

## North

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My father made it as far as Little Iceland. That was the name of the iceberg they found his notebook frozen into, interred like a fossil. At least that was the name written on one of the last pages of his notebook, under a sketch of what might or might not have been the iceberg. There was the question, in those days, of what to name. The impulse was to lay claim to each new fragment of the unknown. Label everything. But icebergs do as they please. They form and break so quickly, it is possible to claim one one day only to watch it divide itself out of existence the next.

What my mother said: we do what we can to make things stick.

My father was an explorer. Every few years, he packed his things—clothes, boots, notebooks, tins of food—and kissed my mother goodbye. She watched from the steps of their cabin in northern Idaho as he hoisted his bag onto his shoulder and set off down the path to the main road. When he got to the gap in

the trees where the path bent back like a hairpin, he stopped and waved, a figure no bigger than her thumb.

He came close to dying enough times she stopped keeping track. Back then, people traveling to the places he did disappeared because of all kinds of things: exhaustion, hypothermia, trichinosis, bears. For a long time, my father was lucky. The things that went missing were largely expendable: food, sled dogs, scientific measuring tools whose cost got chalked up to an expedition's overhead. Still, some things are irreplaceable. By his thirtieth birthday, the only fingers remaining on his left hand were his ring finger, index finger, and thumb.

But my father was a stubborn man. He had an internal compass, he said. It just kept pointing north. Once, at my mother's insistence, he went to see the local doctor in Coolin. The doctor frowned: "Strange," he said, shaking the thermometer. "Let's try that again." But my father laughed and hopped down off the examining table. He'd always known ice ran through his veins, he said. It was only a matter of time before the rest of him froze.

One day my father did what anyone might have predicted. He hoisted his pack on his back, waved through the gap in the trees, boarded the train that wound through the Selkirk Mountains, got off in Seattle, and was never heard from again. My mother waited years, but the body was never found. For that reason she went on for a long time believing he might come back. When I was younger, and thought love was something the world owed you, I had to hide in my room when I wanted to cry over it, this great unfairness.

The sea captain who found my father's notebook frozen into the

side of Little Iceland came all the way to northern Idaho to hand-deliver it to my mother.

We all thought very highly of your husband, he said. The world could use more men like him.

My mother nodded. She said the notebook had clearly been left there intentionally. It was stuffed inside a specimen jar, stoppered, carefully sealed with wax. The pages were in perfect condition, she pointed out, the words only a little smudged here and there.

The sea captain nodded. The balloon could have landed anywhere, he said, sunk anywhere. The water would have carried the party's belongings miles from where they died. With time, their bodies would have been dispersed in this way as well.

Or, my mother said, he could have deliberately thrown it overboard. A *clue*, she called it, as though the whole thing—my father, the balloon, the years of waiting, all of it—were no more than a puzzle waiting to be solved.

Every love story begins with a discovery: amidst the ordinary, the sublime.

This is how it begins.

My mother and her sisters were crossing the road in the town of Sumpter, North Dakota, when a buggy stopped in front of her and a man leapt out. He wore a tall hat, wide red suspenders. His boots were covered in mud, his coat filthy and ragged along the hem, but he walked up to my mother as though they'd known each other all their lives.

"Good afternoon." He stood there, smiling at her.

My mother had never seen a smile like his. It was a smile like a magician's, full of hidden wonders.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, tipping his hat, and her sisters giggled into their handkerchiefs.

My mother had never set foot outside of Sumpter. Her family was close-knit, clannish, five girls born to a Virginia preacher who'd ended up in a dusty town in the middle of nowhere because the Lord commanded him so. His wife liked to remind anyone who would listen that the Lord hadn't commanded *her* to go anywhere. She would have stayed in Virginia forever, if anyone cared. She would have stayed there till the end of time.

There wasn't much for my mother and her sisters to do in Sumpter. They spent long afternoons sewing on the porch, watching the dusty streets turn copper-colored in the sun.

But my mother was not quite like her sisters. She'd been taken to the town physician frequently as a child, because she did strange things to her body even God couldn't seem to explain. She ripped the nail clean off her thumb once because, she said, she wanted to see her hand plainly. She took a pair of scissors to her braid and chopped the whole thing off, the curls that remained so short her ears showed through like little shells. She slipped out to where the prairie grasses grew high as her shoulders, pulled her dress over her head, and ran through those arid, sweet-smelling fields until her legs buckled under her; she lay there a long time, breathing hard into the hot, alluvial soil, letting the bloody taste of it settle across her tongue. She didn't know how to read, but she spent long hours bent over the Bible, moving her lips in a way that might have suggested to anyone

who didn't know her that she was praying. She had desires she didn't have words for.

