Elizabeth James Goodman, 1986

"Do I look older to you?" I ask my husband. "Do I look like I'm aging?"

Alvin looks up from his breakfast, a spoonful of oatmeal suspended in mid-action. "What? No—what?" His eyebrows are arched in a ready-to-go-either-way position as he cautiously advances the spoon to his mouth.

"I'm not talking about Grace." Our oldest left for college six weeks ago and it's hit Alvin hard. He sighs at her empty place at the table, lingers over photos hanging in the hall. In the world of feelings, Alvin doesn't always register where he stops and someone else begins, so he assumes we're all at sea they way he is. I miss her like I miss a limb, but we planned for her to go and she went. I'm not afraid for her out in the world; she's ready. Now the house is a little bigger. A little quieter. Our routine hasn't changed; today it's Friday and Josie is spending the night at her cousin's after 4-H, and Alvin and our twin boys are leaving on their annual bowhunting trip.

"I'm just talking about time passing," I say. "Do I look like time is passing?"

I don't say how I've noticed that he looks older to me, especially in the morning. If we're making love in the morning, I can see where his skin is starting to loosen from the bones on his face. He's a good-looking man, don't get me wrong, but he's spent a lifetime working outside in all manner of Idaho weather. He's forty-three and I'm thirty-eight. Not old but—getting there. It's the dry climate, it's gravity, it's whatever, but when I see the creases—high on his cheeks and around his mouth—I think to myself, I'm seeing the future, it's happening right now.

"This isn't about Grace?" he says.

"No."

"Then I'd say you look as young and beautiful as the first day I saw you."

I give him another chance. "Look at this," I point to my forehead. "This is a new line. Do I look different?"

He kisses my forehead. "I don't see anything," he says.

Why do men think they're being kind when they're just being unhelpful?

I understand that aging is not the same thing for the two of us. Alvin was raised with four brothers in a house where competition was a way of life, where John Wayne was a real person, not a film star, and they were all invincible. For him, aging is a slow heartbreak, the physical toll, the sapping of strength and vitality, not being able to work as hard or as long, needing more time to come back from a sickness or injury. I feel that, too, but is that a bad trade for freedom, or the wisdom of experience? I see my body changing and what I'm hoping is I'll become more interesting-looking. I don't have any delusions about losing my youthful beauty. Physically, I've always been what you call sturdy. Japanese on my mother's side, I'm big-boned, and I'm not tall. I've been described as *wholesome* more than once, which means I could never be a husband-stealer and I could never look sexy. But I would like to look interesting one day. And something

else I would like is to look back on my life and say that I added something to the world, something more than my four children, my marriage, this farm.

Alvin refills my coffee and reminds me that he and the boys will be gone before I get back from Marlington this afternoon. He suggests a lunch out, some shopping. “The garage will give you a loaner until the car’s fixed. Enjoy your leisure time.” He kisses me again. He is good and kind, so I smile for him, as if I’m the one who needs comforting, the one disquieted by the emptying of our nest and the certainty of growing old.

It’s mid-October and between seasons on the farm, maybe the best time of year. The cottonwoods glow yellow in the sun, geese are honking their way south, and stubble fields wait for snow through cold clear nights. The drive from Clifford to Marlington is a little over an hour—a few miles of dirt road, past our neighbors’ dairies and fields, across the desert and open range of sage and patches of volcanic remains, to the Snake River Canyon and the city on the other side. Everyone knows the place you live makes a mark on you, but it isn’t true that you always belong to the land you grew up on. I like it well enough, but this land doesn’t have a claim on me like it does on my husband, or even my kids. The landscape doesn’t live in my bones, my heart doesn’t beat to the pulse of the desert seasons—but nobody wants to hear about that.

I’m bringing the Blazer down for a new CV joint—I say that as if I know what it means. The kid at garage explained it to me but I’ve forgotten, except that one side is bad and it’s a good idea to replace both. The car is only an ’81, but we’ve put 90,000 miles on it in five years, and with Grace up in Washington I’m sure there’ll be road trips.

I also have a doctor’s appointment, which I didn’t mention to Alvin. A breast biopsy, which I’ve had before, and which, like last time, will be expensive and a waste of time. I don’t

want to bother with it, but I can't not go either. A couple weeks ago, an ultrasound showed a sort of dark crevice they want to poke into. On the mammogram, my breast looked like a cloudy mess of cotton with cobwebs criss-crossing all over. But on the ultrasound, it looked like the ocean—each move of the wand revealed watery gray swirls, shallows and depths, shadows and coral reef. I lay in the dim room with my arm propped behind my head, watching the screen, nearly hypnotized. It's so beautiful, I know there's nothing wrong with me.

