

Catch, Release

Two split-tailed ravens strut across the roof. Another lands, the one they've been waiting for, the one with the rock, the flattened tennis ball, the boon of a silver Christmas tree ornament tossed inadvertently in the rubbish. The raven flies to the peak of the roof, considers angles, distances between peak and edge, his compatriots' studied indifference. He waits even as one of the others pecks at the roof as if he's determined to chip out his own toy from the asphalt shingles. Only when a crescendo of complaint begins does the raven release and let roll, transforming the chorus into joyous cackles and a maddened rush to retrieve.

You think this is funny? You think this is play?

It's all about loss. Don't kid yourself. Even a simple game of catch is hinged on the moment the ball leaves the glove, the moment it returns. Don't even try to think this story or any story is about something else.

They were in the church, and Eddie's memorial service had just ended. Without a coffin, without a body, the gathering had felt incomplete. When Digger Fowler, the old funeral director, clutched at the sleeve of Nora's best navy-blue jacket and drew her to an alcove beside the baptismal font, she followed expectantly. The old man's slurred speech was incomprehensible at first, and Nora, conscious of the others waiting to offer their condolences, tried to edge away. But Digger Fowler caught her with his ramblings, words that seemed to enter her ear in disarray, sorting themselves into sense even as his mouth stopped moving and he pulled away to regard her reaction.

"Who can be sure?" he whispered to her. "No records, beyond recognition. Did I see his face? No, I did not. I would swear it... stack of Bibles. I did not.

“Oh, he’d never leave you, darling,” Digger Fowler insisted, his fingers pressing into Nora’s arm. “Rest assured. He’s waiting for the moment.”

What moment? thirteen-year-old Rose wondered. She leaned heavily on the pillar between her mother and the undertaker, waiting for Digger Fowler to speak again. Too tender-hearted for his job, he spoke out of kindness, unwilling to merely shake her mother’s hand and express his sorrow that Rose’s dad was dead. But her mother was no fool, was she?

“The island,” Nora said, softly. “Of course.”

In the undertaker’s theory, her father never died. The night of the accident, the Aid Squad had cut a poor, burnt body from a car (Nora’s car, in fact) and taken it to St. Michael’s Hospital, where they took one look and sent it on to Fowler’s Funeral Home. Yet the next morning, the body—still presumed to be Eddie—was gone. Old Fowler’s son apologized like crazy to Nora. Apparently, the body, confused with another, had been sent on for cremation. But Digger Fowler wondered, one eyebrow raised, was the body Eddie’s? After all, in a most telling coincidence, Eddie’s small sailboat, *Windspinner*, had lost its mooring that night, only to be found swamped a mile or so down the Mill beach, aimed in the direction of the island where Eddie grew up, the island he missed and talked about at every opportunity.

No one lived on Eddie’s island anymore. Just the scavenging gulls and raccoons, the black-tailed deer and slant-eyed wild goats. Those gossiping ravens. The wells had all dried up, and State Wildlife had bought the few miles of craggy rock and forest meadow. Only a couple of ancient sisters and a retired farmer remained, all too creaky to do more than tend their vegetable patches, until they agreed to leave their gray frame houses and tumbledown barns, take the state money, and move on. Eddie had been okay until then, until he read about the closed mail ferry and witnessed the last shuttle of islander goods arriving in Salish Bay.

“Oh, he took that badly, didn’t he, dear?” Digger Fowler had whispered to Nora. “I’d say for certain, he was not in his right mind.”

Nora had never been to the island. Even the motion of the town ferry, toddling back and forth across the placid bay from peninsula to peninsula, was too much for Rose’s mother. A single excursion could make her violently ill. A trip to the island, farther away, across rougher water, was out of the question. If only she could *see* him there, she told

Rose, if she could know the island the way he did, she could hold on until he was ready to come home. But how? Who could paint for her the portrait of Eddie, happy again, slowly gaining his strength so that he could come back to her? Eddie had been the baby of the island. Only a few old folks, missing persons themselves with their memories in pieces, carried the island still.

