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Written by Cheryl Strayed

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Cheryl Strayed

WILD

A JOURNEY FROM LOST TO FOUND

Atlantic Books
LONDON

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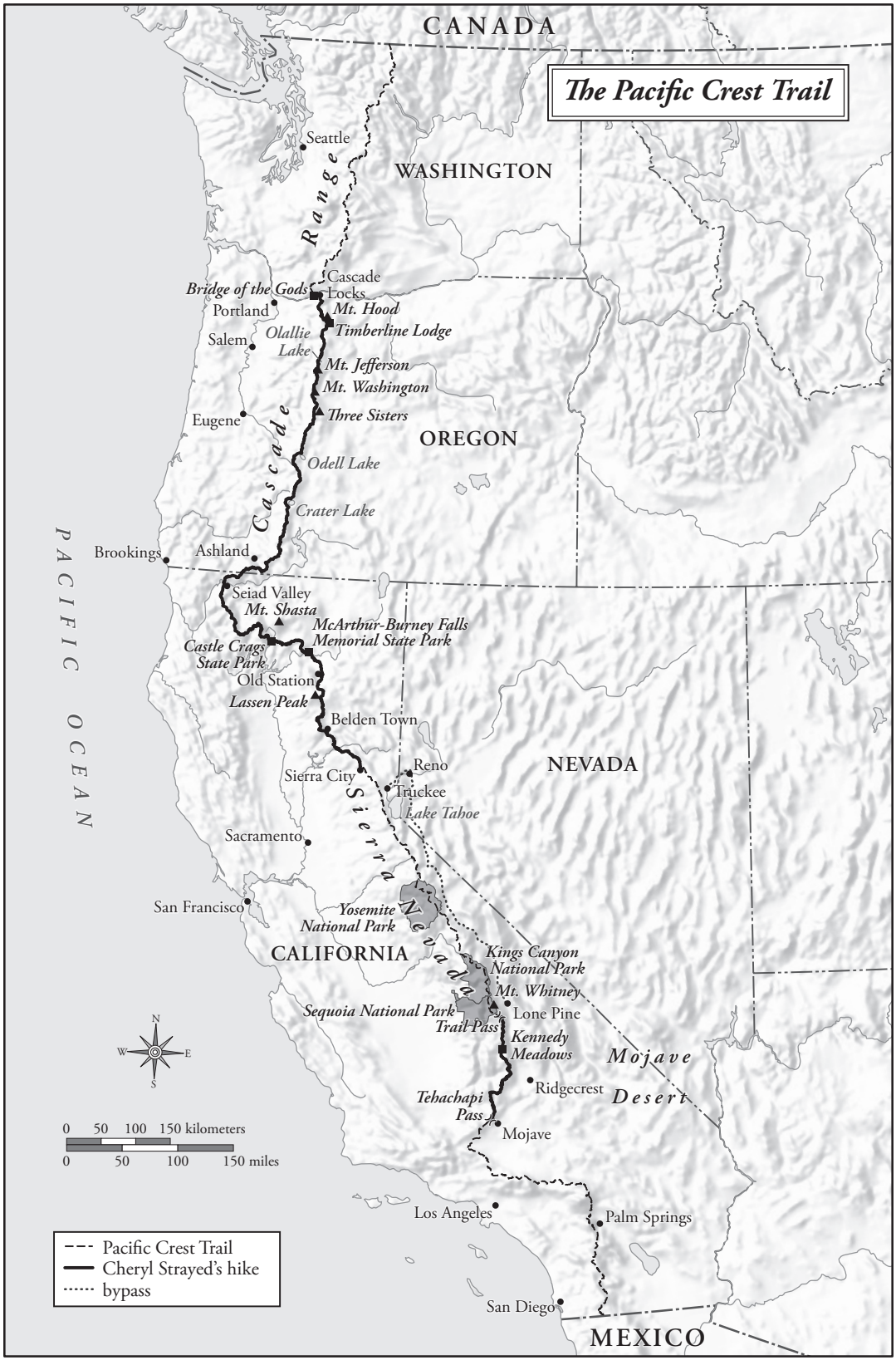
The Pacific Crest Trail
CANADA
WASHINGTON
OREGON
NEVADA
CALIFORNIA
MEXICO
PACIFIC OCEAN
Cascade Range
Sierra Nevada
Mojave Desert
Seattle
Cascade Locks
Bridge of the Gods
Portland
Mt. Hood
Timberline Lodge
Salem
Olallie Lake
Mt. Jefferson
Mt. Washington
Three Sisters
Eugene
Odell Lake
Crater Lake
Brookings
Ashland
Seiad Valley
Mt. Shasta
McArthur-Burney Falls Memorial State Park
Castle Crags State Park
Old Station
Lassen Peak
Belden Town
Sierra City
Reno
Truckee
Lake Tahoe
Sacramento
San Francisco
Yosemite National Park
Kings Canyon National Park
Mt. Whitney
Sequoia National Park
Lone Pine
Trail Pass
Kennedy Meadows
Ridgecrest
Tehachapi Pass
Mojave
Los Angeles
Palm Springs
San Diego
N
W
E
S
0 50 100 150 kilometers
0 50 100 150 miles
Pacific Crest Trail
Cheryl Strayed's hike
bypass

