear up, aggressive in their boldness. They drape us in shadow as we tunnel through the tight-fisted streets. Forty more miles. The grocery stores and gas station bathrooms of Boulder are clotted with tourists en-route from Kansas and Oklahoma City and the Texas panhandle.

Beyond Boulder, the yucca-spiked high plains recede as the pitch of the land rolls and rises to meet evergreen-draped foothills. My sister and I stop counting the moment

we enter the gorge. Shards of sunlight skitter across the uneasy surface of the St. Vrain River. The summer half over, the northern Colorado Rockies still feed the river with snowmelt. Frothing at the banks, it seems to resent the confinement of the copper gorge. As the road climbs toward the crest of the canyon, we glimpse the river one more time, reduced to serpentine liquid silver.

At the top of the pass, I hold my breath, hoping to preserve what's left of the oxygen in the car as the view below sucks it right out. A valley winds toward every corner of the compass, as if unconfined by boundaries, and yet there is an edge, which, once we leave the village of Estes Park behind, with its relentless sales pitches and hooked tourists, asserts itself in a vertical half mile of rock. One mountain distinguishes itself from the rest of the range with its singular height, flat top and precipitous east face: Longs Peak.

Longs Peak is even more commanding once we enter Rocky Mountain National Park. For the next eight summers, this will be my vantage point. From the window of the two-room cabin my parents rent every August inside the park, I study the mountain in the crystalline brightness of the morning, as the elk graze in the meadow below our cabin. At this time of day, the mountain seems closer and less formidable than it is. But, in the graying dimness of a gathering storm, it retreats, a puzzle with missing pieces. If I am patient, the clouds will lift and the mountain will be dusted in snow. Other times the mountain emerges from the mist, a gold dome, or polished silver. The aftermath of each storm short-lived and surprising, at sunset the color of the mountain determined by the density of the cloud cover.

Every summer of my childhood, Longs Peak will hold me spellbound, tempt

meinto testing my wings, comfort me when I am frightened or sad. In its beautiful, but indifferent embrace I begin the journey that molds me into the woman I am today.

My childhood consisted of two narratives. One was fashioned during the school year in the fenced-in yards of Prairie Village, Kansas, neither a prairie nor a village, but a post-war housing development on the outskirts of Kansas City. The other story took shape in July or August, when my father packed up the Ford Woodie with his golf clubs, the Coleman stove, and enough clothing to withstand the fickle climate of the Colorado Rockies. We were headed west for Rocky Mountain National Park.

The continental divide of my childhood rose up at the Kansas-Colorado border. Ahead lay the fractured, uplifted horizon formed by the Rocky Mountains, ahead lay Longs Peak and the alpine meadow where my sister and I played hide-and-seek in the willows below our cabin, ahead lay freedom and possibility.

Left behind, so close to Missouri, it barely qualifies as Kansas: our neighborhood in Prairie Village with the chain-link fence that keeps me out of the concrete creek bed, and the troops of boys who patrol the perimeter, dispensing vigilante justice to the outlaws; and the gangs of girls who gather in their bedrooms, mothering their Barbie dolls with dresses that beautify their bald, featureless, inanimate bodies. Big blond wigs smother any hint of curiosity.

My dolls reside in cardboard shoeboxes, three beheaded corpses to a casket.

Not that I am immune to the favorite past-times of my gender. My thick, diamond-specked, finned eyeglasses pose a barrier to friendship.

Frosty McMurphy tolerates my companionship. He is equally at home with both

tribes. I study him carefully at the lunch table to see how he pulls it off. His blue eyes gaze into mine without blinking. He has freckles and a softness of manner that invites girl talk, and I am not the only girl in Miss Lund's third-grade class with a crush. All the other girls at the table flirt shamelessly with him. I keep my infatuation to myself. If I betray my true feelings, Greta Hettinger will expose me in public. "Jane's in love with Frosty! Jane's in love with Frosty!"

The bell rings and the savages are rounded up and herded back to their classrooms. While Miss Lund diagrams sentences on the blackboard, Frosty McMurphy passes a note to Pamela Pendergast. She blushes and scribbles a note, which she tucks into the back pocket of his pants. Frosty has fallen for Pamela, not me.

The girls make fun of me. The boys take me hostage. The checkered pattern of my butchered bangs brands my forehead like an alien longhorn. I should have asked mother to trim my bangs—she had a steadier hand—but she would have disapproved of the style I had in mind. I wanted a crew cut so I could cross the picket line. I took the scissors from her dresser and began cutting unevenly, haphazardly. Then I wrapped a wad of hair around my index finger, disciplining the unruly curl with one of mother's pin curls, repeating the procedure curl by curl until all my hair lay flat.

The Texas Rangers size me up, label me "it" and hunt me down in the forsythias. See Jane kneel. The diamonds in her fins are made of plastic. Her laughter is as stiff as the fake tulips in Mrs. Jensen's milk can. See Jane beg for mercy half-heartedly. It is thrilling to be the center of attention until they lay me down in the crabgrass and tie me up by the wrists and ankles. In Prairie Village, Kansas, in May 1958, the sky quivers with heat, and the crows on the power line rouse themselves from their Saturday afternoon

social to study my wrists. The shoe laces binding them to stakes compromise the blood supply to my fingertips. I do not deserve to die like this. What was my offense?

“You’re a girl,” says Cousin Charles, the youngest of my three tormentors. Before leaving me to my fate, he kneels beside my head to tighten the shoe laces around my wrists.

The crows on the power line have turned their backs. They are watching the blue jay in the oak tree. I look up at the broken sky. The heat has blown apart the cumulus clouds. The clouds drip with perspiration. I pray for the sirens to go off, for a funnel to swirl out of the melting sky. It will scatter the boys like cottonwood seeds. It will scoop me up with its soft, flicking tail, and hold me tight until it sets me down at the foot of the Rocky Mountains.

I do not belong to either tribe.

In the basement of our tract house, which looks like every other tract house in the neighborhood except for the red shutters and shingles, and the lack of a basketball hoop over the garage door, my father sleeps on the sofa, oblivious to my plight. He would sleep all day if it weren’t for the western matinees on the television. A bottle of Cutty Sark sits on the bar. On the label a ship with giant sails is tossed about by cresting waves. Next to the bottle, a stained glass retains its chill with ice cubes that haven’t entirely melted.

I must have worn him out last night. Usually my sister and I are in bed when he comes home from work. But on Friday nights he tries to make it home in time for my favorite ritual. He picks me up by the shoulders and whirls me around the kitchen. I grip the tops of his patent leather shoes with my bare toes to compensate for the inadequacy of

my arms, which are too short to reach around his waist. Our waltz proceeds at a stiff-legged gait, and despite our mismatched embrace we stick together to the last whistled note. I would dance with him until my toes bled and I'm old enough to marry, but he cuts the routine short, exhausted by another ten-hour day at work.

If my father cannot help me, maybe John Wayne's Ethan Edwards can. He has a horse, a shotgun and a stubborn temperament. I have seen *The Searchers* enough times to know what he is capable of. Five years of searching for his abducted niece, Natalie Wood. I can feel the wild beating of her heart, the sting of sand under her feet as she runs away from her pursuers, dropping her cotton doll in the dirt. Her parents murdered, their ranch house torched. The elder sister also taken by the Comanche and her body dumped in the desert. From the expression on Uncle Ethan's face as he emerges from the canyon empty-handed, I conclude that unspeakable atrocities were committed before her death.

My cousins have left me alone with my imagination. My tethered legs are splayed like a dissected frog; ants crawl up my spine. I am wide-eyed and breathless and beads of sweat pool under my shirt. I wonder what it is like to be a teenager with breasts. Uncle Ethan's niece is a teenager when he finds her, the beads on the bodice of her buckskin dress stirred by the heaving of her chest. I wonder what it's like to be a teenager with noticeable breasts, to be the bride of a Comanche warrior with a battle scar on his forehead. His black hair is thicker and longer than hers. After five years with her captors, her skin is dark as dusk; clipped, incomprehensible sounds roll off her tongue. She has forgotten how to speak English. She belongs to the chief now, and her uncle hates the sight of her. Hates her so much he draws his pistol when he spies her inside the tipi. The longer they keep her, the deeper the mark. Maybe she is better off dead than alive.

Although his hatred clouds his judgment, I trust Uncle Ethan more than any other man in my life. He is too ruthless to give up. He will follow my tracks across the crabgrass, spurring his horse on, his cowboy hat concealing his eyes, his pistol drawn. When he spies my splayed legs, he will dismount and rip the stakes right out of the ground. Because of the hat, I will not be able to discern his intentions.

"Steven Andrew! Charles Davis!" My aunt is standing in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. The boys have long since departed on another mission, and she releases me.

My mother picks me up, and out of respect for my feelings perhaps, asks no questions on the drive home. The moment the car rolls to a stop in our driveway, I leap out and make a beeline for the basement. The sofa is vacant. The dent in the pillow suggests that he slept here recently. I run upstairs and push open the door to my parents' bedroom. My father is asleep in his own bed. I try not to startle him when I lie down beside him, resting my head on the pillow of his stomach. I try to stay awake so that when he wakes up, I will hear him when he tells me he loves me, not once but three times. This is another one of our rituals. If he says it enough times, I will believe him.

In the Colorado Rockies I do not crave my father's attention. The mountains shelter me from harm. They pinch the sky into a faint ribbon, dim the light, shutter our meadow in premature winter, fading my memory of what I've left behind. I learn to predict the weather by watching for subtle movements in cloud cover and light. A halo of black above Longs Peak means a sudden temperature drop and an afternoon shower. I learn to smell the rain before it falls and to cover my ears before the boom that follows each

lightning strike. I interpret the thud of horse hooves on the trail below the cabins as another search party in progress. The rangers must be approaching in their brown fatigues to fetch Fred Bowen, the proprietor, from his wood pile. He is a consummate mountaineer who has climbed more peaks in the park than any of the park rangers.

But instead of rangers, a train of tourists passes by, brownie cameras pocketed, so the straps don't catch on their saddle horns and dismount them. The wrangler sits on the lead quarter horse cock-eyed, as if dozing in his saddle. A badger pokes its head out of a hole to investigate, nose on high alert. Butterflies, lighter than lace, flick the air lilac. I want to fly with them, Huck Finn plotting his escape, slipping away from his aunt's house.

Fred Bowen is as diligent with the wood cutting as Mother is with the cooking on the finicky stove. Scabs and bruises decorate his hands, the bronze medals of his profession. When he isn't pounding a loose nail back into place or cleaning the chimneys to our wood-burning stoves, he is chopping wood and stacking it into tidy piles. By the end of our stay, enough pyramids will be stacked outside the main cabin to see him and his wife Ruth through the winter. He is a man of few words and constant activity who has little time for children and their questions, and yet I would rather watch him at work than interact with playmates my age. He is beholden to no one. He built all the cabins in his self-appointed Bowen Woods in Hallowell Park, hauling the downed timber from the hillside out back. The park service contacts him after a disappearance or an accident, and he hauls those bodies down too if necessary. One of his retrievals slipped while soloing the East Face of Longs Peak. The witnesses shouted down at him from the summit as he lay on a ledge, drifting in and out of consciousness. "Hang on. Help is on the way." By

the time Fred arrived on the scene, it was too late. The climber had rolled off the ledge.

"Never hike alone," Fred told us afterwards. And that was all he had to say on the subject. If he grieved the loss of this unfortunate young man, he expressed it with the swing of an axe against wood.

The spider in the crack wears a red plaid shirt like Fred Bowen's. He is suspended in space, his rope imperceptible in the lenses of the binoculars. His partner crouches on a ledge below, feeding him the rope that is supposed to save his life if he falls─provided the bolts and pitons stay put.

It takes a while to locate him. The weight of the binoculars is winning the wrestling match with my tentative grip. My father encourages me to keep trying; I will be rewarded for my effort. I will witness history, or disaster. Our wrangler intervenes, steering the lenses, adjusting their focus.

Cars two-deep line both sides of the highway below. Binoculars, opera glasses, rented telescopes are all trained on the same spot: the unconquered one-thousand-foot Diamond that dominates the East Face of Longs Peak. The Holy Grail of technical alpine climbing in the continental United States, the Diamond remains the last holdout as less challenging routes succumb in the wake of post-world-war technological advancements. Stettners Ledges, the Window, the Diagonal─none of these routes on the East Face measure up to the sheerness and length of the Diamond. Climbers from throughout the West covet the prize. Skeptics say it will never be climbed.

Besieged with applications, the park service finally grants permission to two school teachers from California. Their resume is persuasive: first ascents on Yosemite's

El Capitan, a successful season in the Tetons. The teachers have been training for months, waiting for the park service to give the go-ahead. They've stockpiled gear, recruited a support party, studied the possibilities, memorized the likeliest lines. It is the kind of determination and commitment I've come to admire after watching John Wayne in *The Searchers* half a dozen times and Fred Bowen at his wood pile.

Cries of indeterminate origin travel across the forested flank of the mountain, dying out in mid-air. "They're yodeling!" the wrangler exclaims, paying tribute with a hoist of his cowboy hat.

"Yogeling?"

"Singing like the Swiss, not like us cowboys," he says, readjusting the position of the binoculars in my hands. Red Spiderman has moved an inch up the crack. The legs of his seated companion dangle off the ledge.

"They're happy?" I ask.

"Maybe the yodeling gives them the courage to keep going," my father says.

Spectators who camped overnight or rode up at dawn place bets on the outcome, the fatalists outnumbering the optimists. His rope still blending in, Spiderman pendulums to another crack as if propelled by his own wings, and vanishes. The mountain has swallowed him. Horns honk. The spectator with the worst sunburn says, "That's the last we'll see of him."

"I hope he has life insurance," his wife says. "He's married."

My father is hungry. He opens the sack lunch Mother prepared before sending us on our way, inhales two peanut butter sandwiches, leaving the stray crumbs for the chipmunks, and takes a swig from his Orange Crush.

We slathered ourselves in sunscreen for the ride up. Now my sister is shivering in the shower of windblown leaves that frequently precedes a storm. The storm is already forming on the peak. Patches of mist swirl around the summit, drifting downward. Our wrangler retrieves a sweater from the saddle pack. The rest of the tourists in our party want to stay until Spiderman crawls out of his lair.

Before our departure this morning, Fred Bowen predicted they would have to spend another night on the mountain. I picture them huddled together, down jackets for blankets, a ledge for a mattress, the Milky Way their only lamp.

“Who will rescue them if they don’t make it to the top?” I ask. A hailstorm turned them back yesterday, their first day on the Diamond, forcing them all the way down to the ledge where they set up their first belay. The ledge was the only place that was big enough for both of them. They roped themselves in for the night and waited for the sunrise to light the route they established with a fixed line for the return trip. Even in good weather, the climb could not be completed in one day, as they had hoped. The fragility of the rock took them by surprise. From below, it looked solid, receptive to the hammering in of their pitons. But the higher they went, the flakier the rock.

Fred Bowen could answer my question, but he stayed behind to attend to his chores. The climber who lost his life on the East Face was climbing a well-known route. They brought the body bag down by mule, Fred walking alongside, holding the reins. No one has attempted the Diamond before.

“They can’t retreat again,” reports a Yosemite veteran who camped here overnight so he could witness the entire ascent. “The ranger said they’ve run out of rope.”

