

Field Walking

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Jennifer is a mother of three—Sadie in high school, Carson in middle school, Jordan in elementary—which means weekdays start at 6:00 A.M. and quickly unspool, devolving into a mad scramble of showers and hair dryers and cold lunches and lost homework and family prayer and kisses good-bye, the front door slamming its exclamation with each departure until 8:00, when her husband, Dean, loads Jordan into the car to take him to school on his way to work.

By 8:05, the house is perfectly still. Most mornings, Jennifer turns on the *Today Show* while she does her chores, the hosts' friendly chatter filling up the quiet as she unloads the dishwasher and sweeps the kitchen floor. Then she takes off her pajama top and puts on her sports bra and does her Thirty Minute Yoga Blast DVD. Then she takes a shower. Then she puts in a load of laundry. Then she does her make-up and her hair. Then she decides what else she needs to do, and how, and when.

Most mornings.

Not this morning, or the last few weeks of mornings. A few months have passed since the miscarriage, and for the first time in her adult life, she feels the charge of rebellion in her veins. Over the years, she's dealt with anxiety and sadness. She even experienced a full-blown bout of post-partum depression after Jordan was born. But never before has she felt this urgent impatience, more powerful than frustration but not quite tipped over into rage. And she's doing all sorts of surprising things. One morning last week she stayed in her pajamas all day long and ate s'mores for lunch, toasting the marshmallows over the bright red coils of the stove burner. A few days after that, instead of going to the grocery store, she drove forty minutes south to the Mall of America, where she bought two new bras from Victoria's Se-

cret—neither of them white—and a book by a self-proclaimed psychic about energy healing. She sat in the food court overlooking the Nickelodeon Universe indoor theme park, hysterical adolescent screams approaching and receding as the roller coaster rattled by (*why were these kids not in school?*), and read the strange little book cover to cover. She pulled in the driveway just minutes before the kids were due home, but none of them asked her what she'd done all day or where she went. When Dean arrived home from work and asked, "How was your day?" she answered, "Fine," then paused and said, "Different." He responded with a distracted kiss on the top of her head. She left the new bras in the shopping bag, the tags still on.

So this morning, as soon as the front door clicks behind Dean's back, she winds her dark hair into a messy ponytail and heads for the car. Last night's dinner dishes remain in the sink and she hasn't done laundry in almost a week, but she doesn't care, and this apathy both astonishes and thrills her. Today, she thinks, will be a movie day. She'll head to the library and stock up on a few films she's been meaning to see but hasn't made time for.

She drives to the library with the windows down and the music up high, the radio tuned to a station her daughter Sadie likes, and she sings along with Lady Gaga—*no you can't read my poker face*—impressed with herself that she knows both the singer and the words. She's aware, too, that if any of her children were in the car with her, they'd beg her to stop singing.

Inside the library, Jennifer stands in front of the rack of DVDs, disappointed. Most of these movies are old, and many are of absolutely no interest to her. She considers *Shakespeare in Love*, a blushing young Gwyneth Paltrow on the cover, but Gwyneth seems suddenly unbearable to her, so stridently blond and healthy and apple-cheeked, as if she'd tucked the key to happiness inside her ruffled blouse, right next to her perky twenty-five-year-old bosom. No, she doesn't want Gwyneth, and she doesn't want Julia Roberts or Reese Witherspoon or even Kate Winslet, bonneted and demure on the cover of *Sense and Sensibility*. Jennifer also moves quickly past any movies for or about children or teens. She wants to watch a grown-up film—a movie made by grown-ups, for grown-ups.

And then she sees a title that makes her stop and consider.

Brokeback Mountain. She remembers the movie receiving a good deal of acclaim years ago, but back then she never would have considered seeing it. Not only does the movie deal with homosexual relationships, but it's rated R, and Jennifer hasn't seen an R-rated movie since the early 1990s. She pulls the DVD case from the rack and recognizes one of the leads, Heath Ledger—the poor young actor who died a few years ago. She'd seen him as the Joker in that *Batman* movie Dean dragged her to (“PG-13 for *cartoon* violence,” he'd said when she objected) and his performance had literally haunted her dreams: his menacing, blood-red smile; the wildness in his eyes. On the cover of this DVD, he looks like an entirely different person—so lovely and so sad. She realizes her heart is pounding at the thought of taking this movie home. Should she? *Can* she? Then she feels her apprehension turning inside her, twisting into indignation and, finally, cool decisiveness. She is a grown woman. Grown. Who's to stop her?

She watches the movie in her bedroom, tucked up under her covers, the blinds closed tight, and her heart races with anguish and empathy as each character on the screen tries so hard to love and be loved, and then fails. The pathos is almost unbearable when Heath Ledger is on screen. He's so vibrant in all his doomed beauty, his wild blond curls and the sweaty shimmer of his skin radiating life. So young, so unaware that his real-life death sits crouching just around the corner, waiting to steal away his earthly promise. *God needed him*. Surely someone said those terrible words to his grieving mother; someone will say them, someday, to his orphaned daughter. The thought of it makes her want to weep. *Who are we to feign understanding of God's mysterious needs?* she thinks. *Why must we bend our tragedies to fit His unknowable will?*

It must not have been the Lord's time. Those were the words her own mother said when Jennifer called to tell her about the miscarriage. Jennifer didn't answer her or acknowledge the platitude in any way. She simply gripped the phone and breathed. As the silence between them continued, her refusal to speak gathered weight and power, becoming an act so aggressive and courageous that she still can't quite believe that she, Jennifer, was the woman withholding even a murmur of assent.