PROLOGUE

The trees were tall, but I was taller, standing above them on a steep mountain slope in northern California. Moments before, I'd removed my hiking boots and the left one had fallen into those trees, first catapulting into the air when my enormous backpack toppled onto it, then skittering across the gravelly trail and flying over the edge. It bounced off of a rocky outcropping several feet beneath me before disappearing into the forest canopy below, impossible to retrieve. I let out a stunned gasp, though I'd been in the wilderness thirty-eight days and by then I'd come to know that anything could happen and that everything would. But that doesn't mean I wasn't shocked when it did.

My boot was gone. Actually gone.

I clutched its mate to my chest like a baby, though of course it was futile. What is one boot without the other boot? It is nothing. It is useless, an orphan forevermore, and I could take no mercy on it. It was a big lug of a thing, of genuine heft, a brown leather Raichle boot with a red lace and silver metal fasts. I lifted it high and threw it with all my might and watched it fall into the lush trees and out of my life.

I was alone. I was barefoot. I was twenty-six years old and an orphan too. *An actual stray,* a stranger had observed a couple of weeks before, when I'd told him my name and explained how very loose I was in the world. My father left my life when I was six. My mother died when I was

twenty-two. In the wake of her death, my stepfather morphed from the person I considered my dad into a man I only occasionally recognized. My two siblings scattered in their grief, in spite of my efforts to hold us together, until I gave up and scattered as well.

In the years before I pitched my boot over the edge of that mountain, I'd been pitching myself over the edge too. I'd ranged and roamed and railed—from Minnesota to New York to Oregon and all across the West—until at last I found myself, bootless, in the summer of 1995, not so much loose in the world as bound to it.

It was a world I'd never been to and yet had known was there all along, one I'd staggered to in sorrow and confusion and fear and hope. A world I thought would both make me into the woman I knew I could become and turn me back into the girl I'd once been. A world that measured two feet wide and 2,663 miles long.

A world called the Pacific Crest Trail.

I'd first heard of it only seven months before, when I was living in Minneapolis, sad and desperate and on the brink of divorcing a man I still loved. I'd been standing in line at an outdoor store waiting to purchase a foldable shovel when I picked up a book called *The Pacific Crest Trail, Volume 1: California* from a nearby shelf and read the back cover. The PCT, it said, was a continuous wilderness trail that went from the Mexican border in California to just beyond the Canadian border along the crest of nine mountain ranges—the Laguna, San Jacinto, San Bernardino, San Gabriel, Liebre, Tehachapi, Sierra Nevada, Klamath, and Cascades. That distance was a thousand miles as the crow flies, but the trail was more than double that. Traversing the entire length of the states of California, Oregon, and Washington, the PCT passes through national parks and wilderness areas as well as federal, tribal, and privately held lands; through deserts and mountains and rain forests; across rivers and highways. I turned the book over and gazed at its front cover—a boulder-strewn lake surrounded by rocky crags against a blue sky—then placed it back on the shelf, paid for my shovel, and left.

But later I returned and bought the book. The Pacific Crest Trail wasn't a world to me then. It was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery. Something bloomed inside me as I traced its jagged line with my finger on a map.

