We woke that night to the dogs barking like it was the end of the world, and, to hear the mushheads at the office tell it, it was. The boys sent away, Henry transferred to Idaho, me back in my own apartment, alone again. But it’s been an eon and a half since I paid them any mind. I’m up on the mesa with the best of them, old firefighter Ray, and though last fall’s entire disaster is spread out below me—the angry swath where the Dago Bird Refuge used to be, the Forest Service compound with its tiny American flag, the three burnt hulks of the snowplows Henry and I are still paying for—I’m cool with it. I can feel the coolness within me like a potable spring.

Then the radio in my breast pocket gives a staticky, “Ten-four, Nancy, let’s get her started,” and I turn around and blast the underside of the nearest oakbrush with a ribbon of flame. At first it just shrivels the leaves and blackens the bark, but pretty soon a crack of molten orange opens up. I wait until I’ve made sure it’s going to catch and then I walk down the road, counting my paces, fifty yards until the next blast of flame. I look back up at my first one and it’s smudging nicely, not too hot but a good slow smolder that should take all morning to work its way uphill. It’s the middle of March and a perfect day for burning, overcast and still. God, it’s good to get out of the office. I take a deep breath and swing back my hair.

I blast and scan, tracing where the fire will eat through the choking green, from the road up to the chalk cliffs where Ray and I have cut our fireline. All oakbrush. Once we’ve burned this slope over the deer will come back, the hawks will hunt here again, and I’m thinking maybe, if we’re lucky, we’ll get Lewis’s woodpeckers. At the office we emphasize the practical aspect of prescribed burns. Less fuel, less chance of catastrophic fire, Ray will say, laying his hands palm down on the Formica conference table. Only once the district ranger’s nodding will I add the bit about the
wildlife. “These systems need fire,” I finish, “to clean them out.” I do not say, to let them breathe: too spiritual for this crowd.

Plus it’s just a hair too close. They’d get it. They’d make the leap. Brush, family, overgrowth, fire. Renewal. And the pity would be back, unbearable, unbalancing. How can I put this so they believe me? Four years ago, it was me, my dog Bette, and my truck; now it’s me, Bette, my truck, and a decent apartment. In the middle there was—what? One mess after another.

Ray’s firing his way up toward where I am. He’s got his ponytail tucked into the collar of his shirt and even from here I can tell he is frowning with concentration, looking each oakbrush up and down for the best spot to aim his torch. Ray’s a good guy. He’s the only one at the office that hasn’t come at me with his false concern, his voice hushed with the Gravity of it all, hasn’t tried to corner me behind some closed door so I can Tell Him What I Really Feel. Maybe that’s because Ray, with his wife, Rita, was our friend from before; maybe it’s just his way: gentle and discreet (the polar opposite of me). I don’t know and I don’t ask.

He moves slower than I do, scientific and cautious, still getting used to this idea of fire as good. We’ve been the prescribed burn team for two years and he’s more serious about it now than I am, I think. He’s always photocopying articles from the Fire Management Journal and leaving them on my desk. But under the precision and the pondering he’s got a firefighter’s heart, big and red and tender to the slightest curl of smoke. Destruction makes him nervous.

I, on the other hand, love fire, the way it’s almost alive, the way it transforms everything. Take anything from around me now and notice how it feeds my excitement. The stench of the propane, the weight of the torch at the end of my arm, its blackened nozzle, even my cracked and burnished work gloves. I send a blast of flame shooting up over my head, burning a juniper from the top down, just the way they tell you not to. I squat to light a huge dry branch lying in the road, then heave it up into the brush, a little advance sortie. The motion almost blows it out, and I hold my breath until I see the flame creep back, curling over the top of the stick and spilling out into the dry leaves around it.

