

BY JOE WILKINS

ENOUGH OF ME

THE SNOW IS GETTING IN.

Bishop and the new boy – he says to call him Wing, which fits his bony legs, his windy breath like tiny bells – found a mess of undelivered phone books and jammed them under the door. They tucked handfuls of crumpled mustard-colored pages into each gapped corner and around the half-hung drywall upstairs. They thought they had it, slapped each other on the back. I knew better. I see what there is to see. I stay up late, watch coyotes slink down from the hills and chatter in the shadows.

Some kind of cloth would work best to plug those holes, but this is Billings, Montana, where they believe in sugar beets and oil refineries and strip malls, where downtown's a pile of bones scraped clean by coyotes and left to carry whatever color the sky decides. No halfway houses here. No kitchens, no shelters. Here, cloth is currency, is sleep and toes, is a block of warm breath, is another breath. It is what we have now, what we hoard. We said what Bishop called a prayer and rolled old Jake out the backdoor naked into the drifts. It was dark, cold, the moon an odd eye watching a body buried fistful by fistful in the snow. Later, we threw Mama Betty's dice for his jacket, his scotch cap, that long scarf he said his third-wife knitted before she disappeared. I lost every throw.

I have five socks though. Blue mittens, a ski-coat with pink lightning flashes, a stocking cap, two thick sweaters, three white T-shirts, boots, a pair of jeans, a gauzy skirt the color of a wound. I wear most everything all the time. Socks one on top of the other under boots, skirt over jeans, sweater over sweater over T-shirt over skin – but two of the T-shirts I hide. They're the only things I change. Each day, even in this February that froze old Jake, I slip off my mittens, my stocking cap, my coat, my sweater, my sweater, my T-shirt – and suddenly I am the color of the snow come evening near the gutters: my thin and blotchy belly, my small breasts gone dull blue, scar still loud and white. I change in the bathroom upstairs because Bishop is afraid of stairs. I hide my T-shirts in the dry toilet tank because Mama Betty'd steal them if she could. I wonder about this Wing – crumbs sticking to his hairless, swept-back chin. I shut a sleeve of yesterday's shirt in the window's white mouth to hang outside. I lift another from the plastic Safeway bag in the tank, pull it across my shoulders, where it is cold against my belly. I tell myself I smell clean as new snow, though I know that it's not true.

My T-shirts were new not long ago. I got them west of here, in Missoula. The days back then were warm and enormous, light leaking down from the mountains, golden leaves adrift in the streets – a mess of beautiful university girls and boys stood behind a folding table, smiled as they handed out used sweaters, T-shirts and underwear still in plastic packages. The professor, her hair spiked, neck swathed in a filmy scarf, roamed behind them, saying things like Jesus was a radical and not some small town Republican. Later, there was a dinner, where we sat in chairs and the students served us, just like a restaurant. It was supposed to show that we were people, worthy of their service. At least that's what the assignment sheet one of them left on the table said. One sat down with me. His name was Tavin. He talked about himself, kept telling me he felt called to work with the homeless, what kind of law he was going to practice, how he was voting for the other guy. I didn't know the first guy.

I'd never met anyone like Tavin, anyone with plans farther out than Tuesday. He was an elephant, a giraffe, a unicorn – something out of



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When I slipped down the stairs, she was on her knees. Swearing, grunting, stuffing strips of it into the crack beneath the back door. She'd done already the hole in the coat closet where a heating vent was supposed to go, the window Jake and Bishop broke wrestling over the last of the dark rum at Christmas. I noticed because I notice things. It's what I do. Mama Betty gets things, I notice things. Two strategies. So far, they've sometimes worked.

Mama Betty, I said, let me have your knife.

No, she said, still kneeling, grunting, swearing softly, taping and re-taping the upholstery into place.

There's a boy I need to kill.

No, she said again.

Okay, I said, resigned. I guess I'll have to strangle him.

Mama Betty looked right at me, her breath loud and snorty. Could get you a length of rope. Maybe a nylon cord. It'd cost you a good wool sock.

Okay, I said. But I need it right away.

