

Excerpt, *Outside the Ordinary World* (MIRA, July 2010),

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## Prologue

I'm pacing circles in the family therapist's waiting room, trying to discern what my daughter is saying on the other side of that door. Hannah hasn't spoken to me in days, but she seems to have plenty to say to a stranger: I can hear the muffled inflection of her voice, rising and falling with some thick emotion, her footsteps beating the length of the wood floor. I time my own gait to match hers—step for step across the narrow, windowless room. Though I've never been taught to believe in purgatory, it must be a place like this, where we hold our breath while the stories converge. A land where we mourn our nature like obstinate children whose parents warned them about the crack in the sidewalk, the fissure in the glass, the lethal fork in the trail.

The night my father died, a Santa Ana wind sent tumbleweeds as big as these waiting-room chairs across our yard. Lying on my bedroom floor, I heard the dry clapping of palm fronds, people's trash barrels bumping down the street. Around midnight, the electricity sputtered out. They say we often know the exact moment of a loved one's passing: I remember sirens, and in the blackness felt my body expand as though it would fill the house. The weight of my guilt pressed down like water, massive, immovable.

I got up then, stood on tiptoe to reach the secret boxes in the upper corner of my closet and brought them, bulging with contraband, into the night. It was almost impossible to light the fire pit with scraps of my father's kindling in that swirling wind, but I kept at it, lighting match after match, holding each illicit letter firm until it caught, curled and blackened in the flame, until the boxes were finally empty and bits of ash scattered and danced across our patio. We do what we can with the rituals we have. Then I hopped the fence, joined with the wind. I walked until an orange dawn bled over the San Gabriel Mountains, until I could no longer feel my feet, until my mother finally drove up beside me and told me to get in.

Until two days ago, I hadn't spoken to anyone of that night.

Thirty years and three thousand miles from that history, I can't believe it's come to this—pacing past the stacks of *Parenting* and *Family Circle*, while my thirteen-year-old, on the other side of that door, makes her case against me. Don't we all assume we'll do it differently, not repeat the past? We believe with all our hearts that we can rise above the things they couldn't. Sometimes, our beliefs blind us.

## 1968

We'd been riding west in the green paneled station wagon for the better part of three days when our cargo trailer came unhinged. We saw it overtaking us in the right-hand lane.

“Look, that car's passing on the wrong side of the road,” announced my big sister, Alison, who at eight was old enough to know. “And look—no one's driving, and it's going all wild!” We gawked, open-mouthed, at the trailer shimmying beside us, swaying like a drunk. Fiery sparks kicked up where the metal hinge scraped hard over asphalt.

“Holy cow—our *things!*” my mother gasped. “Our whole life, Don. It’s getting away!” Her hands fluttered to the half-open window, as if she might be able to reach out and stop the runaway trailer with her bare fingers.

We were driving on Highway 80, well into Nebraska. A few miles back, my father had swerved left, to avoid three enormous hay bales bouncing off a truck. Apparently our trailer had come loose from the jolt, passed us on an incline. Now it was a good bit ahead of us, threatening to rear-end a blue VW bus. My father veered into the right-hand lane behind the trailer and blared his horn until the bus jerked out of the way—just in time, before the trailer would have smashed into it. After that, there was nothing to do but tail it and wait for the worst.

“Keep your distance, Don.” My mother’s voice was as taut as a telephone wire. “The darn thing’s going to crash. It’s going straight into that cornfield!”

“Cut the hysteria,” muttered Dad. Mom fell silent then, clenching her eyes and knitting her fingers together while Ali and I, perched on the edge of the back seat, elbowed each other for the best view between our parents’ head rests. We hadn’t had this much fun since we’d left Chicago, three days earlier. I slid my hot pink Calamity Jane hat back on my forehead and held tight to my sister’s knee.

We jostled onto the shoulder of the road, about twenty feet behind the trailer. Dust swirled around us, obscuring our view, and our father suddenly threw back his head and let out a high-pitched cowboy whoop, so unlike him that Ali and I burst into giggles.

As we watched, as the highway bent ever so slightly to the left, the trailer broke free from asphalt and bounded over the shoulder of the road. It smashed clean through the corner of an old wooden shed before careening into a cornfield, disappearing from sight.

“My new bike’s in there,” Ali wailed.

“The wedding china,” whispered Mom, placing her hand on Dad’s thigh.