Henry used to accuse me of preferring fire to people, specifically such people as him and the boys. He used to say if I had my way I’d live in an efficiency apartment with one of every bare
necessity, one knife, one fork, one pair of underwear, all neatly lined up in the closet. I told him if I had one pair of underwear I’d be wearing it. But secretly we both knew he was right, and I even thought about those spats as I signed the lease this winter, and had to smile. Whatever else, Henry certainly knew me. Without him and the boys, my life is clean and simple. I get home, roam the hills with Bette until dark, and then we both have our kibble and bits and straighten ourselves for the following day. My boots have never been so well polished, my gear never in better repair, and I even have time to brush Bette’s teeth with an old toothbrush and a little baking soda, the way she likes.

* * *

As I burn, my mind can drift back. There’s no territory too dangerous when I’ve got a propane torch in my hand, you could say, or maybe it’s the weather, moody and quiet, and no one crowding in on me. I’m like Janis Joplin, gargantuan beside Henry, who looked like he just finished riding the Preakness. The boys were both rodeo heartthrobs, cherubic blonds with brown eyes. We once made the mistake of having a family studio portrait done and we could never bring ourselves to hang it up, it’s that unnerving. I called it the Manson Family Rides Again. Henry took it down to his desk and managed to lose it within a month. And the photo didn’t even hint at the squabbles we had. Face it, I find myself telling an imaginary audience, some families are better off apart.

Evan, fourteen, and Chris, ten. Early on I asked Henry about their mother. “Up and left one day,” he said. “Wanted nothing to do with them or me.” That was all. His disgust told me everything I needed to know, I thought, and I took it as a warning. I couldn’t even tell you now what I thought I’d been warned against. But I kept my distance, mostly. My job was to make jokes, keep things light. I let Henry be the parent and I was more like the laughing godmother. The godmother who slept with their dad, of course.

Take that time Evan spray-painted naked women on the back of the Forest Service office building. Almost a year ago. It’s not a capital crime, is what I said. And they were interesting naked women, some skinny, some fat, some wearing Coco Chanel hats
and carrying pocketbooks. They’re kinda cute, I told Henry. He refused to laugh. I told him the office needed new paint anyway, and he said I was missing the point. “Oh, Hanky, what is the point?” I groaned, and he said, “The point is, you’ve got to take things seriously some of the time. This is bigger than a stupid wall. This is his life. This is our life. Sometimes I may not want to take it seriously either but I have to—that’s my job. Get it?” And there was a moment there that we stared each other down, for a long minute seeing each other the way everyone else sees us, until I caught the twitch under his mustache and reached out to tweak his skinny little belly. Chris came in then, sidling up between us the way he always did when our fights were over, and I assumed that was the end of it.

* * *

This is what I love about the field: there’s nothing right now but the sound of boots on gravel and the hiss of my propane tank. I continue down the hill, the walking a sort of meditation. My mind wanders, my eyes wander. I can’t see the CDOT burn or the Forest Service compound anymore, so instead I look wide, twenty miles across the river to the opaque shadows of Nipple Peak and beyond. It’s raining over there, or snowing, even. Good. A heavy, windless rain is what we need this afternoon.

So far, so good. All Ray and I have talked about today is logistics. When I come to the end of my line I sit on the truck bumper and watch him, the way he lifts up the edges of the underbrush delicately, really thinking before he points his flame. He sets his feet down the same way, avoiding ruts and rocks. Slow, steady, focused but oblivious. Is this fondness I’m feeling? I ask myself for amusement’s sake, but I have to think about it. Is that what this odd lightness across my shoulders is called? Or is it merely relief at being out of the office? For all that I can tell a good story I’m the village idiot when it comes to feelings, and I guess that’s one of the things I always liked about Henry: he knew his. Anger, horniness, corniness, love. And he knew I had mine under the crazy stories and the smartass jokes. I got used to him reading me before I did, and it throws me, now, to have to come up with the terminology on my own. Not that anyone’s seriously trying, that
presumptuous prying at the office aside. I shift one of my boots on the gravel, its weight dragging the rest of my leg along.

Ray comes up to me, saying, “She’s looking good. Firing well. And this cloudcover ought to keep her in check.”