I would walk that line, I decided—or at least as much of it as I could in about a hundred days. I was living alone in a studio apartment in

Minneapolis, separated from my husband, and working as a waitress, as low and mixed-up as I'd ever been in my life. Each day I felt as if I were looking up from the bottom of a deep well. But from that well, I set about becoming a solo wilderness trekker. And why not? I'd been so many things already. A loving wife and an adulteress. A beloved daughter who now spent holidays alone. An ambitious overachiever and aspiring writer who hopped from one meaningless job to the next while dabbling dangerously with drugs and sleeping with too many men. I was the granddaughter of a Pennsylvania coal miner, the daughter of a steelworker turned salesman. After my parents split up, I lived with my mother, brother, and sister in apartment complexes populated by single mothers and their kids. As a teen, I lived back-to-the-land style in the Minnesota northwoods in a house that didn't have an indoor toilet, electricity, or running water. In spite of this, I'd become a high school cheerleader and homecoming queen, and then I went off to college and became a left-wing feminist campus radical.

But a woman who walks alone in the wilderness for eleven hundred miles? I'd never been anything like that before. I had nothing to lose by giving it a whirl.

It seemed like years ago now—as I stood barefoot on that mountain in California—in a different lifetime, really, when I'd made the arguably unreasonable decision to take a long walk alone on the PCT in order to save myself. When I believed that all the things I'd been before had prepared me for this journey. But nothing had or could. Each day on the trail was the only possible preparation for the one that followed. And sometimes even the day before didn't prepare me for what would happen next.

Such as my boots sailing irretrievably off the side of a mountain.

The truth is, I was only half sorry to see them go. In the six weeks I'd spent in those boots, I'd trekked across deserts and snow, past trees and bushes and grasses and flowers of all shapes and sizes and colors, walked up and down mountains and over fields and glades and stretches of land I couldn't possibly define, except to say that I had been there, passed over it, made it through. And all the while, those boots had blistered my feet and rubbed them raw; they'd caused my nails to blacken and detach themselves excruciatingly from four of my toes. I was done with those boots by the time I lost them and those boots were done with me, though it's also true that I loved them. They had become not so

much inanimate objects to me as extensions of who I was, as had just about everything else I carried that summer—my backpack, tent, sleeping bag, water purifier, ultralight stove, and the little orange whistle that I carried in lieu of a gun. They were the things I knew and could rely upon, the things that got me through.

I looked down at the trees below me, the tall tops of them waving gently in the hot breeze. They could keep my boots, I thought, gazing across the great green expanse. I'd chosen to rest in this place because of the view. It was late afternoon in mid-July, and I was miles from civilization in every direction, days away from the lonely post office where I'd collect my next resupply box. There was a chance someone would come hiking down the trail, but only rarely did that happen. Usually I went days without seeing another person. It didn't matter whether someone came along anyway. I was in this alone.

I gazed at my bare and battered feet, with their smattering of remaining toenails. They were ghostly pale to the line a few inches above my ankles, where the wool socks I usually wore ended. My calves above them were muscled and golden and hairy, dusted with dirt and a constellation of bruises and scratches. I'd started walking in the Mojave Desert and I didn't plan to stop until I touched my hand to a bridge that crosses the Columbia River at the Oregon-Washington border with the grandiose name the Bridge of the Gods.

I looked north, in its direction—the very thought of that bridge a beacon to me. I looked south, to where I'd been, to the wild land that had schooled and scorched me, and considered my options. There was only one, I knew. There was always only one.

To keep walking.

PART ONE

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

The breaking of so great a thing
should make a greater crack.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE,
Antony and Cleopatra

1

THE TEN THOUSAND THINGS

My solo three-month hike on the Pacific Crest Trail had many beginnings. There was the first, flip decision to do it, followed by the second, more serious decision to *actually* do it, and then the long third beginning, composed of weeks of shopping and packing and preparing to do it. There was the quitting my job as a waitress and finalizing my divorce and selling almost everything I owned and saying goodbye to my friends and visiting my mother's grave one last time. There was the driving across the country from Minneapolis to Portland, Oregon, and, a few days later, catching a flight to Los Angeles and a ride to the town of Mojave and another ride to the place where the PCT crossed a highway.

At which point, at long last, there was the actual doing it, quickly followed by the grim realization of what it meant to do it, followed by the decision to quit doing it because doing it was absurd and pointless and ridiculously difficult and far more than I expected doing it would be and I was profoundly unprepared to do it.

And then there was the real live truly doing it.