After the movie she curls onto her side, her knees pulled up against her chest, and when she finds herself sliding into sleep,

she doesn't fight it. She sleeps deeply, never dreaming, until she hears Carson home from middle school, pounding on the locked front door. She hurries downstairs, apologizes for locking him out, and then busies herself cleaning up the house and preparing dinner as usual—grilled cheese sandwiches and chicken noodle soup, one of the few dinner combinations each member of the family will eat without objection.

But she doesn't sit down to the meal with the rest of the family. Instead she grabs the keys and the movie that needs returning, holding the DVD case with the scandalous title facing out, and when Dean asks where she's going, she answers simply, "Errands." When she arrives home, she walks right past Dean and Jordan at the kitchen table, sweeps by without a word as her husband quizzes her son on his times tables (it's the sevens—the unbearable, unknowable sevens, a quiz he keeps failing, the cause of incalculable tears). From her bedroom, Jennifer can't help but hear Jordan's voice escalating, stressed and panicked, punctuated occasionally by Dean's rumbling baritone, but she chooses to stay in her room, reading. At one point, Carson lingers outside her open door, unaccustomed to seeing his mother lying down unless she has a migraine or is ready for bed. But she doesn't look up from her book. She doesn't go downstairs and join any of them until it's time for family prayer.

Then all night long she sleeps fitfully, Dean's rhythmic snoring and the stifling weight of the bed covers bringing her up out of her dreams. By 5:30 A.M. she's given up the struggle and lies there, fully awake and sweating in the muggy morning air of a late-May heat wave.

She speaks one sentence aloud. To the ceiling. To God. "What do You want from me?" She doesn't bother whispering. Dean doesn't rouse.

This is all the praying she can muster, a single line flung up into blades of the fan spinning lazily above her head. She digs her fingernails into the palms of her hands, narrows her eyes, and waits. The house is so still she can hear the metallic whir of the refrigerator in the kitchen. She remains quiet, tensing in the silence, daring God to answer. Listening. Breathing.

Nothing.

Then Sadie's alarm begins its rhythmic bleating, and Jennifer

hears her daughter fumbling with the clock. Then she feels the ground shake as Jordan, always anxious to be the first one up, leaps from his top bunk. Then she hears her name, “Mom!” as Carson yells down the hall, “Where in the crap is my baseball shirt?”

All her life, since she was a little girl, she’s tried to do what she thought God asked of her: marrying in the temple, having children young and staying home to guide them, serving faithfully in her callings. She’d been trained to listen for the promptings of the Spirit, and she thought she knew how to hear them. But for years now—four years, maybe five, definitely since Jordan started first grade, and more emphatically once her children began transitioning to their teens and her failures as a mother were reflected in them more starkly—for all that time, as the emptiness inside her yawned wider, she’s been unable to decipher God’s will for her life.

At first she thought it was a phase, a normal spiritual fluctuation, and she tried to wait patiently for the day when God would open his mouth. She studied her options. Should she go back to college and finish her degree? Start working part-time, see if she could get a job at Jordan’s school? Or perhaps God wanted her to keep her free days free, blessed as she was with a husband who could support her—it could be that a big calling in the Relief Society or Young Women’s or early morning seminary was in the works. But the years passed, and the only calling change was from Sunbeam teacher to CTR 7; no part-time jobs opened up at Jordan’s school; she looked into the University of Minnesota and found that she’d have to retake way too much math.

So she increased her temple attendance. She woke up early to read her scriptures before the rest of the family claimed her day. She got on her knees and told God the truth: how paralyzed she felt by her own aimlessness; how she feared she would soon be overwhelmed by her creeping sense of failure. She pled with Him until the silence whistled in her ears.

And then, after all that pleading, she thought she finally found her answer. *Have another baby*. It was hard to be sure whether the prompting came from God. There was no overwhelming spiritual feeling; no prophetic dream. The idea took hold slowly, beginning first as an example of something she *could*

do, then slowly evolving into something (perhaps?) she *should* do, until finally becoming something she felt she must, at least, attempt. Dean had been surprised that she wanted another baby. She'd been so adamant that they were done at three. And they were getting old, it was true. But once the idea implanted itself, she couldn't let it go. After a year of trying she finally conceived, and immediately she felt jolted out of her terrible inertia, as if she'd been living for years on a broken carnival ride that had been miraculously repaired and was finally moving forward. *So this is what God had in store*, she'd thought, and the relief had been intoxicating.

The bed springs creak as Dean rolls over, finally awake. He moves closer to her and wraps his arm around her waist, his warm hand finding her stomach's bare skin.

"You okay, hon?" he asks.

She can't turn around. She can't look at his face. "I'm fine," she says, her shoulders rigid and unyielding.

"You seem . . . I don't know," he says, his breath pulsing against the back of her neck.

"I'm fine," she says again.

The day is breaking across the Midwestern horizon. Yet another day. Suddenly an idea comes to her, clear as the sunlight bleeding in through her window: Today, she will go field walking. She throws off her covers, releasing herself from Dean's loose embrace, and rises.