*No man will want a wild woman for a wife*, her mother told her, not unkindly.

*A wild man will*, my mother said, and her sisters laughed, because the way she said it made it sound true.

At night, my mother snuck out to sit on the porch. She needed to breathe, she told her sisters. She couldn't for the life of her understand how anyone slept cooped up like that. She curled herself into the rocking chair, still as a cat. Counted the stars in the sky, memorized the pinprick pattern they punched into the blue. With a little concentration, she found, she could float up among them. Vanish from the porch, the still, too-close air. In the wink of an eye, escape.

This was one of the first things she told my father when he came to call on her the next day.

*I should warn you*, she said, eyeing him as she used her pinky to coax a sugar tornado up from the bottom of her glass of lemonade. *I have a habit of disappearing*.

But he just tapped his chest and smiled his magician's smile. *Ask me what I do for a living*.

This is how it begins.

My father, Thomas Hamblen, stands on the narrow strip of shoreline. Overhead, the sky burns a brilliant blue. It is late August, and a breeze ripples the surface of the lake. The air at this early evening hour is already cool, but comfortably so. Even a man unaccustomed to the cold could spend the night outdoors without complaint.

My father eases himself down in front of the water, stretching his back against the gravelly sand. He wears a long-sleeved shirt and cotton pants. Slowly, deliberately, he removes his socks.

He has been home for five days. He is afraid he might be losing his mind.

Over the course of the past fifteen years, my father has traveled to the Arctic and back a total of three times. He came within an estimated sixty-odd miles of the North Pole—so close, he tells my mother, he could taste it. He went first as a boy, chosen for his speed and agility. Later, because he retained a boy's hunger for the unknown. He goes where few other men dare. He does so willingly, eagerly. For this reason, he is respected by other explorers. Admired, even. This does not protect him from anything.

For example, loss. He has lost so much by this point it hardly registers when he loses it all over again, his memory stretched over time to a dangerous thinness. What did he lose? A fellow expedition member. A photograph. Ammunition. Mementoes—lockets, pocketknives, letters. They slid into the water when an ice floe cracked, or they fell out of his jacket, or he traded them for something necessary, something that in the moment drew the line between life and death. There are nights he lies, sleepless, beside my mother and tries to add it all up: five men, sixteen dogs, five pounds of dried meat plus ten pounds of beans, two notebooks... but it is a futile exercise. He gives up and goes back to counting sheep. Easier arithmetic. Or he gets out of the warm bed and goes into the kitchen, where he pours himself whiskey after whiskey, drinking until the numbers disappear.

There are moments on his expeditions, trekking across snow

so brilliant its light seems thrown from some alien sun, where my father stops abruptly, drops his head in his hands. He pretends to cough, to sneeze, to wipe at the tiny icicles forming at the corners of his eyes. He has to, to hide what his companions on these long journeys cannot see: he is in love. His face, like a schoolboy's, would give him away.

Now, he lies back against the damp stones and watches the setting sun bleed into the blue. Clouds shuttle back and forth, pinking up around their edges until they glow like flesh in candlelight. High above the pine trees, a pair of sharp-shinned hawks turn lazy circles, scouting out mice and voles.

My father shuts his eyes, squeezing until red stars explode against the black.

He blinks, and the sky opens above him like an invitation.

What did the Pole taste like?

Like dirty metal. Like salt. Like this, he tells my mother, and she waits, eyes closed, lips parted for a kiss.