Through the binoculars being passed back and forth, we confirm our worst fears:

the angle of the wall on the uppermost part of the Diamond exceeds vertical, and Spiderman is climbing in a partial backbend like an indecisive gymnast. I wonder how they switch leads without tangling their ropes. I wonder how they convince themselves to keep going when the rock grows wet and it isn't raining and they have to climb through the spray of an unexpected waterfall. I wonder what they say to each other when the wind picks up, threatening a storm. Did we make the wrong decision? I wonder if their hands go numb when they encounter one section of ice after another, hundreds of feet above Chasm Lake, where more spectators are gathered, watching through binoculars, calculating the odds, cracking jokes.

They started climbing with two quarts of water in each pack, which they have carefully rationed. They did not expect to spend a second night on the mountain. At dawn a few gulps of water from their nearly empty canteens, and the piece of salami and half-eaten chocolate bars in the pocket of their pants will have to sustain them for the final push.

One more chimney, the sharpest and most decomposed overhang of the entire ascent. The bulge looked relentless, possibly insurmountable, they reported afterwards in their *American Alpine Journal* account. Water dripped from a melting ice block at the top. This was the source of the waterfall. They contemplated bailing, but they didn't have enough pitons left to secure the rope for a lengthy rappel. After two days of climbing, from dawn to dusk, the thought of a rescue from above was even more demoralizing, and they kept going.

In the newspaper photos of their arrival on the summit, they look exhausted and emaciated, not triumphant. The rangers applaud as Spiderman's wife greets him with a

kiss and a chocolate bar.

The victory parade is an impromptu affair at the rodeo grounds. The rangers bet against them, lining up on the summit in anticipation of a military-style rescue operation. Despite the short notice, hundreds of tourists turn out for the celebration. I picture the victors waving through a blizzard of confetti, the whine of the convertible drowned out by cascading cheers.

The hill behind our cabin must have a summit even though I cannot see it with so many ponderosas and boulders in the way. As I slip out the back door, my sister remains on the sofa, determined as always, to stay within calling distance of Mother, who forgot to latch the screen door. I shut it softly so she won't hear me, not that she could hear me over the whistling of the kettle on the wood-burning stove.

I ran away once before in Kansas City, packed up my suitcase with my stuffed animal collection and two pairs of clean socks, bolting out the front door in plain sight of Mother, who looked up from her Agatha Christie and said, "Do you have enough socks?" When I got to the boulevard at the bottom of our quiet street, I turned back, reined in by Mother's frequent admonition: "Never cross a busy street without an adult."

In Colorado she took extra precautions in case of a reoccurrence, zipping me up in the red nylon jacket recommended by Fred Bowen before letting me out to play. This time I zipped myself up, pocketing the biscuit I didn't eat for breakfast. There was no salami or chocolate in the cooler.

I didn't anticipate the gravel. Instinctively I lean outward to counteract the slippage that torques my ankles, and start side hilling like the elk do when they ascend

from the meadow into the forest. Hummingbirds buzz back and forth in flashes of iridescent green. The trunks of the ponderosas soar beyond my range of vision, Jack's beanstalk, their uppermost branches lost in the sky. The lichen-splattered boulders look like they could come to life at any moment and start speaking to me, trolls from the underworld warning me away from the forest. But I am not afraid because the spidermen who conquered the Diamond were not afraid. I will climb a boulder and when I reach the top, I will shout triumphantly at the top of my lungs, letting the whole world know of my achievement. I reach for a handhold and then another, my feet secure on the bottom shelf. Half way up, the lichen sponge me off. Is this how the hummingbirds learn to fly? They have to keep testing their wings? I pick myself up, dusting the gravel off, and hike beyond the boulder. On the other side, a ramp leads to the top. I rely on my legs until the last move, too much of a stretch without an arm lift.

I am not afraid of the height. The chipmunks have crowned me queen of the boulder, their forepaws extended for the royal dispensation. I share the crumbling crust of my biscuit, but it fails to satisfy their hunger, and they scamper into my lap and stand on their haunches, scratching at my jacket. I could shake them off but they are my subjects, and I am their benevolent benefactor.

The search party finds me beneath the umbrella of a ponderosa, napping on a bed of pine needles. Fred Bowen spotted my red jacket during my upward march. I do not want to be rescued. My fear of the forest surmounted, I can banish the night.

My father leans over and brushes the pine needles from my hair. "Lunch time," he says. "Mom baked chocolate chip cookies."

I can smell the butter on her fingers when she holds the screen door open, the

white bomb of the hot water heater behind her gurgling in preparation for my hot shower.

The rest of the summer my scrambles must be confined to the roof of our cabin. From there I can look down on my sister and boss her around until caught and ordered down. My father, a Western American history buff, nicknames me Jane Clark.

Jane Clark, precocious explorer, disappears in adolescence, sitting among the cheerleaders in the school cafeteria in Prairie Village, Kansas, as they discuss which shade of lipstick—Peach Blush or Cherry Kiss─will attract a suitor with a silver ID bracelet. Greta Hettinger's bracelet is engraved with Rusty's name. He has red hair.

The band on my bracelet is blank. Greta eliminates the competition with one remark. "You don't have a sweetheart. You bought that bracelet yourself at the dime store."

Miss B. annihilates the distinctions between us in P.E. class. After the mandatory shower, we hug our towels to our torsos, revealing without our consent enough of the frontal view to pass inspection. Miss B. is a patient woman. As we march through the doorway single-file, she waits for the view from behind before announcing her verdict and passing sentence with a point of her index finger. Greta and I wind up sharing the same showerhead, even though I was the one who lingered at the rear of the line in the vain hope that Miss B. would derive enough satisfaction from her survey of Greta and the rest of the cheerleaders to certify my sweat as moisture. Although her breasts are superior to mine, she refrains from commenting on my concave chest, a genetic birth defect.

My prospects improve senior year when I receive acceptance letters from Bryn Mawr, Duke University and Northwestern. I accept Colorado College's conditional offer.

To the west of campus, Pikes Peak constitutes the entire horizon. If I prove myself in summer school, I can matriculate spring semester. Greta is bound for K-State in Manhattan. “I’m jealous,” she says.

My first fall at Colorado College, I drive to Estes Park in hopes of finding Fred and Ruth Bowen. I haven’t seen them since junior high school, since the conservation-minded park service evicted private property owners from the park. I find their name in the phonebook and call from a pay phone. Ruth is thrilled to hear from me and invites me to stay the night. A half mile before the ranger’s station that marks the main entrance to the park, I pick out their cabin on the hill without consulting Ruth’s directions. Fred’s distinctive pyramids are stacked out front.

Except for the white hair and limp, Ruth corresponds to my memory of her. Pale and unsteady on his feet, Fred has thinned down to bones and tendons, a natural consequence, I suppose, of all those years of chopping wood and chasing after peaks.

A pot of chili is simmering on the stove. Ruth says I can sleep on the sofa next to the living room window.

“I can’t bear to drive by Hallowell Park again,” she says through tears. “Haven’t been near the place since ….” She changes the subject.

Fred doesn’t say a word at the supper table, rising before the peach cobbler is served so he can sit by the living room window. At first I assume he is watching the hummingbirds congregate around the feeder, but then I realize he is staring at Longs Peak. His memory of the peak. It is covered in a veil of mist. He doesn’t participate in the conversation as Ruth and I clear the table and wash dishes. Perhaps he has lost his

hearing. Or perhaps he was always this way, more comfortable with mountains than company.

Ruth tears up again. The park service bulldozed their cabin. The rest of the cabins are decaying and ill-kept by the seasonal rangers who occupy them. Fred shrugs his shoulders and looks out the window again, as if his claims of ownership had moderated in old age. A hand-carved hiking staff with a cracked tip is propped against the fireplace, a trophy from a bygone era. It looks like he hasn't used it in years.

I sit next to him by the window, hoping for a glimpse of the peak, but the sun sets without a break in the mist. Despite the fire Fred lit after supper, we can feel the chill of the autumn night, and our breath fogs the window. I want to tell him of my desire to climb mountains, but at age nineteen I am as shy as the child who trailed him around Bowen Woods.

Next morning, Ruth fries enough bacon and eggs to feed a Search and Rescue party. Fred picks at his modest serving, while I inhale three helpings. After breakfast Fred shuffles toward the fireplace with the stoker in his hand. He nods his farewell as Ruth pulls on her sweater so she can accompany me to the car. "I hope it won't be another five years," she says. The invitation is repeated in Ruth's Christmas card, but I am preoccupied with school, and it doesn't occur to me that time could run out. Next time I drive past their cabin, Fred's wood piles are gone. A ranger at park headquarters tells me that Fred died and Ruth moved in with a relative in the city. Without Fred she couldn't tolerate the isolation of the cabin; a fall would leave her helpless, unable to crawl to the phone on her fractured hip.

After Fred's death, the park service named a peak after him in the Never Summer

Range. At twelve-thousand five-hundred feet, a dwarf in comparison to Longs Peak, Bowen Peak attracts a fraction of the mountaineers who attempt the peaks over the magical number of thirteen-thousand feet. The lack of notoriety would have pleased Fred. He was a modest man who disliked crowds. He could travel in the backcountry without worrying about the consequences. He knew how to protect himself. He used to say that a three-man team was the safest bet. In the event of an accident, one hikes out for help. Another stays behind, treating the injuries, keeping the victim warm. Under no circumstances do you leave the victim alone.

In the daydreams of my late adolescence and early adulthood, one cabin has survived the bulldozing of Bowen Woods: ours. There is no glass in the front window, but the front door is still attached to the hinges, and it is open. The floorboards inside are rotten, but they still support my weight. The grass in the meadow is the color and texture of lion's fur, and the elk are camouflaged. In my daydreams I sit in the doorway, warming myself in the sun, waiting for the elk to lift their heads, for Longs Peak to emerge from the mist.

I imagine myself in the doorway of our cabin in 1966, my sophomore year in high school, when my sister does not come home from college. The phone call awakens my parents in the middle of the night. The campus police found her outside a fraternity house, wandering around in her nightgown, babbling about her fiancée, the Olympic runner Jim Ryan, whom she had been stalking for weeks.

"She has never met Jim Ryan," my mother says.

They take her to Meninger's Clinic in Topeka, Kansas. After weeks of testing and observations, the psychiatrists are unanimous in their diagnosis: schizophrenia.

I retreat into the abandoned shell of our cabin in 1973, the Christmas after my college graduation, when my mattress rocks me awake at five thirty in the morning, and I realize that I am not alone in my rented cottage. A soldier with wire-rim glasses is crouching at the bottom of my bed, a knife in his hand, the paring knife from my kitchen drawer. I convince myself I am dreaming until he grabs my wrists in one hand and presses the tip of the knife in his other hand against my Adam's apple. He promises not to slash my throat if I cooperate. He pulls my nightgown up to my neck, slips my underpants off and places them over my head so I can feel, but not see, what happens next. I close my eyes and hold my breath and wait for him to break his promise, Longs Peak a clenched fist in the empty windowframe of our shattered cabin. The stain he leaves on my stomach and the sheet marks me for life.

Natalie Wood is running for her life again across the desert, John Wayne is closing in. He's got the horse and the shotgun. She runs so fast, she seems to skim the surface of the sand until she finds herself trapped at the bottom of a ravine, and loses her balance and falls to her knees. Gazing up at him, she is unable to discern his intentions. A cowboy hat shades his eyes. He pauses after dismounting, as if he hasn't made up his mind. He could leave her here, cowering in the sand, or put an end to her misery (or is it his?) with a squeeze of the trigger, or he could take her back to her people. He picks her up and holds her in his arms. He is taking the savage back to her people. Only the white people can teach her how to be a proper woman again.

CHAPTER II

ROPED

"I still vote civilization a nuisance, society a humbug, and all conventionality a crime."
—Isabella Bird, 1874

The nurse escorts me to a starkly lit cubicle, draws the curtain shut, and hands me a white gown. "It will keep you warm," she says, "after you undress." She is trying to be kind. I am shivering, and my doctor's whereabouts are unknown. When I filled out the forms at the front desk, she said I could request my own physician. "Some women prefer a doctor they know."

8:03 a.m. 8:12. 8:17. The measured progression of the clock's black hands hasten the detachment from my body as the curtain opens and closes and orderlies wander in and out, pausing at the end of the table for a closer look. I curl up in fetal position, hugging my knees to my chest, covering my eyes with my arm to shield them from the glare of the overhead fluorescent light. The gown barely reaches my thighs, and the vinyl padding beneath the disposable tissue sticks to my bare skin.

9:48. 10:14. My doctor finally arrives with three orderlies in tow. He looks as old as my father, only slimmer glasses and waistline, a brusk demeanor, all business. Patients with appointments are waiting for him at his office, so he dispenses with the introductions and gets right to the point. I open my eyes, roll over on my back, and spread my legs, the scene of the crime submitting to the required examination.

A sheet is draped over my pelvis. I slide my hips toward the stirrups. "Scoot closer," the doctor says as the orderlies peer over his shoulders. I wonder if they are aroused.

I close my eyes, entrusting the rest of the forced landing to auto pilot, letting my

feet navigate the touchdown without visual guidance. My heels bump into the stirrups without holstering and are pinched by stainless steel. Gloved hands grab hold and guide my heels in.

Afterwards, when I come back to my body, I hear voices on the other side of the curtain. “I can’t be certain,” my doctor says. “She isn’t a virgin.”

The police officer mumbles something that I cannot make out. It is the same officer who followed me from room to room, notebook under his arm, as I showed him the open drawer with tousled lingerie, the open window with a broken latch, the paring knife far removed from its customary place on the kitchen counter. “There must be fingerprints on the glass and the knife handle.” He took no notes, explaining, “You must be examined by a doctor.”

If they do not believe me, there will be other victims. If they do not believe me, maybe I will have nothing more to fear. “I will kill you if you tell,” my rapist whispered. Maybe he was bluffing because he knew I got a glimpse of his Army fatigues and combat boots before he covered my face. Prior experience must have taught him the value of stealth. I heard no footsteps, just the creak of the floorboards as he prowled my cottage, rifling through drawers. Then silence.

The inhale and exhale of his breath filled the doorway to my bedroom, muffled the erratic thumping of my heart, extinguished the faint glow of my neighbor’s porch light in the window curtains. The whispered threat lingered on the tip of his heaving breath.

The curtain lies motionless, a blank movie screen with flickering shadows playing in the background. I sit up so I can identify the direction of the footsteps. They are

receding. Betrayed by the squeaking of boot soles on polished marble, the police officer departs without speaking to me.

"Can you tolerate the cold, Miss Bird? Ride at a lope in rough country?" the skeptical innkeeper asked. Her first attempt to reach Estes Park in the fall of 1873 had been thwarted by a snowstorm and an incompetent guide. Satisfied with her answer, the innkeeper recruited better guides─two law students from Greeley, who tried to conceal their disappointment. They had hoped to escort a young, vivacious beauty, not one plump with middle age.

It had taken Isabella Bird weeks to get this far. During the train ride from Cheyenne, Wyoming, five distinct mountain ranges, one above another, beckoned her onward, she wrote in her journal, as they "upheave themselves above the prairie sea. Gradually they are gaining possession of me. I can look at, and feel, nothing else." Overnights in Greeley and Fort Collins, god-forsaken, bug-infested, money-mad settlements on the dusty, rattlesnake-infested Colorado plains, fortified her resolve to leave frontier civilization behind as soon as possible. The more remote and inaccessible the destination, the happier she would be.

She knew she made the right decision when she finally reached the village of Longmont. One mountain prevailed over the adjacent foothills: "the splintered, pinnacled, lonely, ghastly, imposing summit of Longs Peak, the Mont Blanc of northern Colorado." From that moment on, Estes Park became the single-minded objective of her journey.