By 9:30 A.M., she's ready to go: the floor swept, the dishwasher chugging, the comforter on her king-sized bed pulled tight, its pale blue accent pillows arrayed in an artful pile. Jennifer herself is wearing comfortable jeans and a good pair of tennis shoes, and she's prepared a small backpack containing a water bottle, some granola bars, her journal, her phone, her credit card, a Cedarville City trail map, and \$200 in cash.

Jennifer realizes that "field walking" isn't the perfect term to describe her plans for the day. The descriptor doesn't work in the literal sense, since the trails she'll be walking don't cut through fields, but through suburban neighborhoods and nature preserves. And she's not exactly going field walking in the figurative sense, either—the sense that she and her best friend from a decade ago, Amanda DeWitt, adopted during the daily phone calls

they indulged in as punchy, sleep-deprived young mothers. After all, Jennifer isn't bringing a gun. She doesn't even own a gun. And she has no plans to kill herself, although a part of her understands why suicide might appeal to some as a seductively rational solution. No, if she picked up the phone today and dialed Amanda's number to confess her plans, her best friend from ten years ago would sigh in that ironic, drawn-out way of hers and say, *No gun, no suicide, no field? It's not field walking.*

Then Jennifer would agree. Technically, she would tell Amanda, it's true she's not going field walking. But she plans to embody the spirit of the thing. She intends to open her door and wander away for a while, from her home, her family, her life, her self. And whether she'll decide to come back? That remains an open question.

Well, when you put it that way, she can imagine Amanda answering. I get it. I see.

* * *

As young mothers, Jennifer and Amanda often joked about killing themselves. Jennifer remembers this time fondly. Amanda—smart, tough, wry, everything Jennifer wished she could be but wasn't quite—Amanda was the first to dare joke about such a thing, and Jennifer was more than willing to laugh along.

The two of them talked on the phone nearly every day. Jennifer waited for the ring amid the smear of jelly sandwiches and the yammer of Elmo or Blue; and when the call finally came, she would take the phone to the master bathroom, close the door behind her, and join Amanda in the cathartic pleasure of complaining.

"I'm going field walking," Amanda would say, her three-year-old daughter howling in the background.

"Oh no," Jennifer would answer, the sound of barely suppressed laughter in her throat. "What today?"

"Pooping on the stairs. Preschool drop-off tantrum. Bounced check."

"Definitely a field walking day. Heading straight out the back door?"

"Yep. Right out the door. No looking back. Locked and loaded, baby!"

Then Amanda would laugh and Jennifer would join her, their voices tired and musical and young.

Occasionally, their shared black sense of humor made Jennifer feel a bit guilty, especially since the phrase “field walking” referred to an actual woman who’d killed herself: a mother of eight kids ranging in age from infant to teenager living in the Salt Lake City suburb just south of their own. Jennifer and Amanda didn’t know her, of course; Jennifer liked to think they’d *never* joke about such a thing if she’d been an actual acquaintance. The truth was, not many people in the community had known the woman well, but they’d all been shaken by the incident. It’s not every day that a mother of eight escapes out the back door and shoots herself in the head. According to news reports and neighborhood gossip, the morning wasn’t out of the ordinary: the kids were fighting over the cereal, the oldest had missed her bus, and in the midst of all the squabbling, the woman stood up and left. She didn’t say a word to anybody. She simply headed for the field behind her house, barefooted and in her bathrobe. She’d hidden the gun in her bathrobe pocket.

Even today, fifteen years later, Jennifer remembers the irony of the dead woman’s name: Joy. She also remembers the woman’s age, thirty-nine, because it seemed so terribly old to Jennifer at the time, too old to still be having kids. The whole scenario reinforced Jennifer’s decision to have a smaller family—at least by Mormon standards—and to be done having babies early so she could enjoy the rest of her life. Jennifer was twenty-six when the shooting happened and already the mother of two. Three years later, she had one more. A year after that, she began her long-standing relationship with her IUD.

Jennifer and Amanda were in fierce agreement regarding matters of family planning and family size. Have ‘em young. Have three, four tops—although four might be pushing it. Amanda herself had three girls, and whenever somebody would ask her when or if she planned to have number four—“try for a boy?”—Amanda would narrow her eyes and deliver her answer with calculated coolness: *That’s between me and the Lord, don’t you think?* It was a horrible, wonderful thing to witness, the unfortunate questioner babbling her apology and Amanda icily dismissing it with a wave of her hand. Only Jennifer was allowed to ask Amanda such per-

sonal questions; only Jennifer was privy to Amanda's secrets and motives and deepest, most complicated feelings.

For reasons Jennifer never understood and that still remain unclear, for five whole years, she was Amanda DeWitt's anointed best friend. Then a Ph.D. student and divorced single mother named Chelsea moved into the ward; and in a matter of months, Jennifer's phone stopped ringing. Later that year, Dean accepted an offer to head up his company's Midwestern sales division in Minnesota. Amanda and Chelsea co-hosted a good-bye party for Jennifer and her family, during which Chelsea kept Amanda and all the neighborhood men raptly entertained with witty stories and slightly ribald pop culture observations, while Jennifer somehow found herself in the kitchen, helping the children decorate sugar cookies.