I agree. This is the sort of material my conversations are made of these days. The conversations I allow, at least. No more agonizing over whether to ground Evan again or try to figure out something more creative. No more arguing about whether study hall is a class and whether it’s morally if not legally okay to skip it. No more pointless wondering if Henry and I can have something together that isn’t about the boys.

Ray and I stand twenty feet apart or so, facing up the oak-brush slope that is starting to catch and smolder, the smoke drifting down and settling into our clothes and hair. I’m about to say something smartass when Ray speaks instead.

“We’re getting some elk burgers and the last of the apricot preserves out this weekend. Clean out the pantry and the freezer before the summer gets going. Rita said to ask you. Our treat.”

My heart sinks and I wish I didn’t have to answer. “I was sort of thinking of heading over to Denver this weekend,” I lie. “Visit my sister, shop some.”

Ray pokes his head forward with approval. “Keep up with the family, yes,” he says. “The two of you are close, I remember. Got to hold onto that.”

We’re not close, my sister and I. We bore each other.

“Yeah, family. What a joy,” I mutter, throwing my gear into the back of the truck. It’s time to start for the top of the burn, to make sure we keep the damage under control. I hear Ray clear his throat behind me and I start the truck, rev the gas over anything he might be saying.

He waits until we’re driving to continue. “How’re things going, then?”

This is not, not, not a conversation I want to have, at this particular moment. At any particular moment. “Oh, fine,” I answer. “Really, fine.”

I drive fast, up past where we’ve been torching all morning, gunning into the soft mud in the shadow of the roadcut, slipping a little, pulling free. I tell myself he needed to say his little piece, to get it out, and now he’ll let it go. I hope this, anyhow, but suspect he’s still chewing on something over there because he keeps making these fake coughs and fluffing himself.
Coming up is the part of the road we talk about in safety meetings, where it narrows to the width of a pickup and erosion has eaten it away on the drop-off side. If he were to look out his window now, Ray could see two hundred feet down to the remains of the last truck that took this curve too fast. Ray’s got his eyes straight ahead. We’re supposed to take this section at a crawl but I don’t brake. I steer into the bank, not so much that we bounce off it but enough to lift the tires on the driver’s side and tilt us more sharply toward the cliffs. I see a rut edge that will keep us level if I catch it just right. I don’t so much steer as finesse the wheel, smoothing my hand across it like I’m flattening a bedsheets. At twenty-five miles an hour it’s an impressive move, one only a few folks at the Forest Service could pull off. Only a few people would even try, and believe me, Ray may be a firefighter but he isn’t one of them. I make it. I glance over at him without moving my head. I’m hoping I’ve shut him up, but I can’t tell.

At the crest of the next switchback I turn in at the fireline we’ve cut. Hacked-off oakbrush branches squeal against the paint and it’s loud enough in the cab that we don’t have to talk anymore. I drive to the end, where the slope is in permanent shadow and still harbors snow. There’s a smell here like winter, which makes me think, for no reason, of the herons. We get out and start uncoiling the hoses.

Ray goes out one way with one hose, and I go out the other, and when we’ve reached as far as we can in either direction we get back in the truck and drive back toward the road. It’s kind of communal and quiet, just the popping of the fire as it moves our way and the hiss of water hitting leaves. We talk, but it’s basic stuff: whether the wind’s changing, how the sky looks, whether the rain will come like we’re hoping it will.

* * *

The night herons came back this spring. I saw the first one two weeks ago, a male, poking around the charred remains of the old herony. I squatted in the weeds for an hour watching him through my binoculars; he’d poke through the unburnt stuff, finicky, and wade along the shore where the tamarisk still shaded it. He’d fly off for a while, and then come back, and forage some more. Right at dusk he lifted his head and took off, flying in the direction of the river. They’ll nest somewhere else until the preserve grows back, I guess.
“They look like puppets!” Chris said the first time I brought him out to the preserve for some birdwatching—and they do; I’d never thought of it before, but they look exactly like puppets you could pull over your forearm, just that shape and awkward and careful, the way puppets would move. The birdwatching was pretty much against my rules but we both liked it enough that I made an exception. Two or three times a month we’d pack sandwiches and head out at first light, just the two of us, never talking much except to point out birds.