The months between expeditions are never easy. In the absence of imminent disaster, my father finds himself listless, irritable. His appetite vanishes; his body softens like fruit. Days pass and he loses himself in their passing, the predictable sameness of one morning to the next. He loses hours to sleep, or to some strange fugue state between sleeping and waking from which he starts as though from a nightmare, finding himself in the middle of some small task he has no recollection of having begun. He walks outside to fetch water from the creek and wakes with an ax in his hand, his head leaned against the rough, sweet-smelling trunk

of a white pine. He opens his battered copy of *Origin of Species* and finds himself on the shore an hour later, left hand aching, as though feeling the loss of those fingers anew. He finds a pencil and sits on a log, copying lines into his notebook until the pain ebbs from his palm. *Great as are the differences between the breeds of the pigeon...* he switches the pencil to his right hand, forcing his wrist to curve in a way still unnatural. Over the years, the muscles in those fingers have gained only a little more fluidity, but he keeps at it. *Anticipate the worst*, a fellow explorer once told him—this one of the men now gone, succumbed to something or other in lands unknown. *The only surprise should be finding yourself alive.*

One afternoon a few weeks after he arrives home, my father goes into the kitchen and puts his arms around my mother. He is not a man given to regret, but on this afternoon, the world honeyed by the warm September light, he feels suddenly heavy with it, a sadness that sits on his chest like a stone. He tells my mother he has been a fool to leave her all these years. He says she is what he thinks of every night he is gone. That she is what saves him. When he is with her, he tells her, the cold that has a hold on his body retreats a little. Retracts its claws. He is nothing without her, he tells her. A no one. He is hardly a man at all.

*Please*, he says.

*Forgive me*, he says.

For a moment, she stands perfectly still. Through the window, the pine trees are moving their feathered branches in the breeze, the cool, clean smell of them so strong she can feel the rutted surface of their bark beneath her hands, feel the sap lacing itself stickily across her palms.

Then all at once—chattering, her voice too loud—she ducks out from under his arm. *Look!* she says, pushing up her sleeve. Look how strong she's gotten! She makes him feel the sinewy muscles along her shoulder. She has been chopping wood all spring and summer. She put up ten jars of huckleberry jam and ate enough fresh berries she worried her skin might turn blue. There were bears up along the mountainside where the huckleberries grow. She counts off on her fingers: a family of four, two young ones, a mother and three cubs, a solitary giant—male, she thinks. She crept away—so, so quietly—and made it home with her store intact. She caught trout in the stream and dried and smoked it for winter. She made friends with their neighbors in the next cove and has been taking the coach with the wife, Bernice, into town for supplies every few weeks. She stitched a new quilt for their bed. She taught herself how to crochet. She embroidered three separate pillows, one for each chair. She went swimming every afternoon, for hours and hours—see how strong she is? How brown? She thrusts her arm out again. Only two bad storms, and what little damage there was she cleaned up easily. The sun after this long winter a blessing, she says. The sun its own God, she says, making heaven out of—she shakes her head, brushing something off the front of her dress. Heaven, she says. End of story, she says.

He looks at her and sees she is desperately unhappy.

The sun sails from one side of the lake to the other. As it mounts, the air grows heavy with heat. The birds thin out. They retreat into the woods, though the pair of hawks remains, riding air currents carelessly back and forth. When they sight something—a

fish sliding under the surface of the lake, a mouse scurrying through the tangle of huckleberries—they release a thin, high whistle. As the afternoon stretches on, the air cools, and other birds begin to reappear—loons and grebes, the tiny, grey-tailed Grunter finch. My father watches the birds coast back and forth, retreating and advancing towards land. By the time the sun begins to slip towards the lake, the bats have joined in, dim shapes flicking back and forth across the water, sailing low to scoop up the bugs congregating just above the surface.

The air is full of flying things.

My father watches. A dull pain uncoils itself along the base of his skull. He has not eaten anything all day, and his brain, despite the pain, feels sharper for it. He slides his notebook from his pocket and starts a few simple sketches—a duck, a finch, a filigree of alder leaves against the sky—before dropping the pencil, his right hand spasming in a way that makes him want to weep. Glancing at the horizon, he catches a ribbon of ice glinting out from behind the distant mountain ridge: it is bluish, glittering, a faint iridescence like a butterfly's wing. When he looks again, it is gone.

The sky is an angry, bruise-colored violet by the time my mother makes her way down to the lake's edge. Clouds hang low along the horizon. My father has lain here for hours now, half-shaded by a row of tall cedars. A patch of skin across his left foot stings: sunburn, probably, though most of the feeling in both feet he lost to frostbite years ago, the skin there smooth and white as a cadaver's.

My mother stands over him, smiling. "Resting?"

"Thinking," he says, and she turns away too quickly.