Amanda and Jennifer called each other on their birthdays for a few years after the move, but the conversations grew briefer and more stilted until they finally ended altogether. Now, they stay in touch via Christmas card. Last December, Jennifer opened the envelope to find a family photo of Amanda, her husband Will, and their three beautiful girls all decked out in holiday finery. And then, a surprise: a gloriously bald baby boy grinning up from Amanda's lap.

Jennifer had learned of her own pregnancy just days before receiving the card, and she'd been tempted to call Amanda, to revel in the serendipity of it all, to pepper her with questions about pregnancy and childbirth in the face of what doctors called "advanced maternal age." It would be like old times. The thought of listening to Amanda on the other end of the telephone line—her sharp laugh, the joy thrumming through her rich, throaty alto as she exclaimed at the news, a sound Jennifer had once truly loved and hadn't heard in years—it tempted her so much that she picked up the receiver, despite the decision she'd made with Dean not to breathe a word of her condition until she'd reached twelve weeks. But then she hesitated. She looked at the phone in her hand, and her heart clenched, apprehensive. *No*, the thought came. *Don't*.

Looking back, she counts this one event as the single tender mercy of the entire pregnancy and its aftermath. The one time that the Spirit actually protected her from harm.

* * *

Jennifer steps onto her porch and locks the front door behind her. The morning sun hangs low in the sky; the air is warm and filled with frantic birdsong. Her neighborhood, lined with imposing two-story homes and neat green lawns, is devoid of human noise: garages and windows closed tight, no little children riding tricycles on the sidewalks or playing ball on the driveways.

She slings her backpack over one shoulder and strides across the silent street toward her subdivision's nature preserve. Once inside the canopy of trees, she inhales the ripe, heavy air and feels her body relax. She loves these trails, even if she doesn't use them much anymore. Cedarville is famous for its extensive citywide trail system—one reason Jennifer chose to buy a home here was because she liked to imagine herself running on these paths, a fleet figure moving underneath the trees, alongside the lakes—but she hasn't run on them for years. Not since the summer she tore the meniscus in her knee training for a half marathon that a woman in the ward had talked her into attempting.

She heads south, knowing she has hours of walking ahead of her if she keeps following the connected trails, and that, if she keeps following them, she'll end up on the outskirts of Cedarville, its southeastern corner. There, the suburban sprawl abruptly ends, becoming farmland. Long, straight country roads. Fields.

Perhaps, she thinks, if she walks long and far enough, she'll end up field walking after all.

Moments after plunging into the nature preserve she feels her cell phone buzz against her hip. A text. She knows if she's getting a text it's from one of her kids, since Dean doesn't text with her, and neither do any of the handful of middle-aged women friends who have her cell phone number. What she should do is ignore the text. But. If she ignores it, then whichever child is sending it will worry because Mom *always* answers texts; then that child will call home and the phone will ring, unanswered; then that child will call Dean who will call both the cell phone and the home phone and become increasingly more alarmed until he decides to come home for lunch and start looking for her. Then the jig, as they say, will be up.

She pulls the phone out of her pocket. Sadie.

Hey ma so sry but i left my math book home & it has my hmwork in it & i need it by 4th per so i don't get docked. Thnk u thnk u thnk u!

Sadie is a high school sophomore and forgets her homework (or her cell phone, or her permission slip, or her cheerleading shoes) at least once every couple of weeks. Jennifer has tried grounding, allowance-docking, raging, long talks about the psychological reasons behind her disorganization, the silent treatment, and cell phone confiscation as means of treating the problem, all to no avail. Dean has told her over and over again that the *real* problem is Jennifer always rescuing her. She punishes Sadie, yes. But only after delivering the forgotten item to school.

No, Jennifer types, and presses send. She sits on a fallen log, the phone cupped in her hand, waiting for the hammer of her daughter's wrath to descend.

Wat do u mean no? Where r u? Y cant u come?

I CAN come, Jennifer types. I simply choose not to.

The response is immediate. But ma this is an emrgncy. If im late i get docked & thn my grade will be a C+ prblby and then i get on probation for cheer this summer. U know this!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Yep. Consequences suck.

It will take u like 10 mins!!!!!! Srsly mom this is not a good time for u to tch me some lesson or smthing!

Sorry, hon. I'm not coming. No amount of begging will change my mind.

Jennifer's heart beats fast and she realizes she's smiling. Smiling! What kind of sadism is this, when a mother enjoys her child's suffering? Well-deserved or not?

Ugghhh! I dont believe this! U picked the wrong day 2 go crazy mom! UGGHGHGHG!

Is there ever a good day to go crazy? Jennifer thinks, then sends one final text: Love you, hon. Have a good day.

She waits for a few minutes but her phone has fallen silent. Other than the shirring of the trees overhead, the whole world is still. Jennifer stands, brushes off her backside, arranges her pack over both shoulders, and starts to jog.

She jogs for twenty minutes straight, the longest she's run without stopping in years. Her knee feels fine. She's passed a few people on the trail—an older couple out for a walk, an intense young man all decked out in racing gear—and each person has inspected her with curiosity. She realizes she must be a confusing sight: a woman in street clothes with a backpack over her shoulders, running. The older gentleman even looked concerned, as if Jennifer were running away from someone or something and needed rescue, but she made eye contact as she passed and smiled reassuringly. He smiled back and raised his hand in a faltering wave.