After days of searching, Nora lit on the Mary Flower Home: a sprawling, one-story, heavily ramped structure behind a nearly dead privet hedge. She charmed her way into the nursing home, explaining her purpose in a way that made her sound sane, as if she were just a local historian enamored with the abandoned island. Rose was left to follow, slinking in her mother's shadow, averting her eyes from the shrunken occupants of wheelchairs, wraiths who faced the walls and plaintively crooned, or worse, were so drugged that Rose imagined they were already dead and simply propped up around the place to convey an aura of gruesome prosperity. Only twenty souls resided at Mary Flower and, compared with other nursing home patients, their lucidity was striking. Here, the residents were not only forthcoming, they were more inclined to bypass their adult lives and skip back to their own childhood days where Nora lurked, yearning for a mention of the island where her husband had grown up, and where—she was nearly positive now—he might be waiting.

Rose came along because she did not like the new emptiness of the house or the possibility that their neighbor, Mrs. Falcon, herself not long bereaved, would arrive on the doorstep. Old Mrs. Falcon had discovered (as a result of a recent past life reading) that she had once been a renowned baker, destined to do good with her pastry. She persisted in providing Rose and her mother with plate after plate of hard, iced buns or lopsided petits fours, dry as dust on the tongue. She even shared with them a cake shaped, Mrs. Falcon proudly announced, like the face of her grandson, a troubled boy she barely knew, a boy she had agreed to take in upon his release from juvie in two weeks. As a cake, the grandson, with his long, ugly face and hooded marzipan eyes, was not promising. He looked like Abe Lincoln gone pirate. Rose hoped for better things from the actual boy. She tried to imagine him as Tom Ungar, a tenant of her grandfather. Once, in the kitchen of her grandfather's house, Tom Ungar had lifted his long blond ponytail and invited Rose to stroke a tiny ebony angel tattooed on the back of his neck.

Mrs. Falcon told Rose and Nora that her grandson was in juvie because he missed too much school. Later, she amended his crime, telling Rose's mother that "Kids that age are so impressionable. They have no sense of time. They want everything now."

Then: "People shouldn't leave expensive things out where children can find them."

"He's a thief, Rose," her mother told her once they were alone. She sighed. "We better lock up your dad's tools."

They still had the house, one of a pair built by two unmarried brothers as an isolated homestead. Now, the twin frame farmhouses—theirs and Mrs. Falcon's—were simply the last in a long line of houses out on Little River Road. They had the truck, of course. The rent on Rose's father's boat shop was paid up nearly six months in advance due to a scraping and caulking job (his first in months) he had done for Torkney Fleiss, the port landlord. The garden was mulched, garlic sprouting in the far corner, raspberry canes pruned and ready for staking. They had stacks and stacks of dry firewood: madrona and quick-burning fir. The pantry was full of tinned fish—sockeye and halibut caught by Rose's father—and blackberry conserve from a family effort last August. Clothes hung in closets; boots in the hall; a box of tools in the corner of the mudroom. Saturday afternoons the radio persisted in playing the blues show he loved until his heart had grown so sore he would slam out of the house with a desperate look. Gone, but not. Missing, yet found daily: here and here and here. Both of them jumping at the sounds of the cat creaking the upstairs floorboards, the visiting ravens cavorting on the roof. Both of them waiting.

Somehow they made it to March, late afternoon, a Sunday. All morning long, at the Mary Flower, Nora interrogated wizened crones and incontinent old men who sat with their bathrobes open, flies undone on their yellowed boxer shorts, while Rose perched on a chair in the television lounge among wheelchairs, perhaps the only one actually watching *The Little Mermaid*. A social director had made a move to take Rose under her wing, plying the girl with half-sized plastic cups of fruit juice or Jell-O that left a metallic aftertaste. The morning wore them both out, and when the afternoon visitors began to arrive, Nora took Rose home. It was only two o'clock in the afternoon, but Rose was half asleep when the rickety truck left the pavement and bounced into the gravel drive. She opened her eyes in time to witness a tiny figure

dressed in an orange terrycloth sweatsuit leap before them, causing Nora to swerve the truck desperately.

“What in God’s name...?” Nora began, stalling the engine. “Oh,” she said, her voice already let-down, “it’s Claudine.”

“I just wanted to tell you,” the old lady said, leaning in through Nora’s window, “that Gordon’s arrived.”

It took a few minutes for Rose and her mother to recall Claudine Falcon’s delinquent grandson. “He’s had some troubles. He’s just skin and bones,” Claudine confided as she had several weeks ago when she first agreed to take in the boy. Her face was rosy from the wind and, Rose thought, she looked a little hysterical. As always, Rose wondered if Mrs. Falcon was all right in the head. Here she was, beaming as if her grandson’s juvenile record was an achievement.