An eagle emerges from a nearby cove, gliding in before flapping its enormous wings—once, twice, spiraling down across the open expanse of lake, sending the house sparrows into a frenzy. The eagle, my father has read, is nearly seven feet across the wingspan, though to see it glide across the cove is to believe it larger still. It is a bird of such grace and power it seems to come from another world. According to the great Darwin, the eagle is the result of centuries of careful genetic winnowing. He is the outcome of a thousand intricate survival games: does this wingspan help the eagle fly higher or longer? Does this particular curvature of the beak aid or hinder the tearing of flesh? Does the chick with the slightly larger cranial socket hunt more efficiently, or does it die when its head gets stuck in the burrow of some woodland animal it has chased into the underbrush?

The sky is darkening in earnest now, turning indigo and velvety, dense as cream. A cloud drifts out from behind the ridge of trees to his right and my father tries to watch them simultaneously, eagle and cloud, but in the last faint wash of daylight, his eyes refuse to focus. He squints, raises himself on one elbow. Suddenly, the eagle plunges. It drops from the sky like a cannonball, so fast my father barely has time to sit up before the bird is flapping its enormous wings, skidding to an awkward suspension as it scoops one talon into the water and takes off again. Its victory scream is high and loud. Against the rising moon, the outline of a small pike wriggling in the bird's talons is neat and black as a stamp. Up the eagle rises, up, up.

The sky snuffs itself out like a candle.

My father grabs the nearest bit of driftwood and drives it into the pebbles, lights the end on fire. He snatches up his notebook,

turns to a fresh page, and draws the eagle coasting, then dropping, then braking against the air—then, as his makeshift lantern sputters and spits, draws the eagle lifting again, the sudden parasol of those wings.

When my mother calls him in for dinner, she has to say his name three times before he stands. His body is stiff from hours of inertia. His foot burns. His mouth is so dry his lips have cracked, the bottom one—when he runs his tongue along it experimentally—weeping a few drops of blood.

But: his mind. His mind vibrates like a plucked string.

My mother sits across the table from him, smoothing the napkin across her knees. She pretends not to notice how quickly he eats, moving his fork mechanically back and forth until his plate is clean. When dinner is done, he gets up immediately and goes to the little desk by the window and sits down. Opens his notebook to a new page.

*Supplies needed for the construction of a balloon,* he writes.

When my mother goes to bed, she leaves the candles burning. My father does not raise his head as she steps past him, putting her feet down deliberately, rattling the door in its casing. In bed, she tosses and turns; it is after one by the time she finally blows the candles out. She lies there in the dark, listening to the scratch of the pen against paper. She counts the minutes as they pass.

When she wakes, she is still alone. Light leaks in around the half-closed door; she gets up and crosses the room, pulling a sweater on over her nightgown to fend off the early morning chill.

My father sits at the desk, scribbling furiously. He does not turn, and my mother stands there only briefly before slipping

out the back door. Here, in her own home on the edge of a lake so wide she can't see to the other side, she no longer has to sit outside in order to breathe. On the nights she finds herself unable to sleep, she simply leaves. Walks along the trail until she comes to the main road, then up the hill to where it crests against the sky. When she reaches the top of the hill, she turns around and looks back at the cabin, the glint of moonlight off its windows giving it away, like a telltale heart.

She would like to know how it feels, is all.

The next few months are a slow grind of activity. Each day my father cycles through exhilaration, exhaustion, frustration. Each day he arrives at the conclusion that he has embarked upon the most significant journey of his life, one that will write his name beside Darwin's in the history books. Each day he decides he has finally gone mad. He sits on the stony beach with a stack of notepaper, writing letter after letter. He is gathering what he will need to coax his expedition into the realm of possibility: information, interest, hazy promises of involvement, financial and otherwise. Without the necessary funds, the idea will never leave the page. He writes everyone from every expedition he has been a part of since he became a member of this strange club, the club of explorers. He writes John Manley, who once shot and killed the largest polar bear any member of their party had ever seen. *Nanook*, he called it, after the native people's word for the bear. He said he had been waiting his whole life to kill a bear that big.

