

## Someplace South, Anywhere Warm

When things between Claire and me started going south, I bought her a puppy, a purebred Golden Retriever. Even at the time, it seemed like a foolish thing to do, but when you're losing your grip, you'll do just about anything to dig back in. Claire named the puppy Lucy—for reasons I either forgot or never knew—and she really took to her, let her sleep in bed with us, taught her all the tricks, even talked about breeding her and having litters of puppies running around the yard. For those first two years, it almost seemed like my mad grasp had worked.

When Lucy turned two, I started looking for sires. It took me about two weeks of searching to find the one I wanted—a beautiful, thick-coated, rust-colored Golden named Erik the Red. It cost us four hundred bucks, but if everything had worked out, we could have sold those pups for at least five hundred each. Claire seemed disinterested in the search, almost uncomfortable, and now I think I know the reason why. It served to mark two years of make-believe.

I was able to persuade Claire into coming with me to the mating. Lucy sat with her head poking through from the backseat, and Claire rested her hand on the dog's head. As we turned on to Highway 61, the lake cold and blue on our left, Claire spoke.

“A strange thing,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Dogs and sex. They never have much say in the matter. We either cut them when they're young or force them together.” She scratched Lucy behind the ears. Lucy wagged her tail.

“And just look at how much happier they are than us.”

“Who put happiness at the top of the list?” she asked.

I understood what she meant, but it annoyed me just the same. That was Claire. Nothing was ever just a joke. It's one of those traits that I found endearing when we first met but since has only caused me frustration.

When we arrived at the breeder's, Claire waited at the car while I led Lucy to the kennel. The breeder took her from me and brought her to a large pen where waited our stud. The act itself was quick and almost violent, and when the sire dismounted, they remained stuck together, hind-quarters to hind-quarters. I resisted the urge to pull them apart, but they both had pleading looks on their faces. The whole procedure—I couldn't think of it as anything else, especially after what Claire said—took about thirty minutes and was a thoroughly unpleasant experience from where I stood. The breeder asked if I wanted to bring her back in a day or so, just to make sure, but I told her we'd just wait to see if this one took. Next to me, Lucy pranced and wagged her tail. Before I could open the door to let her hop in to the backseat, Claire knelt down and pressed her face to Lucy's and kissed her on the forehead. On the ride home, she rubbed Lucy's belly, and we didn't speak.

Two days after the breeding, Lucy went missing for the night. She slipped past me as I opened the door and ran off into the woods. I chased after her and called her name, but she disappeared into the tree-line. I stood there yelling until my voice went hoarse.

Inside, Claire sat at the kitchen table, ensconced in a book. I sat down across from her.

"Lucy got out," I said.

"What're you going to do?"

"Call John."

“She’ll come back on her own.” She reached across the table and grazed my hand before pulling back.

John Maki was the local vet and the pastor over at Bethlehem Lutheran. I’d met him winters ago, found him passed out in his ice-fishing shack on my way out to drink whiskey and fish in the dark. The door to his icehouse had blown open, and I saw him slumped over the hole. Too many nips from the blackberry brandy he used to stay warm. I shined my light on him and saw that the fingers on his left hand had frozen to just past the nail and turned black. Doctor down in Duluth did his best, but dead flesh don’t come back, even for a man of God. He lost his fingers at the first knuckle. But John still ice-fishes and still drinks his blackberry brandy, and I bring a flask of whiskey, and we talk about the weather and our women and the way jobs keep bleeding south.

“It’s a migration,” he’s said more than once. “I’d go, but I’m too old. North Shore’s not fit for dogs, much less people.”

That’s what I liked about it. But I didn’t buy his line. People’ll always keep spreading.

I disagreed with John when it came to humanity, but he was a damn good vet. I doubt the doctors over at Lakeview Clinic treat their patients with as much respect as he showed my dog.

“She’ll come back on her own. They get a little restless when they’re in heat,” John said when I asked about Lucy.

“What Claire said.” It bothered me a little that she had been right.

“How is Claire these days?” John asked.

“Couldn’t say.”

“If you two want to come in and talk to me.” John wasn’t one of them proselytizers, but he always thought he could fix things on faith. I preferred to fix things with my hands, but I have to admit, I was stumped as to how I could work that on my wife.

“I’ll stick with your vet skills, Pastor Maki.”

