

The Grace of the Court

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he night before, I had felt a sudden need to read the scriptures, something I hadn't done in nearly three months. I stayed up until 2:30 and was asleep when Lynn called from Oakland at 10 A.M. to tell me that her sister Carol was depressed because a Church court was being held on her that evening in Provo and her five-month-old daughter had a 102 degree temperature. Carol has an irrational fear that God will punish her moral transgressions through her child.

Slowly I groped toward the necessary actions: Carol doesn't have a phone. I will have to find a car to get from my apartment in Ogden to Provo. I'm not supposed to leave the house until my back surgery is completely healed — what if I get rear-ended at a stop sign? Carol's depressions can be *mega*, as in huge, enormous, overwhelming — I will have to find energy to face that. Carol will probably be excommunicated even though she believes Joseph Smith saw God and angels as much as I believe I'm alive. More energy, the spiritual kind; but except for last night, I haven't prayed in over two months. I'm tired.

After Lynn hung up, I called the Ogden temple and put Carol's name on the prayer roll. If I couldn't pray at least someone could. Then I lay down on my bed to figure out a plan of action. I fell asleep.

Two and a half hours later I awoke, my head a great deal clearer. I called my mother in Holladay, an hour's drive away. After a burst of protest concerning my health, she agreed to come get me and let me use her car. I went into the bathroom to get ready. My skin was pasty from lack of sunshine. I smoothed on a little Max Factor "Color Rub."

Carol is pretty. We'd been friends for ten years, and had gone together to BYU for a semester. I'd always felt dumpy around her, so today would be no

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exception. I hate going out of the house feeling ugly. Big deal. How could I be worried about the way I looked when Carol was mega-depressed and about to be excommunicated from the Church? *Vanity of vanities, all is vanity*. That was one of the scriptures I'd read last night as I flipped from book to book in the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants. It was strange, like verses or whole sections would jump off the page at me. And I read them.

The drive to Salt Lake City took an hour. After I dropped my mom off and kept going into the second hour to Provo, I knew I should pray — please God, forgive my neglecting you lately, but could you give me some energy now? Please make me not get overwhelmed. Help me know how to help. Please. But I couldn't do it. My faith muscles had gone into some kind of cramp a while back and — whether it was apathy or aversion to spiritual exercise — I felt I couldn't move them.

I looked at the mountains, all snowy since I'd gone into traction and retreat three months ago. It wasn't fracturing a bone in my back and getting laid up for six months that started it. The whole year before, I had felt myself sliding. I had been active in my singles ward for three years: social relations teacher, Relief Society education counselor, get-up-at-6:30-to-read-the-scriptures-and-pray type of person. All that had been very good at times, generating a faith that felt like warmth in my bones.

I think I just started getting worn out from working at it so hard, or maybe the voids in my life were getting bigger than I could handle: Not having an E.P. (as Carol calls eternal partners) and being an almost-special-interest-age Mormon can be stressful: nobody's dirty clothes on the floor but my own to get irritated at, nobody's teething babies but my brother's to soothe with tummy tickles and Gerber biscuits, no sex. Being a student in English lit by day and a waitress by night has its freedoms and exhilarations but sometimes wanting a family of my own would come so hard I could hardly breathe. Al Pope may turn a clever phrase but he doesn't make the night any shorter. Anyway, slowly, for whatever reasons and without anybody's noticing, my enthusiasm for the Church and its multitudinous activities began to dwindle. I had grown tired, bored and lonely; and for the first time I began to understand maybe part of why Carol was so drawn to the lifestyle she'd been immersed in off and on for nearly ten years: she went for laughs and physical (if she couldn't get emotional) intimacy. I knew I didn't really want that, that such an attitude would bring its own unbearable voids and conflicts; but I wasn't sure what I did want. So I went into a sort of spiritual limbo, acting my part of the model LDS woman on the outside, while remaining increasingly aloof and untouched inwardly, feeling generally depressed.

As I headed down I-15, I tried not to think about all of that. I soaked in the mountains through my eyes. I hadn't seen the beautiful Salt Lake valley in almost four months. It was an "everlasting burnings day" (another Carol phrase) with everything blinding white, clear, clean, the air charged with sunlight reflected off the snow. As I had pulled out of my mom's driveway, a gust of wind had shaken the brittle leaves of the apricot tree in our yard; the dry

snow had clouded off the tree's limbs like glitter into the immaculate air. Looking at it all, the beauty felt like strength, like increments of energy nudging their way into me. I began to feel strong enough to think about Carol.