*Dear John,* my father writes. *I write to tell you that I have discovered my Nanook. It is attaining the North Pole by way of*

a balloon. He writes the head of the science department at the university. He writes the great explorer Adolphus Greely, recently returned from an expedition to Ellesmere Island—the trip for all intents and purposes a disaster, all but six of the twenty-five man crew dead. *Dear Mr. Greely*, my father writes. *Before I begin my application for your counsel in earnest, may I express to you my utmost admiration for the bravery demonstrated by you and your crew on your most recent Polar Expedition. This is no easy road, he writes. God help all of us who have chosen to journey it.* He writes the celebrated British balloonist Henry Tracey Coxwell, the architect and pilot of such spectacular specimens as *Mars* and *Mammoth*: *Dear Mr. Coxwell*, my father writes. *It is with great respect for your many accomplishments in the field of aeronautics that I write to you today in search of guidance pertaining to all things balloon.*

He writes Alfred Nobel, whose generosity has made him a coveted contact among adventurers Arctic and other. *Dear Mr. Nobel*, my father writes. *I have not had the pleasure of making your acquaintance, but I understand we hold a similar passion for invention close to our heart. I have a number of ideas pertaining to the recent and unfortunately failed ventures to the North Pole and ways in which I might, with my breadth of experience in the region in question and my extensive knowledge of the conditions related to said region, improve (considerably) upon these failures and, indeed, triumph where others have failed.*

He writes the President of the United States, reasoning that in the off chance some excitable underling may, as he sifts through the mail, find my father's letter and scent the crisp odor of adventure, it will be entirely worth the effort. *Dear Mr. President*, I am

*writing to inform you of a thrilling new development in the field of Arctic exploration, a field in which our brave nation might and indeed by all rights should, I believe, excel. Sir*, he writes, *it is my humble opinion that if given the opportunity I can and shall lead us into the future.* Underneath his signature he writes "Seasoned Arctic Explorer." At the last minute, he adds: "and Inventor."

This is what my father sees when he looks out over the lake: balloon after balloon, rising toward the heavens. A fish flips out of the lake. *Balloon!* In the arc of the fish's body as it leaps out and re-enters there is a fluidity that sends him back to his notebook, sketching furiously. That he is entirely unfamiliar with the nuts and bolts of ballooning gives him little pause: he knows the terrain, he knows the cold. He is intimately acquainted with the brutal physics of heat loss and hope. Over the years, he has lined the cabin walls with stacks of books—a vast assortment of weathered encyclopedias, primarily, collected along his journeys and carried back at the expense of more practical acquisitions: canned goods, a sharp knife, warm clothes for my mother, who has darned and re-darned her skirts so many times the mending yarn now blots out the original fabric entirely. No matter. The latest spoils yielded a reasonably well-preserved and fairly recent edition of the Britannica, which he flips through with growing impatience.

When he finds what he is looking for, he hesitates only an instant before ripping the page from the spine. The prize? A drawing of the late Frenchman Jean-Pierre Blanchard's balloon—the specifics of its construction antiquated by now but still useful. The drawing itself is quite elegant, a bit of fancy my father had



admired in passing and then promptly forgotten—its beauty, he had thought, the indulgence of a fool.

My father bends over his notebook. He begins to sketch.

Here is the envelope, here is the burner, here are the drag ropes, here is the basket. The observation platform in Blanchard's diagram is spare but functional; placed below the burner, it will allow two men to stand watch and take down notes on the weather, the clouds, the view as they peer down from their perch. The basket will need to be lined with something warm—sealskin? Something that repels water would be helpful. Rope that can double as ballast. His pen flies over the pages, making a scratching sound as he draws. He turns the page, fills it; turns to another, another.

On her weekly trips to the dry goods store in Coolin, my mother collects stacks of old newspapers and practices her reading at night, one laborious page at a time. My father takes the papers she has already read and draws preliminary sketches across the brittle pages, scrawling through headlines with abandon. *MAN DEAD AT TWENTY* becomes *M N D E D AT TW NTY*. *STORM APPROACHES COEUR D'ALENE* becomes *T R M AP O CHES C UR D'ALE E*. He uses three entire newspapers in a single afternoon, going through a dozen sketches, two dozen, calculating and re-calculating various heights and weights before settling on the proper dimensions for one of the ballast ropes, which he then meticulously copies down into his notebook. My mother watches him take a stack of fresh papers out to the beach and wipes her hands on her apron, takes a loaf of bread from the stove. She puts it in the window to cool, leans forward. Presses her forehead to the glass.