WHEN I GOT TO SPOKANE I still had some money. I stayed in a Super 8 along the freeway, watched strung out days of MTV, bought a gauzy dress the color of a wound. In the mornings, at a truck stop café, I swam eggs and bacon in maple syrup. Then played the poker machines for hours. I lit cigarettes one after the other and scribbled poems on napkins. I hadn't been on my own that long, at least not in a city, and it was like a story about someone else – coins clinking, the stink of grease and diesel, me jittering from too much nicotine and sugar. Anyway, less than a week, and I was out of money.

A guy who sometimes cooked at the café let me stay in his apartment, a low-slung place near Kaiser Aluminum, the kind of place where each night the neighbors beat each other in a dozen different languages. That cook was an anarchist, and people were in and out all the time, people with ideas. All night talks of politics and collapse, knives and papers, handfuls of pretty pills, men grabbing at my elbow. I never saw the same face twice. Afternoons, I wandered back and forth across the footpath bridges in the park. Below me, the frothing river and the light-shot falls.

The bridges began to scare me. I spent more time there than anywhere, at least that's what I remember. The bridges and the remembering, that's why I left. No matter what, I told myself, I'd get in with whoever stopped. Of course it had to be a big blue pickup. The grinning cowboy behind the wheel said he was headed East. He looked and even smelled like all the cowtown boys I knew from home. But he didn't chew tobacco. I didn't see a jackknife strapped to his belt. So I climbed in. He tipped his hat, was kind and gentlemanly. He commented on the weather, asked me about the rings in my lips, the squiggle of scar beneath my chin. Later, he bought me dinner, a pack of Camels, though he pursed his lips and said I should really quit.

Mile after mile I felt more and more pathetic. Finally, I tried to put my hand down his pants. He caught me by the wrist. Said he was flattered but he'd better not since the man upstairs was watching. He was serious. He told me his church had a program for people like me. I couldn't stand it. I cursed and cursed him, began to cry. He thought I was coming down off something, that I might not make it. I could see it in his kind dark eyes – he thought I needed him. I don't know what I needed, what it is I need.

When he stopped in Missoula for directions to the hospital, I bolted. Found a drain pipe down by the university and crawled right in, splashed through stagnant water slicked with oily rainbows. Just like that I was back in Montana. I sat and hugged my knees, tried to laugh about the stupid way things kept going.

JAKE'S TOES SHOWED through the snow today.

It was bright, the windows wet with melt. I forget which month. Bishop called a meeting, said we had to do something about those toes. He's sort of like the leader. He's not quite 30 but his face is so ragged gray he looks at least a hundred. I'm scared to death of him. It's a good thing he's scared to death of stairs. At the meeting I tucked my hair up inside my stocking cap and sat by Mama Betty. Wing

a child's storybook where there are rainbows. We sat there in the park for hours. Leaves skittering in the wind. I watched his mouth move but didn't understand a word he was saying. It didn't matter. He fell in love with me because my looking at him said he was good. I loved him back as best I could – loved his Hardee's bags of hamburgers and fries, all the things baked with fresh berries he brought from the coffeehouse on campus. Later, after all the gifts, after walks along the river where he spilled his wishes, after hot showers that lasted soapy hours at his apartment and three nights sleep in a bed, I let him touch me where he wanted. Then I took his wallet. Left, I guess, because it's like lying without having to say a word.

And here I am in Billings. Here the bad river rose and flooded and the sugar beet crop rotted, here the refinery laid off half the town and all the new subdivisions across the freeway are empty – streets and streets of half-built houses no one can afford to buy or finish building. They butt up against the sagebrush hills. The hills blow a dusty wind back at them. It's not just the refinery, not just Billings but some kind of crisis all across the nation – at least that's what Mama Betty says. And she knows a thing or two. She has a way of getting what she needs. She got us this one, third from the left along the Paradise Flats cul-de-sac – two pillars and a brick facade, a chandelier in the entry, three bathrooms but no water, heat, electricity. And no paved roads. Which means no regular patrols. Which means we went ahead and moved right in. The realtor's key was even under the welcome mat. Mama Betty knew someone who knew someone at a discount supermarket, Bishop brought home rainbow baggies full of tiny pills, Jake chased me up and down the stairs but was so old he could never catch me. All together and alone, we slid each night on slicks of rum and moonlight. After the others fell asleep, in closets or simply on the floor – I stood at the picture window. The moon was there or not there. The sky black, the stars opening their bright and tiny mouths. I watched coyotes come slinking down the hills, wander the gravel cul-de-sac out front. They looked so soft and kind. I waited and waited and rushed out drunk to steal one. Like shadows in any kind of light, they scattered.