I stayed up all night drinking coffee and cursing, waiting for Lucy to scratch at the door. At two in the morning, faint yowling sounded from the forest. I scooted out the door to the edge of the trees and called for her again. When my fingers cramped from the cold, I went back in to boil another pot of coffee and to empty my bladder. Claire never once came down to coax me into bed. At the time, I thought she understood my stubbornness. Now, I think she was just happy to have the bed to herself.

Lucy came trotting out of the woods with the sun. Mad as I was, I still held her and told her, “Good girl.” After that, I didn’t sleep well. Any movement or sound she made in the night woke me. Claire retreated even further. It began with her leaving for work before me and staying later. One morning she said, “I wake up every time you go check on that damn dog,” but that was all she said. We didn’t have dinner together as often. She spent much of her time in the bedroom, or on the porch, reading. I noticed but pretended it meant nothing.

I began showing up to work bleary-eyed and ashen. The guys gave me hell after I told them why. Called me bitch. Leonard even sent me home one day. Said I was liable to lose a finger if I couldn’t keep my eye on the sawblade.

I never told Claire, but the pregnancy terrified me. Sad as it was, an expecting dog was my initiation into fatherhood. I’d always wanted kids, but Claire kept pushing back. And now we were pushing against the time when we were just too old. Her

reasons were sound enough—money, time, the stress of another body filling up the space in our lives. Probably the smartest decision she ever made.

John told me to relax, that Lucy was healthy as could be, but I still spent many nights kneeled next to her, running my hands through her thick winter coat. She lay on the birthing bed I'd made for her, an old wool blanket wrapped around some pillows, and I'd set my head gently on her belly and listen to the pups' heartbeats. They were fast and out of rhythm.

I spoiled her, too. At the end of the fifth week, I bought T-bones and cooked them rare. Claire didn't like them so bloody, and she ate only a small portion. I gave the rest to Lucy, who gulped it down in three bites and then cracked the bone and ate it as well. I ate mine slow, but left hunks of meat clinging to the bone and set it in her food dish.

About this time, Claire began sleeping on the couch. It happened without comment from either of us. I'm not even sure she planned it. Maybe one night she just fell asleep there and when she woke, realized she wasn't going back. We perfected the practice of living in the same house and leading two different lives.

At nine weeks, Lucy's belly was round and full. She wolfed down bowl after bowl of food and plodded around the house. I ran my hand along the skin of her gut. It was tight and pale and felt thin. I shined a flashlight to it, thinking I might see the pups squirm inside. Her abdomen glowed red, and I traced a spider web of arteries and veins with my finger, but couldn't see into the blackness of her womb. She stared at me with dark eyes and whimpered. At least five times a day, I led her outside to relieve herself. Her belly hung off her like a wet sack. I worried it would split and spill her pups into the snow.

On a Thursday, during the tenth week of Lucy's pregnancy, snow filtered down out of a low sky. Lucy yelped and yowled all afternoon. The pups' shapes pressed against her skin when she moved. Claire paced through the house for awhile, then closed herself in our bedroom. I knocked on the door.

"What's wrong?" I asked through the door.

"Just a headache. What's wrong with Lucy?"

"Think she's ready."

"Call John, then."

I stood at the door awhile without saying anything. I heard her breathing through the wood and couldn't help but think of her laying next to me when we were first married, her breath warm in the curve of my neck.

An hour later, I stood at the bay window in the front of our house, and headlights crept up my driveway, illuminating thick, white flakes. John stepped out of his jeep, went around to the back, and pulled out a black doctor's bag. He shuffled to my front door through the thickening drifts. I met him there.

"Sorry it took so long," he said, shaking snow from his head. "Really coming down."

"Wasn't even supposed to snow today," I said.

"Weathermen. Ha." He smiled. "How's she doing?"

"Same. Not happy."

"Let's take a look."

I led him through the living room and downstairs to the basement. Lucy raised her head when she heard us, let out a short yowl, and laid her head back down.

"Been wailing like that all afternoon," I said.

John knelt on the concrete floor next to her. He placed a short-fingered hand on her belly and whistled.

“Lot of pups in here,” he said over his shoulder. He scratched Lucy behind her ears. “She needs some help.”

He reached in to his black bag and pulled out a syringe, a handful of needles, and a small glass vial filled with a clear liquid.