The month before the fire Chris and I had snuck up to the night heron nest and watched the chicks, two strapping healthy things with the ugliest awkwardest fuzz you could imagine. It felt a little like we were playing hooky, leaving Henry and Evan alone to sleep off their latest fight. Chris leaned in, enormous-eyed, holding his breath, plucking at my elbow. “We shouldn’t touch them,” he decided, and instead we stroked the reeds around the nest, dipped our fingers in the icy marshwater, gently poked the dry sticks. The chicks would clack their oversize beaks at our fingers if they strayed too close, but in between their beaks would open piteously, flashing the pattern of gape and throat. Chris pulled me away so that the adult birds could return and we watched from behind an olive thicket until our knees got cold and stiff. I pulled our sandwiches out of my pack and pulled off pieces for Chris so he could watch through the binoculars and then he did the same for me, biting off a piece and giving a piece.

I tell myself that if Ray and I end up talking about the whole Henry mess today I am going to keep Chris out of it.

More than halfway down the fireline the drizzle begins and it’s clear we won’t need this extra strip of watered ground. Ray and I keep going anyway, without even having to consult each other. With him it’s probably cautiousness and with me it’s putting off the miserable wait in the truck as long as possible. We’re committed to a long day here, until the fire’s reached the fireline and been subdued, or peters out of its own accord.

I zip up my rain slicker and train the hose into the oakbrush below me. I watch the silvery spray battle the smoke-gray drizzle,
the oakbrush drinking it all up greedily. This line of brush is spared the fire, for now, and I imagine it already sending runnels underground to take the space opened up by the burn. I know very well that oakbrush doesn’t grow by runnels, but it spreads almost as fast and as thick as if it did. Part of me hates this part of the prescribed burns, where we have to put it out.

I’m remembering the last time we went camping with Ray and Rita, the last time we did anything as a family at all—almost a year ago now, last Memorial Day. We thought we were at some kind of truce, sitting around the fire with the other adults, talking about the summer to come, the fires that were already starting, down near Grand Junction, the seasonal crews we had coming on the following week, the way the whole summer was shaping up quick into a hectic replica of all the previous summers. The mosquitoes weren’t out yet and the air was frigid as soon as the sun dropped into the trees: the adults were bundled into lawn chairs and the kids were playing some elaborate running game in untied sneakers and shorts. When the sun started streaking orange through the trees we called them in for bratwursts and potato salad, and Rita made everyone in her family wash their hands before eating, even Ray, who looked at us sheepishly.

“She’s got him whupped,” Henry said to me later, in the tent, both of us stretched out on top of the sleeping bags as long as we could stand the cold, wearing undershirts and underwear.

“‘Whupped’? What the hell is that?”

“You know. ‘Wash with soap, Ray, there’s still dirt in the cracks of your palms.’”

“Just because she doesn’t want him to get hepatitis or something he’s whupped. I suppose because I make you use Kleenex instead of your shirt you’re whupped too.” I wouldn’t have admitted it but I felt the same as Henry. We still thought what we had going was so much better than what they had, than what anyone had.

I remember how we whispered then, partly to keep our voices hidden and partly to keep an ear out for the boys’ tent on the other side of the fire. When everyone was asleep we made love, quietly, getting as much in as we could before fire season came and one or the other of us was always away. Henry was happy that night, giggling and making faces until we really got into it. I put my chin on his shoulder and imagined opening myself to the stars,
the two of us rutting in the cold fields like a couple of badgers. Alone and free, the offspring turned out to forage for themselves; the male meeting the female at the outer reaches of their separate territories.