“And what a tired boy! He’s been sleeping since they dropped him off.”

Rose cringed and glanced toward the upstairs windows of the Falcons’ house, half expecting to see the curtains shift. Wedged under the peeling madronas beside the barn was a beat-up silver car that Rose supposed the grandson had brought with him.

“Rose,” Claudine said, “you’ll come over later and meet Gordon, huh? I’ve been baking.”

Rose concentrated on her shoes, the same too-tight black flats she’d worn to her father’s memorial service, and waited for her mother to refuse the invitation for her.

“Give a call when the boy wakes up,” Nora said instead, restarting the truck to park it beside the old barn. “I’ll send her over.”

“Mom,” Rose began when they were alone.

“Later, Rose,” Nora said. “Please.”

Once the bathroom door closed, the faucet roar deafening her mother to the threatened phone call, Rose changed into jeans and a sweatshirt. She slipped on her boots and took the path to the river. Dark, spongy, nearly overgrown, this trail and the plants that lined it belonged to her father. All of it. He’d taught her the names: the lady’s tresses, the rangy purslane, the clumps of fireweed, the delicate umbrellas of enchanter’s nightshade—each distinct shape clustering into green anonymity. She could almost feel him rustling under the shadows like the all-seeing animals who used the river as a drinking hole. Deer sometimes crashed through the snowberries, one ungainly leg after another, while on the

opposite bank, a narrow trail served as a byway for lean, half-wild dogs, so intent upon their journeys that they seldom did more than glance at Rose, never breaking a trot.

The late afternoon sun crawled over the rock where Rose sat. Last winter, she and her father had been right here when he spotted a cougar above them, perched in a tree asleep. Thin and rangy, a mottled beast, it looked nothing like the sleek animal that was part of her plastic toy collection. Rose found it hard to believe the cougar was real. Following her father's instructions, she backed up the trail toward home, raising her hands above her head to make herself tall the way she'd been taught. She rushed into old Ule Falcon and babbled out the story of the cougar, pointing down the trail to where she'd left her father. Ule went looking for the cougar with a gun. Thought he'd shot it but found only the slightest trail of blood.

"Poor starving thing," her father said to her mother when he came in a half hour later. "Even from that distance, I could count its bones." Eddie's eyes were bright for the first time in days, an old coiled energy apparent in the way he leaned against the kitchen counter. He had kept the animal in his sight until Ule and his gun appeared out of nowhere. Her father nearly wrestled the old man down.

Nora had feigned concern, but she too had momentarily changed, lost the hovering, worried expression. Rose danced around the kitchen, raising her arms and catching her parents' hands in an eager demonstration that made them all laugh. They made a feast of nachos and guacamole and ate it in front of a video, a comedy that made them giddy, but later Rose woke in the middle of the night to his pacing. She heard the doors creaking, the far-off rumble of her father's restlessness.

For months, Rose wished the cougar back. She carried scraps from the kitchen to place in the crook of the tree, sure that it was the cougar who carried the half-eaten sandwiches away, even after she interrupted a pair of ravens lolling on the rock, yanking tongues of ham from between bread. Passersby, those ravens. Her father said they liked to cause trouble because they were too smart for the idle life they'd been handed. Their animal chores easily accomplished, only mischief guided them.

She liked to lie on the rock and daydream, mulling over the tricks of ravens and so clearly imagining the cougar chasing them away that she was not surprised that afternoon in March when she opened her eyes to spot, between flighty shadows, a figure in the tree. Seconds later, the boy's

black eyes met hers, and Rose panicked. She fled up the trail, not caring this time that she presented the easy prey of a small, dashing figure.

In the morning there was no sight of the grandson at the bus stop or at Salish Bay Middle School, but in the late afternoon when Rose wandered back up the driveway, kicking gravel, she saw him. A tallish boy with a shock of black hair, perched on the hood of the old strange car. He was smoking furiously, a grocery bag tilted beside him. Mrs. Falcon's own car, a gray Buick, was gone. Nora, too, was still at work.

Rose waved, hoping that would be enough, but the boy slid off the car and, grabbing the paper bag, approached her.