The innkeeper was accustomed to accommodating hunters and fur trappers in buckskin suits, ranchers reeking of cow manure, the occasional rich, uppity Englishman,

who tried and failed to impress everyone with his superior erudition, but an overweight, unchaperoned English woman riding a rented horse in an ankle-length skirt and flannel bloomers? At least she wasn't riding side saddle. As Isabella admitted herself, "This is no place for a woman." The Colorado frontier offered few amenities to tourists, especially the rare female tourist.

Isabella was no greenhorn. This was her third trip to North America. Six years before she had given up overseas travel when her father, a loving, but rigidly orthodox Presbyterian clergyman, died. The eldest and sickliest of his two daughters, she blamed herself, vowing never to travel again. She shouldn't have complied with the universal prescription for incurable illness: a change of air, which for someone of her means, often meant a lengthy sea voyage. Now, having overcome her misgivings, and financed by the family stipend that enabled her to roam wherever she pleased (as long as she didn't boast about it), she was about to embark on the last leg of an eighteen-month voyage around the world. She had seen Australia, New Zealand, Hawaii (the Sandwich Islands then), and California. She would not return home until she had seen the Colorado Rockies.

As she wrote her only sibling, Henrietta, from Greeley, she had nothing to fear but her own boredom. Not only was she traveling alone, in defiance of the conventions of Victorian society, she was a forty-one-year-old spinster who had rejected a variety of suitors, at home and abroad. Dr. Bishop, her sister's physician, was kind, well-spoken and steadfast, admirable traits in a friend but exceedingly dull in a husband. The taciturn farmer, Mr. Wilson, the Canadian immigrant she met in Australia, overreached himself. She tried to forgive him, attributing his gaffe to ignorance of her social position. If only Colonel Heath had exercised the same restraint as that dashing Captain Ross who

managed the coffee plantation in Hawaii, he would have spared himself a stern rebuke. A veteran of the Confederate Army proposing to a descendant of outspoken abolitionists? How dare he!

Not that she minded the attention. With the exception of Colonel Heath, she sought the company of adventurous men who gained her entry to the forbidden garden for women of her class. In Hawaii, she wrote Henrietta, "I did wild things I cannot do with white people, such as galloping up and down hills, halloing my horse to go faster." In the California Sierras she rode alone into the forest outside her hotel, parting company with her horse when a grizzly rose up out of the brush, snarling. Since setting sail for Australia in July of 1872, Isabella had suffered few of the maladies that had kept her bedridden and her doctors mystified at home. An operation on her spine, regular bleedings with incisions and leeches, a steel net to support her neck so she could lift her head from her pillow without straining her back—no matter what the doctors prescribed, her inexplicable constellation of complaints continued to plague her, especially in times of duress. After the death of her mother and then the death of her father, the cycle repeated itself: illness, invalidism, despair. She medicated herself with cannabis and opium and alcohol, and new ailments beset her, which she described as stupidity and dementia.

The cure could not be found because the underlying cause of her condition could not be diagnosed or treated. A well-bred Christian woman was supposed to derive satisfaction from self-sacrifice and charitable deeds. If she failed to secure a suitable husband─a strong possibility given the number of bachelors in service overseas to the Empire─she lived with her parents, a helpmate, and when they died, she moved in with relatives and tended their household and children. She didn't go to school. There were no

schools for girls, and universities excluded women. And so Isabella Bird was schooled at home. She read the Bible and Trollope and Dickens, the poetry of Tennyson, Browning and Arnold.

Her desire to write was evident early on. After her first trip abroad, to Canada and New England, she published her first book at age twenty-five. This trip, her third, would define her as a writer. On her return home, her letters to Henrietta would be revised and censured for publication in magazines. The subsequent book, her fourth, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, would help establish her reputation as one of the most popular travel writers of her time.

September 28, 1873: "We entered on an ascending valley,… and then taking a track to the northwest, we left the softer world behind, and all traces of man and his works, and plunged into the Rocky Mountains. … I have just dropped into the very place I have been seeking. In everything it exceeds all my dreams. There is health in every breath of air … I have a log cabin all to myself."

By 1975, I have one marital prospect: Will, who will lead me up a dozen peaks a summer and initiate the love making at fourteen-thousand feet. At the moment he is living in California on temporary assignment. The other prospect stopped calling after the police interrogation. Although the length of his hair and his limp did not match my description of the rapist, the police were more interested in pursuing a line of inquiry that would confirm their suspicions of me than following up on leads that would result in the arrest of a soldier and stranger.

Perhaps I could have improved my prospects, as Isabella did, with an overseas

trip, but I cannot afford such an extravagance on a typist's salary. I have graduated during a recession and teaching jobs are hard to come by.

My mother, wondering how on earth I will support myself in the years to come, is grateful for Will's devotion. He calls nearly every night after work, checking on the progress of the investigation. He does not know where I really sleep, on sofas in friends' apartments, until I wear out their welcome, then in the back of my Volkswagen hatchback. At bedtime I pack up my toiletries and wash cloth and drive up the canyon to the parking lot of a four-star hotel at the foot of Cheyenne Mountain. The security lights relieve the anxiety of chronic insomnia. Wherever I bed down for the night, I sleep fitfully. I might as well sleep within shouting range of the security guard. He may be gray-haired and unarmed, but his silver flashlight might intimidate the vampire.

Although I never sleep there, I keep my rented cottage. I can't bear to give up the first home of my own since leaving Kansas City and graduating from college. Before departing for California, Will transformed my cottage with his voluntary labor. Beneath the worn carpet is a pine floor, which reminds me of Bowen Woods, and the dingy walls brighten considerably with two coats of sunflower yellow. It takes a while to adjust to the avocado green in the bedroom; my appreciation for soothing colors grows in Will's absence. I miss his frequent sleep-overs, the down comforter of his warm skin, even though neither one of us is the least bit interested in a permanent arrangement.

Will made the first move the day he stopped by my desk during his lunch break. "Cute dress," he said, the opposite of what my boss said about my sleeveless Hawaiian muumuu. With his thick, curly beard and big, hairy hands, he epitomized my conception of a mountain man. The blueness of his eyes penetrated his wire-rim eyeglasses. He did

not mention the girlfriend in California. I soon learn that he is more dangerous than any mountain on his peak-bagging list. My ideas about men are dangerous. Will, my mountain guide, will teach me and heal me and make me strong; he is a mature ponderosa sheltering a sapling in a hailstorm. I will follow him up any mountain provided he carries the rope.

She awakened with a start, breathless, bewildered. Someone was prowling about her cabin. She could hear heavy breathing suggestive of a wolf panting. The floorboards beneath her straw mattress rattled and shook. Her candle had burned out. Her imagination took over. She tried to go back to sleep, but it was hopeless.

Next morning her host, the Welshman Griff Evans, set her straight. The skunk nesting underneath the cabin could not be dislodged without a stink. Best to wait until it moved out of its own accord.

There was only one trail to Evans' summer tourist encampment and pasture in Estes Park, and it passed through Muggins Gulch. At the mouth of the gulch lived the infamous squatter known as Rocky Mountain Jim. Once Isabella recovered from the shock of the hut ("it looked like the den of a wild beast"), and the digger's scarf holding up his baggy deerskin pants, and the knife in his belt, and the revolver sticking out of the breast pocket of his coat, and the paws of a beaver pelt dangling from his saddle, and the ravaged eye, she noted the elegance and refinement of his speech, the courtliness of his conduct, the perfection of his profile.

That face: one half scarred beyond human, lending credence to his self-portrait as the most notorious desperado in the Rocky Mountain West, the crimes too horrific for a

genteel woman to bear in detail. The other half, worthy of imitation in marble, and befitting the poetry he recited in a soft Irish brogue. Many of the verses she knew. Others had the ring of romanticized bravado.

In conversation and rhyme, he recounted his former life, nine lives more like it, as a scout on the plains, a renegade soldier in the Indian wars, an outlaw. Perhaps she fleshed out the details at night, alone in her cabin, huddled beneath a pile of blankets as the wind whistled through the chinks and a grizzly sniffed for a neglected calf. Whose version was more spellbinding? The Rocky Mountain Jim of his invention? Or the Rocky Mountain Jim of her imagination that made its way into the pages of her book?

He was born in Canada of Irish parents and left home at age eighteen, an orphan by choice. The rest of the autobiography varied from story teller to story teller. Men who knew the lay of the land sided with the Englishman who stayed at Lord Dunraven's and nicknamed Rocky Mountain Jim the Mountainous One because of "the extraordinary altitude of his lies." He was a Canadian alright, a defrocked priest or a disgraced school teacher, maybe both.

He had settled in Estes Park five years before, one of a handful of hard scrabblers staking their claim before the rest of civilization caught up. Besides Griff Evans, only one other seasonal homesteader could be found within seventy-two square miles. Between his fur trapping and his hunting, Rocky Mountain Jim knew this country as well as anyone: the elk and Indian trails, the best places to watch a sunset, the safest route up Longs Peaks. In this man of culture and child of nature, as Isabella called him, she saw her own reflection.

Fellow boarders at Evans' summer tourist encampment and pasture also kept her

company. She volunteered for cattle roundups with her host, impressing him with her horsemanship. She would rather ride with the men than bake another loaf of bread for the hungry boarders. Sometimes she preferred solitude, a brisk ride through the countryside, ridge after ridge of pitch pine, forests alternating with glades, equally dense with deer and elk and bighorn, as tame as pets.

The falling gold and scarlet leaves of Indian summer were swept away by the hard frosts of approaching winter. If she stayed too long, the snow would bury the only passage out.

On our first date Will picks me up in his Ford Bronco for the drive to the Mt. Sherman trailhead. There are fifty-four mountains in Colorado over fourteen-thousand feet. Will wants to climb them all, pick them off one, two, three at a time, the conquest, by his reckoning, to be completed within a couple of summers. According to the Colorado Mountain Club guidebook, Mt. Sherman (Sherman who helped win the war with his scorched-earth strategy) is the easiest fourteener, a romp through the tundra, ideal for introducing children to the rigors and rewards of the sport.

I do not question his choice of hiking mates, the timing of our departure. He is ten years older, with two master's degrees from Stanford. He is the expert. When he was two months old, his father carried him to the top of a peak overlooking Los Angeles. At age eleven Will made it to the top of Mt. Whitney, the tallest mountain in the United States, unassisted but sicker than a drunk sailor, the accomplishment not sinking in until his father indicated the view of the Pacific Ocean and the Great Basin with a sweep of his arm. In college, a summer in the Tetons, cleaning up after the ravenous tourists and

challenging himself on the tourist-free routes of the Grand and Mt. Moran, secured Will's rite of passage to manhood.

I come from more sedentary stock. My parents admired the view of Longs Peak from the front porch of our cabin in Bowen Woods, stoking their memory with postcards. In Kansas City my mother kept in shape, and her hair dry, by swimming at the country club pool in her shower cap, while my father traversed the golf course in a motorized cart, knocking off eighteen holes of golf without breaking a sweat. In seventh grade I left my brassiere at home so I wouldn't have to endure another basketball game in my red stop sign of a P.E. uniform or Greta Hettinger's cat calls from the bench. During tornado drills at school I could duck and roll with the best of them, but the vertical drop from wooden seat to linoleum floor barely exceeded two feet, not enough conditioning for the psychological challenges of mountaineering.

On Mt. Sherman Will and I are the only ones going up. Everyone else is coming down. They start hiking at daybreak; we arrive at the trailhead at noon. I manage to stay within ear shot until we reach timberline and he catches his second wind. The rougher and steeper the terrain, the more impressive the performance. Boulders that remain upright as he hops from one to the next, lurch and buck me off. He gains altitude; a landslide carries me backwards, in slow motion, towards the car. At this rate Will will bag the summit before I can scramble to my feet. The wind doesn't help; it blows harder than ever, pushing me back into relapse.

The wind drags a sheet of moisture in its wake and our destination is draped in grey. The ferocity of the storm is telegraphed with a buzz of electricity. The boom sounds like it has blown up the ridge, and the echo roars across the basin. Spared by a lightning

bolt from the humiliation of failure. I did not see the elongated flicker of light that preceded the strike, but Will must have. He is running down the boulder field, the boulders rocking and rolling beneath his dancing feet. Force of will harnessing the force of gravity. The only pin left standing in the alley, wobbling and spinning without toppling over.

After that outing we cast ourselves as Lady Emily and Lord Willard in a goofy gothic adventure story inspired by my English ancestry and favorite novelist in adolescence.

"Willard!" I shout whenever I lose sight of him.

"Emily, over here," identifying his location with a wave of his white hat.

He tries to let down the California girlfriend gently. She wants to know why. He says I don't mind sleeping in the back of the Bronco with the tailgate open so we can watch for shooting stars, and I keep my hysteria to myself when his unconventional route up Mt. Blanca peters out, and we have to turn around and descend the same steep, icy couloir we crawled up. Will offers his shoulders and kneecaps for support. He didn't bring a rope.

His bouquet of roses for my birthday is a photo of Lady Emily stretched out on a hummock of Rocky Mountain sedge and arctic gentian. His Christmas card is a photo of a blue spruce decorated in a twinkling coat of fresh snow. We didn't make that summit. We lost our traction in the ice that formed beneath our crunching boots.

Will makes the next move atop Mt. Elbert, the highest mountain in Colorado. Above timberline I am still a virgin. Ours is an awkward coupling, but a coupling nonetheless. Our contractions give birth to momentary equilibrium. His physical prowess

and grace; my timidity, astonishment and longing moderate during the exchange. His motion, my response, this rock under my spine, that marmot whistling for handouts, and all the other distinctions dissolve with the racing clouds that carry off time, perspective and distance.

Motion consolidates and preserves the union, refines our teamwork. He teaches me how to defend myself in an environment where no one is immune from danger. A haphazard row of boulders rests on the skinny neck of a ridge, reminding us of a display of decapitated heads after a public execution, and we get the message and rise from our snack break. A cliff discharges a boulder that clatters down the mountainside, and Will runs for cover, while I try my best to keep up.

He didn’t leave me when the police questioned my integrity. He won’t leave me now. He came back from California permanently and with his toolbox so he could install window bars in my cottage.

I no longer sleep in the back of my Volkswagen. Will provides me with the reassurance of his companionship and the tundra, where the columbines, Indian paintbrush and yellow daisies seem to thrive in an environment of perpetual encroachment. An environment so precarious, so whittled down to primal necessities, only one animal will risk the winter and without hibernating: the pika, who scurry about all summer long gathering and drying grass for the haystacks that must sustain them until June. A cousin of the rabbit, the pika have sacrificed their ears, tails and other extremities for heat conservation.

Will is an adaptable creature too. After the close call on Mt. Sherman, he no longer rolls over, feigning sleep, when the alarm goes off before sunrise. He realizes that

in Colorado you have to protect yourself from the storms.

Newspapers from Greeley to Denver trumpeted her triumph. Anna Dickinson, “the pepper, spice and brains” of the women’s suffragette movement, as one paper put it, summited Longs Peak. First woman ever. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the claim, though mistaken, was accepted as fact.

Three weeks later Isabella Bird arrived in Estes Park.