You hear all your life how good it is to have compassion for others. It's Christian. What nobody tells you is that compassion isn't easy and sweet to feel: it hurts. My mother tells me I have the "gift of comfort," which means that when people are feeling bad I can somehow make them feel better. I guess I know how to empathize and that's why people sometimes like to come to me when they have troubles. When you're suffering you don't need philosophical tidbits on the blessing of adversity; you just want someone to *feel* with you. My patriarchal blessing says that I will find "the greatest of joy in serving others." That used to be true; but as my spiritual energy (the scriptures call it charity) had decreased, my capacity to bear the pain of compassion had too. I was tired. Sometimes I avoided my friends who had problems, feeling guilty and relieved simultaneously. How do you endure the grief of a friend with two children just after she's been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis? Or the loneliness of an emotionally handicapped teenage cousin? Or the anger of a recently divorced neighbor whose husband has won custody of their children on fraudulent grounds?

I decided the only way I could do it was by steeling myself. I would try to turn my feelings and will to rock. Through sheer will, I would go through the motions of responsible and compassionate action. As I headed toward Provo, letting myself think about Carol, the beauty of the day receded from my vision. The increments of energy dissipated. I felt myself locking into rock-position, staring straight ahead at the freeway.

Carol and I had been friends since high school in Oakland, and had gone to the same ward. My parents didn't dislike her, but they worried about our friendship. They said her "sexy clothes" didn't reflect the standards of the Church, and that people would judge me by who I went around with. Carol's dad was weird. He used to hit her a lot, like if she came home late from a date, or if she'd been wearing lipstick. He'd check for signs of makeup (which she always carefully removed before going home) by rubbing her eyes and lips with a Kleenex. One time when I came home with her after seeing an evening movie he grabbed her by the hair and rubbed her eyes so hard I almost yelled, "Stop it! You're going to wreck her sight!" But I didn't. He's a big man. Once Carol cried when we were talking about him. She said he'd always hated her — not Lynn or their younger sister, just her — and that she hated him too. He has mellowed substantially since then, but that's now.

Carol was sixteen when she went bonkers with sex. The first time she slept with a guy she said to me the next day, "I did it. I don't know why. I just did. I feel terrible, like I really am ugly inside. But I want to do it again." And she did, again and again with many different boys. I didn't understand promiscuity, but I accepted it in her; the ability to accept people no matter what seems to be part of the gift of comfort. I tried to help when she had periods of self-hatred, but when she started hanging around with a nightclub crowd, we drifted apart. I still liked her — her peculiar blend of frankness

and sentimentality, and her clever humor — but we weren't interested in the same things. My parents breathed a sigh of relief that probably rocked the Oakland Bridge.

I hadn't seen her in two years, when she called again and said she wanted to get back into the Church, that she couldn't stand doing all these sins anymore. Carol (whose family, except for Lynn, was only borderline active) had always had the kind of "I *know* the Church is true" testimony that I envied. It had baffled me at high school parties when she'd get loaded on pot and then start telling people about Joseph Smith and the gold plates. She was an enigma, an exaggerated example of the spirit being willing but the flesh weak. We decided to start doing stuff together and get her introduced to some of my straight friends. She confessed to the bishop who said that even though her sins were scarlet they would become like snow. The repentance program lasted four and a half months. She called me many times after midnight in tears, saying she was so lonely she couldn't stand it, Mormon guys didn't like her, she didn't think she could live righteously, she was bad to the bone. She would ask me if I hated her and if I thought she was a slut. I said no, and no, and that she *could* do it. I didn't know what else to do. I told her maybe a psychiatrist could help. The intensity of her confusion and suffering frightened and saddened me. I wasn't surprised when she went back to the old crowd.

