

JENNY

She had taken care of Thomas like any virtuous mountain woman. After the doctor made him quit truck driving because of his back and his breathing, Jenny watched him even closer. She worried if he went to help work on a neighbor's car or played poker too late with his brothers. What time he was home, she could sort of let her guard down and they had a good time. They ate breakfast on the back porch, listening to the creek. Flirted and leaned close enough to smell each other's coffee breath over a word search, sharing the pencil.

But then, he was different after he quit work, softer, even helped her clear the table and washed a few dishes while she wiped the stove, his forearms soapy in the dishwater. Seemed like he enjoyed having his hands in warm water, being at the house with her. When she dried the skillet and put it back in the bottom cabinet, he grabbed her dishtowel and snapped it at her behind. Their life was finally coming together except he coughed no matter how much she opened the windows to let the air in, and lost weight no matter what she fed him. But she kept on, because what else could she do?

"I like you like this," Jenny remembered telling him, shielding her backside. Before she could straighten up, he would be around her waist, soapy hands cupping her breasts, wetting her flowered housedress. He kissed her nape causing a cool shiver down her back, like when they were young. She pushed her spine into his chest, head aside beneath his chin. Layered her arms over his, her hands entwined with his fingers, holding their magic. She had turned to face him, letting her arms drop around his waist, his arms around her shoulders. Felt the open, wet dress

front press against his chest, skin to skin. Their lips touched, and they waltz-walked leg-around-foot to the bedroom. She wanted that memory to last.

Two years later Thomas was completely bedfast. He gapped to breathe. His ribs stuck out and his neck muscles took on a ropey shape, his lips dusky. She tried not to let him smoke like he wanted to. When he asked her to roll him a cigarette, she held him off for another hour or another thirty minutes. “

“Ain’t that what got you in this shape, Thomas?”

“If I can’t have what I want I’d just as soon be dead.” He might throw back the covers, expose his bony white stick legs, then she knew to give in. Then she lit him one, the ends of its paper twisted, flaming. She sat on the side of the bed and held the ash tray as it wobbled between his lips, too weak to hold the cigarette steady.

“You’ve been spoiled your whole entire life, from the time your mommy seen your face.” But she got a whiff of pleasure seeing his long drag off it, knowing the rush it gave him. Jenny cracked the window and turned on the fan beside his bed to pull the smoke out. She stayed right there with him so that if he drifted off, he wouldn’t set the mattress on fire.

She smoked, too, always had. Her whippoorwill frame was the result of it. She’d rather smoke than eat but she still had breath where Thomas didn’t. He had driven a coal truck on dusty roads, around coal mines, and he always smoked more than she had, started a lot earlier in his life, weak lungs. When they ran low on tobacco, she put their cigarettes in his shirt pocket. At the house, she emptied stubs or did without until he got paid. Ever since they married, she had got up early on his workdays, put his socks and shoes on him just like her boys, just like his mother had done, fixed his lunch bucket. Sometimes she took a bite out of the corner of his sandwich, to

remind him of her. He'd tell her later that he liked it. She kept a spotless house for when he came home, mopped linoleum every day til the rose pattern faded. But seeing him in this shape took away her desire for a clean house. Or tobacco, the pure devil in a silk dress.

"Thomas," she whispered, "it's time for a treatment." If he was smothering, he would turn his face to her, meet her eyes, accept. She brought the pan of steaming water from the kitchen stove, put a dollop of Vick's salve in it and held it under his chin. "Here you go," she pulled him upright on his stack of pillows. The mist curled around his mouth as he breathed, jerky like he was about to hiccup. Her arms ached holding the pan by its handle, a towel around it to keep it hot. He closed his eyes long before then, worn out from the effort. She rubbed her arms to get feeling back.

"Mary Beth," he raised his head, mumbled. Laid his head back down.

"What? What did you say, Thomas?" His lips were dry. She gave him a sip of water. Smearsed Vaseline around his mouth. "Thomas," but he gasped instead of answering. He was sick, and maybe just out of his head. But did he ever know someone by that name? She shook her head to clear it. The man had hardly been out of this bed for a year, her carrying every bite to him, holding water to his lips, and emptying his potty in the outhouse. She saw every human that came and went, and it was all family or some of his old trucking buddies come to try to get a rise from him. It was their boys, Tommy and Howard, and his sister, Jo, her husband, Dean. Thomas was falling away to a skeleton, and a man in his shape couldn't lift a finger for himself much less another woman. Then again, he hadn't said those words before, not even when he talked in his sleep.