“Yep—everything.” He slowed to a stop, the cloud of dust rising around us and filtering through the windows. Some of it landed on the skin of my bare arm, coating the thin blonde hairs. Midday sun glared through the windows and we were quiet, each of us staring at the gap in the cornfield that had just swallowed our possessions. There wasn’t much: my wagon with the peeling red paint, our bulky winter clothes and photo albums, some treasures from Mom’s wealthy parents, Dad’s fishing gear and medical books. We’d left all the ratty, second-hand furniture behind, since it had come with the apartment. The idea was we’d buy all new stuff when we got west: we were starting over with a better house, better furniture, better climate, better schools. We were going back to California, where we came from—like the song said—in search of the good life, just as the pioneers and our grandparents before us had done. At least, least that’s what Dad kept saying. But this didn’t seem to comfort Alison any; she burst into tears at the thought of losing her new bike.

“It’s alright.” Dad draped his arms over the steering wheel, the wild cowboy spooked out of him. “If we’re going to be pioneers, then we gotta be tough, right?”

I loved the idea of being a pioneer, or better yet, a cowgirl. I could imagine ditching the old trailer *and* the station wagon, donning a pair of chaps and riding a wild Palomino filly across every wide-open acre between here and Los Angeles. I didn’t remember much about California, being only two when we left, but I knew plenty about Annie Oakley and Dale Evans, and I figured a girl should be able to get her start in the western-most state of the country.

“Well, we’d best get out and see what damage there is,” said my father, opening the car door. And then we heard the sirens.

Half an hour later, Ali and I sat on the bumper of the Ford watching as the tow-truck hauled our trailer from the cornfield, as the police lights flashed and spun, as the brick-faced farmer, flanked by officers, barked words I couldn’t understand. He wanted *collateral*. There’d better be *reparation*. And why in hell hadn’t the chain been fastened on the goddamn hitch? His hands dove like angry crows around my parents’ faces until one of the policemen placed a restraining paw on his forearm. I couldn’t quite fathom all this fuss over a rickety old shed, a few dozen rows of corn. But clearly we were in trouble.

Dad gripped Mom’s bare shoulder. He stood weirdly erect in his blue plaid shirt; even so, he was scarcely two inches taller than her. We were fully insured, he insisted, squinting into the glare. He was terribly sorry. In their hurry to get on the road, he must have overlooked the chain. The tall officer wrote things down while the other just stared at Mom, his gaze sliding over her green sleeveless sweater, down the slim length of her khaki pedal-pushers. I could have sworn he even winked, after which Dad tightened his hold on her, the dark circles expanding beneath his armpits. I was pretty sure I’d never heard my father apologize before, and I elbowed Ali in the ribs, wanting her to take notice.

“At least they’re not arguing anymore,” she sighed, nudging me back. “Move over, Sylvie—you’re hogging the whole car.” She was in a better mood now, having discovered that her new bike was still intact, little pink basket and all. All our things had been spared, in fact, except for a few glasses and the wedding china. When Mom picked up one of the boxes, heard the faint tinkling inside, she’d bit her lip, eyelids fluttering, while Dad patted her wrist bone.

Now Ali hoisted herself onto the hood for a better view, and I wondered if she was right—if the accident had put an end to our parents’ bickering. Perhaps this was why God allowed it. I was six, and still believed God was in charge, directing the show like some capricious old ringmaster—allowing this disaster but not that one. It was all part of the “Grand Design,” as Pastor Lindley from our Oak Park church liked to say. This was God’s Plan, I decided while Dad explained to the officers, pointedly massaging the back of Mom’s neck.

“It won’t happen again,” he was telling them. “I assure you.”

Still, it didn’t take long for the bickering to resume once we were finally back on the highway, our dented trailer secured behind us. My mother argued, in her clipped, quiet way, that we needed a break, that we girls had been traumatized. The accident was a reminder to slow things down, she said, rethink our priorities. We ought to stop for some lunch, maybe end the day early and find a Travel Lodge with a little pool.

“It’s hot, Honey. You’re expecting too much of them.”

“We’ll stop at supertime,” Dad sighed, reminding her the accident had just cost money we didn’t have, that we were now two hours off schedule, our budget blown to hell.

“There’s no need for *language*. The girls will pick it up.”

“And what are they picking up from you? That there’s money to burn? You know we can’t afford fancy motels—not yet.”

“What about the park? You did promise.” She was whispering, as if she actually believed we couldn’t hear. Ali and I had started our own silent war in the back, over where the imaginary line between us was supposed to be. We’d moved on from gentle shoving and were grinding our knuckles, hard, into each other’s bare thighs. In the course of our short stint as ‘pioneers,’ we’d learned how to practically kill each other without making a sound—stomping each other’s defenseless toes, suffocating one another with our blue bears. We knew if we got wild, made too much noise, we were asking for it. Usually, it was me who got it. Maybe because I was easier to yank out of the back, throw against the hot metal side of the car. Two days back, in Iowa, I’d gotten a mouthful of roadside dirt for calling Ali a farty old pig’s ass. So now I relented, slipping out of the game as it got too rowdy. But Mom wouldn’t relent:

“It was all this rushing that got us into a fix.” Her shoulders were creeping up around her ears. “Besides, you promised them.”