When I got to Provo on the afternoon of the court and knocked on the door of her basement apartment, I was steeled up for the encounter. Carol didn't answer, so I knocked again and called her name through a ground-level window. She finally opened the door, smiling and crying at the same time. We went downstairs. The baby, who was cross from fever, was plump and beautiful with Carol's slanted blue eyes and her full mouth. Even she was going to make me feel dumpy. Holding Jennie, Carol looked radiant, as I've always heard but rarely seen new mothers be. It was the baby that had drawn the bishop's attention to her situation. Carol hadn't been attending Church and the visiting teachers, who had come once in thirteen months, reported Jennie's arrival.

For most single women pregnancy is a calamity. Carol, however, had been scared but extremely happy. She'd been told by two doctors that semester we were at BYU that she would never be able to have children. Her tubes had been damaged by V.D. when she was nineteen. BYU had been her second attempt at repentance. Her parents wanted her out of the house, she wanted to turn her life around, and they said they'd support her if she went away to school. The doctors' report had come the first month of the semester. She was blackly depressed by it, fighting the old lifestyle but seeing no hope in the new. What Mormon man would want a wife who couldn't have children? And Carol, right or wrong, could not live without a man.

During that period was the first time I ever consciously felt the gift of comfort in me. It happened one night when Carol came home late. She had been to a bar in American Fork, had gotten drunk for the first time in four months, and had had sex with some cowboy in the cab of his pickup truck. She was hysterical, crying again and again that she was filth, that God would have to

punish her forever and ever and still she would be filthy. I had been fasting that day, but I couldn't handle this. I was afraid — she was talking suicide. And then, as I desperately tried to calm her — all the while inwardly pleading, God help — I felt enfolded, as if a soft mantle had fallen about my shoulders. I took Carol's hands in my lap, touched her forehead, and started to pray out loud, my words a quiet rising and falling wave of sound. I can't remember anything that I said, but as my voice flowed over the darkness of the room, her sobbing gradually stopped. She lay her head against me and I rocked her in my arms. When I had stopped praying a moment, I said, "Let's go into your room and I'll help you get ready for bed. When you lie down I'll brush your hair. Do you think that would feel good?" She nodded. I helped her undress that night and sponged her face with a warm, wet towel, and gave her some lotion for her face. She fell asleep as I brushed her hair.

My patriarchal blessing says I will find the greatest joy in serving others. My mother says I have the gift of comfort. All I know is that that night, through all the pain, I felt a kind of joy. I learned something about love. I felt a soft shock of awareness, as if I were beginning to understand what Christ and the gospel and the Church were all about. Over the past five years, that awareness has ebbed and flowed. The day of Carol's court I was at the lowest tide in a long, long time.

We took the baby over to a friend who had volunteered to tend, then went to Burger King for dinner. After that four months at the Y, Carol had slipped back to her former ways but continued living in Provo. We had stayed in touch even after I moved to Ogden. Across the plastic table at Burger King, she first talked matter-of-factly. The baby was a miracle. God had given her the one thing that could possibly motivate her strongly enough to change her life, a child. She had to repent. Then Carol's control cracked a little. She wondered if it was possible to repent of the same things more than once or twice. One of the scriptures that had popped out at me the night before came immediately to my mind (I still don't remember what book it is in): "As oft as my people repent will I forgive them their trespasses against me." I repeated it to her and said I thought most people genuinely repent of some things many times in their lives. It's just that circumstances can sometimes blur a person's vision, weaken resolves, make you forget what you once saw and determined so clearly. I knew that from personal experience. It seems a person often has to live from rebirth to rebirth, and the moments of high spiritual awareness are usually interspersed with darker times. It is easy to stumble during the dim periods.

Carol told me her bishop had said she would probably be excommunicated — to be prepared for that. As long as I had known her and despite her extreme feelings of unworthiness, Carol had dreaded excommunication. When she'd gone to confess to our BYU bishop after first arriving in Provo (she hadn't had the courage to go to the Oakland bishop again), she hadn't been able to eat or sleep for almost two days. As unloved and unlovable as she felt, it was as though the Church were her one tie to the *possibility* of finding the merciful Christ she so passionately believed in but could not seem to reach.

I don't think a human being can live for very long without some kind of hope. Church membership for Carol was, I think, like the substance, the symbol, of a hope, however faint, that someday, somehow she could be redeemed.