I drive to the repair shop where I'll leave the car. Thompson and Sons is a used car lot and garage across the street from Marlington College—MarCo—the school I went to until I married Alvin. The sons are three brothers who look a bit prehistoric, like they just stepped out of *Alley Oop*—low, dark foreheads, wide chests. Two of them lumber about the garage in coveralls and speak in blunt barks over the sound of drills and hydraulics; the other stalks around the lot in blue jeans and a pressed shirt, looking purposeful and necessary despite the lack of customers. Old man Thompson is white-haired and birdlike; he sits in a chair most of the time staring into space and saying nothing. It's hard to believe these three boy-men with their massive, hairy forearms are his offspring. What I'd give to get a look at the mother; she must be seven feet tall.

One of the boys fills out the paperwork and says the car will be ready by the end of the day. An embroidered patch on his coveralls reads, "Kevin," and he is the same kid who patiently explained the work to me last time. His hands are clean but grease and oil cling to the corners of his nails. In his chunky paw the pen looks like a twig ready to snap, but his cursive is delicate and impeccable. My name swirls dreamily on the page, as if accompanied by song: *Liz Goodman.* It's the handwriting of my grade school teachers, of a genteel lady, of a poet. *Promised by five.* I stare as he moves the pen across the paper. He tears off my copy, hands it to

me, and I notice that his eyes are the same chocolate color of his imposing brows, the lashes long and curled. “Keys in it?” he says, and in my daze I almost forget to ask for a loaner.

I feel tranquil and calm as I leave the garage. Across the streeet at MarCo, students tote backpacks down concrete sidewalks. The sky is Idaho blue—deep, wide, and cloudless—and fall colors glow in the strange profusion of trees, like an oasis in the desert, which is exactly what it is. When I came to the school, I didn’t know trees like this could grow around here: lace-leaf maple, ghostly smoke bush, yellow tuliptrees, filbert trees. It was like entering another world, so much possibility. I wanted to be a nurse, like my great-aunt Eleanor, study plants and remedies like my father’s aunt Jean, who roamed the countryside on horseback “tending people.” I got pregnant and married by the end of my first year. My own landscape was unfolding before me, but I didn’t see it until it was too late to change it.

Nostalgia packs a surprising kit. When I look at the campus now, I feel the old regret, but the air of possibility is still there, or there once again. My kids are nearly self-sufficient; Josie will have a driver’s license in four years, the boys graduate in two. Sure, I’d be forty-something by the time I got my RN, but how old would I be if I didn’t get it? Commuting to Marlington would be expensive and a pain—could I really make the drive every day in winter? What would I say to Alvin? What about the price of books, and what about the kids’ basketball games, and track meets? I take a deep breath and I can almost smell the classrooms, the chemistry lab. As my father would say, I’ll think on it later. I’ll let it go for now.

The Women’s Clinic is at the far edge of town; a blockish, gray building next to the hospital. I think it exists because of actual female health needs but also to shield the other half of the population from the messiness of mammograms and pap smears. It wasn’t around during my mother’s day—she must have been in the regular cancer ward in the hospital. She died when she

was thirty-one. Likewise her mother, who also had breast cancer and died at forty-three, just before I was born. My aunt Eleanor told me they both had mastectomies and I don't know what other treatments. Eleanor has photos of my mother as a girl, when they were all held at the Minidoka camp during WWII; my mother looks pretty, delicate, and impossibly young. In one photo she is nineteen, and smiling in front of a large sign that says, "Honor Roll" in big letters under a stern and imperious bald eagle. She is pointing to the names of her brother, her father, and her uncle—Eleanor's husband—who were all killed in battle. Eleanor said they'd enlisted to prove their patriotism but only proved the idiocy of war. Her own daughter was eleven when she died at the camp, and I was ten when my mother died; I felt there was a cosmic shorthand to this that linked Eleanor and me, that made me especially close to her. When I told her about the biopsy, she offered to come but didn't insist when I said no. She's the kind of person who understands without saying.