The staying and doing it, in spite of everything. In spite of the bears and the rattlesnakes and the scat of the mountain lions I never saw; the blisters and scabs and scrapes and lacerations. The exhaustion and the deprivation; the cold and the heat; the monotony and the pain; the thirst and the hunger; the glory and the ghosts that haunted me as I hiked

eleven hundred miles from the Mojave Desert to the state of Washington by myself.

And finally, once I'd actually gone and done it, walked all those miles for all those days, there was the realization that what I'd thought was the beginning had not really been the beginning at all. That in truth my hike on the Pacific Crest Trail hadn't begun when I made the snap decision to do it. It had begun before I even imagined it, precisely four years, seven months, and three days before, when I'd stood in a little room at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and learned that my mother was going to die.

I was wearing green. Green pants, green shirt, green bow in my hair. It was an outfit that my mother had sewn—she'd made clothes for me all of my life. Some of them were just what I dreamed of having, others less so. I wasn't crazy about the green pantsuit, but I wore it anyway, as a penance, as an offering, as a talisman.

All that day of the green pantsuit, as I accompanied my mother and stepfather, Eddie, from floor to floor of the Mayo Clinic while my mother went from one test to another, a prayer marched through my head, though *prayer* is not the right word to describe that march. I wasn't humble before God. I didn't even believe in God. My prayer was not: *Please, God, take mercy on us.*

I was not going to ask for mercy. I didn't need to. My mother was forty-five. She looked fine. For a good number of years she'd mostly been a vegetarian. She'd planted marigolds around her garden to keep bugs away instead of using pesticides. My siblings and I had been made to swallow raw cloves of garlic when we had colds. People like my mother did not get cancer. The tests at the Mayo Clinic would prove that, refuting what the doctors in Duluth had said. I was certain of this. Who were those doctors in Duluth anyway? What was Duluth? *Duluth!* Duluth was a freezing hick town where doctors who didn't know what the hell they were talking about told forty-five-year-old vegetarian-ish, garlic-eating, natural-remedy-using nonsmokers that they had late-stage lung cancer, that's what.

Fuck them.

That was my prayer: *Fuckthemfuckthemfuckthem.*

And yet, here was my mother at the Mayo Clinic getting worn out if she had to be on her feet for more than three minutes.

"You want a wheelchair?" Eddie asked her when we came upon a row of them in a long carpeted hall.

"She doesn't need a wheelchair," I said.

"Just for a minute," said my mother, almost collapsing into one, her eyes meeting mine before Eddie wheeled her toward the elevator.

I followed behind, not allowing myself to think a thing. We were finally on our way up to see the last doctor. The *real doctor,* we kept calling him. The one who would gather everything that had been gathered about my mom and tell us what was true. As the elevator car lifted, my mother reached out to tug at my pants, rubbing the green cotton between her fingers proprietarily.

"Perfect," she said.

I was twenty-two, the same age she was when she'd been pregnant with me. She was going to leave my life at the same moment that I came into hers, I thought. For some reason that sentence came fully formed into my head just then, temporarily blotting out the *Fuck them* prayer. I almost howled in agony. I almost choked to death on what I knew before I knew. I was going to live the rest of my life without my mother. I pushed the fact of it away with everything in me. I couldn't let myself believe it then and there in that elevator and also go on breathing, so I let myself believe other things instead. Such as if a doctor told you that you were going to die soon, you'd be taken to a room with a gleaming wooden desk.

This was not so.

We were led into an examining room, where a nurse instructed my mother to remove her shirt and put on a cotton smock with strings that dangled at her sides. When my mother had done so, she climbed onto a padded table with white paper stretched over it. Each time she moved, the room was on fire with the paper ripping and crinkling beneath her. I could see her naked back, the small curve of flesh beneath her waist. She was not going to die. Her naked back seemed proof of that. I was staring at it when the real doctor came into the room and said my mother would be lucky if she lived a year. He explained that they would not attempt to cure her, that she was incurable. There was nothing that could have been done, he told us. Finding it so late was common, when it came to lung cancer.

"But she's not a smoker," I countered, as if I could talk him out of the diagnosis, as if cancer moved along reasonable, negotiable lines. "She only smoked when she was younger. She hasn't had a cigarette for years."

The doctor shook his head sadly and pressed on. He had a job to do. They could try to ease the pain in her back with radiation, he offered.

Radiation might reduce the size of the tumors that were growing along the entire length of her spine.