She had been his mother for the last year, not a wife in the real sense. He became paler and wheezed so loud she could hear him from the kitchen, but nothing she did kept his life from slipping away in front of her. Everything and anything she could think to do for him was not enough. But she kept on anyway, for him, for the boys, for her conscience. It was what she was supposed to do. She gave him the treatments anyway. Kept offering him potato broth and soft-cooked chicken meat and quit putting his black pepper in it because he said it burnt his stomach. She kept him in clean clothes and rubbed lotion on his back, bony though it was. When she heated the steam treatments every two hours in the night, and if he tried to resist, she gently threatened him, "Doc Adams said so," reasoning that if she did everything she was told to do, he might get better. That her good will might win over what was in front of her face.

"Jen, let this one go." And more and more she would turn off the stove, leave the pot of water to cool there on its own. Instead, open the window a crack to let in cool night air to maybe help him breathe. She got a minute of rest hearing the night bugs outside the bedroom window. Or she'd turn on the radio to WSGS, Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, Lester Flat and Earl Scruggs to keep him company. Float with the music over the kitchen floor, replay that memory of the two of them, when life was pure and clear, and their place in it easier. Now, she was a nursemaid and has-been, no longer desirable beyond wiping his spit and straightening the bed covers. Was this where she saw herself when they first married? Now it all seemed to fold on itself, life, love, raising kids, and being alone even though he was in there, in that other room, but she was alone. She missed him, them. Love. Him telling her she was pretty, that her hair smelled good, having that glint in his eye.

The cars on Elk Creek Road went too fast and too close to their house. The dust choked him, settled on the tables and chairs, one more thing to wipe and polish, but he needed air and so

did she. He was her third child, and she'd smooth his hair back, cradle his jawbone. If he looked scared, she put the handle of the tinkle bell in his hand, closing his fingers over it. When she turned to leave him alone and sleep on the bottom bunk across the room, if he patted his mattress, she crawled in behind him instead, pulling a corner of the quilt over her, a wave of nausea at the salty air from his cough-up. But she dropped like a rock off the cliff into deep unconsciousness, her body like a clump of soaked hay, heavy, piled, still.

But he drifted more than slept. Little catches and then he was reaching for her, like his sleep was brittle, a dry stick, light and near the surface. She dreamed he was pulling on her arm, and woke to his bony fingers grasping her wrist, his fingernails needing to be smoothed. Her weighty eyelids could hardly open, once they closed for a time she could not know, seconds or a few minutes, she could have slept for a month or a year but then popped back open in a startle. "What?!" She couldn't remember not feeling worn, not when he was trucking double shifts and she took care of their boys for weeks at a time by herself. Not even during his drinking days when she would not see him for a three or four day binge. Her body had been sucked into the bed but now she had to pull it up into motion, to him, his grunt, a sound she knew but feared. "Is someone breaking-in the house?"

But as she stilled her thoughts and heard nothing, she didn't even know why she felt afraid; he was still alive. Nobody was trying to break into their little house. Nothing to steal. A slab house by the road. Old car out front. Rusty body. Start of a little garden patch at side of the house where, so far, she had only stuck a couple of sprouting onions into the ground, just to have new life. Nothing. But to her, everything. And she could in her moments, think of setting out a few cabbage sets, if she could get to Isom to buy them. She had so far kept it all together, kept it running. But for how long? She couldn't think about the future because then she panicked. What

if he died on her? What if he punished in the final minutes of his life? How could she live without him? Or worse, what if something happened and she died first, then what would happen to Thomas? No one else would be able to wait on him, not even his sister because she had a husband to tend to.

The radio was low, Roy Acuff, as she watched him breathe. It was regular for a while then erratic and at times he stopped for enough seconds that she shook him, then he would take a long deep one. Her own breaths came in rhythm with his as if she could generate enough wind for both of them. She pushed outward on her lungs like pressing the brake on the passenger side when she wanted him to slow down only now, she wanted to put life back into him, give him her strength or some of it, enough to piece him back together. Willing him to get well, and be her big man again, pick back up where they left off before smothering. Have more time when the boys were grown and married, this empty nest that she and Thomas filled like a delayed honeymoon.

There in the dark, with only the moon shining through the window, she could imagine Tommy at his day shift at Ford Motor in Dearborn. Putting motor parts in the engines that came along the assembly line, but he liked motors. Had learned to work on them from his dad, one good thing. Howard, more lately hired on. Good boys, they called to check on Thomas and came in about every four months, but that almost made it worse. She could see the worry in their eyes, and it made her want to hold them instead of letting them go back. Like some tragedy unfolded for them and they were powerless to fix it and too young to stand it.