I've been getting mammograms since my early thirties. The first one was the worst. The machine smashed my breast between the paddles and then the nurse hand-cranked it a few more times until I was gasping with pain. She seemed surprised she'd hurt me but she didn't back it off. "Don't breathe," she said from behind the partition, as if I *could* breathe—locked onto this monster by a vice grip on my boob. I think she's left the clinic, thank God. I wonder if she moved away or found another more sadistic specialty. The biopsy is easier because my breast is numb. There's a panel below my chin so I can't watch the needle go in, which I kind of want to see and I kind of don't.

If I told Alvin about the biopsy he'd have gotten worked up over nothing. He's missing Grace so much right now—a few days with the boys is just what he needs, to traipse around the woods, hunt and gather. The trip will be good for the twins as well; Abel misses his big sister,

he's sensitive, plus he's noticed what's going on with his dad, I'm sure. Jerry, on the other hand, just wants to know who's going to get the extra burger. They all need this kind of arduous entertainment, to feel exhausted and invigorated. It's a welcome undertaking, and not just because Grace is away.

Last night, they stayed up late sorting and packing their gear. Their bows are complicated machines of wheels and strings, menacing and medieval. They talk about pin settings and broadheads specifically for elk; there is an elegance in their order and preparation, enthusiastic seriousness.

"The best is a double-lung shot right through the chest," Alvin said, "so you want to get him broadside. Just behind his front leg, about a third of the way up his chest." He raised his left arm and reached around with his right to point to a spot on the side of his own chest. "He won't survive a hit to the vitals and you get a real good blood trail."

The boys nodded. The fire crackled in the background like a scene from *Outdoor Life*. My three killers, going out to stalk the wildlife. They will bring home one elk at least, which we will eat all winter and into the spring. I can see the animal with an arrow through its breast, running with shock, then stumbling to its knees. I can hear it panting through its wet, black nostrils; it snorts as it tries to rise. I can hear the slow approach of my three boys, pine needles crunching under their boots; quiet for a human, deafening for a forest. The iron smell of warm blood as it seeps into the earth. They are good hunters. The elk will die quickly.

At the clinic, the waiting room has been done over in shades of pink and gray. On the walls are colorful prints of adobes and Indian women with blankets and chili peppers, as if we're all living in New Mexico. The images are nice but I wonder if Indians are honored or exploited by such things. I wait the usual twenty minutes past my appointment time and listen to the nurses

chatting. One is going on about her son who works full-time but is taking night classes at MarCo in painting and life drawing—which is artspeak for nudies, she says with a sniff. He is a natural artist, a genius. He's taking her out to lunch today. I recognize the nurse but I don't think she remembers me; she's the short one with wiry gray hair that makes her head look like a pyramid. She sways from foot to foot when she walks and she's unfriendly without effort. My friend Evie's mother is like that, and she doesn't particularly care that she is. People more or less accept her behavior even if hurt by it, though Evie has always considered her mother *horrifying*. This nurse, though, must see so many women, so many breasts, can anyone really care about them all? The way she speaks of her son, I know she has a heart in there somewhere. She ushers me to the exam room where I will wait some more. "Down to the waist, open in front," she says, nodding at the gown on the table, and wafting back out the door.

I make myself at home in the exam room. They have some interesting tools in the drawers—a headband with a light, shiny forceps in all sizes, blunt-nosed scissors, tweezers that lock in place—I'm tempted to steal something and call it a parting gift. *"Thanks for playing. Johnny, tell her what she's won."*

In one drawer is a variety of liquid-filled pouches—soft, white, opaque—and when I pick one up I realize it's a breast implant. I hold one in each hand, weighing them, feeling the smooth outer layer of plastic. I imagine them in someone's body, in my body, under my skin, masquerading as my body. Of course I know what my odds are, of course I know that this could be the time they find a tumor. The possibility lurks at the outer edge of my thinking until I remind myself of what I've known for years—this is not how I die. The idea of implants is meaningless, just morbid fantasy. I could break one in my hand just by squeezing it. I could pierce it with my fingernail.

"When you feel them both, you can tell why people prefer the silicone over the saline." The doctor has come in, but not my regular doctor—it's the other one, the younger, good-looking one.

I'm startled but determined not to act guilty. The drawers aren't locked, after all. I can't tell if the two I'm holding are different or the same.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because it feels more like a natural breast, of course," he says.

I stare at the implants—a natural breast? My breasts are fibrocystic and feel like lumpy bags of frozen peas. This is what normal breasts feel like? My face heats up with anger and shame. What's he talking about? "Hm," I say, as if I couldn't care less about this thing I'm supposed to know already. I drop the implants and bang the drawer closed.