“That was before we had to buy a fucking *shed*.”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t curse.”

“Why didn’t you use some of that feminine charm to get us out of a ticket?”

“I haven’t a clue what you’re referring to.”

“I mean, if you’re gonna flirt, may as well make it useful.”

They ended by falling into a bulky silence, Dad drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, Mom heaving exhausted little sighs and turning her face to the window. After a while, she doled out stale peanut butter sandwiches and dill pickles without saying a word.

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For the past four years we’d been living in the damp three rooms of an apartment in one of Chicago’s shabbier suburbs. We’d been sleeping on someone else’s mattresses, eating at someone else’s green Formica table, watching someone else’s black and white TV on their ratty polyester sofa with the stuffing spilling out one seam. Mostly, my mother and sister and I had been doing these things while Dad worked, completing his medical internship, taking most of his meals at the hospital, because he could. Sometimes, he didn’t come home for three nights running. When he finally appeared, Ali and I were usually in bed. I’d hear bits of his talk as my mother poured him a drink, asked about his day as if she were entertaining an important stranger. I knew I wasn’t allowed to go to them, no matter how many dark blue bats startled through my nightmares. I feared and longed for that prohibited after-bedtime world, ice clinking in his drink, his voice—as strange and ubiquitous as the moon.

I often wonder if her restlessness took root there, shut into three rooms during those mid-western winters, caring for us by day, typing medical reports by night. She was new to the city and didn’t have a car. She loved Dad, but how lonely it must have been in that apartment when we were tiny and whiny and underfoot, clinging to her knees. How relentless it must have seemed, one baby crying on her hip, the other running wild, tossing Tupperware into the toilet and trying to cut her bangs with the nail scissors, no husband in sight.

What else to lean into to but the secret, infrequent lunches with her ‘special friend?’

A few days before we left Chicago, we had the last of those lunches, my mother, Mr. Robert and I, at a Big Bob’s on University Ave. I wasn’t supposed to mention Mr. Robert, with his gap-toothed smile, his Broadway songs and wavy, silver-streaked hair. During that last lunch, he bought us ice cream sodas, as usual, and we ate them with the heavy, long-handled spoons I loved. Then I colored on the placemat while they talked in somber tones.

“So you’re really going next Sunday?” Mr. Robert asked.

“Sunday, that’s right.” My mother stared into her lap.

“Well, I have to admit, I won’t be sorry not to make this trip every few months.”

“I thought these trips were all about *business*, Robert.”

“Now let’s just quit being silly, Lainie. Just tell me the town, for God’s sake.”

“You *know* I’m not telling you this time. I’m just not.” They were quiet for a while. My mother’s breathing reminded me of the ocean at Goat Rock, when we’d last visited Gram and Poppy. Finally looking up, I was startled to see a single tear glittering along the side of her nose. She glanced at the people in the next booth, the bluish office buildings outside, traffic lurching past in the summer afternoon—she was looking everywhere but at Mr. Robert, who suddenly reached out and wrapped his meaty fingers around her wrist, as if to take her pulse.

“Is this your friend Sammy’s silly advice? Why don’t you just quit this game?”

“We need to let it go. Don’t you *see*? This is a chance to—“ She faltered, hugging herself as if she were cold, though the afternoon was humid as a sock.

“What? A chance to be foolish? Miserable?” Mr. Robert’s voice seemed thin and stretched now, a balloon ready to burst. I wondered why Mom was being so difficult. I wondered why she didn’t want Mr. Robert to find us, when he was so nice, and bought us ice cream sodas, and made her laugh like a man—mouth wide, head tossed back: I’d never seen her laugh that way for anyone else.

“You know I’ll find you,” he whispered.

“We need to let it go,” she repeated after the waitress brought our check on the little red tray. Mom extracted her dark glasses from her handbag, slipped them on. I loved her in those glasses, which were huge and round, and made her look like Jackie Kennedy.

“I will *never* let it go,” Mr. Robert said in a thick, radio announcer’s voice, as if he wanted the whole restaurant to hear. Into the startled silence that followed, he hummed a tune, beating out a cheerful finger-rhythm on the linoleum tabletop. “*Lainie, Lainie, give me your answer, do. I’m half crazy over the love of you,*” he sang. Then he winked at me, as if somehow, we were in this together.