Lying in bed next to him, forming her waist around what was left of his, she gave him her body heat, laid her hand on his chest as light as a leaf. Felt his heart chug inside his bony chest frame like the truck motors he used to drive. She closed her eyes and remembered when he was strong. When he was the person that looked back at her in a way that made her believe in herself.

Just like now, he looked at her like she had all the answers, but she had always believed that he knew them. Or wanted to believe it. She couldn't stop herself from asking, "Who is Mary Beth?" to test him, but then hated herself for doubting him, ever. She had never heard tales on him. Never suspected anything. He was a trucker; he always came home smelling like diesel. But the important thing to her was that he always came home.

In her mind's eye, Jenny could see him walking out the door to work, climbing up into the Mack truck, twenty-ton bed, his work boots on, lunch bucket in his hand. Could imagine him pulling up to mine tippie for an overfull load, then back down the steep mountain teetering with coal falling off the top. Once, his brakes went out and he had to drive up on the berm to slow down. He drank more beer for a while after that. But he went back to it for her, Tommy and Howard. And she had fried chicken and potatoes for him, crisp like he wanted, simmered pinto beans and a pone of cornbread and always fresh sweet tea. That was her part of the bargain, to keep house and raise their boys. Remembering it made her eyes blur. Her own chest tightened. It wasn't supposed to go this way. There were more dreams she had to live out with him, now that he had been fully with her again.

Her mind drifted to the hope they had had of buying a better car and driving out west. She had always wanted to see Old Faithful, feel its spray on her face. He never got to see the giant redwoods. She could imagine them getting in a car and going, going, with a roll of bologna and a loaf of bread, like a long picnic. Thermos of coffee. Roll up about two hundred cigarettes to smoke on the way, elbows hanging out the windows. See the sights and send post cards to Tommy and Howard, and their wives. She would say in the cards that We're having a great time and wish you all could see these unbelievable sights like the Grand Canyon, like pictures we've seen.

They had planned to someday add another bedroom on the house, put in a bathroom, maybe. Two rooms were not enough since the boys had wives, having to sleep two to a bunk like when they were kids, with a blanket hung up for a partition in the middle of the room between hers and Thomas' bed. When they were little, she and Thomas had to wait to make love until they heard the boys snoring. Whispering bedroom talk. Slowing when the bed creaked, it had always been true between them. He never failed to not want her. A woman can tell. His saying Mary Beth had to be because he was sick, out of his head, a name he heard on a western. Doc Adams said he might do that when his oxygen got low.

Her arm stung and she realized his hand grasping her. And his rattle cough from deep in his gut. She had been half in a dream about the trip they would take. Raised up on her elbow and looked around, trying to get her bearings. The clock said five and it was not daylight, so she turned on the lamp by the bed.

“Jen,” he barely whispered, raspy. When she raised up, he went on, “I need to tell you something.” He stopped, turned his head toward the window, then back at her. “I had another woman.”

“No,” she said. “You just had a bad dream.”

“Listen here. I don't want to end up in hell.”

“Alright, it's just your oxygen's low. Now rest.”

“It was a few years ago when I was driving the truck for Lawrence. When I had to go to Lexington. You remember that?” He coughed in a protracted spasm.

“Yeah, you was gone all the time over that two years but Thomas, that was ten years ago. What are you thinking? And why now? I don’t want to hear this,” but in a way she did. Had to, now.

“Mary Beth worked at a roadside grocery and gas station on the way.” He stopped and caught his breath. Jen wondered where he was getting the energy to talk this long. She crawled out the end of the bed and went toward the door, but he called her back. “Jen, listen.”

“No, don’t.” She felt the coldness of air from the window. Shivered her arms.

“I want my conscience clear.”

“What about what I want?” She heard herself almost screaming, wanting to run outside. She heard a plane going overhead, and bugs humming as if they called her to come out there but maybe they were just in her ears. Wetness was on her face, and she wiped it with the back of her hand, then on her nightgown but could not be sure if it was anger or just sadness or what. It was different and scary.

“Jen, I ended it. It was wrong, but I was weak then. She was married, too.” He was looking at her or looking past her. She couldn’t tell. “I never stopped loving you. It was wrong. I wish it had not happened. If I could take it back.” His eyes were open, but in the yellowish light he began to look like a ghost. She panicked.

“Thomas!” but no answer. She heard her own voice, a screech, “Thomas, are you okay?” She ran to him and shook his shoulders. When he did not answer, she jerked the sheet down and put her hands on his chest. Nothing. Pulled his face toward her and bent down to him trying to feel breath on her cheek but only quiet. “Come on, don’t leave me.”