But then the wind went cold, ice and snow pinged against the windows. We ran clean out of pills. One morning, Old Jake just didn't wake. We were cold. We stripped him and rolled him out back into the drifts. Now I wake to frost along my lashes. The snow is getting in.

THIS MORNING Mama Betty tried a fuzzy swath of wine-red vinyl.

Before sunrise she'd torn it with her steak knife from the seat of someone's car. That's Mama Betty. She has a way of getting what she needs. A winter hat, good cigarettes. In her pockets she's got a steak knife, mismatched dice, duct tape, that picture of a little boy she says is some doctor's and she's going to steal him for the ransom. This morning she got upholstery, the fake-leather kind. The color of a spill of wine.



HE ASKED IF I NEEDED A RIDE, SAID DON'T WORRY, HE COULDN'T GET INTO DEEPER TROUBLE

if he tried. He must have known he was lying. Anyway, I climbed right in. He began to lecture – told me it wasn't too late, told me not to pay attention to what people said, said he was sorry about what that boy had done to me and had always seen promise in my work. I knew the kinds of promises he meant. End of the rainbow kinds of things, things you think and dream and even begin to believe – until you open up your eyes and look around and you're still stuck in some dust-dry town that stinks of silage.

didn't say a word. He's so thin and wrong and skinny. The way he rings and whistles when he breathes, laughs for no good reason. He eyed me, eyed Bishop, nodded like he knew what he was doing.

This is fucking providence, Bishop kept saying, gesturing around the room. The snow may drift inside the door, but at least we have a door. Old Jake appreciated that. He wouldn't mind a bit. He paused and waited, looked lovingly over the bare drywall, the exposed and snaking wires, the little drifts of snow cresting, melting in the corners. We'll need a car. Carry him at night, leave him in the Safeway parking lot.

Mama Betty nodded, said she'd get a car.

Wing licked his skinny lips, blew music out his nose.

I slipped my hands up inside the sleeves of my sweater. I know the way a lie slips like snow through broken windows, hangs around like a shadow strung out back of you. I know how we begin to believe even when we don't. Not a one of us was thinking of old Jake that day.

Beneath my T-shirt I could feel my ribs, my breasts. They felt like someone else's. This body, I was thinking, it just won't do.

HE TAUGHT GEOMETRY. Or, he sat in front of the blackboard with math books scattered across his desk, and the ones who'd someday leave our little prairie town of dust and rumor, the ones who said

college like they meant it – they sat up front and asked him questions. He answered. After 12 years that's all that he had left. Answers for the smart kids. Not bad, I guess, considering the rest of us – boys with Copenhagen bulging in their cheeks, girls scratching obscene pictures onto desktops. Later, in Spokane, someone told me I should have never left, told me small towns are peaceful and that's where people still care about one another. I pulled down the neck of my sweater to show the jackknife scar scrawled between my breasts and up my neck.

Still, I didn't mean to leave. I meant to explode – to clear the hill out of town at a 110 and never come back down, to guzzle so much vodka at some bonfire party the world would never be the same. I wanted to find a place, a person, something that would let me be sad and strange and happy as I am. Nothing there looked like what I saw behind my eyes. Montana never felt like home. Or anyway the lovely letting go I've always imagined home must be.

I was just 15. The note they caught me with said, *Would you? I would totally let him do it if he promised me an A! That's what Lisa Ryan did!* I didn't even write it. I don't know who did. We were only bored and horny, knowing already it was our bodies that got things done. He hadn't done a thing. But, like pregnant-one-more-time Lisa Ryan, I was bad news. What's more, he didn't go to church, had divorced the year before and sometimes drank too much at the teachers' Christmas party. They put him on suspension without pay for the rest of the semester. Then told me I should stop passing notes, take a week at home.