She had slept on the rim of Mauna Loa’s giant caldera, fourteen thousand feet above the sea, fountains of yellow fire spewing from fissures in the crusted barrenness of an active volcano. After that ascent and others on horseback, she was reluctant to leave the islands. After learning of Dickinson’s achievement, Isabella wouldn’t leave Estes Park until she summited Longs Peak herself. Griff Evans, Dickinson’s guide, tried to dissuade her. October is no month to indulge in an alpine expedition, and you can’t ride a horse to the top of the mountain. Isabella persisted, the weather turned unseasonably warm and dry, and before departing for his winter quarters in the plains, Evans loaned her a pair of hunting boots. Isabella’s boots were falling apart. Rocky Mountain Jim would be her guide, Isabella insisted on it, and the law students from Greeley would accompany them in hopes of also making the summit.

October 1873: “We rode upwards through the gloom on a steep trail blazed through forest, all my intellect concentrated on avoiding being dragged off my horse by impending branches … The gloom of the dense, ancient, silent forest is to me awe-inspiring. … it is soundless, except for the branches creaking in the soft wind, the frequent snap of decayed timber, and a murmur in the pine tops as of a not distant

waterfall, all tending to produce eeriness and a sadness hardly akin to pain."

Is this how we heal ourselves, Isabella? Must we sip from the same chalice? Entrust our despair to the almighty magnificence of the mountains? I can only speculate about the source of her sorrow. The death of her parents? A broken heart at a tender age? Her surprise encounter with "the fiend" in Australia, recounted in broken syntax and confused chronology for Henrietta, suggests that this might have been the case. Paragraphs were snipped out, letters tossed in the fire before Isabella's death at age seventy-three.

All of those injuries forgotten in the humbling presence of the sublime, in the dark pines against a lemon sky she described, the gorges of deep, infinite blue flooded with misty gold, their streams fringed in ice, the grey peaks reddening and etherealizing in the late afternoon sunlight that baked the distant plains brown.

They camped in the last grove of blue spruce before timberline. The brightness of the half moon paled in comparison to the light from Jim's roaring campfire. Before retiring for the night, they sang their favorite songs, the open-throated pitch of their voices drowning out the wolves. Jim recited one more poem, of his own composition. The fair maiden was Griff Evan's sixteen-year-old daughter.

From her bed of pine boughs and borrowed blankets, Isabella studied his sleeping face. The untouched half was turned towards her. His shoulder-length curls spilled out of his cap and onto the blanket cushioning his head. Closed, his ravaged eye lost its frightful association with the legendary encounter with the grizzly that had mauled him in Middle Park and left him to the buzzards.

A wolf howled. Stars shivered through the pine bough roof of Isabella's makeshift

bed. She contemplated tomorrow's climb, too agitated to sleep. At dawn one of their companions called her to Jim's side. He wanted her to see the sunrise. Blood streaked the sky, splattered the mountain, as the sun wheeled above the horizon. To the East the Great Plains reflected back the grey-blue of Jim's intact eye. He removed the filthy beaver cap from his head.

"I believe there is a God!"

Isabella recited a verse from scripture.

They departed after breakfast, the men walking while she rode. The men hobbled her horse at the bottom of a shattered expanse of boulders slickened by a recent snowstorm. From here on, they would have to continue on foot. Griff Evans's boots were much too big, and Isabella repeatedly slipped and fell. She found a pair of small overshoes behind a rock, probably left by Anna Dickinson. The shoes fit. But even with the best of gear, the icy, unstable rocks would have hindered their progress. As they gained elevation, their lungs ached from lack of oxygen, their throats throbbed from lack of water. Jim carried a rope. Pulling her by the arms and the lariat he looped around her waist, he succeeded in getting them both to the notch that marked the start of the final push. A thousand feet of granite towered above them; below, broken, precipitous rock littered every conceivable detour. "My feet were paralyzed."

She insisted on being left behind. The rest of the party could summit without her.

One of the students concurred. "A woman is a dangerous encumbrance."

Jim wouldn't stand for it. "If it isn't to take a lady up, I won't go up at all." He scrambled up the ridge until the ice and exposure turned him back. On his return he announced his decision. The students would proceed to the steep gully that bypassed the

cliffs beyond the notch. Jim would find a safer route for Isabella on the back side of the mountain. “We’re descending.” Four hours later, he hauled her up a face of pink granite “as nearly perpendicular as anything could well be which it was possible to climb.” Clinging to the rope, pushed from behind, pulled from above, Isabella jammed her toes and shoved her fingers into cracks until her fingers touched the top of one last ledge.

They stood together atop the continental divide, atop the tallest mountain in the northern Colorado Rockies, gasping for breath, gazing out in every direction, at stacks of snow-capped ranges, at Pikes Peak a hundred miles to the south, at the teardrop aquamarine of lakes, the silver threads of rivers tumbling towards each ocean.

Her achievement was tempered with embarrassment. “I have no head and no ankles, and never ought to dream of mountaineering; and had I known that the ascent was a real mountaineering feat I should not have felt the slightest ambition to perform it. As it is, I am only humiliated by my success, for Jim dragged me up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle.”

Will carries the backpack with his provisions, the stove and matches, tarp and both sleeping bags. I carry a daypack with my rain gear, lunch and canteen. We set out at noon, trudging up the endless, eroded switchbacks through the forest. Perspiring every step of the way, I relinquish more moisture than my canteen can resupply. The forest gradually peters out, giving way to partially exposed boulders that litter the steepening trail. Blisters burn the bottoms of my feet. Although it means we will be pitching the tarp in the dark, I am grateful for the onset of dusk until I start shivering in my damp shirt. When we reach our designated campsite in Jim’s Grove, we are too tired to rekindle the

romance between Isabella Bird and Rocky Mountain Jim. The sun dives out of sight in a red flare, barely noticed. Jim's Grove has been thinned for firewood over the years and provides little shelter from the wind.

At dawn we pack up our gear and hike into the alpenglow that tints the Diamond rose, then amber. Our death march through the boulder field takes longer than for other parties. It is my first summer of mountaineering, and my inexperience keeps us at the back of the pack, where we stay because of the slipperiness of the iced rocks. The ice does not melt until our arrival at the notch beyond which Isabella refused to go. Jim prevailed with the conviction of his logic and the rope. Will rewards me with some of his favourite chocolate, dark German chocolate with a kick that is supposed to propel us to the top. The traverse across the back side of the mountain follows a broad ledge, and then the real climb begins, which terrified Isabella. In comparison to the boulder field, the rock feels secure as long as I focus on the placement of Will's hands and feet above me, and not the exposure. But the steepness and oxygen deprivation drain me of my last drop of energy, and Will has to coax me upward with predictions of the view and more offerings of chocolate.

On top, I straddle the continental divide of my childhood. To the West, partially blocked by a humpbacked ridge, Fred Bowen's meadow registers as a thumbprint on a three-dimensional painting. I see my mother, hands cupped to her eyes, watching for the return of Jane Clark, precocious explorer. I see what Isabella and Jim saw, stripped of snow, in a haze of human-roused dust: a string of mountains yoked to our peak, their tips capturing the intermittent sunlight in snapshots. To the East, beyond the forested foothills and treeless plateaus, the Euclidean grid of suburbia and industrialized agriculture

checkers the grasslands tan and silver. A sheen of moist light and dust filters out the harshness, and the possible border with Kansas floats off the edge of the horizon, as dreamlike as an hallucination.

Through the shimmering haze, the past declares itself like a revelation. I hear the creation story of a mountain range as glaciers grind warped earth into valleys; I hear the report of spent rifles and thunder of ghost buffalo as soldiers follow in the wake of fur trappers and surveyors; I hear the forbidden prayers of captive nomads. I see the saber-toothed tigers and woolly mammoths and Isabella's wolves before the hunt to extinction; Coronado, greed-stricken and delusional, driving his men to madness; covered wagons bearing my ancestors from Virginia to Ohio to Kansas; miners dynamiting for fool's gold that glitters in their hands and dispatches them to cemeteries now covered in weeds and fallen tombstones; the whores of Silverton and Cripple Creek and Central City, who died young and heart-broken, embraced in the afterlife by the high society that spurned them; my father putting a permanent padlock on his liquor cabinet (another fantasy); the cheerleaders (divorcees now, chastened by hardship) including me in the conversation at the lunch table; the ski area developers with their bulldozers (if only they could see what I see─an eagle's perspective of the carnage.) I trace our route of this morning, switchback by switchback, all the way back to the skeletal blue spruce of Jim's Grove.

When they finally reached camp, the men lifted Isabella off her horse and wrapped her in blankets. The sun had set hours ago. She fell asleep within minutes only to awaken with numb feet. Jim was sitting by the fire that illuminated the handsome side of his face. She joined him. He had freed the hem of her frock from a rock with his hunting knife,

propped her up with his shoulders, the rope, like her fingers, too stiff in the damp cold to be of much use during the descent from the summit. Now they sat by the fire, bathed in moonlight, Longs Peak white-faced from the frost, the stars shining more brightly than she thought possible, while Jim spoke of his wasted youth, of the great sorrow that had ruined his life. In her published account Isabella withheld details, abiding by the decorum of her day.

His tears, the moonlight, her exhaustion, the crackling fire. “For five minutes at the camping ground on Longs Peak, I thought love possible.” But then she dismissed her feelings as “vanity unpardonable in a woman of forty.”

We are co-participants, Isabella and I, in a conspiracy of shame—her physiological symptoms deriving from a religion of self-denial, my mind rejecting the body that not only engaged in the act without my consent but failed the examination. Victorian doctors had a name for chronically ill patients like Isabella: neurasthenic, for disorders that originate in the mind. Deep down she shared their suspicions, characterizing her condition in a letter to a friend as “severe prostration of the nervous system” and “partial failure of the heart” rather than “any constitutional tendency.” My doctor labeled me “not a virgin.” Does that mean I am a whore and therefore an unreliable witness? The police refused to investigate despite my willingness to cooperate. If my testimony is not believable, then my even my mind cannot be trusted. Our birthright disowned and pathologized, Isabella regulated her temperature with her flannel trousers, torn frock and borrowed blankets and got sick; my mind fled the contaminated vessel and rebelled against the night.

From the summit of Longs Peak, our destination glows obliquely, ominous as a raven's feather, Lake Lady Macbeth. We will camp at Black Lake tonight, Will says. "It's only a couple hundred feet, I think." He is comparing the shape and location of the lakes on his topo map with the lake at the head of the valley to the West. The vertical drop looks like one-hundred-thousand feet to me. If I had known how to interpret Will's topo map, I would have insisted on returning to Jim's Grove. The scree slope on the back side of the mountain, once we return to the notch for the start of the descent, plunges into oblivion. I spend more time sitting down than standing up, shredding my hiking pants, bruising my butt.

In the dark we cannot find a legal campsite, so Will guides us by headlamp until he finds an opening in the trees. He strings each end of the tarp to the crossbows of crouching Doug firs, and we crawl under as raindrops the size of silver dollars splash mud. Our tarp leaks, and puddles of water soak through our sleeping bags, dividing the down feathers into airy lumps. We hug, inhaling one another's warmth. Will's lit candle grows fainter as the flame descends, and the hot wax drips and pools around the blackening wick. I give of my own free will what was taken by the soldier, my body absorbing and responding to what my mind no longer tolerates. I roll deeper into the heat of Will's embrace, studying his expression in the flame, as if by my vigilance both will last the night.

October of 1873 passed. Winter came in spurts, the snow accumulating, burying the trails, the lakes, until a warm spell melted everything back to temporary normalcy. The longer Isabella stayed, the more difficult it would be to leave. If she stayed too long, she

wouldn't get out until spring.

When Jim drank too much whiskey, he cursed and raged at his misspent life and Lord Dunraven's scheme to buy up every acre in the park for a private hunting preserve. Even the roughest of roughnecks in the area avoided him.

On their rides into the wilderness, she never knew what to expect: the wit and charm of sobriety, or a drunken fit. She urged him to give up his whiskey, saying, "I despise a man of your intellect being a slave to such a vice." She encouraged him to write his autobiography and bought him a leather diary in Denver.

He paid her a visit at Evans' place, two revolvers tucked in his belt, not his customary practice. She let her fellow boarders do the socializing. That night, alone in her cabin, she dreamed that Rocky Mountain Jim barged in and shot her. What frightened her more? His reputation and outbursts, or her desire?

She wanted to go home, but until the financial panic subsided and the banks reopened, she was stranded by a shortage of funds. So she departed on a six-hundred-mile solo through the Central Rockies. Riding through Denver, the lone Englishwoman in a crowd of armed and unshaven men attracted a lot of attention. If she felt self-conscious, endangered, she never said a word about it in her letters to Henrietta. Jim had loaned her his pistol. She didn't need it, her safe passage guaranteed by the governor's note and the code of chivalry that protected virtuous women of her class.

What drove her away, if only temporarily? It wasn't just to see what was beyond the next range. Perhaps she was seeking another mountainous sanctuary not unlike the one she left behind in Estes Park. Fending for herself, she could forget Rocky Mountain Jim. But she was at the mercy of the weather. En-route to South Park from Manitou

Springs, she lost her bearings in the swirling snowflakes. The unearthly, transparent blueness of the mountains that spurred her onward had retreated behind a shield of white.

Strangers took her in. She slept alone in shacks and sheds, grateful for the hospitality. At each settlement along the way, she was given directions or discouraged from continuing. “Impossible! No one has been there for five weeks. Too much snow,” the hotelier in Georgetown said when she inquired about the lake on the other side of Guanella Pass. He changed his mind when he learned she was the English lady who was traveling through the mountains. She had crossed the continental divide alone in the snow. “You are said to be the boldest rider in Colorado.”

Isabella was caught between two impulses: her yearning for independence and her desire. Is there no other choice but to pick one over the other? On her return to Estes Park, she barely recognized Rocky Mountain Jim. He “had grown old and haggard.” No more whistling or singing or needle-quick repartee. When he finally told her why, she wrote him a letter, chastising him for his breach of etiquette. He shouldn’t have declared his love. He shouldn’t have said anything. Their next encounter was in person. She stood her ground. Jim shouted, “I will not see you again.” It was a promise he could not keep, and this time she did not protest. He held his tongue, and she still enjoyed the kinship of racing through the trees at a mad gallop, their mutual admiration for the engineering feats of the beaver, the pot of coffee and lit fire with which he thawed her out after a bitterly cold ride. She had reconciled herself to the facts. “He is a man whom any woman might love but whom no sane woman would marry.”

My turn to tie into the umbilical cord, the dangling rope. I start around the corner, and the

route to the top of Dallas Peak disappears into thin air, like Will did forty-five minutes ago when he took the lead. Once my eyes adjust to the glare, I realize I am standing on a snowed-in ledge that leans away from the mountain, towards Blue Lake two thousand feet below. My postholes in the snow cannot take the heat at this altitude, and the only secure route back to terra firma collapses.

The ledge looks like it will run out soon and then what? Dump me? I break the golden rule and look into the bottomless void and pray for a Search and Rescue chopper. Maybe I can fake a sprained ankle. I shout at Will to tighten the rope. It jerks to maximum tension. Even though the wind blows with deafening certainty, he must have heard me. Except for an occasional tug on the rope and his disembodied “Off Rope!”, he hasn’t kept in touch.

He must be up there somewhere, guiding the rope, protecting us both with properly positioned chocks and slings. If I slip and his backup fails, the rope in his lap might unwind in a heartbeat, wrapping his ankles, and we’ll both fall off.

A bonk rattles my helmet, then another. The rocks have found the perfect target: the black *X* I taped to the top of my helmet for good luck. I shake off the debris. Three chocks nest on the buckle to my climbing harness. The protection Will placed on the traverse must have popped loose and slid down the rope. “Tighten!” I yell. The wind howls back. Will can’t possibly hear me. Maybe the weight of my body will slow the swing of the rope as it pendulums its cargo across the cliff.