I did not cry. I only breathed. Horribly. Intentionally. And then forgot to breathe. I'd fainted once—furious, age three, holding my breath because I didn't want to get out of the bathtub, too young to remember it myself. *What did you do? What did you do?* I'd asked my mother all through my childhood, making her tell me the story again and again, amazed and delighted by my own impetuous will. She'd held out her hands and watched me turn blue, my mother had always told me. She'd waited me out until my head fell into her palms and I took a breath and came back to life.

Breathe.

"Can I ride my horse?" my mother asked the real doctor. She sat with her hands folded tightly together and her ankles hooked one to the other. Shackled to herself.

In reply, he took a pencil, stood it upright on the edge of the sink, and tapped it hard on the surface. "This is your spine after radiation," he said. "One jolt and your bones could crumble like a dry cracker."

We went to the women's restroom. Each of us locked in separate stalls, weeping. We didn't exchange a word. Not because we felt so alone in our grief, but because we were so together in it, as if we were one body instead of two. I could feel my mother's weight leaning against the door, her hands slapping slowly against it, causing the entire frame of the bathroom stalls to shake. Later we came out to wash our hands and faces, watching each other in the bright mirror.

We were sent to the pharmacy to wait. I sat between my mother and Eddie in my green pantsuit, the green bow miraculously still in my hair. There was a big bald boy in an old man's lap. There was a woman who had an arm that swung wildly from the elbow. She held it stiffly with the other hand, trying to calm it. She waited. We waited. There was a beautiful dark-haired woman who sat in a wheelchair. She wore a purple hat and a handful of diamond rings. We could not take our eyes off her. She spoke in Spanish to the people gathered around her, her family and perhaps her husband.

"Do you think she has cancer?" my mother whispered loudly to me.

Eddie sat on my other side, but I could not look at him. If I looked at

him we would both crumble like dry crackers. I thought about my older sister, Karen, and my younger brother, Leif. About my husband, Paul, and about my mother's parents and sister, who lived a thousand miles away. What they would say when they knew. How they would cry. My prayer was different now: *A year, a year, a year.* Those two words beat like a heart in my chest.

That's how long my mother would live.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked her. There was a song coming over the waiting room speakers. A song without words, but my mother knew the words anyway and instead of answering my question she sang them softly to me. "Paper roses, paper roses, oh how real those roses seemed to be," she sang. She put her hand on mine and said, "I used to listen to that song when I was young. It's funny to think of that. To think about listening to the same song now. I would've never known."

My mother's name was called then: her prescriptions were ready.

"Go get them for me," she said. "Tell them who you are. Tell them you're my daughter."

I was her daughter, but more. I was Karen, Cheryl, Leif. Karen Cheryl Leif. KarenCherylLeif. Our names blurred into one in my mother's mouth all my life. She whispered it and hollered it, hissed it and crooned it. We were her kids, her comrades, the end of her and the beginning. We took turns riding shotgun with her in the car. "Do I love you this much?" she'd ask us, holding her hands six inches apart. "No," we'd say, with sly smiles. "Do I love you *this* much?" she'd ask again, and on and on and on, each time moving her hands farther apart. But she would never get there, no matter how wide she stretched her arms. The amount that she loved us was beyond her reach. It could not be quantified or contained. It was the ten thousand named things in the Tao Te Ching's universe and then ten thousand more. Her love was full-throated and all-encompassing and unadorned. Every day she blew through her entire reserve.

She grew up an army brat and Catholic. She lived in five different states and two countries before she was fifteen. She loved horses and Hank Williams and had a best friend named Babs. Nineteen and pregnant, she married my father. Three days later, he knocked her around the room. She left and came back. Left and came back. She would not

put up with it, but she did. He broke her nose. He broke her dishes. He skinned her knees dragging her down a sidewalk in broad daylight by her hair. But he didn't break her. By twenty-eight she managed to leave him for the last time.

She was alone, with KarenCherylLeif riding shotgun in her car.

By then we lived in a small town an hour outside of Minneapolis in a series of apartment complexes with deceptively upscale names: Mill Pond and Barbary Knoll, Tree Loft and Lake Grace Manor. She had one job, then another. She waited tables at a place called the Norseman and then a place called Infinity, where her uniform was a black T-shirt that said GO FOR IT in rainbow glitter across her chest. She worked the day shift at a factory that manufactured plastic containers capable of holding highly corrosive chemicals and brought the rejects home. Trays and boxes that had been cracked or clipped or misaligned in the machine. We made them into toys—beds for our dolls, ramps for our cars. She worked and worked and worked, and still we were poor. We received government cheese and powdered milk, food stamps and medical assistance cards, and free presents from do-gooders at Christmastime. We played tag and red light green light and charades by the apartment mailboxes that you could open only with a key, waiting for checks to arrive.