A breaking branch makes me jump, but it’s just the burned oakbrush settling in on itself. My fingers are starting to get clumsy from the cold and I think that if we could have always been that way—that free—maybe we would have made it. The thought makes me ache with grief and for the first time in four months I wonder what Henry’s doing now. If he’s out in a Targhee National Forest pickup, trying to get a feel for the new country. Or if he’s stuck in a meeting somewhere, his blood pressure ticking up with every minute on the clock. No one there to pass him a goofy note or to jiggle his knee; no one there to keep things light.

By the time Ray and I finish dousing the fireline the hillside is socked in. The view has vanished, town and mountains both, so that it’s just the two of us, the truck, and the smoldering hillside. The rain’s running off my sleeves into my gloves and dripping off my helmet down my neck, and I’m desperately trying to dream up a task to keep me from sitting in that truck with Ray for the next few hours. He’s shaking his hose, clearing it of water so it folds better and doesn’t mold or freeze; he has an awkward way of doing this, leaning out over his boots and holding the heavy hose at the end of his extended arms. He looks up from it sideways. “Glad to hear you’re doing well, over there,” he says. Meaning my apartment, I presume, and not where I’m standing as we speak. “It’s been a year of change, for sure.”

“That it has.”

We climb into the front seat to get out of the wet but leave the doors open, our legs slung out the sides. The silence builds up between us.

“Looks like we might have to burn again next week,” Ray says. “To get all of it.”

I nod.

We get out our lunches. Ray has a sandwich, probably made for him by Rita, that’s bulging with fresh produce, and a dinner roll spread with homemade jam. I’ve got three cheese-and-cracker
packs, slightly crushed. I try not to look envious, although I can already taste the way my mouth will feel after all this salt. On my good days I used to make five sandwiches of a morning, one each for myself and the boys and two for Henry. I’d never been a sandwich person—all that assembly—but I got pretty good at it. I liked standing in the kitchen in the half-dark, putting sandwiches and chips and cut-up carrots into little baggies while the guys stumbled through the shower, one after another.

All that ended after the boys moved to their mother’s in Florida. The trailer was deadly silent, like a museum. I’d clean something, straighten the magazines on the table, vacuum the rug, and it would stay just as I’d set it for days. Even Bette and Bruno seemed to tiptoe around. I kept expecting to find Henry crying, or for some little thing to set him off to where we could open up into it, scream, hold each other again, but everything stayed fixed and perfect. I would pat Henry on the shoulder and it was like patting the couch. My total fantasy of married life, Henry to myself and not a single fight, and I could barely breathe.

Ray wipes a mud smear off the dash with his sleeve. “I guess I’ve never been clear what happened,” he says, glancing at me. “That stuff with the boys?” He’s nervous, which is what throws me off my guard, I’ll decide later. It makes me think I can do this: he’s just curious. I think I can handle curious.

I start with the phone call, middle of the night, how the dogs leapt up like they’d been shot. Barking so loud we could hardly think. I’m going to make this good, I decide as I warm into it. Give him his money’s worth. I haven’t had too many chances to tell this story, and it’s great to hear my old voice, hear the way it can tweak and smooth until the mess sounds like just another crazy brouhaha.

“After Henry hung up the phone,” I tell Ray, “I remember I yanked on my boots. Didn’t even lace them. The light was on, that big fluorescent one in the kitchen, so it was super bright, but to look at us you would’ve thought it was pitch black. Henry, stumbling around, me, stumbling around, Henry already pissed as a hornet caught in a window. The dogs crawling around the kitchen floor with their tails between their legs.

“We got to the door and the smoke about knocked us on our backs. Little bits of ash floating down like snow.”
Ray nods—“You could smell it all the way down in town,” he said.

— I couldn’t even tell you if Henry was up ahead of me, or behind me, or what, except that I could hear him yelling—I make my voice go into a fake growl to imitate him—I’m gonna get you little shits! I’m gonna kill you both! And I was like, oh man, better keep Henry out of trouble, and I wasn’t even thinking about the boys. Like I couldn’t grasp it yet or something, how serious it was.