“This’ll get her going.” He unwrapped a syringe, popped a needle out of its plastic wrap, and locked them together. “Hold her head?”

I knelt and placed one hand on Lucy’s neck and one on her muzzle. Her breath burned hot in my palm. “Didn’t know doctor’s still carried those little black bags,” I said.

“We’re a dying breed,” he said. “Hold tight. She may jump.” He sunk the needle into Lucy’s hip. She yipped, but didn’t move. “Good dog.”

Lucy quieted some after that. Claire came to the landing, sat on the top step, and asked how things were going. We told her fine, and she asked John about Susan and about the church, then thanked him for coming by and went back upstairs. An hour passed, then two. A chill seeped into the basement. John and I settled into our familiar icehouse banter.

“How’s the mill?” John asked.

“Talking about more lay-offs, but what’s new. My job’s safe enough for now.” I didn’t know if that was true, but I’d stopped worrying about it a long time before. Jobs up here were steady until they weren’t, and there wasn’t much you could do about it.

“How’s the church?” I asked.

“Didn’t get into it for the job security, but it’s one of the perks.” He reached over and rubbed Lucy’s nose.

Lucy panted fast and shallow. Her belly stretched larger.

“Here they come,” John said.

The first pup slid out, a slick orangish lump. Lucy licked it clean. Then another and another. She cleaned them each as they came. Five more pups, all more or less like the first. Then out dropped a pale ball, the color of birch bark. I stared, not comprehending, and looked at John. He laughed.

“Mixed litter,” he said.

“That’s possible?”

He nodded, and I remembered the night Lucy had tramped off into the woods and not come home until dawn.

Four more pups after the surprise, all golden. I felt the proud papa, and already worried about taking care of the little things, worried that I wouldn’t know how to watch over them, how to keep them safe.

That night, I fell asleep next to Claire, her back to mine, but woke in the middle of the night. I got up off the bed, and Claire didn’t wake as far as I could tell. She let out a small murmur, but her breathing stayed steady. I went down to the basement to check on the litter. All dry now, they laid in a heap against Lucy’s belly. The white one sprawled on top. She opened her tiny mouth in a yawn. I wrapped my hands around her and lifted her to my face. She sniffed at me and suckled the end of my nose. I pulled her away and set her down, next to the other pups. She climbed back to the top of the pile.

During the next two weeks, Lucy barely left her bed in the basement. Her hair came out in clumps, which John said was normal, but still scared the hell out of me.



While the pups nursed, I sat and stroked her neck. This was where I was when Claire left. It was undramatic. She said she was sorry. I said nothing. I couldn't move from my spot next to Lucy. As much as I'd like to call this strength or stubbornness, it really boils down to shock, though I'll admit to a sort of pride in it. Nothing I said could have made her stay anyway.

The pups grew, and the white one began to stand out. I wondered about her father. I named her Gypsy, the only one of the pups I gave a name. She looked like a Golden, but her snout was longer and her white coat coarser. On top of that, she was larger and faster, and quickly asserted her dominance. All the pups tugged and tore at each other, but Gypsy wrestled each into submission. She stalked from pup to pup and pinned them between her paws. They whimpered and laid their heads down, and she bounded away. The other pups soon quit challenging her. When they were out in the yard, the litter followed her around like a school of fish. She cut through the yard, and the other pups mimicked every turn.

Gypsy led her little pack, but also spent more time near her mother than the others. They nursed and then weaned and then spent most of their time clumped together. Gypsy slept with her head pressed into Lucy's belly and, when she wasn't tormenting her brothers and sisters, followed her around the yard. If another pup approached, she chased it away.

John stopped by a few times to check up on me and the pups. He kept asking me to come out to the icehouse, and I kept refusing. John said the dogs would be all right on their own for an afternoon, and I believed him, but I still couldn't leave them. With Claire gone, there was no one to watch them but me. I offered John pick of the litter, but he snorted and said he had enough animals to deal with.

At six weeks, folks came to look at my batch of Golden retrievers. I kept Gypsy hidden, stashed in the upstairs bathroom. I'd decided to keep her without really thinking about it. I knew that people would want her most. She whined and scratched at the door. After the people left, their new pup howling and barking, I'd find her sitting, head cocked to one side, questioning.

On more than one occasion, I picked up the phone to call Claire at her mother's, but never dialed. I'd just slam the phone down and set myself to one chore or another. It's easy to mask fear with fury.