Once her breath turns ragged she slows her pace, walking briskly out of her neighborhood preserve and through an older residential area. She walks alongside the busy thoroughfare bisecting Cedarville, her hair flown loose from her ponytail and whipping in the wind as cars barrel by. She walks past a playground, near a mother sitting on a bench reading a magazine while her toddler, a redheaded girl in pink tennis shoes, piles rocks at the bottom of the slide. She walks across the cracked asphalt of a gas station parking lot. She walks the eastern length of Carver Lake. She walks past a municipal tennis court where two gray-haired women play, their legs wide and white in their tennis shorts, their practiced swings both elegant and strong. She walks into a dense patch of forest ringing a medium-sized pond. She can hear the frogs, their cries like a screen door creaking.

She has walked now for over three hours without stopping, and she's finally hungry and tired. She's on a little-used trail, an offshoot of the main trail encircling Carver Lake. A number of beautiful homes back up against this path, the nicely kept grass of their long green back lawns sloping down toward the jumble of wilderness just beyond the walking trail. Jennifer sits on the slightly damp grass of a particularly well-tended yard, not caring whether her jeans get wet. After she takes a long swig of water, she opens a granola bar and eats it slowly, considering. It's almost one o'clock. She is a three-hour walk away from home, and Carson, her middle schooler, gets off the bus at 3:15. He knows the garage code and can let himself in, but thus far in Carson's middle school career he hasn't had to do it. Jennifer always makes sure she's there. But there is no way, now, she can make it back in time.

No way. She's walked too far.

She pulls the trail map out of her backpack and studies it. An hour's worth of brisk walking will lead her to the southwestern outskirts of her town, emptied into the stark brightness of farmland. Once she reaches the end of the map, she knows there are no bus stops. No municipal trails. No canopies of sheltering trees. Just long straight roads, furrowed fields, and the occasional car whizzing along the two-lane highway.

She wants to keep walking. She wants to keep walking until she disappears.

She imagines what it would feel like to reach the end of the trail and step off the pavement into the mounded furrows of newly planted crops. She would pick a path through the wispy sprouting corn until the road behind her fell away, until the farmhouses receded to smears of color against the horizon, until only the buzz and hum of silence filled her ears. Then she would lay herself down against the loamy brown earth until the sun burned itself to darkness, and when the night air covered her body, she would close her eyes and rest. All alone. Her whereabouts a mystery.

But she can't do such a thing. Can she? An image of her family crowds into her mind: Dean and Sadie and Carson and Jordan, each of them standing as still and expressionless as chess pieces on a board. They are light and hollow, carved out of balsa wood or pine, and she sees her own hairless arm sweeping across the flat plane of her imagination, sending them all tumbling. It's so easy. One swipe and they topple, helpless.

Her family. The family she made.

She remembers a voice from her young adulthood, a non-Mormon college professor at Utah State, telling her class full of mostly Mormon students that they should wait until they're older to marry and have children, not only for their own sakes, but for their children's sakes as well. She remembers the professor's words exactly: *Children deserve to be raised by grown people*. Oh, how this woman offended her! She remembers putting a hand over her abdomen—Sadie was growing inside her—and seething. But as she thinks back on all her failures as a mother, all those mistakes born of naïveté and blindness, she can't help but wonder who her

children would be if they'd been raised by someone more mature. Sadie would be kinder, Carson would have learned how to manage his anger, Jordan would have received the early intervention or medication or (what? can she even think it?) the undivided, focused attention that she knew he needed as a preschooler, but that she was too exhausted—too *selfish*—to provide.

But she can't change any of that. No matter how long or how far she walks, she can't escape these truths: She is her children's mother. She is her husband's wife. The past trails behind her like a cobbled path, each stone set into the ground with her own two hands.

Jennifer pulls out her phone. It's almost 1:00. Dean will be at lunch with a customer, she's quite sure. He's a good salesman because he knows how to keep his people happy, which means that every day from 11:30 to 2:00 he's usually out of the office, sharing an afternoon steak with some middle-aged plant manager. Jennifer can call his office phone and leave a message so at least he won't panic. She can do that much.

The phone rings once. Twice. She composes the message in her mind: *Hello, Dean. I'm fine. Please don't worry about me, but I'll be gone for a little while, maybe until tomorrow. I promise I'm healthy and safe and I have every intention . . .*

"Hello?"

Dean's voice sends a jolt of adrenalin straight to Jennifer's heart. He's at his desk? Her mind races, scrambling her memorized explanation into an incoherent jumble.

"Jen? That you?" He has caller ID. There's no turning back now.

"Yes. Yes, it's me. I didn't think you'd be at your desk."

"Oh, I get it! You only call me when you think I won't be here? Ha! How's that for wifely devotion?" He laughs at his own joke, his powerful voice booming in her ear. Jennifer closes her eyes and inhales slowly. It's difficult having a happy husband. She's never admitted this to anyone—she has a hard time even admitting it to herself, it sounds so ungrateful—but it's true. He's never understood her, really. Her sadness. Her fear.