"Hey," he said, crushing his cigarette under one black boot. He held the bag out to her. "From my grandmother."

Rose took a step backward into the weeds beside the driveway. "A cake?" she asked.

"Pie," Gordon said. "Who knows what kind."

Although he looked fierce and serious, Gordon's voice was gentle, almost girlish. Rose felt a little sorry for him stuck out here with his grandmother, the reborn baker.

Gordon put the bag down. "Yours?" he asked, nodding toward the strange car.

"I thought it was yours."

"There's a note on the dashboard for someone named Nora."

Rose said, "Let me see."

The car was from her grandfather.

"You mean he's just giving it to you?" Gordon said.

Her grandfather rented his old Victorian in town to a motorcycle gang who called themselves The Phantom Corps. Her mother called them The Lost Boys. The Phantoms never seemed to pay their rent in cash. Tools, car parts, welded sculptures, old tape decks, even a chicken house—such was the currency that passed between Rose's grandfather and his tenants. When the Maverick appeared, her grandfather thought of Nora and the old truck. He had Tom Ungar drive it right over to Little River Road, his solution to a problem Nora had not yet acknowledged.

"She won't want it," Rose told her new neighbor.

"What will you do with it?" he asked.

Rose shrugged.

“Let’s get it outta there,” Gordon said.

Deep violet stains splotched the red vinyl interior, and the car stank of cigarette smoke. A dozen or more slits riddled the cracked dashboard, filled with matchbooks from places as diverse as the Sea Grift Motor Inn on the Oregon coast and Candy Jane’s, a strip joint in a place Gordon immediately proclaimed he had to visit—Candy, Alaska. The seat had been ripped out of the back, leaving just the molded gray metal form of the car’s underbody, with pieces of a brown, hairy undercarpet stacked on one side. Gordon and Rose sat in the Maverick for a half hour, reading the matchbooks and the surprisingly pristine owner’s manual they found (along with a pair of bright yellow panties and one pink mitten, filthy in its palm) in the glovebox. Tom Ungar had left the key in the ignition and when Gordon turned it, the Grateful Dead slammed into their heads.

Gordon was triumphant. He was glowing. He paced around the car, admiring it, so absorbed it took him a while to realize Rose was staring at him.

“What?” he said.

“You look like your cake,” Rose blurted out.

Nora arrived home just as Rose was explaining how Mrs. Falcon had captured his square-jawed ranginess in a three-layer dacquoise that had had the misfortune to have been made with rancid butter. Rose watched her mother drag her work folders and a grocery bag from the truck. She knew her mother wouldn’t notice the car. They had to point it out to her. They made her come closer, examine the details.

“It looks like the car of a serial killer,” she said.

Her eyes slipped back toward Eddie’s steadfast green truck. Beside it, the Maverick looked like a flashy slut, sleeping off a bender in the woods. Rose worried that her mother would want the car removed, but by the time Nora wandered across the lawn and through the back door, she had forgotten Rose’s new car.

The Maverick was nearly out of gas. Before dinner Gordon drained the gas tank of the seldom-used RV that had been the reason for Ule Falcon’s specially built garage. Gordon knew something of engines, he said, but Rose had to show him where the dipstick was, where to pour the can of thirty-weight oil they found in the Falcons’ garage. By ten o’clock, the women of both households were asleep, and Rose and Gordon met by the barn.

“I’ll drive first,” Gordon said, and he slipped behind the wheel.

For weeks, Nora was the soul of patience, the darling of the elderly, who, floating above the unfamiliar landscape of their current life, needed to tug continually on the strings of memory, that gnarled wire that still secured them to the earth. Nora anchored their ancient hands, while they tested themselves, stroking that thread with a wavering volubility. She heard tales of childhood pleasures (new dresses, old dogs, feasts scratched from a single ingredient—meals more delicious than any that came in the more prosperous years that followed) and childhood pains (hair curled in paper with hot tongs, castor oil, woodshed beatings). The old people regaled her with stories of peculiar habits: the unemployed father who kept a notebook, recording each nuance of the passing day; the mother who would only eat alone in the kitchen; the sister who fell weekly from the barn loft after wrestling with an imaginary suitor.