"We aren't poor," my mother said, again and again. "Because we're rich in love." She would mix food coloring into sugar water and pretend with us that it was a special drink. Sarsaparilla or Orange Crush or lemonade. She'd ask, *Would you like another drink, madam?* in a snooty British voice that made us laugh every time. She would spread her arms wide and ask us how much and there would never be an end to the game. She loved us more than all the named things in the world. She was optimistic and serene, except a few times when she lost her temper and spanked us with a wooden spoon. Or the one time when she screamed *FUCK* and broke down crying because we wouldn't clean our room. She was kindhearted and forgiving, generous and naïve. She dated men with names like Killer and Doobie and Motorcycle Dan and one guy named Victor who liked to downhill ski. They would give us five-dollar bills to buy candy from the store so they could be alone in the apartment with our mom.

"Look both ways," she'd call after us as we fled like a pack of hungry dogs.

When she met Eddie, she didn't think it would work because he was eight years younger than she, but they fell in love anyway. Karen and

Leif and I fell in love with him too. He was twenty-five when we met him and twenty-seven when he married our mother and promised to be our father; a carpenter who could make and fix anything. We left the apartment complexes with fancy names and moved with him into a rented ramshackle farmhouse that had a dirt floor in the basement and four different colors of paint on the outside. The winter after my mother married him, Eddie fell off a roof on the job and broke his back. A year later, he and my mom took the twelve-thousand-dollar settlement he received and with it bought forty acres of land in Aitkin County, an hour and a half west of Duluth, paying for it outright in cash.

There was no house. No one had ever had a house on that land. Our forty acres were a perfect square of trees and bushes and weedy grasses, swampy ponds and bogs clotted with cattails. There was nothing to differentiate it from the trees and bushes and grasses and ponds and bogs that surrounded it in every direction for miles. Together we repeatedly walked the perimeter of our land in those first months as landowners, pushing our way through the wilderness on the two sides that didn't border the road, as if to walk it would seal it off from the rest of the world, make it ours. And, slowly, it did. Trees that had once looked like any other to me became as recognizable as the faces of old friends in a crowd, their branches gesturing with sudden meaning, their leaves beckoning like identifiable hands. Clumps of grass and the edges of the now-familiar bog became landmarks, guides, indecipherable to everyone but us.

We called it "up north" while we were still living in the town an hour outside of Minneapolis. For six months, we went up north only on weekends, working furiously to tame a patch of the land and build a one-room tarpaper shack where the five of us could sleep. In early June, when I was thirteen, we moved up north for good. Or rather, my mother, Leif, Karen, and I did, along with our two horses, our cats and our dogs, and a box of ten baby chicks my mom got for free at the feed store for buying twenty-five pounds of chicken feed. Eddie would continue driving up on weekends throughout the summer and then stay come fall. His back had healed enough that he could finally work again, and he'd secured a job as a carpenter during the busy season that was too lucrative to pass up.

KarenCherylLeif were alone with our mother again—just as we'd been during the years that she'd been single. Waking or sleeping that summer,

we were scarcely out of one another's sight and seldom saw anyone else. We were twenty miles away from two small towns in opposite directions: Moose Lake to the east; McGregor to the northwest. In the fall we'd attend school in McGregor, the smaller of the two, with a population of four hundred, but all summer long, aside from the occasional visitor—far-flung neighbors who stopped by to introduce themselves—it was us and our mom. We fought and talked and made up jokes and diversions in order to pass the time.

Who am I? we'd ask one another over and over again, playing a game in which the person who was "it" had to think of someone, famous or not, and the others would guess who it was based on an infinite number of yes or no questions: *Are you a man? Are you American? Are you dead? Are you Charles Manson?*

We played it while planting and maintaining a garden that would sustain us through the winter in soil that had been left to its own devices throughout millennia, and while making steady progress on the construction of the house we were building on the other side of our property and hoped to complete by summer's end. We were swarmed by mosquitoes as we worked, but my mother forbade us to use DEET or any other such brain-destroying, earth-polluting, future-progeny-harming chemical. Instead, she instructed us to slather our bodies with pennyroyal or peppermint oil. In the evenings, we would make a game of counting the bites on our bodies by candlelight. The numbers would be seventy-nine, eighty-six, one hundred and three.