March faded to April, and I still had two Golden pups left. One I gave to Leonard, who said he needed a watchdog. I tried to tell him Golden retrievers will play fetch with anyone with a stick, but he just laughed and said all dogs know to protect their master.

The last I gave to a young girl driving to Duluth from Canada. She was pretty. The wind pressed her shirt to her chest and whipped her long brown hair back and forth. I felt like a fool talking to her. She wanted to pay, but I wouldn't let her. While she held her pup and soothed it, she told me she was a student at the U and her family lived in Thunder Bay. After college, she wanted to move someplace south, anywhere warm. She said that when the world ended it wouldn't be much different from a northern Minnesota winter.

Then it was just me and Lucy and Gypsy. The rest of the spring was quiet. Each cool, April day blended into the next. After work, I fed them and let them off their chains. They trotted around the yard while I carried the last of the firewood or pumped well-water. Some days, when they tumbled and played, I jumped in and wrestled them to the ground. After dinner, I tossed them scraps. As the sun went down, I sat on the porch and called to them. They came running from the trees or around the corner of the shed,

Lucy in the lead, Gypsy loping close behind. They'd lie down next to my chair, heads on their front paws, and we'd sit still into darkness.

Twice, Claire left messages telling me she'd be stopping by to pick up some stuff. You'd think the woman could have gotten all of her stuff in one shot, but she had to drag it out over months. I made sure to be gone, and when I came home stalked through the house, dogs at my heels, building a mental list of everything she took. It's strange what you miss when it's your spouse making off with it, not to mention what hurts when you discover she left it behind. I didn't give a damn about the old photos, but I went through the house top-to-bottom when I couldn't find the cutlery set we'd gotten as a wedding gift, a set so garish we'd never even used it. And when I saw a book I'd given her in passing still on the bookshelf, I threw it in the trash out of anger.

John continued to come by. He said that now that the pups were gone, he wanted to check on me, see how I was doing on my own, but I think Gypsy drew him. He followed that dog around like he was attached by a string. There were times I felt a twinge of jealousy when watching them play tug-of-war or fetch.

Claire called a couple more times, but I was in no mood to clear the air between us. I'd spent too many nights imagining her happy. I couldn't handle the image of her on her own, making it clear how little she ever needed me. Summer moved to fall, and we didn't speak once. What I've realized since then is that it's still a choice when you make no choice at all.

When she stopped by in mid-September—no phone call, no warning—to pick up the last of her things, I said hello, and went to the shed. The cold, metallic smells of winter were faint in the back of my nose. I watched her through the small, streaky window. She moved back and forth between the house and her car. I saw her with things I considered

mine, but said nothing about it. I couldn't stand the thought of confronting her because I knew I would spill out more than I wanted. Even when our marriage was solid, she hated it when my emotions took over, good or bad.

When she finished pillaging, she came to the shed and poked her head inside. I kept my back to her.

"I'm done, Robert," she said.

"Get everything?" I asked.

"All the stuff I wanted."

I looked back over my shoulder, tried to look angry.

"I want you to keep Lucy," she said and put her hands behind her back, twisted at the waist, like she used to do when she wanted me to do her a favor.

I turned around and faced her. "That's a kind gesture."

"I'm just trying to make peace." She stepped inside.

"Then peace has been made."

Neither of us said anything for a moment, and I hoped she would just leave. But she stood there, giving me that look that said she doesn't think I'm able to take care of myself. That look that makes me wonder if I am.

"The white pup sure turned into a beauty," she said.

"Thanks," I said. "I spent a lot of time fixing her up."

Claire laughed at my absurdity, and so did I. Before I could stop it, my laughter swelled and broke free, and I leaned against the workbench, trying to catch my breath. Claire clenched the muscles around her mouth, shook her head, and fought, but lost, and her laughter spilled out in tiny giggles. I thought, we used to laugh like this.

Claire regained her composure before I did. “Robert Larsen, builder of dogs.” She smiled, but there was more than a little bitterness in her voice. With that, she turned and walked out of the shed. I almost followed her, almost grabbed her around the upper arm to stop her. I don’t think it would have done any good, but I guess I’ll just have to keep guessing about that.

John came over that night with a bottle of whiskey. We sat in the dining room and talked. Lucy lay under the table as we drank. For once, Gypsy didn’t lay next to her, but paced back and forth in the kitchen until I got annoyed and shouted at her to go lay down. She tucked her tail and plodded into the backporch.