"Listen, Dean," she begins. She has no choice, now, but to tell him. "I just want you to know I've been out today, doing some things. Some thinking. It's been good to be out."

“Good, good. I’m glad. You needed to get out. Hey, did you call that new woman in the ward who wanted to go to lunch? Annie? Or was it Amy. You know—the youngish one with all the hair . . .”

She can feel her resolve crumbling beneath the weight of his optimism. She interrupts him. “Dean.” Her voice isn’t loud, but it’s sharp.

“Oh, hey, sorry. Go ahead,” he says.

She steels herself. “Here’s the thing. I need some . . . space. Some time alone, I think. Not a lot of time alone; not weeks or even days or anything like that. But just, you know. Time.”

Silence fills his end of the line. She imagines him holding the phone to his ear, his face blanched with confusion and concern. Finally he answers her. “Is this about the baby?”

Is this about the baby? She wants to laugh, or cry, or both. That he even has to ask! *Is this about the baby?* Dean was the one she roused awake in the middle of the night, her abdomen clenched like a fist, the bed they shared crimson with blood. He was the one who knelt beside her on the cold bathroom floor while she sat on the toilet, moaning and sobbing, overcome with pain and fear. He was the one who yelled at their son Jordan when he appeared, ghost-like and stricken, at the door of their room: *Get out! Get out!* He was the one who wrapped his arms around her broken body and let her sob until she was ready to clean herself up and go to the hospital.

He had been there. And then it was like he hadn’t. *Let’s think positive*, he told her. *We can have another*. Just days after the miscarriage he told her this, all confidence and peace. *We can have another*. As if it hadn’t been her idea in the first place to have this baby, not his. As if it hadn’t taken them more than a year to conceive. As if she wasn’t forty years old. As if this wasn’t a sign from God that His answer was no, she’d been wrong all along, and He wasn’t going to let her try again.

“Of course it’s about the baby,” she answers, her patience straining. “It’s about the baby, and it’s about you, and me, and life, and God, and loneliness and futility and rage.” She spits out the last syllable. She can’t help herself.

“Rage?” He speaks the word as if it’s a stranger to his mouth,

as if it belonged to a foreign language he'd learned in his youth but had since forgotten.

The sound of rushing blood fills Jennifer's ears. "Dean, please just understand. I need a little more time, is all. Away."

"Away," he says, not a question this time, but a statement, tight with understanding. He swallows. "You need some time away," he repeats again.

Then a sadness wells up inside her, a sorrow too corrupted by guilt to be sympathy. "I know how this sounds, but you have to trust me," she says. "I'm not *leaving*, leaving. I just need some time."

She hears the sharp crack of his office door closing. "So let me get this straight," he says, louder now, and she's somehow relieved by the sound of his anger rising. "You went on a walk, but now you don't want to come home and you thought, what? You could leave me a message and nobody would worry? You realize you sound like a crazy person, right? Do you have the car? Do you have money? Are you lost?"

She answers him slowly. "I don't have the car. I told you, I've been walking. I have money. I have food. I have my phone if there's an emergency."

"But, Jennifer, where are you going? What does this mean?"

She doesn't answer him.

"What is it you want?"

Again, she is silent. She wishes she could answer him, but she simply doesn't know what to say. *What is it you want, Jennifer?* Not a question, but a stone—so huge and impossibly heavy that she's lost hope of ever turning it around, a portion of its surface forever curving just outside her range of vision.

"We can have another baby," he says, a note of pleading in his voice. "It's not too late."

"Isn't it?" She wants to know. Hasn't it suddenly become too late for almost everything? Can't he see how narrow, how strait, their road has become? *We can have another baby*, he says, and he says it without thinking, without paying attention to the words as they leave his mouth. *Can*. Such a slight little word—just one staccato syllable—and so deceptive. As if the act of claiming a choice is simple enough to be contained in one tiny burst of sound.

"I've told you, Jen, I'll support you in this. Whatever it takes.

Testing. In vitro, if you need it. I know we don't have much time, but it's still possible. If having a baby is what you want, we can make it happen."

Her hands are shaking and she needs to take a few deep breaths, but the desperation in her chest won't let her inhale. She misses the child she carried, the child she lost, its absence a hollow ache inside her rib-cage. She'd envisioned an entire life with her (she'd imagined this baby a girl), a life more beautiful and purposeful than the one she currently led, one where she parented with patience and vision and could call herself wise. This baby, this girl that she lost—she could have been her delight and her redemption.

Who was she to ask such a thing of a child? Who *is* she?

She's exhausted, so tired she can barely speak. "I can't talk about this right now, Dean. I've got to go."

"Wait! Just wait. Let me come get you. We'll talk, I promise. I'll take you wherever you want. We can go . . ."

"Dean!" She is not deaf to her husband's pain. She feels like a criminal, like an assassin. Truly cruel. "I'm hanging up now. I am fine. I will be fine. I'll be in touch with you tomorrow. But I'm hanging up now."

"Jennifer, wait! I need . . ."

She presses "end." She holds down the power button and listens as the phone chimes three times, signaling its good-bye. She lies back against the grass and closes her eyes.

When she opens her eyes again, the angle of the sun tells her that it's early evening. Five o'clock, perhaps? She would take out her cell phone and look, but she doesn't want to turn it on again. She knows there will be a message and she'd be tempted to check it. Her body is stiff from sleeping flat on the hard ground. Her bones are not young.