I looked at her over my French fries and Whopper and wondered how such Church action would affect her now. As if she'd read my thoughts, she blurted out, "Being ex-ed will probably be the best thing. Who knows? Maybe the loss will feel so big it will give me even more motivation to change." Her tone reminded me of the time she cried when telling me her father hated her and then insisted that she hated him too. In some ways she had changed over the past few years, though, had grown more accepting of herself. As an afterthought, she said frankly and sadly, "Or maybe I just can't be a Mormon. Right now, I just don't have it in me. Maybe *that's* the bottom line." She looked at me, then ate a French fry and quickly ducked her head, covering her eyes with her hand. Her eyes glittered with tears when she looked up again. "But what about Jennie?"

As we drove over to the chapel, I thought about her question. I started talking about grace and some of the scriptures that had impressed me: how it is by grace we are saved after all we can do; how the Lord doesn't require *us* so much to be strong as to rely on his strength; how he doesn't require perfection so much as humility — a broken heart, and a contrite spirit; how the mere fact that she *saw* her inability to be righteous on her own power might be the thing that would allow her to receive a transfusion of strength from God. She listened to what I said, didn't toss it away with "yes, but . . ." I knew I was saying things she needed to hear. I had hardly felt a breath of inspiration during the past months; I'd refused that along with other feelings. But driving down University Avenue in my mom's '76 Chevrolet Impala, I recognized the flickerings of the Spirit. Thoughts and intuitions that during the past year had defocused to absolute gray were all at once clear in my mind. I let them come. It felt good, like smelling my late grandmother's cologne last summer on an older woman at the jewelry counter in ZCMI.

I parked the car in the lot facing the chapel. It was an older building in a dark neighborhood. We sat there in the cold and dark for twenty minutes. A car pulled up beside us as we talked. A man got out and went inside the chapel. Carol said, "One of my condemners." I laughed. She laughed too, and said, "I'm serious. There's no way these guys are going to say anything but '*Out*, girl.' My clothes will be enough to determine the verdict." She was wearing tight levis, platform shoes, and a too-small sweater — hardly the clothes of a penitent. She'd told me earlier that she wouldn't dress like Miss BYU, pretending to be something she wasn't — and wasn't even sure she could become. She went on: "The bishop and his counselors have probably lived in Provo their whole lives. They're nice — *really* nice — and everything, but there's no way they aren't going to be totally blown away by the things I'm going to have to tell them."

The man who had walked into the church was short and round, his head balding. He looked like someone who had just finished a dinner of macaroni and cheese with a horde of energetic children and a tired, sweet, slightly over-

weight wife. Carol was staring at the chapel: "You know, I've been trying to look at this philosophically, how it's all for the best, but . . ." Tears came suddenly to her eyes and her voice got shaky. "I just now remembered what it was like when I was a little girl — the bishop standing in the foyer shaking people's hands and welcoming them to church. He used to bend way low to shake my hand, so we'd be face to face." She tried to laugh at her tears and said something about how the bishopric was going to think it was really weird when she — "Miss Sleeze" — got all choked up. I said we'd better go inside; it was after seven o'clock. We got out.

It was a starry night, *lots* of stars. I was looking up as we approached the steps. On the building above the entrance I saw the words in gray metal letters: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I hadn't been inside a church for three months because of my back, and had been there only dutifully for some time prior to that. And here again came a surge of assurance of method mixed with all the madness in the world. Just looking at the metal letters with the backdrop of stars, I felt like a wayward pilgrim who has accidentally stumbled onto her shrine. Immediately, I glanced at Carol and felt selfish relief that her eyes were on the ground. If I had been her, the letters would have felt like guilt or loneliness. We went inside and stood in the entryway for a minute looking around. The moment of inspiration subsided within me. I asked Carol where the bishop's office was. Just then he appeared in a doorway, the man we'd seen five minutes before.

He greeted us warmly. Carol introduced me, explaining I was to be the witness her letter had said she could bring. He asked us both to wait outside the office for a few moments, then he would ask Carol to come in alone, afterward, I could testify. I was startled. When, earlier, Carol had asked me to be her witness, she said I'd just have to watch and confirm that she was treated fairly.

I said, "You mean I'm supposed to say something?"

The bishop replied without sarcasm, "That's what witnesses usually do."

"I'm here mostly to offer Carol moral support. I don't think I have anything to say."