“So there we were, flailing along, coming up on the district firetrucks parked along the road, and we could even see the West Divide fire crew trucks down near the CDOT, and more trucks turning up from the highway—and then we hear this explosion, and I’m like, oh, fuck. And Bob Brenner gets on the megaphone, and he starts telling everyone to evacuate the area, evacuate the area.” I do a pretty good imitation of Bob Brenner’s self-important drawl and Ray snickers a little, despite himself.

“And Henry and I pay him absolutely no attention, of course, with Henry on the warpath and me worried that he’s going to make some huge fool of himself in front of the entire five-agency fire crew, and then we come up over the ridge.”

I pause a moment. I remember the ridge, and how that was the second I realized this was something different than what I thought. I came up over the ridge and saw the heronry in flames, that great forked cottonwood trunk at the center of it burning away like a campfire, and it was like my heart stopped within my chest. The first thing I thought was, the herons. Then, they couldn’t possibly have done this. Not the boys. Then I decided it must have been Evan. I could see him doing it, but not Chris. But there they were.

“And that’s when we saw the two of them, down by the squad car already.” I crumple up my cracker paper and stuff it under the seat. “Half of what the squad car’s there for is to protect them from the parents, in that kind of situation. They’re not dumb. Because we were livid. Well, Henry was. As the parent. Came screaming down the entire hill in that smoke, it’s lucky he didn’t keel over with asphyxiation. And I was pretty pissed too by that point.”

I wonder how much of this story Ray’s heard, and from who. If Officer Davis or any of the West Divide fire crew has told him
how I was actually the one to get to the boys first, screaming like some hysterical elephant. I try not to remember this part.

“Not one of my best moments. You know, because this was the thing—they’d taken our fire gear—these things. The very propane tank I used today. This very helmet.”

Ray shakes his head and says, “You got to wonder what those boys were thinking. Got to wonder.”

“Well, not very much, that was clear,” I say.

I am remembering how they both looked so tired and worried, their soot-streaked faces lit by the fire. They were wearing my personal protective gear, my helmet and spare helmet, my firefighting jacket and windbreaker. My things. I wanted to rip the stuff off their bodies. Evan was practicing an arrogant sneer and Chris was shivering up against him, trying not to cry, and I was having none of it. None of it.

Maybe I kind of did try to tear the clothes off them, because I kept grabbing and snatching at them, screaming, “What about them? Did you think about them?” Even though it was Evan I finally got ahold of it was Chris I was asking. I had my face down so my nose was almost touching his. “Did you just forget about them just like that? Or do you not even care?” I’m not even sure if they knew I was talking about the herons—well, Evan would have had no idea. But Chris might have, except that he was so scared he was actually trembling. Not even that stopped me, not one whit.

“Not one of my best moments,” I repeat to Ray, shaking my head. My tone’s different; I’ve let the story get away from me. I even feel a weird tremor in my chest, a shaking I’m afraid will spread. I take a deep breath, try to calm myself.

“And you know how the rest of it goes,” I add lamely. “The charges, the penalties. What we decided to do, because we had to do something, and then Social Services getting involved. The whole huge mess.”

My heart is pounding and I look out the window at the miserable rain, think how for most people it would be the burning that brings back that ash-choked night. For me it’s the sodden piss of water on leaves. I’m wishing I’d kept my mouth shut.

Ray clears his throat. He says, “Actually, that was the part I was asking about. How that all happened. Because. Well, be-
I have a sudden image of the trailer on the evening after Henry beat the boys with his Rodeo Days belt. Henry sat in front of the TV with a plate of peas and hot dogs, eyes fixed on the screen but not watching, not responding. I ate my dinner alone at the dining room table. Through the closed door to his room I could actually hear Evan’s complete and total scorn; I could also hear the miserable little sobs of Chris. I suppose this was where an intelligent person, a sensitive person, would have done something. But for some reason I thought it would all blow over, that we’d get over it, like we always had. Or else I thought it was already too late. I don’t know. That day is kind of a blur, and all I can really conjure up is how the hot dogs felt as big as horse pills going down my throat.