She rises up on her elbows and listens. She hears the sighing wind, the birdsong, the creak of the frogs, but there's another sound, too, higher and more insistent, riding just above the rest. A thin, urgent wailing. The noise registers deep inside her brain: a newborn's cry.

The sound comes from behind her. She turns and looks up at the house set back from the trail and realizes immediately that she's being watched. She can make out the form of a woman hold-

ing a baby, standing inside the screened-in back porch, inspecting her. Although the length of the manicured back-yard separates them and the woman stands behind the gauzy mesh, Jennifer senses the moment their eyes meet, the subliminal *click* of seeing and being seen. The baby in the woman's arms continues to scream. Jennifer stays frozen on her elbows, caught. How long has this woman been watching as she sleeps on her lawn? How will Jennifer explain herself?

Finally, the woman opens the screen door and steps onto the deck's top step. From this distance, Jennifer can tell she's close to her own age. Her dark hair hangs like heavy curtains against her shoulders and her long gray T-shirt shows a telltale circular stain against one breast. The baby is swaddled tight in a blue receiving blanket, and his cries pierce the evening stillness, tense and rhythmic.

"Do you need help?" the woman calls.

Jennifer raises one hand and shakes her head, embarrassed. She begins to stand.

"I've been watching you for a while now," the woman says loudly, the sentence carrying past Jennifer and across the water. "I was beginning to get a little worried."

Finally, Jennifer is able to speak. "I'm so sorry!" she says. "I was on a jog. I mean, a walk. I sat down to rest a little and before I knew it . . ." She lets the sentence trail away. She raises a hand and sweeps a few blades of grass from her matted hair.

The woman takes the three steps down onto the cement landing of the deck. She squints at Jennifer. "You sure you're okay? You look a little—I don't know. Shaken?"

Jennifer tries to laugh dismissively, but it sounds stiff and forced. "No, no. I'm okay. I don't do stuff like this usually." She increases her volume over the wailing infant. "Sleep on people's lawns!"

The woman moves across the grass toward her. She's not smiling but her bearing is friendly, even as her eyes run up and down Jennifer's body. "Yeah. You don't look like the type," she says confidently, standing a few feet away now. "Although I don't think I've interacted with another human being in, oh, seventy-two hours, so my judgment could be a little rusty."

Jennifer lets some of the tension out of her shoulders, relieved

that the woman is kind. “The baby doesn’t count as a human being?” Jennifer asks with what she hopes is a playful tone. The red-faced bundle bucks against his mother’s tight grasp.

“Ha! Sometimes I wonder.” The woman smiles ruefully. “I probably should have said *adult* human being. Or even *verbal* human being. I think I would take a conversation with a three-year-old at this point.”

“How old is he?” Jennifer asks. “Three or four weeks?”

“You guessed it. Three and a half.”

“Three and a half weeks old. I remember three and a half weeks old. Does it help to remind yourself that the crying usually tapers off around six weeks?”

The woman sighs. “That’s what the books say. They also call breastfeeding a ‘beautiful bonding experience’ instead of ‘hellish physical torture,’ so I’m a little skeptical.”

“I hear you,” Jennifer says. “I bottle-fed mine. Couldn’t do breast feeding, although heaven knows I tried. But you know what? It didn’t kill them.” Jennifer knows her nonchalance is misleading. She still remembers her defeat as she filled those bottles of formula, an ace bandage wrapped around her breasts like a guilt-grip on her heart. Three times she couldn’t get her baby to latch on right, three times her nipples cracked and bled, three times she gave up, conquered. She couldn’t bring herself to feed her babies in the mothers’ room at church, feeling somehow unworthy to be around the breast-feeding moms and their easy, natural mothering. And she still blames herself, just a little, for her children’s average test scores. The correlation is scientifically proven. She’s read articles. “It’s great that you’re breast feeding; don’t get me wrong. But don’t let them make you feel too guilty about formula. Being a mom is hard enough without all the guilt.”

The woman closes her eyes a beat longer than a blink. When she opens them, Jennifer is surprised to see tears welling up, then spilling out and down her cheeks. “You’re right,” she says softly, shifting her gaze away from Jennifer’s face, embarrassed. “This really is hard enough. It’s harder than hard enough.” The boy in her arms has maneuvered his upper body free from the swaddling and one hand flails above his angry red face.

Without thinking, Jennifer opens her arms. “Would you let me take him for a minute?”

The woman's eyes find Jennifer's and fill with relief. "Would you? He won't let me put him down. I don't know what I'm doing wrong but he won't let me put him down." Her voice breaks. "My mother left two weeks ago, and then on Sunday my husband went out of town, and I told them I could handle it. I told everybody I could handle it, but I can't handle it. He won't let me put him down!" She's sobbing now, unashamed, her nose running and her tears staining the baby's blue blanket.

Jennifer takes the baby gingerly, then turns him so he's facing outward, his body running lengthwise along her arm, her hand gripped between his legs. She swings him slowly, side to side. All three of her babies were colicky, and all three liked this hold best. He keeps crying, but the pitch seems a little less frantic.

"Thank you," the woman says, and wipes her face with both hands. She takes a deep, shuddering breath. "What you must think of me!"