At the end of the ledge looms one of those thank-God-there-is-a-chimney that consoles mountaineers with vertigo. The chimney is filled with rotten snow and loose shrapnel. Either I commit to the climb or I shriek at Will to feed me more rope for the

retreat.

I flail at the first lift up until the frontpoints of my crampons catch. Left point, right point, ice axe swinging at any mark in the rock that resembles a crack. An unorthodox technique to be sure, but I don't give a damn because there is my reflection in the eye of Will's fifty-five millimeter lens. I crawl past him, and take a seat as far from the edge as possible. Now I understand why no one has climbed Dallas Peak twice.

I manage a victory smile as Will wraps his arms around my shoulders for the summit snapshot. Of the one hundred highest peaks in Colorado, we have just climbed the toughest one. Eighty-six down. Fourteen to go. Will researches the access and the routes; I keep score with checkmarks in the margins of our list.

December 10, 1873: Jim rode with her to Longmont to see her off. When she had ventured the journey alone, a blinding fog had frozen her eyes shut and she fell through the ice, not realizing there was a lake beneath the snow. The day they rode together it was clear and cloudless but much colder. The air was filled with diamond-shaped ice crystals, which evaporated on contact with their breath. That night, they sat in the kitchen of the inn in Longmont, warming themselves by the stove, talking quietly about his poetry and her account of their Longs Peak ascent. The men peered in through the doorway from time to time, eager to glimpse the most notorious desperado in the Rocky Mountain West.

Jim told Isabella what he had told her before. It was too late to give up the whiskey. "It binds me hand and foot; I cannot give up the only pleasure I have." He told her he prayed every night for God to give him a good death. Next morning, Jim stood beside his horse, watching as Isabella boarded the coach. She didn't look out the window

until the coach had pulled out of the village. Jim was leading his white mare across the snowy plains, back to Estes Park. He looked like the man Isabella imagined him to be in his youth, his graying curls bleached blond in the sunlight. When the stagecoach pulled into Greeley, she looked back one more time. "The Rocky Mountains, and all that they enclosed," had sunk below the prairie sea.

A cloud of frosted breath envelops us on our awakening. The temptation to burrow deeper into the cocoons that preserve our body heat is overruled by other considerations. The last mountain on our one-hundred-highest list, which has no name, is lost in a staggering crystallized haze. We'll have to improvise. Snug in our tent in the trees, we could wait for the sun except we're in a bigger hurry than it is, even though the rock won't dry for hours. It is mid-October, and a short burst of winter has arrived on the heels of Indian summer.

We are the only party on the mountain. The tourists have gone home, defeated by the cold, resigned to the resumption of their responsibilities. Leaving the Engelmann and blue spruce behind, we pass Conundrum hot springs, moisturizing ourselves in the drifting steam, and, cleansed for the ascent, advance on the tipping saucer of the rock-strewn tundra. Clouds swirl around us like smoke from an out-of-control wildfire. Graupel bears down on us sideways, stinging our already burning cheeks. Will consults his compass so he can navigate in the fog, and we shout at each other so we can hear above the cacophony. The wind pastes icicles onto Will's beard, sucks us dry, and bends us into old women with arthritic spines. Patches of skunk cabbage and coneflowers sag in rusted heaps smelling like wet shoes.

Will wears the tuxedo he wore to our wedding, his one concession at the time to the formality of a mainstream ceremony. The down tie I gave him for Christmas flaps in the breeze. It is the color of a Rocky Mountain sky in autumn. In the summit photo we are joined at the neck like two courting swans. The tips of Will's tie intertwine with the flying ruffles of the nightgown I am wearing over my climbing attire. We name our nameless peak Mt. Gray because of the similarity between the rock and the weather, and the contrast with our mood. The celebration will continue in the hot springs until the champagne bottle runs dry and our friends fish us out, as wrinkled as prematurely delivered twins.

We marry at a more sensible time of year, in July, when the alpine meadows are awash in red paintbrush and purple lupine. The wedding date falls half way between our birthdays, a compromise that alleviates my anxiety. In five months I will turn twenty-four, reducing the ten-year age difference to nine.

The ceremony takes place in an outdoor chapel overlooking Cripple Creek and its cemetery, where death is the great equalizer, and gunslingers and prostitutes are buried alongside respectable mining families. When the minister finishes his recitation and turns to me, my mind goes blank. I can't remember my part of the agreement, even though I wrote the vows. The ring Will slips on my finger is set in agate. He purchased the polished stone at a rock shop after noting the resemblance to the color of my eyes. The necklace I string around his neck is made of leather and wooden beads. After the ceremony a friend of my father's says, "You looked like the hangman at an execution, Jane."

She announced her marriage on mourning stationery and wore widow's weeds to the ceremony, staggering to the altar "drunk with loss," "half-blinded with tears." In the wedding photo she looks like she hasn't eaten for weeks, and the expression on her face resembles a death mask. Is she mourning the loss of her sister Henrietta? Or the loss of her independence in 1881 at age fifty? Or both?

Hennie, her darling one and pet; her confidante, inspiration and surrogate self; the sister who stayed home performing the charitable work expected of them both so Isabella could travel guilt-free.

For five weeks, Isabella sat by her bed, praying for her recovery, as Henrietta lay there, unresponsive, ashen-faced and delirious. With the help of his nurse Dr. Bishop tended Henrietta day and night, trying to reduce her temperature with blood-lettings, enemas, warm baths and cold compresses, administering chloride of sodium, carbonate of magnesium, potassium, opium, ammonia. Her fever would not break. Henrietta slipped into a coma and died without regaining consciousness.

John Bishop was a patient man. He had proposed once before, accepting Isabella's change of heart with resignation but no vituperation. "I'm scarcely a marrying woman," she had said. The ten-year difference in age did not intimidate him. He admired her curiosity and intellect, her acclaim as the author of five travel books. Although he failed to understand her incessant need to travel, he agreed to respect her desire to keep traveling and writing and publishing. They could sleep in separate bedrooms. It was her companionship that he sought.

The honeymoon was brief. Nine months later John Bishop fell ill after operating on a Swedish sailor with a skin infection. The doctor had a cut on his face, the likely

source of the transmission. Isabella took charge of the recovery. She took her husband to the south coast of England, the French Riviera, the Swiss Alps, but neither the sea air nor the mountainous air improved his condition. He was given a blood transfusion, an experimental procedure, and her husband's condition continued to deteriorate. He lost so much weight, he gazed up at her from his bed, a bright-eyed skeleton with translucent white hands. Inch by inch he was losing the battle with anemia. She tried to ease his pain with chloroform. Two days before their fifth anniversary, he died after promising Isabella, "I will be with you always."

It was easier to acknowledge the ghost of an unconsummated romance than the death of a husband she had grown to love in the last year of their marriage. Within a month of the funeral, she was writing again. She was obsessed with a visitation that had occurred twelve years earlier, and she tried to reconstruct the memory in prose so it could be investigated and validated by male scientists associated with the Society of Psychical Research.

She was lying in bed in her hotel room, writing to her sister when she looked up and saw Rocky Mountain Jim gazing down at her. "I have come as I promised," he said. Then he waved farewell and vanished.

Three of the bullets had passed right through him, as if he were indestructible. The fourth bullet had shattered his nose. They took him to the hospital in Ft. Collins and the speed with which his entry wounds healed astonished his doctors. Soon he was well enough to be seen on the streets, so it was a surprise when he suddenly took a turn for the worse and lapsed into a coma. He was shot in June of 1874 and he died in September, when the tangle of cottonwoods and withered clematis and Virginia creeper along the St.

Vrain River had turned gold and scarlet just as Isabella described them the year before during her first ride up the canyon as she made her way to Estes Park. During the post-mortem the coroner found two fragments in the back of Jim's brain. This was the fifth bullet. It had fractured his skull. Griff Evans was arrested, but never tried. He said Jim was drunk and vile and threatening, and he shot him in self-defense. Before he died, Jim said Griff shot him because of his refusal to sell out. Griff had sold his ranch to Lord Dunraven and Jim was the only hold out. Some people said Jim flirted with Griff's daughter too much.

Isabella heard five different versions of his death. But by then she had distanced herself. "Don't let anybody think that I was in love with Rocky Mountain Jim," she wrote a friend. "It was pity and yearning to save him that I felt."

In the required Colorado Mountaineering Club course for aspiring trip leaders, the instructor drills us in the art of tying knots, handling the rope, and rappelling. The double figure eight is the most difficult knot for me to learn and remember. I have to withdraw enough rope from the coil to loop it twice into a figure eight, in such a tight embrace, the parallel knots are indistinguishable except for the seam at their junction. It takes me a half-dozen tries to trace the second loop around the first one without kinking the rope. I have to trace the pattern of the first one exactly.

My double figure eight secured, I check both locks on the gate to my carabiner twice, as instructed, then walk backwards towards the edge, clutching the rope in my right hand.

"Let the rope flow gently through your hand as you back off the edge and lean

away from the rock," the instructor says. "Your feet will balance you."

I stand on the edge of the cliff, my eyes on the hand that will control the rate of my descent, and not the bottom of the cliff, another instruction.

"Don't rush or hold on too tight. The rope will burn. Take your time and lean back."

I look at him for reassurance. He grins and gives me a thumbs up. "If you hug the rock, you might get tangled up in the rope, and we'll have a hell of a time extricating you."

On the rappel off the summit of Dallas Peak, I get carried away with excitement and go too fast and lean too far back. I turn upside down and hang by my harness, twisting in the breeze.

"Grab the rope," Will hollers down when he finally hears my shrieks. "Pull. Pull yourself up."

At first I do not believe him. The rope will snap in two, or I will yank him off with me.

"Use the rope to pull yourself up. I've got you." The rope jerks. He is reeling in all the slack so I won't bounce and strain the rope with more weight than it can support.

I reach up and grab hold. The rope twitches and turns. My head and torso swing upwards, a hummingbird restored to flight, fluttering towards the sugar water.

Will's chocks and slings, and my double figure eight hold.

CHAPTER III

FALLING

They will be safe here atop their screened cliff in the shadow of Pikes Peak. The mountain will shelter them from the bipolar disorder of the city below. The nocturnal activity of raccoons and chattering of blue jays and squirrels in the day time will keep them company, and the curiosity seekers will be turned back at the front steps. Their dog can roam to his heart's content without being hit by a car. They can escape whenever they wish, throw open their back door and walk into the sunlight and scarlet paintbrush. If they keep climbing, the forest will take them in, dampening the clamor of buzzing saws and backfiring mufflers. The forest goes on and on, obliterating the sounds of progress, reducing the sun to a pinpoint. They will encounter no human habitation of substance until they reach the other side of the mountain and the half-abandoned mining town of Cripple Creek.

After months of searching, Will has finally found a property that interests him: one of the biggest, oldest homes in Manitou Springs, Colorado, on five acres abutting a national forest.

"Now is the time to buy fixer uppers," the real estate says as he escorts them down the crumbling steps from the upper parking lot. "This house has potential."

Will hopes the bank will agree. In 1976 few banks loan money for homes in Manitou Springs; lenders associate the historic renovation market with hippies who skip town after the marijuana bust.

"This house has character," Will says as he gazes up at the ivy-covered walkway to the faded redwood deck on the second story. A windowless addition to the rear end of

the house covers the original core, constructed in 1886, and they have to walk inside to see the Victorian details: a locally quarried stone fireplace the color of rain and sagebrush, high ceilings, picture-rail Doug fir moldings that will complement his nature photography, and large windows framed in wavy panes of hand-blown stained glass that make an artistic statement out of an imperfect process.

From the veranda on the front of the house, they can hear the gushing of Ruxton Creek below. She pictures the two of them in wicker chairs, Will in the white suit he will wear for the wedding, she in her silk gown with off-white lace trim, sipping strawberry daiquiris, their laughter the toast of the town. They will grow old here together, and when their spines can no longer tolerate the wicker furniture, they will replace it with a rocking chair and hammock, and doze away the afternoon, reminiscing about all the mountains they climbed in their carefree youth.

In the master bedroom upstairs, she can raise the window, step out on the balcony and spy on the neighbors on the other side of Ruxton Canyon, provided she doesn't entrust all her weight to the rotten floor joists. The hillside opposite is choked with lop-sided dwellings and cork-screwed alleys with tilting street signs. A castle, built for a French priest in 1896 and converted into apartments after the war, is surrounded by bungalows, cottages, and wannabee mansions whose original owners were rather careless in their haste to escape civilization or tuberculosis or the disappointment of a failed relationship. There are too many structures for one eroding hillside to bear, and, a century after the building boom, survival seems questionable. How much longer will the houses stay put on those sagging foundations and slanting streets? Perhaps the priest, who abandoned his castle within three years of moving in, was uneasy about the

precariousness of the location.

They don’t notice the precariousness of the location until after the loan is approved and Will has signed the mortgage papers.

A modest front yard buffers their house from a hundred-foot free fall. Seventy-six steps lead up from Ruxton Avenue. She counts them her first trip up as she negotiates the tunnel of interlocking branches of overgrown lilac and rose bushes, the blue spruce and scrub oak tipsy with vertigo from their cliffside perch. An intruder might get lost, or strangle himself, in this Mad Hatter’s tea party of foliage, which makes her feel even more secure.

Will calls the house Ruxton House, for his hero, the peripatetic Englishman George Augustus Frederick Ruxton, who spent the winter of 1846 exploring the Colorado Rockies. The canyon and street below are named for him. After his expulsion from Sandhurst Military Academy at age fifteen and a short-lived career as a mercenary in Europe and Canada, Ruxton abandoned the profession of his paternal ancestors and struck out for the frontier. Africa first, and when that continent failed to live up to expectations, the American West, where a competent outdoorsman could live like James Fenimore Cooper’s Leatherstocking.

Camped near one of the half-dozen springs in the canyon, Ruxton was convinced he had found the idyllic spot to winter; the hibernating grizzlies were too weary to pose a serious threat, and the elk, antelope and buffalo grazed in plain sight, in nonchalant thickets. The promise of Cooper’s ecstatic prose fulfilled. Black-tailed deer filed by like rotating wooden ducks at a shooting gallery. Sheep, Ruxton called them and he wasn’t

being derogatory. Unlike the beaver trappers, whose indiscriminate slaughter he disliked, Ruxton questioned the zealotry of his marksmanship. They came to him as if he had whistled in a loyal hunting dog, and watched, tails twitching, as he shot the plumpest buck in the heart. The band scattered and the buck gave chase on convulsing legs until he stopped and ran around in circles. As suddenly as he bolted, he collapsed.

She prefers the original name of the house, the Bird Cage, Miss Ida Clothier's boarding school for girls. It was a name that kept her out of trouble with the law. Local politicos who were regular customers saw to it that she didn't have to pay property taxes. Miss Clothier's girls also serviced the miners who rode the narrow gauge train to Cripple Creek and back. The tracks were pulled up after World War II, but the railroad bed still parallels the upper property line, and Tunnel Number Two remains standing and undisturbed except for the hoots of the owl nesting in the mildewed eaves.

The passage of time has worn down the house, the chandeliers removed by subsequent owners as well as anything else of value that could be pried loose and sold. Miss Clothier's gold-and-chartreuse exterior color scheme painted over in respectable white; the pink bedrooms, in psych-ward green. The yard, all five vertical acres of it, left to nature.