A chipmunk knocks a pinecone down from a nearby tree. My father squints: *balloon!* They will need more ballast than anyone has ever thought necessary. If the balloon is to stay afloat for a matter of days rather than hours, and if it is required of the balloon that it be able to be controlled tightly once they approach the yawning territory of ice and bitter winds, then they will need to harness not only the power of the sun and the air currents but also that of gravity. Sand, my father reads, is the usual thing, but when he draws a sketch of the basket he includes three five-pound sacks of sugar. They can use it in their coffee, pitch what's not needed over the side. He has heard that the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, tales of whose recent forays into Greenland have begun to assume the size and heft of myth, takes coffee on every expedition, never mind the vehicle of motion: sled, boat, foot. My father finds the thought of coffee in the air appealing: it is as though, flying, he need not be any less at home than he is on the ground. He sips the coffee my mother has made him and starts a preliminary list:

*Coffee, five pounds*  
*Sugar, twelve pounds*  
*Meat, ten pounds*  
*Fowl, ten pounds*

When his hand begins to cramp, my father closes his eyes. (His right hand he has abandoned, the work too fine, the degree of control required too high.) The sun burns through his lids, producing a shimmering red glow. *Balloon!* Hot air fills the envelope. The hydrogen hisses like a snake.

If he rounds the bottom of the basket, will it bounce lightly along the ground rather than smashing to smithereens? If he can control the drag ropes the way he controls the ropes that guide the sled-dogs, keep them from tangling up in one another, what is to stop him from landing the balloon lightly as a feather? Anyone who knows ice knows it must be treated like a beautiful woman: gently, warily, with a firm but respectful hand. He flips the newspaper over and wets the nub of the pencil against his tongue.

A dragonfly lights on his knee, wings quivering as it cleans its front legs.

*Balloon!*

A letter from Henry Tracey Coxwell arrives. My father takes the envelope down to the lake and opens it there, his heart fluttering girlishly. The letter is brief but cordial. In it Coxwell expresses his enthusiasm for my father's venture and outlines the specific ways in which he would like to be of service: the names of a few potential crew members, a wealthy benefactor acquaintance with a taste for the exotic, a seamstress willing to purchase reams of silk on credit. My father stands a minute, pressing the letter to his lips. It is sunset, and the air has taken on an exquisite shimmer, a wash of blues and violets and pale, petal-pinks.

*I wish you the very best of luck in your ventures,* Coxwell writes. *Godspeed.*

It is only when my father goes to put the letter back in the envelope that he discovers the second sheet tucked into one corner, folded neatly into quarters. He unfolds the quadrants, smoothes it against his arm.

In the dusky quiet, my father lets out a whoop. A single meticulous diagram covers the page: A balloon, perfect as a pearl.

Winter comes and goes. Spring.

My mother sweeps a cluster of fallen elderberry blossoms from the steps. As they whirl up around her broom, she sees they are newspaper, shredded into tiny bits.

The ice melts. The stream that empties into the lake swells and groans, the rushing of its overflow so loud it wakes my mother up at night. She lies there a moment, shivering a little under the thin quilt, then turns onto her side and lifts her nightgown so she can press her bare skin against my father's back. He is burning up all the time now, his body running on some strange, inexhaustible fuel.

She is out clipping the laundry on the line to dry one morning when my father steals all the pillowcases from the linen closet and spends an entire afternoon at the edge of the lake, tossing them into the air, where they billow and collapse like lungs. He pulls the leaves off her favorite alder and sits by the water for days, clumsily sewing them together, blunting her needle until it is unsalvageable. He takes all the silverware from the kitchen drawers; he spends the rest of the week building strange, gleaming cities in the sand. At mealtime they eat with their hands and my mother wonders idly if my father is going insane.

He disappears into the water for hours, swimming towards the horizon until the lake closes behind him. Not so much as a ripple to show where he's gone.

A mallard beats its wings, pitching its feet forward as it slows,

flapping hard as it comes down to rest on the shore. Its body is sleek and fat, the feathers glossy. My father rubs his eyes and turns to a fresh page.

*Balloon! Balloon! Balloon!*

My mother begins spending all her time inside. She stops going into town. Stops wading in the stream, surprising unlucky trout. Stops walking the trails up to where the huckleberries cluster in fat, blue-black globes, leaves her needlepoint to languish on the bedside table, the thread slowly unspooling. Instead, she stands in the kitchen stirring sugar into cup after cup of tea, watching my father through the window. The spoon hitting the cup over and over again makes a sound like a little bell.

One evening, when my father finally emerges from one of his marathon swims, the sun hits him from behind just so; he is golden, glowing. The light is so strong it has the peculiar effect of drawing a second, shimmering man around the first, as though my father has doubled himself, gone into the water and emerged with a twin.