And the clothes! She was deluged with wardrobes: beaded hats and tiny strapped shoes and gloves buttoned up the sides, spring suits of pale blue linen, crepe party dresses with hand-stitched lace collars, winter furs, foundation garments—garters and girdles and slip straps biting shoulders—muffs and fur caps. She heard the firsts: a dance, a radio, a car, the first refrigerator replacing the icebox and the iceman with his ever-patient nag. The lasts: ancient mothers turned into babbling children, recriminations at the bedside, the back door closing quietly, the front door slamming, the silent phone. Weather: the roof that blew off the police station, the icicles on the milkman’s handlebar mustache, the fine hot nights that had children lined up under thin blankets on the summer lawn. The war, old friends, the war, the Depression, the lost house, the lost hope, the open hand. Secrets bottled up for decades were exhumed in incoherent whispers that brought on weeping fits and pride so tender Nora had to turn her face away as if she were presented with an open wound, incapable of seeing a connection between their lives and her own mission.

Patient—oh, she was so patient! Weeks went by before she heard of an outing to the island, a simple beach picnic long before Eddie’s time.

Imagine finding a scrap of fabric—a square-inch of pale, lavender linen with shredded edges and a hole in the weaving. Imagine sitting night after night with this forsaken relic, weaving the threads back into orderly lines that seem to lengthen and straighten with every pass of a

careful needle until finally the edges are looped and expertly bound, and what is left is a miniature but wholly perfect garment. This is what Nora did with a simple, half-fabricated memory from a strange, wispy-haired woman named Winckett, who released that long-ago picnic to Rose's mother. Nora snatched it up and reworked it as her own.

In the memory, there's a family picnic. On the island's beach, Nora filled her pockets with smooth beach stones, the flat green agates that lined the western shore. Stones she could imagine Eddie collecting on the rare warm day. She dragged a stick along the tideline and pounced upon the clamholes, jumping back before the stream of water shot out. She ate a piece of fried chicken and a tiny green apple and drank water from a canteen. Sand blew into the rice pudding, but she ate that, too, spooning in the grit with the smooth. Through everything, she kept looking over her shoulder for Eddie's approach, despite the fact that the picnic occurred some thirty years before his birth. She wandered, and when the picnic boat left, Nora was marooned on the darkening beach. The thin moon rose and the black beach transformed itself into a photograph of shadows. Whole families of raccoons waddled toward the water, their tidy hands rummaging in the stones for a forgotten half crust, an apple core. She huddled into herself, closing her eyes against the unusually light wind that hummed around her ears. When she opened them, the raccoons were gone and Eddie, years younger than she had known him, crouched beside her. As if she were a stranger, he showed her how to plunge her cool hands into the hill of stones beneath her. She pressed her hands and bare feet deep down to where the hidden stones, like forgotten coals, still contained the day's heat. Her eyes closed in pleasure. She held her hands there until that warmth too dissolved and Eddie was gone.

Through this one memory, Nora composed the island beach. She tried for more: the trail through the scrim of trees to the fields, the overgrown path leading up to the bluff house that Eddie's great-grandfather had built. She scoured local natural history books, but the photographs, wonderful in their individual context, could not be applied to the vague outlines of a dream. Nora felt her loss acutely. The landscape receded, the fabric stretched to its breaking point. She ate only soda crackers for a week, her heart half broken again. Even Rose could not claim her attention. Nora let the girl fend for herself, hardly noticing how Gordon had taken up residence at their kitchen table, eating soup from tins with Rose, watching television as Rose watched her.

“Mom,” Rose called again and again, her voice like a distant ringing telephone.

“Mom.”

“In a minute,” Nora whispered, closing her eyes.

In the trees outside, the ravens mimicked. First, they performed their imitation of the cats. The trees resounded with plaintive meows that caused every feline in the vicinity to slink low and take cover, but Nora paid the ravens no mind until one of them tried *his* voice, a single low note from a favorite blues song. Then she lingered in the drive, holding her breath so that even that slight interruption wouldn't mask the sound she desperately wanted to hear. The ravens pelted her with cedar berries, urging her to wake up, but she wouldn't budge, and disgusted, the ravens flew away, imitating her weeping as they went: *Uhnub-uhnub waawaawaa*.

They didn't mean to be cruel. It was just a game to them.