“Claire get the last of her things?” John asked.

“And some of mine.”

“Are you planning on fighting over it?” He poured whiskey into my glass.

“What’s it matter?” I took a long swallow, drained my drink.

“Can’t say I like the attitude, but you got the right idea. Let it go. It’s just stuff.”

I leaned forward, poured myself another glass. “What would you do if Susan left?” Even half-drunk, this felt like a dangerous question, but John smiled.

“First, I’d have to figure out how to tie my own shoes again.”

I laughed loud, and Lucy hopped up, startled. Gypsy poked her head around the corner. I called to them both, and they came to me. Lucy laid her head on my leg. Gypsy nudged her way between us, so I grabbed her collar and pulled her around to my other side. I petted one, then the other, enjoying the feel of their soft coats in my hand, thinking that these dogs might be enough. John spoke again.

“Honestly, though, I’m afraid I might just fade away.” He held his whiskey against his cheek, shortened fingers gripping the glass. I scratched my dogs behind the ears, and Lucy sat up and put both paws on my lap. I pushed her down.

“Sorry,” John said. I shook my head. We changed the subject and finished the bottle. A bright moon rose, clouds covered it, and a freezing drizzle fell.

It got real cold, real early that year. Two days before Halloween, a blizzard came charging out of the west, lightning flashing across the sky and thunder rumbling in the low bellies of the clouds—something I’d never seen before, or even heard about, in a snowstorm. I left the dogs inside when I left for work.

Most guys had called in sick. Their trucks didn’t start, or the roads were too icy. Leonard and I spent much of the morning doing inventory and routine maintenance on the machines, stuff that would get done during the normal cycle of the mill, but was a good way to pass the day. After our morning break, I cut a few planks just out of routine. Leonard and I talked some. He told me I was right about Goldens not making great watch dogs, but that he’d never had a dog so loyal. Mostly, though, we worked in silence, and I thought about Claire, about how, on days like this, I never went to work when it was the two of us. We’d both call in, stoke the fire, and curl up under a blanket on the couch, watching movies, or reading, Lucy buried at our feet.

On my way home from work, snow fell through my headlights in dizzy patterns. There were empty cars in the ditches, and it took me a good hour to get home, but I felt happy and calm for the first time in months. It came just like that. I turned up the driveway, following the twists until it spilled out of the trees. I parked and walked through snowdrifts to the shed, where I filled two pails with dog food, still feeling that lightness that comes with emancipation.

As I carried the pails into the house, Gypsy sneaked past me. She took off into the woods, running at full speed, blending into the new snow. I dropped the pails, made sure Lucy couldn't get out behind me, and stepped out onto the porch. I yelled Gypsy until my voice shivered and broke. It had stopped snowing, and the air was dry, like salt in my throat. Spittle froze and cracked at the corners of my mouth.

When I knew she wasn't coming back, I went inside and peeled off my coveralls. Sawdust spilled from my hair. Grease and mill-sap invaded the crevices in my hands and the pits of my elbows. A quick, hot shower would've washed it all away. I threw on layers of clothes instead. Two pair of wool socks. Long underwear, plain old waffled thermals, top and bottom. Over that, a pair of fleece-lined jeans and a wool sweater. Back downstairs, I loaded into my thick, goose-down parka. Even with it unzipped, sweat beaded on my forehead. Lucy followed me around while I dressed and whined the entire time. When I was ready, I stood with the door open, trying to decide whether to take her with me. I worried it might be too cold for her, but, in the end, I let her outside because I didn't want to be alone.

With my stocking cap pulled down to the ridge of my brow, and my parka zipped up to the spongy tip of my nose, I slipped my hands into a pair of choppers and plunged outside. Ice seared the back of my throat. I buried my face deeper in the upturned collar. The wind scoured tears from my eyes and froze them on my cheeks. I took heavy steps over the snowdrifts until I got to the semi-shelter of the trees. Lucy ran on ahead, but not too far.

Gypsy had always stuck close. When we were outside, she might disappear on her own for a few minutes, but usually came back before I even thought to call for her, and always came running when I did. I couldn't figure what had changed.