He lifts a hand to his forehead, squinting at something in the trees, and his twin does the same, his hand drawing a streak against the sky like a shooting star.

The spoon falls to the floor with a clatter, my mother's pulse suddenly wild.

That night while my father snores, my mother slips her hands under his nightshirt. She runs her fingers across his ribs, up and down the knobby articulation of his spine. He is so thin these days she might see through him. If she lit a candle and brought it under the sheets, she might see straight in to the mess of organs,

that dense, wet tangle. She might see through to his heart, the tireless muscle of his desire.

And her?

In one swift motion, she yanks her nightgown up over her head.

At a certain point he clutches her around the waist and she freezes, her hips lifted a quarter-inch above his. But his hands fall away almost immediately. He groans; once, he murmurs her name. Or maybe it is *sorry*. Maybe it is *glory*. Or *goodbye*. She watches his eyes flutter open, the whites of them in the dark startling. After, she lies back against her pillow and folds her arms across her chest. Warmth rises from her like the mist that comes off the lake in early morning. Or like there is something dangerous running through her, both of them burning up from the same fever.

There are things my father wishes he could explain. Things he would like my mother to understand. The sky there is God, he wants to tell her. The ice is God. The fat, hideous walrus is God.

My mother places a pie in the window to cool, standing a few deliberate inches from the steam that rises from it, smelling of burnt sugar. The nausea has just come on. A little over two weeks ago now, but she'd known when the first day of her bleeding came and went without so much as a vague cramping. She has always been regular as a clock. Her body has never failed her. And now—well, now it has only done what she asked of it. She finds the nausea unpleasant but feels otherwise well enough; she is a little tired, occasionally dizzy. No appetite most of the day, though at times hunger comes upon her so suddenly, with such

urgency, she finds herself racing to the kitchen to cram hunks of bread down her throat. It helps both nausea and fatigue to focus on a single point. Standing by the window, she pretends she is on a boat in the middle of a vast ocean, though she has never seen the ocean, never seen a body of water larger than this lake. She has never, truth be told, been anywhere. She grips the edge of the kitchen table, pressing her palms against the wood as her stomach rolls and flips. When she closes her eyes, she sees it: hope the size of a seed.

When my father comes in from chopping wood, cheeks red from exertion, she is standing over the pie, halving it, quartering, slicing it into eight. She does not turn around. All these months, he has never said one word about the balloon. He is like a child, afraid to speak his wish for fear of it never coming true. But of course it is ludicrous to pretend my mother doesn't know. Even before the letters, before he began covering the pages of his notebook with sketches and calculations, filling it with the many blueprints of his dreams—long before any of that, she saw it, the glint in his eye.

She does not know when my father's leaving turned from adventure to abandonment. Nor does she know when the freedom to do with her days what she pleases became its own oppression, but she pins some portion of the change to that afternoon up on the mountainside, picking berries. She had been happy tramping through the underbrush, the sun hitting her full-tilt. Her basket filled to the brim with fruit. She had been looking forward to the jam, to the elbow-deep immersion its making required, those many hours hers to do with as she wished. And then, as she turned halfway down to admire the view, something

about the lake, the way it curled around the mountainside, still and unwieldy as a giant's finger—something about that had stopped her in her tracks. She had to lie down right there in the bushes and wait until the roaring in her head subsided. This is what she had meant to tell my father. Not about the bears, but about the loneliness that struck her, sudden as a storm.

She places a slice of pie on his plate.

How many pairs of socks, she says, turning, does he think he'll need this time?

At dinner he eats a little less each night. My mother serves him the same heaping plate, twice as much as covers hers, and he mentally quarters each portion and eats as slowly as he can, ignoring the groans of protest from his gut. They are both eating less and less. Pretending for very different reasons that everything is just as it has always been. She pushes her food around with her fork and drinks plain hot water, cup after cup. She has a headache, she says. She is just tired, she says.

My father stands on the shoreline in his undershirt, watching the moon glaze the frozen lake silver. He flips through his notebook, runs his finger across the pages covered top to bottom with his cramped print, his carefully-detailed figures, the lists dutifully numbered and separated according to category. The few letters received in reply he keeps tucked into the back cover, the pages folded and refolded so many times the paper has been worn to unnatural softness, Coxwell's balloon diagram the texture of velvet.