"You'll thank me for this someday," my mother always said when my siblings and I complained about all the things we no longer had. We'd never lived in luxury or even like those in the middle class, but we had lived among the comforts of the modern age. There had always been a television in our house, not to mention a flushable toilet and a tap where you could get yourself a glass of water. In our new life as pioneers, even meeting the simplest needs often involved a grueling litany of tasks, rigorous and full of boondoggle. Our kitchen was a Coleman camp stove, a fire ring, an old-fashioned icebox Eddie built that depended on actual ice to keep things even mildly cool, a detached sink propped against an outside wall of the shack, and a bucket of water with a lid on it. Each component demanded just slightly less than it gave, needing to be tended and maintained, filled and unfilled, hauled and dumped, pumped and primed and stoked and monitored.

Karen and I shared a bed on a lofted platform built so close to the

ceiling we could just barely sit up. Leif slept a few feet away on his own smaller platform, and our mother was in a bed on the floor below, joined by Eddie on the weekends. Every night we talked one another to sleep, slumber-party style. There was a skylight window in the ceiling that ran the length of the platform bed I shared with Karen, its transparent pane only a few feet from our faces. Each night the black sky and the bright stars were my stunning companions; occasionally I'd see their beauty and solemnity so plainly that I'd realize in a piercing way that my mother was right. That someday I *would* be grateful and that in fact I was grateful now, that I felt something growing in me that was strong and real.

It was the thing that had grown in me that I'd remember years later, when my life became unmoored by sorrow. The thing that would make me believe that hiking the Pacific Crest Trail was my way back to the person I used to be.

On Halloween night we moved into the house we'd built out of trees and scrap wood. It didn't have electricity or running water or a phone or an indoor toilet or even a single room with a door. All through my teen years, Eddie and my mom kept building it, adding on, making it better. My mother planted a garden and canned and pickled and froze vegetables in the fall. She tapped the trees and made maple syrup, baked bread and carded wool, and made her own fabric dyes out of dandelions and broccoli leaves.

I grew up and left home for college in the Twin Cities at a school called St. Thomas, but not without my mom. My acceptance letter mentioned that parents of students could take classes at St. Thomas for free. Much as she liked her life as a modern pioneer, my mother had always wanted to get her degree. We laughed about it together, then pondered it in private. She was forty, too old for college now, my mother said when we discussed it, and I couldn't disagree. Plus, St. Thomas was a three-hour drive away. We kept talking and talking until at last we had a deal: she would go to St. Thomas but we would have separate lives, dictated by me. I would live in the dorm and she would drive back and forth. If our paths crossed on campus she would not acknowledge me unless I acknowledged her first.

"All this is probably for nothing," she said once we'd hatched the plan. "Most likely I'll flunk out anyway." To prepare, she shadowed me during the last months of my senior year of high school, doing all the homework that I was assigned, honing her skills. She replicated my work-

sheets, wrote the same papers I had to write, read every one of the books. I graded her work, using my teacher's marks as a guide. I judged her a shaky student at best.

She went to college and earned straight As.

Sometimes I hugged her exuberantly when I saw her on campus; other times I sailed on by, as if she were no one to me at all.

We were both seniors in college when we learned she had cancer. By then we weren't at St. Thomas anymore. We'd both transferred to the University of Minnesota after that first year—she to the Duluth campus, I to the one in Minneapolis—and, much to our amusement, we shared a major. She was double majoring in women's studies and history, I in women's studies and English. At night, we'd talk for an hour on the phone. I was married by then, to a good man named Paul. I'd married him in the woods on our land, wearing a white satin and lace dress my mother had sewn.

After she got sick, I folded my life down. I told Paul not to count on me. I would have to come and go according to my mother's needs. I wanted to quit school, but my mother ordered me not to, begging me, no matter what happened, to get my degree. She herself took what she called a break. She only needed to complete a couple more classes to graduate, and she would, she told me. She would get her BA if it killed her, she said, and we laughed and then looked at each other darkly. She'd do the work from her bed. She'd tell me what to type and I'd type it. She would be strong enough to start in on those last two classes soon, she absolutely knew. I stayed in school, though I convinced my professors to allow me to be in class only two days each week. As soon as those two days were over, I raced home to be with my mother. Unlike Leif and Karen, who could hardly bear to be in our mother's presence once she got sick, I couldn't bear to be away from her. Plus, I was needed. Eddie was with her when he could be, but he had to work. Someone had to pay the bills.