It was the third day he picked me up. I was smoking Camels down by the oil wells – the pumpjacks winging up and up but always coming right back down. He was driving, aimlessly, he said. He asked if I needed a ride, said don't worry, he couldn't get into deeper trouble if he tried. He must have known he was lying. Anyway, I climbed right in. He began to lecture – told me it wasn't too late, told me not to pay attention to what people said, said he was sorry about what that boy had done to me and had always seen promise in my work. I knew the kinds of promises he meant. End of the rainbow kinds of things, things you think and dream and even begin to believe – until you open up your eyes and look around and you're still stuck in some dust-dry town that stinks of silage. But he looked at me like he meant it, said it sweet. It's never too late. You can turn things around, if you try.

Maybe it's the truth. Maybe it's a lie. I didn't listen. I couldn't help myself. I made sure he found me each day after and drove me home. Who knows where my mother was that week, or any week, so finally he came inside. He read my poems, called them sad and wonderful. Then he poured us both a glass of wine. It wasn't fair. He spoke so sweetly. My mother beat me worse than any father I could hope for. It wasn't fair. He was balding, slope-shouldered, his face round and white, unoffending as an egg. He simply couldn't get enough of me. He kissed me with his teeth. A dozen years he'd been in that town. He'd taught in Africa after college, got a thank you letter from the president. Now he wept and bit my shoulder.

That sad cowboy town we called home was so far east it was nearly North Dakota. So he took me west, said I needed space to start over. The world had turned out to be so much less than he expected. He left me in Spokane with \$300.

MELT OR NO, OLD JAKE WAS SO SOLID WE COULDN'T BEND HIM INTO THE TRUNK. Wing had to sit in back with Jake's blue body across his lap. He just grinned and whistled, didn't say a word. Who knows where Mama Betty got the car.

Sad but necessary, Bishop sobbed, his yellow eyes wet with tears, one hand shaking on the wheel, other arm across my shoulders.

I held Bishop's fat, hot hand to keep him from reaching any farther.

Back of the Safeway, near the stucco wall of another strip mall, we slid Jake onto a stretch of asphalt scraped clean of snow. He was mostly blue, little bits of blood like wine around his mouth, at the corners of his eyes. I looked for the eyes of coyotes but couldn't see a thing for all the lights. For months it had been only moonglow, stars and sunlight. Now every car dug a bright hole through the dark. There was music from a bar somewhere. Full of cymbals and

the stomp of boots. Country. The kind of shit they played back home. Home. That's where I was going with my rope. Home, though I called it that and spit. I'd wait until they were sleeping, leave a kiss on Mama Betty's forehead, Bishop's nose, listen for the whistles – just in case Wing woke – then steal the car and head East.

Bishop tried another prayer but couldn't finish for his coughing. Mama Betty slapped him on the back. Wing wandered in the shadows. I stood there and was cold and sick – a breath of frost on my lashes, frost cracking in my ears, that bad word *home* heaving through me.

FOR YOUR FIRST YOU WANT HEAVY BREATHS, moonlight and quick confusion, a cool wind outside the car but a warmth between the two of you. I got a jackknife at my throat, his drunken tongue in my ear.

His name was Roddy. He was older, the kind everybody wanted, but look how pretty I must be because he picked me. He took me back of Buster's – a café out on the highway – and cut the engine. He didn't take his hat off. He kissed me, spit Copenhagen on the floor. His father was some big rancher, owned most everything for miles north of town. He spit again and undid his belt, told me to get my shirt off. I said, No. He laughed like gravel, said it didn't matter – he'd make me his. He tore my blouse, slapped my crying face, then with his jackknife put his drunken brand across my breasts.

A highway patrolman drug him off me. He'd stopped for coffee, heard me screaming. You're lucky I was thirsty, the patrolman told me, as they loaded me into the ambulance, my whole world gone liquid, slippery – blue-dark bloom of blood across my gauze-wrapped chest.

Fuck you, I tried to say but couldn't make a sound. The patrolman saw me struggle, shook his stupid head, left his hand too long on my bare shoulder.