He said that was all right. Then he went back into his office. We walked around the foyer hearing the murmur of voices through the cloudy glass window in the bishop's door. There was a map of the world drawn on a blue poster board that hung on the wall. At the edges were photographs of five young men, an older couple, and a young woman: Missionaries. Each picture had a piece of colored yarn taped to it that stretched to a country on the map where the yarn was held in place by a matching colored thumbtack. "GO YE UNTO EVERY NATION, KINDRED, TONGUE, AND PEOPLE" was printed over the map. One missionary smiled out at me, all teeth and bright, startled eyes beneath his awkwardly cropped thatch of hair. Carol said, "I wonder what they're talking about in there," hitching her shoulder toward the office. I said I thought they were praying; you could tell because it was only one voice and had a certain rhythm I'd heard a thousand, thousand times. Then the bishop came out to get Carol. He said I might as well find a

comfortable place to sit down to wait and pray. He emphasized the “and pray.” I sat on an old pew that served as a bench in the foyer. I thought he should have asked Carol if she wanted me to come in. For some girls, confessing sins to a roomful of men could be a harrowing experience.

Pray. I knew Lynn and their mother had been fasting and praying for Carol since yesterday. I looked around the empty foyer. Down one hallway there was a drinking fountain with a step chair for children in front of it. The foyer was panelled with new-looking imitation wood. The banister leading to the basement was good, golden hardwood, warmly polished by the army of hands that had gripped it over the years. I remembered my own childhood and the stairs I clattered down in my chapel in Oakland. That banister was oak like this one and so were the moldings around the floors and doors. I looked at the print of Jesus directly across from my pew, the one I’ve always thought made the Lord look too mild, even effeminate. His hair was wavy and golden brown. The colors in the print were the same tones as the banister. It was the only picture of Jesus I’d seen in three months. “Come Follow Me” was inscribed in brass on the bottom of the frame.

My prayer was silent and short, no mention of unworthiness on my part, no promises to repent. I prayed for the bishop to be inspired, for Carol to bear well and grow with whatever decision was reached, for myself to know what I could do to help and to be able to do it. I looked at a fluorescent yellow poster on a bulletin board to my left: “If not you, who? If not now, when?” Next to it was a picture of Joseph Smith receiving the gold plates from a glistening Angel Moroni and a pamphlet entitled “Which Church Is Right?” There was also a Primary display on reverence — a large crayon drawing of two children, their arms folded like jointed pretzels, receiving the sacrament from a leggy deacon with a solemn pink face.

The murmur of voices from behind the door broke upon my consciousness and suddenly, like a tremor through my body, the thought came: What if that were me in there? What if *I* were being tried for my membership in the Church? What if I were excommunicated? I had drifted far enough to make that a startlingly and frighteningly imaginable possibility. Carol was using her matter-of-fact tone, probably saying something like “I’ve done this and this and this. It sounds like I should be excommunicated, so let’s do it and get it over with, okay?” She was her own accuser and, I knew, would make no defense. What if I were behind that door? Being excommunicated would be like being a single feather falling from a bird in flight to a disinterested earth; like being a button, snagged and torn from the breast of a worn, warm woolen coat; like being an ivory queen in a mystical self-propelled game of chess, moving heedlessly but deliberately into jeopardy.

I knew I had to be more than a silent witness for Carol. The metal letters, the drinking fountain, the banister, the Jesus picture, the displays were tiny electric generators, first throwing out sparks, then sustaining a current of re-awakening emotion and spirit-sense and sensation. Oddly, I heard Carol’s voice clearly for an instant through the door: “Well, I don’t think she really has anything to say.” But I did. They were talking about me. I stood up and

crossed the room. But what would I say? Another scripture from the previous night came to mind. "The Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what you ought to say." I didn't know whether to knock or wait to see if they came out to get me. When Carol opened the door I was standing right there. I was momentarily embarrassed, wondering if they thought I'd been standing there the whole time, spying.