There are cracks in the walls and missing shingles, and other defects, but as the real estate agent said, this house has potential. Whatever doubts she has, she keeps to herself. She doesn't want to upset the balance of power anymore than it already is. Will picked the property and Will paid for it. Her name was left off the title because she had no money to offer for the transaction.

Will calls the defects "projects." The leaking pipes, pin-striped plywood paneling,

crumbling lath and plaster and peeling wall paper, false ceilings, and converted coal-fired furnace, which consumes more energy than it produces, can be repaired or replaced. The number and complexity of projects appeals to the engineer in him.

Despite the demands of his engineering projects at work and at home, Will also makes the decorating decisions. It is easier to let him win than to hold her own in a debate with a Stanford man who contributes five times the income to the household budget than she can with her occasional substitute teaching gigs.

The antique cathouse sofa in the living room is hers, even though he paid for it. It is his birthday gift. Reupholstered in burgundy velvet and with new springs, it will support the weight of her ambition — to be as alluring as the dancing hall girls of Cripple Creek, who assembled in the Imperial Hotel lobby in their satin and silk finery and advertised their wares in hopes of attracting the attention of a gold miner who hadn't gambled his money away.

She looks forward to the weekends. She will have Will to herself. They log several hundred miles in his Bronco sometimes, another ten or twenty on foot, in their quest for more mountains to climb. Weekdays Will's job and voluntary community service frequently keep him away until bedtime. Perhaps he is beginning to notice her absence. Unable to admit pleasure unless it can be associated with pain, her body takes as much as it gives, registering each synchronized thrust with full sensation, opening and receiving and vibrating, while her mind preoccupies itself elsewhere, in the arms of an imaginary lover, a lover she seduced in her imaginary red satin gown and white pearls.

Her lover pays handsomely for her services, as handsomely as the gold miners before their downfall.

Her imaginary lover keeps her company when Will is on the road, installing spook software for the military, or code-scramblers to confuse the enemy. He can't say any more than that because these projects are highly classified and he doesn't want to violate the terms of his security clearance. He flies to Boston, Las Vegas and Australia. One night she calls him at his hotel in Philadelphia. He doesn't have time to talk. She hears the clink of a glass in the background and the smack of lips. They can't be his lips. His lips are attached to the phone.

"You have a visitor?" She visualizes a blond nurse of Norwegian ancestry. He is from California, where all the women appear to be Scandinavian blond.

"It's practically midnight," he says. "Why are you calling at this hour?"

"Who is in your room?"

"No one is in my room. I have a single. I always do. You know this."

She will wonder again: the overly generous tip to the waitresses, the cancelled dates, all those late nights at work. Is the purpose of every trip top secret? But she won't ask any more questions. Will believed her when no one else did. And she has a family history.

Before the court hearing and commitment to the state hospital, her sister wore a red dress with no stockings or bra. She stalked the Olympic runner Jim Ryan on the telephone, claiming to be his wife. She prowled their parents' neighborhood, knocking on the doors of strangers. If a man answered, she invited herself in. Some of them were old enough to be her grandfather. Psychoanalysis, shock therapy, the corkscrewed lips, darting tongue and twitching feet of half a dozen neuroleptic drug regimens, all but one a failure. She sits on the orange vinyl sofa in her ward, in her stained dress and torn

stockings, the nurse's aide watching her every move so she doesn't snatch a cup of coffee from one of the other patients or grab the phone and place another collect call to Jim Ryan or the White House. The highlight of her day, the line-up before each meal, hands outstretched for the dispensation of meds, Monday and Wednesday Afternoon Swim, Friday Morning Workshop assembling fish lures for Goodwill Industries. She sits there, with unshaved, parted legs, making baby talk to Twiggy, her favorite doll reduced to rags after ten years in the state hospital.

Maybe Will is worried about her family history, and that's why he pays so much attention to her wardrobe. When she wears the used clothes she purchased at the Salvation Army (a size too large, for better concealment), he calls her the Bag Lady. She hopes the gauzy floor-length gown she purchased at Filthy Wilma's, the vintage clothing and jewelry shop at the mouth of the canyon, will be more to his liking. It is made of cotton, not satin, but that isn't the problem. The puffed sleeves, delicate violets and off-white lace are too childish for his taste, although he doesn't mind the plunging neckline beneath the lace. Perhaps the dress reminds him of the age difference. "Are you Daddy's girl?" he says on more than one occasion. She can't tell if he is joking. They talk about the unclimbed mountains on their list, they talk about equipment and Colorado politics and the dismal state of world affairs and the environment, but they rarely talk about their relationship, especially in bed. That is a subject to be avoided at all costs.

She feels courageous when she wears the dress, even though the lace barely conceals the dent in her chest from her birth defect. She invites her lady friends to tea parties, a more sympathetic, approving audience especially when lubricated with a shot of brandy in each cup. That's as far as she dare go. The kicking legs and raised skirts of the

Parisian show girls on the poster she hung above the sofa dance for her. Will is unable to attend. He is too busy earning a living for both of them.

Filthy Wilma displays her heavily-made up face on the brick exterior of the shop. Even in paint on such a hard surface, her face offers a container into which she can pour her desire. Wilma's face becomes her face with the makeup she buys at J.C. Penney's at aprice she can afford.

With a shock she notices the resemblance to her sister at age sixteen, disembarking from the plane from Los Angeles in a sleeveless, tropical-fruited orange silk shift, floppy white raffia hat, and big bronze sunglasses, a long bamboo cigarette holder pinched between her fingers, her eyelashes blackened and glued together with excessive mascara. Her sister had brown eyelashes. She did not smoke. She hated colors that singled her out or turned her into an object of contempt or pity. In 1965 a virtuous woman did not paint her face like a whore.

She thinks too much. That's why she stays up half the night. If she were one of Ida's girls, she could take the cure at the spa. Instead, she follows the advice of the billboard campaign as it directs the tourists off Highway 24, into the overwrought heart of the downtown shopping district. Between the July 4th fireworks display that sets the steep mountainside behind Ruxton House ablaze and the Labor Day weekend festivities that soften the blow of yet another school year, she sits at the bottom of the stairs, watching the Greyhound buses cruise up Ruxton Avenue en-route to the Pikes Peak Cog Railway. They come and go, the passengers' views of the choked hillsides obscured by lowered sun visors and tinted windows. Or she strolls down the avenue, past Filthy Wilma's and

Muzzleloaders Outfitters, and turns right for a genuine rubber-tomahawk window-shopping experience on Manitou Boulevard. Ignoring the made-in-Taiwan-moccasin and cheap turquoise ring displays, she bypasses the loiterers outside the Hooka Lounge and sits on the closest bench to Patsy's. In her candy-striped gazebo, Patsy's is as seductive as the mouth of a Venus flytrap. Her power undeniable and irresistible. Patsy's scent—of caramel apples and oversalted popcorn—lures the tourists out of their air-conditioned El Dorados and into the back of the line. They do not realize their children have been spirited away until they lick the salt from their lips and hear the gunfire, whistles, and shrieks coming from the Penny Arcade across the footbridge, on the other side of Ruxton Creek.

Although she doesn't know it, she is a tourist too, just passing through, unable to resist temptation, a sucker for false advertising and hype. On the return trip she compares the sales pitches at the Irish linen shops: "All merchandise 75% off!" at Shamrock's; "Going Out of Business! Prices, a Steal!" at his competitor's across the street. The same claims they made ten years ago. She is beginning to suspect that marriage is also a business transaction, seller and buyer bargaining for the best terms. As long as the defects are disclosed and covered by the warranty, the transaction should satisfy both.

Will has no time for sightseeing or speculating. He has more important responsibilities on his mind. Walls must be knocked down, a kitchen modernized, a staircase and deck rebuilt before they give up the ghost. He tackles the living and dining rooms first. The wall in between, a Depression-era addition, must come down to make room for the dining room table. He sets up his table saw in the kitchen, what's left of it in the aftermath of a well-intentioned, but unfortunate plumbing relocation project, and goes

to work in a dense cloud of dust, shredded cobwebs and falling plaster. Despite the occasional curse, he seems as content with his work as their recently adopted cat, who stalks the mice from her hiding place in an unfinished cabinet. Will has found his mission in life: the restoration of the historic and structural integrity of the house.

She wonders what to do about the fruit orchard and garden. The peaches have been chewed to their pits, their branches partially defoliated. Will strings more strands of barbed wire to the fence, and the black-tailed deer sail over to finish their feast. A prolonged heat wave has not only decimated their preferred forage but subjected the vegetable garden to a grasshopper invasion. They hop up and down, clicking their castanets in rhythm with their diabolic Mexican hat dance. Nothing is spared—the bib lettuce, zucchini and sugar peas mowed into matchsticks. A month's planting laid waste in a matter of days. The bent corn stalks remain standing despite the miscarriage of their de-kerneled husks. She could have fought back with malathion but that would have defeated the purpose of chemical-free gardening.

There will be no canned vegetables or fruit preserves in the pantry to sustain them over the winter. Her primary contribution (besides vacuuming) to the containment of the household budget will have to await a more propitious planting.

July seemed so promising. The thunderclouds would build over Pikes Peak by early afternoon, as they often did this time of year, and a rain shower would follow, settling the dust and dropping the temperature.

On July 31, 1976, their second summer in Ruxton House, a thunderstorm rolls in later than usual. It is the eve of the state centennial, and an unrehearsed fireworks display of lightning, punctuated by booms that ricochet from one side of the canyon to the other,

pre-empts the public celebration.

The timing isn't the only noteworthy aspect of the storm. Rather than a short-lived outburst of rain and hail that clears out as suddenly as it starts, this thunderstorm is unlike any on record—a stationery downpour that rattles and films over windows, chills the whole house. They huddle beside the radio, listening to the weather updates. Suddenly a groan outside, and then a thud that shakes the cracked foundation of the house. The house itself doesn't budge. They rush outside, into the sobbing dementia of the storm. The earth slid. The slope behind the house with no retaining wall shed its Great Basin wild rye and Rocky Mountain thistle. In the fading light of dusk, red clay oozes into ink, and the staircase they ascend every morning to the upper lot bursts into a waterfall. Will grabs a shovel and starts digging a dam of uprooted bushes, and relocated grass and gravel. If they don't hold back the earth, it will bury their house. She runs back into the house and turns up the radio. Flash flood in Big Thompson Canyon. Nine month's worth of rain has fallen in four hours, and a tower of water twenty feet high is roaring down the river gorge below Estes Park, one hundred miles to the north, taking out everything in its path: cottonwoods, cabins, smoking charcoal grills, Ford campers. Into the roiling carnage is swept a thirty-ton water pipe, ripped out of its concrete moorings, and an unknown number of fishermen and their families who fail to make high ground in time, or ignore the warnings.

They shovel despite the burning in their chests, shaking the droplets off like dogs. No matter what obstacle they throw in its path, the migrating earth gains ground on the back of the house. Will works through the night, hauling and slinging sandbags, reinforcing the remaining slope. She helps until her lower back freezes up and her

shoulder blades rub together like continental plates. Her body can take no more.

She wonders how George Ruxon felt, helpless before the fire that chased him off the mountainside in the middle of the night. An Arapahoe hunting party had spotted his pack mules. Their fire ignited in the parched timber. Fanned by a brisk breeze, the flames spread almost as fast as Ruxton and his mules could run. When he reached the Arkansas River, seven miles away, he watched the enlarging and merging torches that lit the night sky and illuminated Pikes Peak as if it were noon. His venison stew and jerky had been left behind, his rifle was soaked from the panic-stricken creek crossing, and the nearest fort was a three day's march, but he had escaped with his scalp still attached.

Will turns back the flood in time to save the house. Next morning, they survey the damage. The foundation and front yard are still intact, and Ruxton House is in no danger of collapsing or sliding off the cliff. A vigorous hosing will take care of the mess in the back. The toll from the Big Thompson Canyon flood will take months to calculate: two million dollars in property damage, one hundred and forty-two dead.

The interior requires patience, persistence, perfection. Sometimes the project is completed to Will's satisfaction; more often than not, he abandons one project to start on another. His mission in life fulfills him, this husband of hers, wielding a crowbar and claw hammer in his ski goggles and face mask. Room by room he strips the walls to the studs, exposing a maze of rusted lead pipes, frayed copper wiring and deteriorating newspaper insulation. Advertisements from the November 8, 1911, edition of the *Pikes Peak Journal* float through the air, miniature B.F. Goodrich hot-air balloons proclaiming the benefits of Tutt's Insomnia Pills and Carmichael's Honey and Tar Cough Suppressant

and Dr. Sansbury's treatments for dyspeptic ladies, with the consultation hours posted beneath his portrait.

Saturday mornings Will emerges from the rubble to shop the antique auctions for bargains: a marble-topped end table, a china cabinet with curved glass and clawed feet, a mirrored cadenza with sliding beveled glass door. He hauls a trailer full of family heirlooms from California and covers them in white sheets to protect them from the construction dust.

For the Halloween Party at the haunted Ruxton House, she strings cobwebs over the sheets and arranges the bed pillows into the body of a corpse. The head consists of a pillowcase stuffed with his soiled shirts. The party will become an annual affair. More than fifty friends from the Colorado Mountain Club show up for the first one, some from as far away as Denver. They carry ropes in their knapsacks, as the invitation suggested, for the climb in the dark up the seventy-six steps. Her portrayal of Alice's Queen of Hearts is so convincing, every animal in the house, except the dog, runs for its life. Will tracks them down in his undertaker's costume and opens the closet door in the upstairs back bedroom. When Mighty Mouse and Tony the Tiger and the White Rabbit try to escape, she swings her croquette mallet and shouts, "Off with their heads!"

The walls, what's left of them, have come alive with the scratching of claws and scampering of feet. There will come a time when she will recall these events with a sense of humor, but not now. Interrupted in mid-dream, she gropes for the covers and pulls them to her neck. The dog is curled up on the edge of the mattress, fast asleep despite the tiny pair of pink eyes glowing at them in the darkness. She reaches for the lamp, but

before she throws it the flicking of a white tail reveals the identity of the intruder. The dog sits up and growls without giving chase─chastened by the previous intruder, a raccoon who entered through the cat window. Of its own accord the wood rat scurries back to its warren for the winter, disappearing into the same maze where his mate and their growing brood have been hunting for food and nesting material. With so many holes to choose from, they come and go as they please, tunneling their way deeper into the bowels of the house, propagating their species.

Will's sledgehammer has been ruthlessly efficient; forgotten fragments of her past escape through the holes, projecting themselves onto the screen of her subconscious, and she is a teenager again in Kansas City. Three men in black uniforms, nightsticks drawn, motion to her father to accompany them. Then they return for her sister, who has accused their father of rape. Shrieked her accusation at the top of her lungs so that the filthy, unspeakable, damning words exit the football stadium and cross the state line, penetrating the fundamentalist hinterlands of Kansas and Missouri. Len Dawson's pass to Mike Garrett connects and Garrett hurtles into the end zone. The umpire flashes a V with raised arms, and the crowd rises to its feet, drowning out the weeping of her mother with their cheers. She sits beside her mother and two empty seats, waiting. The stadium is half empty when their father returns with her sister. Her sister's psychiatrist confirmed his statement.

She awakens again at 5:25 in the morning, the exact moment the soldier placed his hands on the foot of her mattress. This mattress is facing the wrong direction. The arrow of her internal compass, her head and feet, are lined up on the east-to-west axis. She must be sleeping somewhere else, a motel room perhaps. It must have snowed last

night and they fled their campsite in the mud. Where is Will? The dog? The dog has left his muddy paw prints all over the window glass. He must have tired of waiting for her to let him back in. The drip from the sink faucet in the adjacent bathroom locates her in the sitting room. Will gutted the master bedroom before he left for Utah on temporary assignment.