"And you're saying this to the lady who's been sleeping on your lawn?"

"You have a point," the woman says, and smiles. "I know this sounds arrogant, but I never considered that this might be too hard for me. I'm a lawyer, you know? I deal with crying babies all day long." She shakes her head. "But truly, what was I thinking?"

Jennifer smiles sympathetically.

"I'm asking you in all seriousness. What *was* I thinking? You said you did this three times. Three times! I can't imagine that. What were *you* thinking?"

Jennifer looks at this woman, this stranger, with her long unwashed hair and her tired, middle-aged eyes, and she feels a surge of love and sisterhood well up inside her, a visceral expansion so powerful that for a moment she can't bring herself to speak. "I don't know," she says quietly. "I don't know what I was thinking. I simply did it back then. It was what I was meant to do, so I did it."

"But would you change it? If you could go back, I mean. Would you change any of it?"

Jennifer knows the answer that almost any mother would give: no. Automatic, deep, instinctual. She, Jennifer, wouldn't alter the fact of choosing motherhood when she did because her *children* are the fruit of that decision. Her living, breathing children, with their warm skin and flashing eyes and fragile wrists. Hers. But she

can't simply answer this woman with a "no." The question is too complicated.

"I wouldn't trade my children for anything. I wouldn't change having *them*," Jennifer says. "But there are things I regret. I think you can regret things even if you'd never change them."

The woman nods, understanding her. The baby has relaxed against Jennifer's arm and his crying has mercifully ceased.

"Look at you," the woman says. "A pro."

"I don't know about that. No. Not a pro."

"You have three kids. Don't they give you some kind of upgraded status for that? A mothering medallion or something? Baby whispering certification?"

Jennifer laughs, loose and honest, the kind of laugh she remembers sharing with Amanda and can't recall sharing with any woman since. "Nope, no certifications here. Anyway, I was young when I had them. Too young, probably. I made a lot of mistakes. I was actually hoping for a do-over."

The woman tilts her head to one side, curious.

"I was going to have one more. Actually, no. I did have one more, just a few months ago. It was a miscarriage at eleven weeks. But there was a baby." Jennifer takes a deep breath, preparing herself to say it. "And that baby died."

"Oh!" The woman's single round syllable stabs the air, full of surprise and sympathy. "Oh, no!"

She reaches out and gathers Jennifer in an embrace. Jennifer wraps her free arm around the woman's waist and keeps her other arm tightly grasping the baby, his warm body fitting snugly between them. She buries her face in the woman's dark hair and she cries.

The two women spend hours that evening on the back lawn, talking and passing the baby between them. The woman's name is Candace, and she is forty-one years old, twice-married, Episcopalian, more Libertarian than Republican, and her high jump record at Eden Prairie High School still stands. Jennifer tells Candace everything: about field walking and Amanda DeWitt and Utah and Mormonism and her worries for her children and her husband's infuriating cheer. She tells her about the two new bras. The fascinating book by the energy healer. The last phone call between Dean and herself.

“You can stay here tonight, you know,” Candace says. “I mean it. Is that weird? But you can stay with me, if you want.”

Jennifer looks up at the rows of windows lining the back of Candace’s house. She imagines entering Candace’s mysterious guest bedroom and slipping between the cool sheets of a relative stranger. She’s surprised to realize she wouldn’t be afraid. She could do it. But not tonight.

“Thanks,” Jennifer says. “Truly. But I think I need to be alone. For one night at least, I need to be alone.”

Candace nods. “But where will you go? You realize you can’t do the thing where you lie down in the middle of a corn field, right?” She smiles.

Jennifer laughs again, soft and knowing. “I know. But the Days Inn is just a few miles away. It’s not too late yet. And I can walk. I want to walk.” Her legs feel strong, and the night air is perfectly cool. She’ll be at the hotel before it gets too dark, and then, for the first time in her life, she will check into a room under her own name and stay there, alone. The desire to do this thing—pull out her credit card, claim her anonymous shelter—wells up inside her with the force of inarguable necessity. *One night*, she thinks. She can give herself one night. A stake planted in the ground so she can tether herself.

“So after tomorrow, then,” Candace says. “What do you want to do?”

For the first time in years, the question doesn’t sound like an accusation. “I have no idea,” Jennifer says, and then she begins to laugh again. “Isn’t that awesome?”

Candace’s brown eyes are luminous and wise. It’s so easy to meet her gaze. “You’ll figure it out,” she says, and the timbre of her voice—so serious and kind, so unambiguously certain—sounds the way Jennifer had always imagined God’s might, if she’d ever heard Him speak aloud.

Jennifer embraces Candace, tight. She smells like mother sweat and milk. “You have my number. You call me.”

“I’ll call you,” Candace says firmly, and Jennifer believes her.

Jennifer leans down to kiss the baby. “What is his name?” she asks, suddenly aware she’s never learned it.

“Henry,” Candace says. “After my father.”

“Henry,” Jennifer says, brushing her lips against the top of his

warm head. “Beautiful Henry. I’ll see you again.” Then she pulls on her backpack and starts along the trail, heading west, retracing her steps toward the hotel and into the setting sun. She doesn’t need her map. Even in the gathering darkness, she remembers the way she came.