"Henry kept asking me, what should I do, what should I do?" I say, hating the way my voice is husky. "I said, I don’t know. They’re your boys."

Chris those days not even looking at me, not meeting my eye. Sulking, I thought. That was the other thing: all the old roles and alliances were broken. Maybe I was in it just as deep as Henry, only I would never admit it. Have never admitted it.

"Henry’d just keep pestering me. Should we do this, should we do that? Trying out all these ideas, like he was asking for my permission or something." That was how we worked, I want to explain.

I go on. My imitation Henry voice has gotten clumsy, bitternessounding. "'On the one hand it was an accident,' he’d say. 'They were just playing with your fire gear.' 'On the other hand that equipment isn’t a toy,' he’d answer himself. 'And they ought to know that by now. Mistakes have consequences, that’s something I’ve got to teach them. They’re just these irresponsible little punks right now. It’s goddamn embarrassing.’"

God, how he was pissing me off. This thing, that thing, what should we do. When all I thought was that it wouldn’t matter either way—whatever he did would ignite the blow-up, and then we could wait awhile, and then things would go back to normal. The thing was, I was telling myself all along that it was Henry who had to make the first move. I say, "I just got sick of all Henry’s dither-dathering. So in the end I was like, go for it.”

Ray nods. Thoughtfully. Pretty far cry from your own little home, I want to say, but obviously don’t. I want to ask him what he would have done, on the odd chance his honor-roll kids went
out and torched three snowplows and a wildlife refuge. I want to say, okay, we’ve had our little heart-to-heart, let’s move on.

He brushes some crumbs off his lap, straightens up. “Did you ever find out who told Social Services?” he asks.

It’s a question that takes me by surprise. “Well, the boys, we always thought,” I say. It wasn’t something Henry and I ever talked about. But the boys weren’t exactly shy about parading their welts around to any and all that asked, although come to think of it, the only ones I knew for sure to have asked them were Social Services, and then later the Judge. I remember suddenly how for a while I had a weird suspicion that it was Henry who’d turned himself in, because of the way he just let everything happen after that. He didn’t even put up a fight when Darlene, his ex, called collect from Florida to tell him she was going to sue for full custody.

Something in Ray’s face changes as he says, “It was a strange time, then. Lee Hale was on leave that month, you remember. So it was just Henry and me down in that basement office. And he was muttering things, muttering and muttering. I never knew what to make of it and then you weren’t talking either, wouldn’t say nothing to nobody…”

“I was trying to stay out of it,” I say, my voice a little louder than it needs to be.

“Well, I didn’t know what was going on. And it turned out the day I picked to go down and talk to the boys was I guess just the day or so after. After Henry. And when I saw all those bruises and then tried to confront Henry—things just got out of hand.”

It’s like I know what Ray is trying to say and I don’t want to hear it. I lean down and turn on the truck so that we can go somewhere, anywhere, get out of this conversation. I figure we better get down past that tight spot in the road before the roads really get soft and I probably say something like this to Ray. In any case he doesn’t seem to have any objection to what we’re doing. In fact he’s still over there talking, even though I can barely hear him over the noise of the engine and the squeal of the branches taking off our paint.

This is what it sounds like he’s saying: “Of course they asked me when I filed the report whether I thought you all posed any danger to the boys. And I don’t know. I didn’t know what to tell them. So I said I didn’t know. Said I didn’t think so but I didn’t know.”
We pull out onto the road and it is greasy. Slick as snot, as we like to say. I’m more cautious than on the way up and I stop to make sure I’ve got it in four-wheel drive low. No need to rush this, I tell myself, although my toe keeps fluttering the gas a little too hard.