The blade, when she lifts it out of Will's razor, nicks her thumb without drawing blood. She presses the tip of one edge into her right forearm. The same arm she painted blue in retaliation for Greta Hettinger's false accusation in Miss Lund's third-grade art class. She did not tip over the paint. She is a not a crazy bitch like her sister, not a collectively dissected specimen on a stainless steel table, not for rent or for sale.

Three pricks, with the attentive detachment of a nurse taking blood samples. More cuts would be too messy, thwarting the point of the exercise. She doesn't want to kill herself. She wants to see the color of her blood so she can determine whether her body is dead or alive.

Her therapist calls it a five-week date rape. She calls it something else. She didn't solicit, but she didn't protest either. After thirteen years of marriage, she has finally called it quits without admitting it. She is thirty-seven and restless. He is a friend of a friend. Desert rat and hot-shot war correspondent, eyes the color of glacial meltwater. The Mujahedeen smuggled him into Afghanistan so he could report on the activities of the Russians. Majored in anthropology and conducted research on the Navajo Reservation. The suicide of his first wife predicted by a masked dancer at Shalako who shook his rattler at him and spoke to him in perfect English.

She offers him a glass of wine. He is careful not to spill it on her burgundy velvet sofa. He takes a sip and tells her another story. He was driving across the Rez on a misty night when he saw an old woman walking along the roadway. A shapeless figure wearing a scarf, leaning on a stick. He braked, thinking she was a hitch hiker. Instead of a face he saw the eyes and beak of an owl. When he looked into his rear view mirror, she was gone, a phantom of the mist or a skin walker. "Navajo witchcraft," he explains. An ordinary human by day and an evil doer in animal form at night, a skin walker must slay a loved one to secure its power.

He invites her on a camping trip in November, a hell of a time to hike in the desert. She tells Will about it. "I don't have to go. Would you rather I didn't?"

"Go. I have to work over the holidays." A statement he will regret.

Just one word. A kiss. And she would have changed her mind. But his back is turned and he is kneeling, adjusting the valve on the radiator. Doesn't he give a damn? Or maybe he cares more about the house.

She remembers the journey and the topography in fragments, tangled threads that when pulled unravel the entire fabric, but not the act other than its tireless redundancy. His advances and her acquiescence easier to justify in the isolation of their first campsite. She remembers the turquoise ring around the moon that captured the clouds and constricted them before tearing them to pieces. The sand dunes at their back, white as death. The black hulk of the Sangre de Cristos hunched above the armless crucifix of the river. The sin of their adultery washed away in the sand. Except there is a witness. The fawn that lifts its head from its mother's flank.

Next morning, when she looks back, the sand has covered up their tracks, her last

memory of Colorado. She relinquishes her car keys. She relinquishes everything: her self-respect and dignity, her soul. He does all the driving, most of the talking. She does not say much because her mind has wandered off to some dreamscape that seems more real than the fractured landscape on the horizon. She wishes he would slow down. He's taking her beyond the blue mountains into renegade Indian country, where the earth is skinned to the bone, its back broken, and lonesome mesas and petrified sand dunes rise up and float away like apparitions. He's following the escape route of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and losing the posse in the slickrock, the coyote trickster of his laughter bouncing off the canyon walls to further confuse the lawmen.

Thanksgiving with the turkey vultures in Sheik's Canyon. They have to ford the icy creek in their bare feet to reach the pictograph panel with the horned serpents and headless torsos painted in blood and urine, Kokopelli, the flute player, mocking them with his monstrosity of a penis. Inflating the size of his, which can't have enough of her. In the tent, on the trail, in the alcove beneath the beheaded deities of a migratory, displaced people. The anniversary of Pearl Harbor on a dirt road to nowhere, the trail lost, the tent pitched in the dark. The deepest and most remote canyon of them all. Separated from friends and family, home and work. Her bloody underpants impossible to cleanse in the dried-up wash. Her pain the source of his pleasure. Winter solstice among the ruins of an imperial outpost. The Sun Dagger on Falajah Butte off limits, where the high priests tracked solar and lunar equinoxes and eclipses, and sacrificed their captives to satiate their hunger and thirst with flesh and blood. Desperate measures for desperate times. Their civilization was collapsing from drought, malnutrition, spent resources and constant warfare. Christmas Eve in a Pueblo chapel, the priest praying for their souls in English,

Spanish and Kiowa-Tanoan, as if redemption were still possible in any language. New Year's Eve in a neon-lit motel, a wooden Indian outside, the grunts of fatigue and hot showers next door and canned laughter accompanying Johnny Carson's monologue a welcome muffler to her feigned moans. He watches her constantly, his eyes more like the burnt coals of a Charlie Manson or a Ted Bundy than an alpine lake. Why didn't she notice until now? After the fireworks go off, he shows no signs of wearing out. He's been popping Percodans the whole trip. A half-empty pill bottle rattles around in the pocket of his shed hiking pants. An uncorked champagne bottle sits on the nightstand. She pours her portion into the bathroom sink, flushing the toilet simultaneously to conceal the deed. At the rate he's drinking, the combination of alcohol and narcotics will knock him out and she can steal away into the night in her coyote skin, her medicine more potent than his. But he wakes up more than once, rolling over to cop another round. "You alright, hon?" the proprietor's wife asks when they drop the key off next morning at the front desk.

He suspects correctly that she will cut and run unless every bridge is burned. He has the bigger vocabulary, the superior intellect so she lets him dictate the revisions. She wishes she could blame her compliance on witchcraft, but that would be a lie. Her fingers steered the pen, her tongue licked the envelopes. One letter for her parents, another for Will. He drops them into the slot so she doesn't pull a fast one.

The significance of the Pearl Harbor date eludes her until the interview with the psychiatrist. December 7, the anniversary of the rape.

Will gives her a second chance. Even her therapist can testify that she was out of her

mind and her lover a psychopath. She's got the pill bottles to prove it: Trilafan, a modest dose, she's not as sick as her sister. "You'll notice the difference in five to six weeks." Lorazapem for the anxiety that makes her skin crawl and her feet twitch. Ambien for sleeping, which does the job for a while. A week in the hospital followed by biweekly counseling.

Can he write her a prescription for staying awake? Will has taken her back but she wonders how long that will last. He married a skin walker, half-human, half-beast.

Her feminine intuition is still intact. Will has to work late. His boss is afraid of his new boss. The company has just been sold, rumors of pink slips for Christmas are circulating among middle-aged employees, and Will is approaching fifty. He doesn't show up for the concert at Memorial Park. At the last minute he cancels their dinner date at a four-star French restaurant. If there is a weekend hike on the agenda, a sure bet, she can no longer count on him because he frequently breaks that date too. The dog does his best to keep up with her in the mountains, but his hips are wearing out.

"Are you in love with Roseanne?" she asks him in counseling. She would have asked him sooner, but she dismissed her suspicions as the delusional thinking of a deranged woman.

"No, of course not. Don't be ridiculous."

"You're spending an awful lot of time with her so I can't help but wonder."

"Well, you've got it wrong."

She digs at the dirt in her nails from the previous weekend's hike with the dog. "I believe you. I do."

Will digs the pit on the only level, foliage-free site near the house: the spot where the earth slipped and nearly washed away the foundation. Unless the cloud cover blots it out, the blinding fireball of the sun will rise here every morning, lighting the city below before it reaches their sanctuary.

After wrapping the dog in his blue blanket, Will lowers him into the pit. It is raining. It is raining so hard she can no longer feel the moisture that was there before. The casting of dirt is unnecessary. Clumps of mud migrate into the pit, staining the blanket.

She put the dog to sleep before the divorce was finalized. Will didn't want to do it so she took charge. In her new life she will not have the resources to care for a cripple unable to stand on his own. The divorce decree arrives on July 13th, 1991, the day after their fifteenth anniversary. They stopped seeing the counselor several months before. Her dinner plate had shattered the uneasy truce struck at the therapist's office. No one was more surprised than she. At the last minute she spun around and aimed it at the sofa instead of Will's head. It hit the window.

His confession took her by surprise. She was stroking the back of his neck when he said, "That's how Roseanne touches me."

When the decree arrives, they are standing in the kitchen, sorting dishes and utensils into his and her piles. The decree comes by mail in an envelope that makes it look like a bill. Since that is still Will's responsibility, he is the one who rips the envelope open. When he looks up at her, she thinks he is going to tell her that she owes him something. Instead, he says, "We're divorced." They both comment on the irony of the date as they look at each other in disbelief.

The raining is falling lightly two weeks later when she turns over her key to Ruxton House. She is abandoning her claim; this piece of property never belonged to her in the first place. She is giving her share back to the natives—the black-tailed deer who descend from the steep forest at dusk; who ignore the no-trespassing signs and leap the fence.

The spring rains have been frequent this year, but not violently so, and the peach trees at the Ruxton House have benefitted from this act of generosity. They have grown three feet since 1976, and their branches are pregnant with fruit, and the heaviest branches on the bottom bow and graze the wheatgrass. The fruit they bore in 1976 were eaten by the deer. That was the year when promises were made and broken, and lightning streaked into the horizon like melting comets, and fishermen were sucked into the crushing turbulence of a runaway river. They didn’t find the bodies for months. They had to wait until the sediment and debris settled and spit them out. They recovered all but two of the corpses.

CHAPTER IV

SOLO

I name my house Bijou, for the street outside my bay window in Colorado Springs. Bijou is French for finely crafted ornamentation of a delicate nature. Will bought this house too and renovated it for a rental unit. Once I start paying the bills and redecorating, I will call the house Jane's house. This is the first house I have ever owned. It was ordered from a Sears catalogue, and the pre-cut lumber was shipped by rail. The front porch tilts, fingerprints disfigure the wallpaper along the door jams, and the siding is pockmarked from exposure and age. For a house that was built before statehood, it has weathered the storms rather well.

The Bijou House is half the size of Ruxton House, only older, with more upkeep, and the peeling paint on the front porch, frozen pipes when the temperature plunges into the single digits, taxes, utility bills, and maintenance and decorating decisions are my responsibility. Will kept Ruxton House; my name replaced his on the title to Bijou House, one of his half-dozen rental properties.

The file cabinet in the upstairs study houses my share of the topo maps, split fifty-fifty. I spread my maps out on the carpet, tantalizing and torturing myself with possibilities. Six-hundred-and-thirty-eight mountains over thirteen-thousand-feet high, each one a monument to someone's version of history. It would take several lifetimes to do them all. I would climb them all in this lifetime, if my joints could tolerate the punishment. I want to leave my mark, scrawl my signature on a scrap of paper and add it to the collection inside the glass jar. I want to possess these mountains as they possess me. I want to know everything about them—the density and condition of their forests, the

scent and variety of their flowers; the angle, age and condition of their rock, the size of their summits. I rank them by altitude—the highest ones first. One hundred-and-fifty highest. Two hundred highest. The tricentennials. I will conquer them all in that order. I was the first woman to climb the one-hundred highest; mathematical precision reduces the enormity of the rest of the task. I group the mountains on my list in logical, achievable categories, recording each triumph, like a bird watcher, in my notebook with the date, and initials of my companions. The solos with the dog we buried at Ruxton House are signified with his nickname spelled backwards: God.

I hike for the exercise, burning off bad memories as if they were Christmas calories, transforming grief into muscle. “What’s the rush? Are you training for an ultra-marathon or something?” my friend asks when I return to camp an hour after he does. He turned back at timberline, exhausted by the pace I set.

I hike so I don’t have time to think, in memory of that child who dared to cross the divide. I hike for the thrill of it, scaring myself shitless on more than one occasion. But my body is up to it—legs of granite, heart and lungs a two-hundred-horsepower engine that propels me upward at eighteen hundred vertical feet per hour. Sixty-five heart beats per second, three-thousand six hundred per hour. On the trail my body ceases to be an object of curiosity or despair. It has a weight to it. My footsteps land lightly but my feet feel rooted. Every step a declaration of intimacy with the rock, the grass, the soil. The tapping of my hiking poles synchronizes with each inhalation and exhalation. My breath distills into the clarity of light.

Mummy Mountain, Rocky Mountain National Park: I glance back at the dilated, bruised clouds and pick up the pace as I scramble up the last two hundred feet of the

summit block, beating the lightning-charged monsoon to the top by ten minutes. The ridge I pick out as a logical shortcut to camp proves correct, and I outrun the storm's southward progression in my direction. Back at camp, I am welcomed by a Boy Scout troop leader who covets my spot for his party of ten. I'm happy to comply, confident I can beat nightfall too and make it out in time for a sanitary dining experience. No pine needles in the tea cup. A steam-cleaned fork. A USDA-certified source of protein on the porcelain plate. I don't want to break my dinner date with my parents, who have rented a condo for the week. I told them I was hiking with a friend.

How do I explain that even though I am alone for the first time in my life, I am not as alone as they would assume. That I feel safer in the mountains on my own than I do among strangers in the city. That this is my rite of passage. I earned it. I paid for it, the scar tissue on my forearms and in my heart a map of the interior topography of my life. Maps can be revised.

Ophir Pass, San Juans, early August: a coyote shows me the truest of seven false summits. Head cocked back, nose sniffing for a meal, he eyes me warily and lopes off the other side of the ridge, exposing the summit cairn next to where he sat. Pole Creek Mountain, San Juans, late August: Eight miles up Lost Creek, I find a safe place to cross, where the elk have flattened and narrowed the bank with their habitual crossings. Their hoof prints in the mud provide stirrups for the leap to the other side. I land without falling backwards into the water. Several hundred feet below the summit, another set of elk prints guides me through a cliff band without incident. I will reach the top before the hailstorm and be back to camp by lunchtime.

Uncompaghre Wilderness, mid-September: The *whoosh* of a low-flying hawk

awakens me from a late-afternoon nap in a basin beneath Mount Silver. It is three hours back to camp and the sun will set in two. The persistent bark of a coyote encourages me to keep moving. She is safeguarding her pups, leading me away from the den, towards my car.

Culebra Range, early October: A trail of fresh bear scat through the forest issues a challenge. I hustle along at warp speed even though I know it is not a grizzly. The last one was shot in 1976.

"You love the mountains more than you will love any man," my mother says, and, even though her comment irritates me, I suspect she is right.

The conversation with the architect I met at Wild Oats in Colorado Springs comes to a halt when he looks down at my bandaged feet in the post-op sandals. He says he's running late for his doctor's appointment and he'll have to skip the coffee refill. We hadn't gotten to my mountaineering resume yet, or the bunion surgery.

The friend of a friend agrees to meet at my favorite Mexican restaurant in Denver. At this stage of the game, I insist on rendezvous sites that cannot be traced to my house. He orders chips with hot salsa, and after the waitress delivers the order, he says, "I reserved a room for you at the motel across the street."

"Even the coyotes don't do it that quick."

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant. I thought you'd be too tired to drive home tonight. It's a long drive in the dark, isn't it?" he asks, ignoring the Dos Equis with squeezed lime that the waitress left on his placemat.

"I'm not driving home tonight. I'm camping out in the mountains." The chef put too many jalapenos in the salsa, and I'm on my second glass of ice water.

"It's May. There will be snow up there. You're alone."

"My tent and sleeping bag are in my trunk." I look at his watch (mine disappeared in a ravine) and excuse myself before the waitress brings the dessert, saying, "Got to pitch that tent before dark." I do not tell him about my trophy collection, which is probably bigger than his.