Not for Nora. She tried for more at the Mary Flower Home, but the old woman who supplied that thinnest of images was as coy as the ravens. That Mrs. Winckett, an island widow. She teased Nora, claiming kinship to the island as well as a memory that emerged and receded as drastically as a summer tide. Reluctantly, Nora returned to party dresses and china patterns and the thieving lies of wayward brothers, as she waited for another crumb from the old woman.

Gordon taught Rose to drive. Each night they cruised into town long after the single stoplight had been turned off, blinking an endless yellow in their direction. Gordon found the school bus barn, and it was as if they had tapped an oil well. They filled all their gas cans and a half dozen milk jugs besides. He taught Rose how to hold the hose in her mouth and suck just until she felt the pressure, the slight tang of fumes on her tongue. Gordon had a habit, Rose observed, of appearing to be looking straight forward while, in fact, he was watching everything to the side of him. Twice he had put his hand on the inside of her thigh as they drove, shrugging only slightly when she removed it, as if he'd hardly noticed that his hand had strayed. He tried to kiss her once, too, awkwardly, gasoline still on their tongues. Rose pushed him away, spitting into the weeds, and they had gone right back to their sibling alliance. For all his height, Gordon was skinny and weak; he was not Tom Ungar.

In the Maverick, they found a world entirely separate from the daytime. In the Maverick, everything belonged to them alone. They

drove down the beach access roads. They plowed through the empty sand, rumbling over the high tide line on Gold Egg Beach. They discovered the shadows of logging roads. On a moonlit night, from the top of a logging bluff, Rose spun the car to a stop and pointed out her father's island to Gordon.

"Car crash, I heard," Gordon said, giving her one of those sidelong looks.

Rose opened her mouth to answer, but she was speechless, staring at the far-off hazy hump of her father's island beyond the black water.

Nora lost more weight. Her skin seemed thinner, too, translucent and delicate. Mrs. Falcon sent over cream scones that nearly broke Rose's teeth and a Lady Baltimore cake that reeked of mouthwash.

"Tell your mother she needs to eat," was the message Mrs. Falcon sent to Rose through Gordon. But Rose could stand directly in front of Nora, practically screaming, and her mother would not leave her trance. Gordon played drums on the kitchen pots; the cats yowled from inattention. Nora moved upstairs to the armchair in her bedroom. The only one who seemed to hold her attention was the old witch, Winckett, the rest home pretender from the island.

Old Winckett was, so she said, a distant cousin of Eddie's grandfather. A cousin then, but she did not have any Eddie in her that Rose could see. In Rose's father's photographs, the Marvels were all fair-haired and freckled, with sensitive eyes that resulted in a squint by the time they reached their thirties. They had long thin faces and pretty mouths with slight overbites and children's pearl teeth. Winckett was a dark little woman, her face scrunched together. Woven within her white hair were strands of black that glistened as if she oiled them. Black hairs grew between her eyebrows, out of a mole on the left side of her face, and in a thin line above her upper lip. Her narrow, pinched lips were cracked, and the corners ran continually with saliva that she dabbed at with a soiled handkerchief. She reminded Rose of an ancient, cunning monkey.

On their way to the Mary Flower Home, Nora always stopped at Closet Creek Carry-Out to purchase treats for Winckett. She called this The Price of Admission. Nora, who had never allowed Rose to spend her own pocket money on a single chocolate toffee, now filled a shopping bag with treats wrapped in dusty cellophane. It was all the old woman seemed to eat. Her love for chocolate stained the rheumy corners of her

mouth and gave her a greedy, alert expression. She hoarded Nora's gifts in her beside drawer, nibbling at whatever her hand touched until the ants got in, and then she railed at the staff who cleared away the mess, vacuuming the ants without a single word of reproach. Rose peered into the drawer once, and she told Gordon later how she saw stiff cakes the color of dried mud; long chocolate biscuits gone white at the edges; and musty-smelling chocolate straws that she had seen only in Canada on a trip with her grandfather years ago. The old woman had picked and gnawed on every article in the drawer as if marking each for her alone. Rose thought they looked like animal droppings.

Lacey Dorchester, Mary Flower's social director, shook her head once when they were leaving, when Winckett called Nora back to wait on her one more time.

"Poor woman," Lacey said, drawing Rose aside. "You should make her stay home. You know, don't you, that your daddy's dead?"