"I'm Dr. Owens, and you must be Mrs. Goodman." He flips pages on a clipboard. "Dr. Krutchfield is on vacation so I'll be taking care of you today."

I take a tissue from the counter and settle myself on the table, feigning composure.

"We're going to biopsy your left breast," he continues, not looking at me.

I don't know if I'm supposed to answer or if he's just talking to himself. He looks younger than me, tall and trim. His skin is tan, his hair is chestnut, and his eyes match the blue shirt he wears under his lab coat. He looks like an actor playing a doctor, not like a man qualified to examine my breasts. After a pause, he seems satisfied with the clipboard and looks at me. "So how are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Good," he says. "Nervous?"

"No."

"Good," he says, nodding. "Your husband with you today?"

"No."

"Who's taking you home later? Someone will need to drive you."

"Oh, my aunt," I lie. "My aunt is with me." It's just a local and a valium. If I can drive myself home from the dentist I can drive myself home from here.

"Good," the doctor says. "It's good to have family with you." Another pause. "Well, let's take a look."

He scoots toward me on his rolling stool and I sit up straight. I don't want this young, good-looking doctor feeling my breasts; I want powdery old Dr. Krutchfield with his Brylcreem and watery eyes. This doctor should be playing tennis or solving crimes at the beach. I look away as he opens my gown and then he has both my breasts in his hands. I examine the door, the top of the cupboards, the ceiling tiles with their many tiny holes. His hands are softer than hands should be, and warmer too. I look at him and he is staring at some middle distance near my navel and concentrating. His touch is careful and scientific, both hands on the right, now probing the left, inspecting, palpating. They're no longer breasts—just something to investigate, almost not part of me. I let out my breath.

His hair looks sun-kissed, and fine gray strands shine among the brown. Where did he come from, this doctor, where did he grow up? I imagine him as a boy, with his surfboard and easy laugh. Or playing football, going to college, and falling in love with a girl who smooths his hair and picks lint off his jacket. He is the type that will always be handsome and appear younger than he is; if his whole head went silver at forty, he'd be *distinguished*. It's the old double standard, but I don't know if I'm more annoyed or envious.

He shakes out his left arm and does a weird thing with his neck, as if he's trying to stretch out his jaw. "There's a lot of dense tissue here," he says. "Do you do self-exams?"

Obviously, my breasts don't feel "natural" enough to him. "Yes," I tell him. "Every month."

"Uh-huh. Every month," he repeats, but he seems irritated now. He frowns and does the thing again with his jaw, then he shakes his left arm and winces.

"Well, they usually feel extra lumpy before my period," I explain. "So I do it after, when they're not as sore." I feel like I'm defending myself.

He puts both hands on his knees. He takes a deep but uneven breath and frowns at my chest. "It's very hard to get a read through all this fibrous tissue," he says, and I can't tell if he's angry or embarrassed but his face is getting red. He huffs and cranes his neck.

And you know what? I really don't want Miami Vice doing my exam, I don't want him judging my boobs. "Maybe I should wait until Dr. Krutchfield comes back—"

His face is definitely red and he scoots back his chair. "Your breasts are . . . very dense," he squawks, and struggles to stand. But it's as if my lumpy breasts are just too much for him, he's reached some kind of brink.

"Well, I'm sorry I don't have nice little pillows of silicone!"

He looks at me and makes a horrible face. His blue eyes are bulging. He puts a hand to his chest and lurches forward. An image of Frankenstein flashes through my mind, the old black and white, his outstretched arm and angry groan. The doctor falls into me with a stricken, gagging sound. I feel the heat from his face when he hits my breasts and falls into my lap. I shout when I push him off me and he slumps to the floor.

I'm still yelling when the pyramid-headed nurse rushes in, and somehow, right behind her, is the mechanic from the garage. His bulk takes up the whole doorway. The nurse pounces onto the doctor like a cat; she feels his neck, puts her ear to his mouth, and then starts walloping on his chest.

"Kevin, tell Tracy to get help!" she says.

Kevin looks at me with his chocolate-brown eyes and I realize my gown is still open. I grab at it, clutching it around me. When I look up again he has disappeared.

I squint while the situation unravels before me with all the logical nonsense of a dream. The nurse continues CPR, counting while pounding furiously on the doctor and his body reverberates with each blow. His face is turning from red to purple and I realize I'm counting along with her. *"Come on,"* I whisper, urging. *"You're going to make it."*