Once we got between the trees, Lucy ran out of sight, but for some reason, it didn't worry me. We were in it together. For twenty minutes, I trudged uphill to the stream, calling Gypsy with no luck. As the word passed my lips, the trees knocked it down, and the icy air swallowed it. Long shadows sprawled out on the forest floor, black on white. Numbness tingled in my feet. I pictured them dead-black, like John's fingers. The only sounds were the wind in the trees and stream water flowing over rocks and small ice-floes. Everything else was muffled by the snow and cold. I called Gypsy again, but my voice scratched. Felt like my throat had been sanded away. I came to the stream and sat down on a large granite slab on its banks. The cold crept through my layers. The woods were dark. I stood and shook my head to break the daze. My toes had lost all feeling and numbness seeped into my hands. It was at this moment, when I didn't know whether to go on or turn back, when I was either going to have to piss myself or risk frostbite, that a bark cut through the dusk-light.

Rigid muscles cramped as I jogged alongside the stream. I heard another bark, and saw a golden patch in the darkness. Lucy limped around the base of a tree, foreleg tucked underneath. She stared up into the tree and barked again. I didn't want to scare her or whatever she had treed so I kept my steps slow and quiet. Gypsy was nowhere to be seen.

When I reached Lucy's side, she sat, like she knew I was there all along, but never took her eyes from the tangle of branches. In the tree, there was a shape, movement. My hand rested on Lucy's head, and I felt a sticky wetness. The tip of her ear was gone, and a red streak of blood slashed across the back of her neck. I pulled her away from the tree, yanked hard on her collar. At first, she wouldn't go, and let loose a flurry of barks. Whatever was up there scrambled higher. I pulled again, and this time



she turned away and limped along with me. I didn't want to leave Gypsy out in the cold, but I knew I could stumble through the woods all night and never find her. Lucy was here, and hurt, and I needed to get her home. I called Gypsy's name as we walked and hoped to see her come running, but she never did.

Lucy couldn't cross the stream without getting wet so I carried her. It felt good to have her heft and warmth in my arms. I kept her there until we got home, and she didn't struggle once. Even in that bitter cold, sweat soaked through my shirt and matted my hair.

Under the kitchen lights, I cleaned and dressed Lucy's wound. The creature had torn away a jagged piece of flesh, but it looked worse than it really was. Lot of blood vessels in the ear. She whined some as I worked, but didn't twitch even when I scrubbed the dirt out. Mostly, she just looked at me the way dogs do, the way you often wished people did.

While I worked, I forgot about my own pain, but once I finished, I shivered and couldn't stop. My feet were numb so I pulled off my boots and socks and held my toes in my hands. When that did nothing, I went upstairs, filled the tub with cool water, and submerged my feet. Sharp cracking pains ran along the bone. I prayed they weren't frostbit. Losing the tips of the fingers on your left hand isn't quite the same as losing your toes. While I sat there, I worried. Outside, the wind pressed against the windows and intricate patterns of frost grew out from the corners. Gypsy was a good dog, a smart dog, a tough dog, but all that didn't amount to much in this cold. Mostly, though, I was angry. Angry at her, yes, but more angry at myself for leaving her out there, for what I hadn't done.

A sharp tingle leaked into my heel. Sensation bled into my toes, but not warmth. I emptied the tub and dried off my feet. I dressed in long underwear and wool socks, hefted my parka over my shoulders, slipped on a stocking cap, and went to sit on the porch. I shouted Gypsy's name into the cold, dry air.

I thought about picking up the phone to call John, to call Claire. I wanted to ask John when he knew his fingers were lost and maybe even to pray for Gypsy. I wanted to ask Claire when she knew we were done. Instead, I called to Lucy. I wanted to head back into the woods and find my other dog, but for the moment I needed warmth. She came and burrowed at the bottom of the chair, where I buried my feet beneath her.

As I sat there, a memory came to me from the first year or so of my marriage, when I still believed we were happy, long before the dogs entered our life. I had awoken in the middle of the night, frightened and disoriented, flat on my back, sure that something awful and irreversible had taken place while I slept. Claire lay with one arm draped over me, our bodies clinging with surface tension. She shifted in her sleep and pulled me closer. I slipped my arm beneath her and held her tight, and a strange thought came to me, a strange way to keep her safe. I wished that she loved someone else, that she was laying in another bed, next to another man, holding him the way she held me. And I wished that I loved another woman, even though I couldn't possibly see how.