Rose nodded, although until that moment she wasn't sure entirely that she did believe he was gone for good. Her mother's quest, her faith, had borne them past their initial hard grief. For the first time in months, as she watched her mother cradle the old woman with one arm, helping her down the hall, Rose felt her chest heave involuntarily under the weight of missing her father. Right after the accident, she had cried all the time, even waking from dreams to find her cheeks wet and her eyes sore.

"She's not related to Dad," she told Nora in the truck as they drove home.

"Look at me, Mommy." Rose shook her mother's arm and the truck bounced toward the shoulder. "If he were there, he'd let us know."

Nora barely turned her head toward Rose as she righted the wheel.

The next week Rose left her mother in the truck as they were leaving, on the pretense of needing the bathroom. Her mother was in a daze, trying to piece together a Winckett story of Eddie's first boat—fir planks tied together with strands of cedar bark.

Rose found the old woman in her room, sorting out her chocolates.

"Leave her alone," she whispered fiercely.

In a voice unlike the island cadence she presented to Nora, Mrs. Winckett hissed at Rose like an ancient gangster.

"Get lost," she said. "Take a hike."

“You’re hurting her.”

“Go jump a cliff,” the old woman stuttered with a smile that showed off her ruined teeth.

A madwoman. And outside, her mother in tears, clutching the steering wheel of her father’s unmoving truck.

“Why doesn’t your mom just go there and see for herself?” Gordon asked. His grandmother was so intent on her latest project—her masterpiece, she called it—that she was still up, well past her nine o’clock bedtime, and the children were housebound. Rose got a brief glimpse of Mrs. Falcon throwing cups of river dirt and high-rising flour into an enormous yellow mixing bowl.

“Someone will die from that cake,” Gordon pronounced, catching the expression on Rose’s face as Mrs. Falcon drizzled a thin green stream of what looked like antifreeze into her batter.

They moved to the screened porch and listened to Claudine Falcon’s mixer screeching in the kitchen.

“She can’t,” Rose said. “She gets too sick. She’s already sick.”

“We could go. You don’t get sick, do you? *I’ll* go.”

“You’d go anywhere.”

“I would,” Gordon admitted. “How hard can it be to find a boat to borrow?”

Rose smiled in spite of herself. The Maverick’s back floor was piled with items “borrowed” from unlocked cars in Salish Bay—tapes and sweatshirts, a bottle opener with a *Go Cougars!* logo on it. She shook her head. “He’s not there. Besides,” she added, “my mother wouldn’t believe me. The only one she listens to is Winckett—the pig.”

Gordon leaned forward in his seat to light a joint. The screen porch filled with an aroma that reminded Rose of moss and damp fur. Gordon’s teeth glistened as he bared them in a smile, smoke escaping in thin streams. Rose could feel his excitement.

“How’s this,” he said, sipping the air as he inhaled, “for a plan?”

Eleven o’clock on an April evening, Rose eases her bedroom door closed behind her. Her mother is asleep in the next room, worn out from Winckett’s teasing, her face on the pillow golden in the hall light she keeps burning like her own heart, steady and lonesome. Rose hugs the edges of the stairs so that the wood doesn’t sing her presence. Out the kitchen door, into the damp night, the funneled wind. New leaves and thin branches flung across the gravel drive that separates these

two furthestmost houses on Little River Road, the outpost of Salish Bay. And here is Gordon, waiting beside the barn under the madrona trees whose discarded shivers of red bark curl like tiny wounds over the silver Maverick, the car Gordon has already shifted into neutral. Then the two of them push through the gravel, their light footsteps hidden beneath the wind. Away from those two lonely houses to the blacktop of Little River Road, the black road, the empty road, where soon they're running, the doors half open. Rose will drive this time. Watch how she slips so easily behind the wheel while Gordon, with a well-practiced jump, lands one foot onto the doorjamb before ducking inside himself. A routine, anyone could see at a glance, performed each night in stealth because they are children after all. Gordon is fourteen and Rose a half year younger. How else could they fly if not in the ever-trilling dark, the engine silent until they are out of earshot, already lost?