And let me tell you, Ray is not exactly helping. Blabbity blabbity blab. It’s like he’s had this confession up his sleeve all winter and was just waiting for the perfect moment. “And then when I talked to the boys,” he’s saying now. “I kept telling myself this. And then when Henry started having his doubts I knew I had to do something.”

“Henry had his doubts?” I ask, not even thinking about it. The rain’s really coming down and I’m starting to wonder if we shouldn’t pull over and wait for the roads to dry out a bit before trying the safety stand-down curve. I have a sudden sense of what it will feel like as the wheels lose their grip on the road, as the clutch gives up and we start sliding down.

“You remember how Henry was after that first week. Going around the office telling everyone he didn’t think you were fit parents, that maybe once you were but now you weren’t. He kept saying, Something has broken, something has broken.” I can sense Ray looking at me while he talks, waiting for me to nod in agreement. I can’t agree because I don’t remember any of this. Henry never said more than two words to me after he hit the boys.

“I knew it,” I say. “Henry had a breakdown.”

“Nancy, what Henry said is that he’d always thought you kind of loved the boys. In your phone-it-in way. That’s how he put it. Phone-it-in way.” His rueful laugh makes me jump. “But then after you just didn’t do anything, after you just let him—well, he said he didn’t know any more. He said it seemed like Evan and Chris could have been any two kids, for all you seemed to care. Whatever he thought the family was built on, he said, was false. And there wasn’t any more point to any of it.”

Here we are at the curve. I stop the truck. “What?” I say.

“Now I think he might have been over-harsh,” Ray keeps going, picking at his cuticles nervously. “But at the time, with everything that was going on—well, I wasn’t sure. I just wasn’t sure.”

I open the door before he can lean forward and say anything more in that earnest voice of his. I get out into the rain, saying that I just have to check the road. The rain plasters my hair to my head, my boots thicken with mud, and I see that we couldn’t
possibly have made it. At least this is what I think I see. It’s as if I notice for the first time how incredibly narrow this stretch is, how it seems I could span it with my outstretched arms and I’m sure I couldn’t do the same for the truck body. But there is no crumbling, no washout, nothing to show that the road is any different than it’s ever been. But it’s obvious to me we’re going to have to walk out.

I feel light-headed and nauseous, have to lay my hand on the truck’s hood to steady myself. Have to lay my forehead on the hood, too, the steaming gritty surface not quite a comfort. I’m furious at my shaking legs. Bad roads are nothing and we’re fine, we stopped in time, we’ll be able to get out of this just fine. I’m trying not to think about the last time I saw the boys, getting into the truck the morning Henry took them to the airport to send them on their way to Florida. Chris looked so small, the hood of his sweatshirt almost too big for his head. He looked back at the trailer one last time, his face blank and desperate; as he met my eyes I saw his face lift with a sudden something—hopefulness? fear? regret?—and I stepped back from the window, out of his line of sight, as if I hadn’t noticed.

Ray opens his door. “You all right?”

I wonder if throwing up would be a satisfactory answer.

“I am not fine, Ray McCallum. I am not fine,” I say, finally. I am trying not to think about the things I could have done.

I am trying not to think about what I did not do.

I am trying not to think about the bare apartment I will return to in a few hours, where I will strip off my gear, my sodden jeans and my mud-caked boots, my rain slicker and my rain-soaked shirt and my sweat-soaked bra, with Bette frolicking desperately around my feet. Where I will run the hot water in the shower until the mirror steams up and the great miserable hulk of myself has disappeared and I will not have to look at this great beast breaking down in gusty sobs because the whole great world she had thought she had was gone, forever, gone.

I don’t wait for Ray to pull together his things, for him to gather whatever items he thinks are prudent and necessary. I start walking, the mud-caked soles of my boots making a slight sucking sound at each step. By the time I get to the burnline I’m alone, one woman lumbering through the smoldering mess. I don’t hear the purr of the truck until it’s almost upon me and Ray’s leaning out the driver’s side window saying, “Get in. Nancy, for Godssakes, get in.”