I sat next to Carol in a big shiny dark wood chair — the kind I remember seeing on TV's *Divorce Court* as a child. The bishop was there, his two counselors, and the ward clerk. The clerk asked my name, then asked me to spell it so he'd get it right on the official record. He was a small, dark-complexioned man with a harelip. He didn't say anything else the whole time but sat, his head bowed over the endless notes he scratched on his paper. The first counselor sat across the large conference table from me. He looked about thirty-two, had deep acne scars on his face, and wore a plaid, imitation-Pendleton jacket over his broad thin shoulders and spider arms. His smile was wide and spread slowly across his face when the bishop introduced him to me. Unlike both Carol and me, he hadn't had braces on his teeth as a teenager. His eyes were glittering, translucent stones set in an ill-cut length of pitted hardwood. They were the color of Bear Lake, intelligent and kind. I don't remember the second counselor very well. He sat directly to my right, three seats down, out of my immediate line of vision. He smiled whenever I glanced his way, and as I talked, marched the fingers of his left hand, which was stretched in front of him, silently upon the table, from index to pinkie, forward and back, like a four-note scale repeated again and again on the piano. The bishop asked me to tell a little about myself, then with a question mark in his voice said, "Carol tells us you are an active, committed member of the Church." The past year was my business and God's. I said, "Yes, I am."

Then I started talking, explaining what I knew of Carol and her problems over the years. Much like the night I prayed with Carol long ago at BYU, the words flowed and I can't remember now what exactly I said. Things, I think, about her father, her deep — if not apparent — feelings for the Lord and the gospel, and her terrible frustration at her failures to live faithfully. At some point she reached over and took hold of my hand. Then a strange thing happened, strange for me at least. I started crying, so hard that I couldn't talk for several minutes. I rarely cry in private and almost never in public, but the steel in me that had been so mysteriously softening over the past hour suddenly melted completely, like ice in fire.

I remember a symposium on world religions I attended several years ago at BYU. A holy man from India told a fable illuminating the Buddhist (or was it Hindu?) belief system. Ultimate transcendence of the world and its cares lay, for his people, in experiencing what he could only describe as an "unutterable gush of compassion," whether for an individual or the whole of humanity. Sitting in the *Divorce Court* chair in this Mormon bishop's office, I experienced a pure and purifying gush of compassion for Carol, a giant surge of the gift of comfort. Carol began to cry and her mascara ran in black streams down her cheeks. The bishop lowered his head. The first counselor rubbed his

scarred face with three flat fingers, his Bear-Lake eyes brighter with unspilled tears. The second counselor's fingers marched silently. The clerk's pencil stopped. When I could finally talk again, I said, "I guess that's all I have to say."

The bishop asked Carol a few more questions, and then she and I stood up to leave while he and his counselors deliberated. He rose and came to her, taking her hand. He spoke quietly, and said, as nearly as I can remember, "The Lord is full of grace, Carol. Let yourself accept that and take joy in his gifts. In my life I've had moments of peace and inspiration and encouragement from our Heavenly Father. Sometimes they even come when I know I'm not really worthy and I think he's furthest away. Just remembering those moments helps me get through the dark times in the way I know I should. He loves us. You're a precious girl." It was the first time I'd ever heard a bishop say the word *grace*.

Carol and I crossed the foyer arm in arm. I said, "Let's wait outside for a minute." I opened the double glass doors. We passed beneath the metal letters: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It was a moonless night with more stars in the black sky than I had seen since right after a week of windstorms five months ago. I like to look at the stars. I got a small telescope for Christmas two years ago. The night of the court the stars seemed full of motion and shapes, invisible lines connecting them into fleeting images of horses running, ladies dancing, or mere arcs of light slicing the dark sky. We looked up at them for a long moment. If I focused on one corner of the night, I could, like a child's dot-to-dot picture, draw a line from star to star to form whatever configuration might be suggested by the pin-points of light and spaces of shadow. I traced what looked like the trunk of a tree.

Carol said she was cold. I glanced at her. She'd pulled two handfuls of her long hair tightly over her ears, twisting the ends together under her chin. I smiled and said, "Okay." We turned to go inside where, after thirty-five minutes, the decision for Carol would be disfellowshipment — and hope — rather than excommunication. I looked back before opening the first glass door. My eyes had stopped on the star that is Orion's right shoulder. Tomorrow night, if it was clear and I stayed up past midnight for maximum darkness, I could go up on the roof of my apartment and draw the branches of the tree. I would perch for a while on Orion's shoulder, getting my bearings, carefully — I had a brand-new constellation in the making. Then — stars connected behind and scattered before me — I'd draw a straight path into the blackness of the shadows.