My mother has stopped crying. For this, he is grateful.

A loon calls somewhere not too far from where he stands and he squints into the glowing darkness, searching.

Behind him, the last candle gutters out in the cabin.

*Bal-loon*, cries the loon. *Bal-loon, bal-loon.*

The weather begins to turn again. The snow melts on the mountainside, sending down water like a Biblical flood.

My mother wakes one night to a sensation so strange she nearly cries out: just below her ribcage, under the new softness in her belly, a small wave rolls through her. She lies there in the dark for hours after, pressing her hand against the memory.

The day my father leaves, my mother wakes early. She slips out of bed, pulls his favorite dress over her head. She has made a special trip into town the day before, buying provisions for pancakes: flour, butter, eggs, precious as gold. Even so, it is not until she stands there buttoning her dress in the semi-darkness, her fingers trembling so violently she finally abandons the last few, that she realizes what she will do. What she has been planning to do ever since she felt me in the night, flipping inside her like a little fish.

She stands in the kitchen, whisking salt into the flour. Her heart is everywhere: in her throat, her chest, the heat she feels in her cheeks. She will tell him over breakfast. She will get up from her chair as he wipes the last of the syrup from his plate, take his hand and place his palm flat against her belly, the give where, soon enough, I will push the skin out, taut as a drum.

“John,” she will say. “After your father. Dorothy if it is a girl.”

What he is leaving behind is no different that what he is leaving for, she will tell him. A truth stranger than any magic: Inside her is the wildest land.

She stands and pours the first of the batter on the griddle, making

a neat row of circles. She is humming loudly to cover up the noise of her heart, a tune she used to sing with her sisters—so long ago now she remembers no more than the refrain: *my dear, my sweetheart, my hind*. When my father walks in, she turns away to hide her smile.

“Mary,” he says, and when she hears the determination in his voice something that is not me flips over inside her. “*Mary*,” he says urgently. “Listen to me,” he says. “I am going to change the world.”

And just like that, her smile disappears.

My father has been gone four months the night my mother wakes up to a band of pain like a vise tightening around the swell of her belly. She shifts onto her side and lies still as long as she can stand it. It is dark when she wakes, and as she turns onto one side, then the other, she watches the light begin to seep in around the edges of the curtains. She watches, in particular, one bar the width of her ankle, makes herself guess the length it creeps along the floor. When the pain gets worse, she stands and paces the small living room. It takes ten steps to go from one wall to another. ONE-TWO-THREE-FOUR. She counts out loud. In between contractions, she puts wood into the stove, manages to get a few pots of water boiling. She can't imagine what she will do with the water but she remembers this from her own mother, the pots bubbling on the stove, remembers the births of each of her four younger sisters, the hot, salty smell that filled their small house, the dampness hanging in the air. She remembers the look on her mother's face, after, the blunt incredulousness of it. The broken veins beneath her eyes strange and beautiful, like crushed flowers. She remembers her sisters, each blonder than the last, and she, my mother, dark as an owl. How terrible that love should contain

such contradictions. How utterly insane, she thinks, biting down on the pillow, that her body should think it can contain another human being. She ought to have known all along it is madness, this business of belonging. It is lunacy.

As the contractions get stronger, my mother stares out the window at the water, bright with the last of the moonlight, and counts off the seconds until they are done. She says the two names to herself, over and over again, like a spell. *John. Dorothy. John. Dorothy.* If she says them enough times, she reasons, eventually someone will appear to claim one of them, a stranger she will make her own.

Of course she will know me the instant I come howling into the world. She will know exactly who I am.

I am born at noon the next day. My mother tells me this is the first thing she did: she checked the clock. I am still attached to her when she looks. We are not yet two when she begins to keep track of me, the seconds I have been alive and then, after she cuts through the cord herself, cleaving my body from hers with a kitchen knife, the seconds I have been on my own.

This is what women do, she says.

By which she means she understands that one day I will leave her, too. Lift off the ground, think myself beyond gravity.

Let go.

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To read an interview with Aria Beth Sloss about "North," visit the stories section of [one-story.com](http://one-story.com). To discuss the story with other subscribers, visit [one-story.com/blog](http://one-story.com/blog).

*One Story*, Volume 12 Number 7 October 9, 2014. Copyright © 2014  
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232 Third Street, #A108, Brooklyn, NY 11215.