The clock ticked on the wall. Bugs kept on outside the window. Metal springs clanked when she shifted her weight from one knee to the other, leaning over him. Early light came in around the window and the outline of trees on the ridge of the mountain was visible. She could not tell how long she looked at the window, or just when she looked back at him, but her hands trembled, and she could not steady the glass of water she tried to bring to his ashen lips as she lifted his head atop her other hand. She laid it back into the pillow like a tiny bird egg and set the water on the bedside table.

A scream from the pit of her stomach came up like heartburn from her throat. A strangeness, chilly and awful cramped her insides. Her hands went to her face, wet and contorted. She opened her mouth, but no more sound came. Just the clock on the wall ticking, the heartbeat in her throat, now the only one in the room. Now the only one she could count on, but it felt too weak to live, as if a vulture's body got into her and sucked out her heart to carry itself out the window as if she were carrion.

Jenny ran to the telephone, but her hands were shaking as her fingers missed the dial holes. She couldn't remember Doctor Adams' phone number, so she shuffled the telephone book. But Doc had told them on the last home visit there was nothing more he could do, that she was to keep Thomas comfortable. She hung up the receiver, then called Tommy. His voice sounded thick. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"He's gone. Your daddy's gone." Her breath stopped in the back of her throat.

"Mom, are you alright? Are you there by yourself? Where is Aunt Jo?"

“Tommy, I am here with him. I want you to come. You call Howard. I just want you all to come.” He said they would start. Be there in about ten hours. “Just be careful,” she heard herself say.

Jo said she knew she should have stayed all night. “Jenny, you try to do too much by yourself. I’ll get Dean up and be there right away.”

From the bedroom, she heard the refrigerator kick on. Heard insects outside the partly open window. The clock still going on the wall. She was alone. Walking into her kitchen, she saw a knife by the sink. She looked back at him in the bed, still and white, and picked up the handle. “Mary Beth, indeed,” she murmured, as she walked toward the bedroom. Love was what she had always felt for Thomas, but that was the husband who never cheated. This Thomas looked like a stranger and had said strange words to her. She pulled back the sheet and lifted his private, slicing a small horizontal cut under it, then laid it back in place. “Now, then, Mary Beth and Thomas.” Jenny returned the knife to the sink, rinsing it under the faucet. She laid it down on the counter beside the pan with cold water and jar of Vick’s salve. For a minute she did not return to the bedroom but stood at the front of the sink, staring out the kitchen window.

The cliff beyond Elk Creek seemed closer to her. She could see herself on top of it but then falling off. No rocks to grab hold of, no scraggy tree limbs to catch. Straight down. No bottom. Just dropping, alone, off the cliff, hundreds of feet, like his truck without brakes, full load, no place to pull over, no road, just down, wind stinging her face, hitting her head against the cliff as she fell and fell. Lost. Darkness. Nothing.

She went to their bed and laid down behind him. Laid her head on his chest. “Thomas, I hope to forgive you,” but next to him she started smothering. Her breath was short, like her soul

cracked open and she found nothing in it. Touching Thomas, her hand drifted to his sunken belly. Her finger laid on the dip of his belly button. Let her hand drift. Lifted the sheet to see him, remembering the words he just told her, looked at the incision she had made, she pulled the sheet back over his belly, the flannel nightshirt down over his chest.

She got up and went back to the sink. Reached into the side cabinet for a washcloth and towel, his comb. "I got to wipe your face and hands. Comb your hair. We got company coming." She groomed him, laid his hands one over the other on his chest, put clean socks on his feet, and clean denim jeans then pulled the sheet back over his legs and middle. She tidied the room, taking away remnants of the night, wet washcloths, the comb and towel, as if everything was normal except for his still body. Turning up the radio for him, she pulled on a sweater and went out on the porch. She couldn't reach the coroner until eight.

A car went by now and then, but no one she recognized. Half noticing the twitter and twerp of bugs, she took the cigarette from her pocket and lit it, walking back and forth through smoke trailing behind. Sadness settles in her chest, then nothing, then mad at him but thinking of the boys on their long trip and she found that she wanted to forgive him or at least plan the lie she would tell everybody, that he was a good and faithful man. What if the stuff he had said was really just his condition? Couldn't that be true? And if it was true, then she had done something very wrong. It was like he won again, even in death, getting one over on her.

Daylight woke up fully around her. Robins were already hunting worms. Jenny heaved out to her garden patch, the onions sprouting deep green. She pulled in the morning air, cool on her arms and face. It was her favorite time of day.