San Luis, Tijeras, Blanca, Pico Asilado, hidden away in a back valley, like the name suggests, with enough exposure to skip my customary self-portrait on the summit. Cyclone, Cirrus and Oso, where a member of the Hayden survey of 1874 encountered a grizzly and lived to write about it. Heisspitz, Heisshorn and Little Matterhorn, as if the Colorado Rockies were an extension of the Swiss Alps. Engineer, Galena, Eureka, Gold Dust, Crystal, Treasurevault, Lucky Strike, which isn't how I felt about it a century after the bust as I detoured around one collapsed mine shaft after another, trying to avoid the arsenic-tainted water. Conundrum, Comanche, and that pragmatic compromiser, Ouray, who died before the forced relocation. Nathaniel Meeker, self-righteous Indian agent whose murder precipitated the banishment; Kit Carson, Ulysses B. Grant scattered across three ranges on opposite ends of the state (one of those accidental ironies of naming mountains for conquerors), while Arapaho and Navajo share a ragged ridge in the humiliating wake of their defeat. The Ts, the Vs, the Ss, the numbered and nameless peaks, my preference. A name transfers ownership. I wouldn't mind a Susan B. Anthony Peak. She toured Colorado in 1877 on behalf of the suffragette movement. Of all the mountains in my trophy collection, only a handful bear a woman's name. Silverheels, the nickname of an anonymous prostitute, seems prophetic in retrospect. After nursing the miners of Fairplay through a smallpox epidemic, she contracted the disease herself,

covered her ruined face with a veil, and vanished.

I climb Silverheels twice: once before the divorce, a second time with women friends who are also adjusting to changed circumstances. On the way down, when the terrain switches from talus to turf, we strip off our jackets and wrap them around our hips. Then we leap into the air and land on our sides and roll down the mountainside like a spilled sack of potatoes. We come to a stop in a bed of alpine forget-me-nots and moss campion cushions, unharmed. Kathleen unbuttons her shirt. Judy clasps her hand to her mouth in a futile attempt to suppress a giggle. I rip off my clothes and they follow suit, a pack of alpha females intoxicated by their collective strength.

Week days I work to pay the bills, to convince myself I am capable of taking care of myself. During back-to-back integrated marketing meetings, while team leader Tim recites the messages, I confine my perambulations to pictographs in my notebook: Aztec pyramids with red dots to indicate the route of the sacrificial victim, half-circles for walkups alone or with friends, an anthropomorphic figure with an eagle head, human torso, and coneflowers for hands. I keep my commentary to myself for fear of creating the wrong impression, stifling the howl in my throat, which could be misinterpreted as the wailing of self-imposed widowhood or the mating calls of coyote woman.

I hike until the vision in my left eye clouds over, and I stumble into my ophthalmologist's office, complaining of the sunlight in my eyes when I drive, and he schedules cataract surgery. I hike until the joints in my big toes dislocate and the podiatrist orders me to take three months off to recover from the bunion surgery. I'll hike until my heart skips one too many beats, and they find me beside the trail, belly up, my richtus grin a cautionary tale for parties who ignore the electrical power of a high-altitude

storm.

I wear out two sets of tires on my Honda Civic, not counting blown and shredded ones, and a U-joint; the one-hundred-thousand mileage marker on the odometer resets to zero, restarting the journey; and the bumper drowns at a creek crossing in the San Juan Mountains.

No matter how many times I glance at the bathroom mirror after showering the dirt off, I am startled by the alteration. I resemble Alice, on her return from Wonderland, somewhat disheveled, no longer a child but bright-eyed with astonishment.

Fifteen to twenty peaks a summer, and I lose my way only once without sacrificing the summit, my sense of direction restored with a thorough examination of the topo map. I can feel the tingle of electricity on my scalp in time to dodge an incoming grenade. I can identify a peace-loving skunk in the dark and find a summit in the fog, but lose my Honda Civic in the grocery store parking lot. The orienteering course offered by the Colorado Mountain Club does nothing to minimize my disorientation in town. I am dyslexic with street signs, especially in my former neighborhood in Manitou Springs. Mountain Meadow? Deer Path? Elk Park? The names do not compute with the Kentucky bluegrass lawns and domestic cats sunning themselves in the living room windows.

After a lengthy absence, I test my orienteering skills in in Manitou Springs. I park my car with the Texans in the public lot behind Patsy’s and walk the crooked, hilly streets for hours on end, until my stamina gives out. I start out at dusk, when most of the tourists have already packed it in for the night. The camera around my neck identifies me as a stranger. I don’t recognize the intersection with Ruxton Avenue. My landmark, Filthy Wilma’s painted face, is gone. The sign over the doorway to the shop says,

“Greenhouse Gallery: A Co-Cop of Manitou Artists.” I’ve never heard of any of them.

I head up the avenue. The gate at the bottom of the staircase has separated from its upper hinge, and the gate won’t open without a hoist and shove. I lift and push; it screeches as it scrapes the concrete sidewalk. The steps are covered in piles of dead leaves. I take a deep breath. There are seventy-six steps and they are steep. The leaves crackle as I begin the ascent.

The slap, slap, slap of running sneakers on asphalt stops me in my tracks and I spin around. There she is—my successor, the Nordic goddess, perpetual youth. Copper-toned skin glistening with sweat, bared leg muscles taut and rippling, twin greyhounds trotting along on her right and left, eyeing the street riffraff ahead. I know it is her because Will has boasted of the dogs’ racing pedigree.

She races by in skin-tight, sky-blue Nike polyester, the greyhounds in lock-step. She must have been doing laps, training for the Pikes Peak marathon. Will runs it every August.

I retrace my route on Ruxton Avenue, pausing to admire the Mexican and Indian imports in the window of Casual Comforts before turning onto Manitou Boulevard. Patsy’s is open for business but no customers are lined up at the order window. I cross the footbridge and stroll down the alley, into the Penny Arcade. It takes me nearly twenty minutes to find Zambini, the Fortune Teller. Between the throngs of tattooed, spike-haired teens and the rat-a-tat of their Star War dog fights, I am completely disoriented. But, after asking the night manager for directions three times, I finally find Zambini in a dusty, dimly lit corner of the antique room. I drop a quarter into the slot, and wait for the turbaned head to fix me in its red-eyed stare.

I must have been his first customer in years. His voice warbles as if swimming from the bottom of a fish tank, or awakened from a Rip Van Winkle nap. “Look into my crystal ball,” he commands.

He holds the ball in his hands. Then his gut clanks, and a card pops out of the metallic slit in his shirt pocket. He orders me to take it.

“Your lucky color is green.” He got that one half-right. I have hazel eyes. In the sunlight, when I wear my contact lenses, flecks of green speckle the brown irises. Several dates have been complimentary. They say my eyes are my best feature.

I fritter away a wallet full of quarters until the fortune I am seeking finally slides out of his pocket. “Unlucky in love? Your luck will change but only if you stop looking in the usual places.”

The house in my dream resembles neither the Ruxton House nor the Bijou House. It is a small cabin in the woods, though not nearly as small as our cabin in Bowen Woods. From the living room window of that cabin, I could see a meadow and a mountain. The cabin in my dream is surrounded by towering pines. The swaying silhouettes of their branches graze the window sills and the muted forest green of the interior walls. There is no furniture. Maybe the owner hasn’t moved in yet. But the kitchen has a modest refrigerator and stove, and pine countertops where you can chop fresh vegetables from the garden without nicking the surface.

The Bird Cage in another recurring dream is made of brass, and its dome is twined in gilded ivy. It appears to be unoccupied until the door opens and a lime green parakeet hops onto the lip, inflates its chest and unfolds its wings. Airborne, the bird is

transformed into a parrot with iridescent green plumage and an orange chest. I wonder if the bird will survive the change in habitat now that it has given up the advantage of camouflage.

My therapist isn't withdrawing the top rope; he doesn't think I need a rope. Seven years since my last hospitalization, two sessions of therapy a week reduced to one, and a successful weaning from the psychotropics. Our last meeting he gives me his home phone number in case I encounter some rough terrain after the move to Utah.

Elk Range, Colorado Rockies, mid-July: I'm alone today. My camping companions left before dawn for Pyramid Peak. A peak I already climbed in my impetuous, immortal youth. A perfectly named pyramid of rotten rock zippered with vertical couloirs and frequented by unexpected thunderstorms. A sado-masochistic exercise if repeated with unreliable knees and declining eyesight. A memory that grows bolder during the retelling but not at the thought of reliving. I remember my therapist's parting words: "Your body never lies." Good advice.

Before we parted, Joe and Sam asked for a route description, and I mustered the best advice I could offer at five thirty in the morning. Something about cairns, sudden shifts in wind direction and speed, and sensible judgment. Follow the cairns; they mark the safest route up. The wind, if you pay enough attention to it, will serve as a reasonably reliable barometer. If it picks up, changes direction and blows in from the northwest, count on a lightning storm.

I worry most about Joe, a good-natured Mormon boy from Salt Lake City, who was the first to sign up for my Wasatch Mountain Club trip. He's got a sedentary wife and two toddlers at home. This is his second fourteener in the Colorado Rockies. In a

tight spot, would his speed and enthusiasm overrule common sense? At his age I wasn't exactly a pillar of wisdom. At least he's wearing a red jacket.

We wave goodbye and set off in opposite directions.

The cold chills me to the toenails at this nonsensical hour of the morning, and the fog in my sleep-deprived brain doesn't lift until I'm high above our camp and squinting into the first rays of sun to touch the shoulders of Pyramid Peak. Part way up my second pass of the morning, I scare up three buck elk. They bolt into the basin where I am headed. Marshes of spring snowmelt contain miniature continents in the dehydrated spots. One sloppy footstep and I'll be wading knee-high into frost bite. My alarm clock was supposed to wake me up.

My destination is a peak with no name. I've climbed lots of those over the years. This journey, though not particularly long in comparison to previous outings, requires the same degree of commitment. For a reasonable shot at the summit, I must cross the basin and scramble to the top of yet another pass. The peak's alternating layers of white-and-maroon sandstone keep me going, whetting my appetite with their resemblance to a wedding cake that has sat out in the sun too long. After several hours of non-stop hiking, I'm feeling half-baked myself.

The basin conforms to the contours on my topo map, more or less, rising and falling in gentle, surmountable undulations, the high points jammed with boulders teetering above aquamarine pools. Some of the boulders could be elk. I watch for motion.

A fleet of cumulus sails by, momentarily darkening the basin, and then the ridge between me and the one where Joe and Sam are probably making their way up Pyramid Peak. Will the storm arrive in thirty minutes, or three hours? I have less to worry about

than they do; I can bail without a rope.

The next pass should deposit me on the summit ridge, provided my interpretation of the topo map is correct. I don't have a route description; this mountain is not mentioned in any of the guidebooks. The steep scree looks tedious and I am grateful for the switchbacks of migrating elk and the backpackers who have followed in their wake.

A musky odor confirms my hunch that the elk have passed through here recently. I track their scent for a hundred feet or more before I squat to mingle my scat with theirs. The clouds have bloated into an armada of warrior ships. I have to get to the top of the pass before the storm does. From there, the summit will seem feasible, a mere sprint.

My destination today is further than I think. It usually is. The closer I get, the more elusive the trophy—the distance distorted by the limitations of my perspective. Optical delusion, as mountaineers like to say. I forget about the swelling clouds, my advice to Joe and Sam before we went our separate ways this morning, and concentrate on route finding.

I forget until I'm sitting on the summit forty-five minutes later and gulping the contents of my second canteen. If it takes me as long to return to the saddle as it did to reach the summit, I may be the loser in a neck-to-neck race with a lightning storm, and Joe and Sam will never trust me again, the woman in charge. Maybe I'm the one who should follow my advice of this morning.

Seventy feet back along the ridge an opening appears in the cliffs. It drops me into a steep couloir, steeper than I prefer. I'm thankful for the thundershower that kept me up half the night. It struck here as well, softening up the gravel so the heels of my boots can dig in and apply the brakes, stabilizing my rocking body for the rest of the descent.

I’m on familiar ground. Perhaps it’s the altitude adjustment or the protective hovering of the cliffs. The cliffs I just negotiated.

Half-way across the basin, I find the perfect picnic spot: a boulder that landed years, or possibly centuries ago, in upright kitchen table position with a nearby carpet of dark red pom-poms, my first king's crown sighting of the season. The crowns of the queens are pink. Not a trace of that color anywhere in sight. Just an occasional king surrounded by bluebells with bowing blossoms. I stand up and stretch. I've been sitting on the lonesome queen in the vicinity. She appears to be undamaged.

At the top of the pass, I can’t resist the urge to sit on the plumpest sandstone mushroom in a trio. Somewhere beneath my feet, which rest on the uppermost step of a talused terrace, a pika squeals a mighty lung full for a critter I could cradle in the palm of one hand, provided I’m quick enough to catch one, which I’m not.

The clouds have departed, the restoration of summer or an intermission. Sun-kissed and sleepy, I recline in my pew, listening to the sermon of wind on rock, Pyramid Peak, the tallest stained glass window in the cathedral. Beyond Pyramid and my nameless hump, wave after wave of mountains come crashing through the artificial barrier. After thirty years of mountaineering, my heart is lean, efficient and relatively pure. It surrenders to nothing but the necessity of the moment. Tibetan Buddhists have a saying, “Surrender completely. If you try to conquer or possess a place, it will always elude you. You can’t seduce a place. It seduces you.”

The mountains pitch and roll, and I lose my Self in the waves—my personal and historical memory, my fallible judgment; I forget our mutual treachery; I forgive myself and them, the conquistadors for the savagery of their conversions and the gold miners for

the wreckage of their greed. My arms molt into eagle feathers and open into wings; my heart beating wildly as I step off the edge and entrust my weight to the wind. It lifts me into the graceful embrace of a thermal, which swoops me across the basin, my shadow a tether that guides my trajectory beneath the burning fingers of the sun.

I could lie here all afternoon in rapture, but I've got Joe and Sam to consider; they might appreciate a cup of hot tea after their climb, and a warm sleeping bag awaits me in a dry tent. The lake below our campsite a safer place to meditate if the storm materializes. I apply more sunscreen to my chapped lips, tighten my boot laces, and shoulder my pack. Cupping my hands to my eyes, I scan the upper couloirs of Pyramid Peak for a glint of red. I spot him on the ridge, then look again through squinting eyes to make certain the figure is not a mirage, a trick of the bright light at this altitude. The finger is a column of maroon rock. Wherever I look, no flickers of red suggest movement or the location of a fallen weekend warrior.

Red is the color of the Sangre de Cristos at sunrise and sunset, inspiring their Spanish name, Blood of Christ, and the color of the soil that inspired the name of this state. Red is the color of wind-burnt skin, and lust and heartbreak. I'm done with lists: the finished lists celebrated on champagne-soaked summits and the unfinished business that kept me awake at night. The fifty-four fourteeners. The one-hundred highest. The bicentennials. The tricen-whatevers. The empty bottles of Ibuprofin at the bottom of my pack. The raised porcupine quills on my forearms alerting me to an incoming lightning bolt.

I left them all behind in Colorado with the rest of the junk I ditched when I moved to Utah ten years ago for a new job and life. The file cabinet with my topo maps went

with me in case I changed my mind.

When I arrive at our campsite, I run into a member of another party attempting Pyramid Peak. He says he turned back. He didn’t like the look of the weather. “No mountain is worth dying for.”

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