Roddy was 17. He got juvenile for a year – for assault, they said, because the sex was consensual.

I was 14. I got this cursive scar all across the front of me. Later, my friends' mothers' funny stares, their fathers' wet-lipped leers. It's never hard to do what's expected. After the third glass of wine, I pulled the sad math teacher to me.

WE LEFT OLD JAKE THAWING IN THE LOT. We drove away. The sadness was too much. Give or take a bad-luck year, that was any one of us out there – a blue body naked on the asphalt.

Back at Paradise Flats we had some rum, a little wine. We sat in a circle on the uncaulked tiles of the kitchen floor. We didn't talk at first, just passed the bottles round and round in the dark. I had the rope up my sleeve, was ready anytime to go.

Then Mama Betty said the boy was hers. She showed us again the picture. A child dirty-cheeked and happy, like before, but now we saw the brown river in the background. Her show was on tv, and she'd told him not to bother her. He drowned. He was six, liked to build worlds in the river mud but didn't know to swim. No one had ever taught him. She didn't cry. So for her, we did. Bishop started in then on the war, how in a Humvee you ran around cities just like this one, and then with your rifle up a flight of metal stairs, and who the fuck knew what would be waiting for you there – babies, bombs, a woman with no arms to hold her babies because of bombs. It was morning. The wind was warm, the snow at melt – you could hear it drip and run. Everything was changing. They'd find old Jake tomorrow. I'd planned to take the car, find that Roddy, slip a rope around his neck and yank it tight. See, I thought I needed him to die for me to be alive, for me to take back my body.

But then, my story – somehow it just slipped out. One part, then another, and suddenly I was pulling off my sweater, my other sweater, my t-shirt – moonlight on my skin. I was confused. The wind blew



BISHOP TRIED ANOTHER PRAYER BUT COULDN'T FINISH FOR HIS COUGHING.

Mama Betty slapped him on the back. Wing wandered in the shadows. I stood there and was cold and sick – a breath of frost on my lashes, frost cracking in my ears, that bad word *home* heaving through me.

warm through all the cracks, warm to kiss and shiver me. I told them what he'd done, traced the scar between my breasts and up my neck.

I sat there a long time. Naked, shaking. The sun was rising. My breasts were small and wet, the sun and wind warm on my dirty skin.

Wing shot a whistle out his crooked nose. Wouldn't be too hard, he said. We've got a car. Enough of us. Know all about dumping bodies now.

Oh, fuck yes! Bishop yelled, fallen over, crying on the floor.

Mama Betty looked around. I'll get some groceries. A bit more rope. We'll leave this afternoon.

IN THE BACK WING WHISPERS strategy to himself, scribbles notes and plans and schemes on a paper grocery bag. Beside me Bishop sleeps with his mouth wide open. Sitting shotgun Mama Betty stares out the window and counts crows and fenceposts, shuffles whatever treasure is in her pockets.

And me? Me, I told them I knew the way, told them I better drive. Me, I'm headed west, the wrong way altogether – but strange enough it feels like east and home, or anyway the letting go I always hoped home would be. Though it sounds ridiculous the story was enough. My telling, their listening. It was like suddenly my life was mine, not his. Like I'd killed him already in the telling. I'm not even fucking kidding – cold and naked in the circle of them, I felt good and sad and close to home.

But they were so excited. It seemed a shame to waste such scheming happiness. Let them plot, I thought, plan and have their fun. When they finally figure it out and ask, I'll say I forgot the way, I'll say it's impossible to know, I'll say there's more than one way to go murderously home. It'll be a lie. It'll be the truth. It'll be the story that needs telling.

Today, the road is open. The sun white behind the far blue mountain of the sky. Missoula. It seems as good a place as any. Better than most. I'll pull right up to Helping Hands. Tell them we need some help.

I've had enough of me. Enough of all the stupid things that made and unmade me. I'll make me. I'll be a coyote slipping through the suburbs, a gull circling landlocked Montana here. I'll be a ghost in love with the same old body, my skin both hot and cold – the feel of your hands above a fire after being out too long in the snow. <HDI>

ON THE WEB: To read an interview with Joe Wilkins about the story, visit www.highdesertjournal.com