Eleven o'clock. Not so late, but late enough for a secluded edge of town, populated only by two widow women and a pair of children. All along the coast that night, travelers' advisories are calling people home, but for the two children, especially Rose, the weather is a familiar, as if all their wild longings have pushed beyond their meager bodies into the world which can itself barely contain them. Rose turns the radio on to its fullest volume to match the rhythms she hears outside and smiles as the Maverick rocks like a foolish ship alone in the storm. Gordon nudges her and, ignorant of any real danger, passes her a newly lit joint. But Rose knows. In the rearview mirror, tree limbs swoon across the road behind them like calls to their blind backs. The children smoke, their faces briefly illuminated. They push through the tearing wind and the wretched, receiving night to the bridge where the river is rising and past there to the cliff road, the old logging trail, all Rose's choices this night. Just as the Maverick begins to buck the potholes and gravel and jutting roots of that upward trail, the rain slams down upon them, blinding the children under its racketing. Rose forges ahead, trusting the Maverick to keep to the gravel, to beat through the fingers of tree boughs, whisking across the side windows. Gordon's eyes are closed—under the tumult, he's humming like crazy.

Storms come and go. They are of no importance to Rose. The Maverick rises steadily up the logging road into the eerie light of a besieged night sky. Abruptly, the narrow road curves to the right and the Maverick miraculously follows, the storm beating on its back, down the road that is almost a trail, that crosses another rough bridge and, still climbing, meets the lonely pavement of the county road.

In Dahline, the storm has passed. The Mary Flower Home is almost dark. A single center room, the nurses' station, illuminated. Rose points out Winckett's room on the northernmost corner, entangled by the fierce tentacles of a climbing rose. Gordon reaches into the back of the Maverick and carefully removes the tall box that he has taken from his grandmother's kitchen.

If the aides who catalog the night at Mary Flower choose this time to check on Winckett, they might think they are dreaming. Rose does, and she knows better. She stands outside the window in the open space Gordon has made with his Buck knife among the tangled, thorny branches and watches as Gordon's shadowy figure unveils Mrs. Falcon's latest, a seven-layer devil's food wedding cake. There is only one figure atop the cake. Gordon had insisted on one and Rose plucked the first she could find, the little plastic cougar that sat on her dresser. Her father once told her that cougars are called the ghosts of the forests since they move so stealthily. For Rose, this seems a fitting representation of old Winckett: treacherous, craving, dead.

Gordon finds Mrs. Winckett's little bedside lamp, and her eyes glow greedily in the semi-darkened room when she sees what he has brought her. It's no surprise to Rose how the old woman accepts Gordon's offering so easily. She's a taker, the old woman is. Rose watches Gordon from the window; it's as if he and Winckett are on stage. Observes him pull a spoon from the pocket of his jeans and wheel the cake on the bedside trolley so close to the old woman her hands begin to twitch. For what seems like an hour, Gordon feeds Winckett. Her ugly mouth opens again and again in anticipation. Rose can hear her grunts, her heightened breath growing steadily weaker, melding into the night sounds around her—the click of crickets, the echo of a barking dog, old rain shuffling through leaves.

While she waits for Gordon to finish, Rose remembers a story her father told about another game ravens play. A grieving ritual, he thought. Huddled on treetops, they'll watch solemnly while one of their own lofts himself into the air, higher and higher, higher and higher before suddenly, without warning, he loses all that lovely upward drift and begins to plummet. What had been grace ascending a mere moment before now becomes a fast falling dead weight. Is he hurt? Is he dead? If not, surely he will be so when the ground smacks against him. The trees have never been so quiet. Even the wind ceases its useless twirling. And oh how time stretches! What should take a moment, an instant you'd

miss if you merely glanced away, is endless. Little raven hearts nearly burst from the pressure of anticipation.

And so the raven falls. Backwards, its great wings spread wide. Like a rock. Like a hurled weight. The ravens left in the tree begin to jostle one another, a rapid jittering that breaks the silence. Squawks of raucous glee erupt as the raven falls and falls. From every branch, they offer encouragement to the plummeting bird, the rock, the weight, which at the very last minute comes alive, flipping and bouncing onto the wind. Wings flapping easily, our hero shoots back to the tree's crown, where the other ravens greet him with more squawks and full, almost intelligible words. Wings overlap wings in good will as they push each other toward the edge of a bough.

Who's next? Who's next?

The old woman will die, Rose knows, her witch's heart stopped by greed, and when in the morning her mother hears the news, she will understand finally what Rose is learning: that death can't be called back; that it comes unbidden, however much we hide ourselves, no matter how far we are from home. Those behind can only keep up the pretense—catch, release, catch, release—until the game is over.