I cooked food that my mother tried to eat, but rarely could she eat. She'd think she was hungry and then she'd sit like a prisoner staring down at the food on her plate. "It looks good," she'd say. "I think I'll be able to eat it later."

I scrubbed the floors. I took everything from the cupboards and put new paper down. My mother slept and moaned and counted and swallowed her pills. On good days she sat in a chair and talked to me.

There was nothing much to say. She'd been so transparent and effusive and I so inquisitive that we'd already covered everything. I knew that her love for me was vaster than the ten thousand things and also the ten thousand things beyond that. I knew the names of the horses she had loved as a girl: Pal and Buddy and Bacchus. I knew she'd lost her virginity at seventeen with a boy named Mike. I knew how she met my father the next year and what he seemed like to her on their first few dates. How, when she'd broken the news of her unwed teen pregnancy to her parents, her father had dropped a spoon. I knew she loathed going to confession and also the very things that she'd confessed. Cursing and sassing off to her mom, bitching about having to set the table while her much younger sister played. Wearing dresses out the door on her way to school and then changing into the jeans she'd stashed in her bag. All through my childhood and adolescence I'd asked and asked, making her describe those scenes and more, wanting to know who said what and how, what she'd felt inside while it was going on, where so-and-so stood and what time of day it was. And she'd told me, with reluctance or relish, laughing and asking why on earth I wanted to know. I wanted to know. I couldn't explain.

But now that she was dying, I knew everything. My mother was in me already. Not just the parts of her that I knew, but the parts of her that had come before me too.

It wasn't long that I had to go back and forth between Minneapolis and home. A little more than a month. The idea that my mother would live a year quickly became a sad dream. We'd gone to the Mayo Clinic on February 12. By the third of March, she had to go to the hospital in Duluth, seventy miles away, because she was in so much pain. As she dressed to go, she found that she couldn't put on her own socks and she called me into her room and asked me to help. She sat on the bed and I got down on my knees before her. I had never put socks on another person, and it was harder than I thought it would be. They wouldn't slide over her skin. They went on crooked. I became furious with my mother, as if she were purposely holding her foot in a way that made it impossible for me. She sat back, leaning on her hands on the bed, her eyes closed. I could hear her breathing deeply, slowly.

"God damn it," I said. *"Help me."*

My mother looked down at me and didn't say a word for several moments.

"Honey," she said eventually, gazing at me, her hand reaching to stroke the top of my head. It was a word she used often throughout my childhood, delivered in a highly specific tone. This is not the way I wanted it to be, that single *honey* said, but it was the way it was. It was this very acceptance of suffering that annoyed me most about my mom, her unending optimism and cheer.

"Let's go," I said after I'd wrestled her shoes on.

Her movements were slow and thick as she put on her coat. She held on to the walls as she made her way through the house, her two beloved dogs following her as she went, pushing their noses into her hands and thighs. I watched the way she patted their heads. I didn't have a prayer anymore. The words *fuck them* were two dry pills in my mouth.

"Bye, darlings," she said to the dogs. "Bye, house," she said as she followed me out the door.

It hadn't occurred to me that my mother would die. Until she was dying, the thought had never entered my mind. She was monolithic and insurmountable, the keeper of my life. She would grow old and still work in the garden. This image was fixed in my mind, like one of the memories from her childhood that I'd made her explain so intricately that I remembered it as if it were mine. She would be old and beautiful like the black-and-white photo of Georgia O'Keeffe I'd once sent her. I held fast to this image for the first couple of weeks after we left the Mayo Clinic, and then, once she was admitted to the hospice wing of the hospital in Duluth, that image unfurled, gave way to others, more modest and true. I imagined my mother in October; I wrote the scene in my mind. And then the one of my mother in August and another in May. Each day that passed, another month peeled away.

On her first day in the hospital, a nurse offered my mother morphine, but she refused. "Morphine is what they give to dying people," she said. "Morphine means there's no hope."

But she held out against it for only one day. She slept and woke, talked and laughed. She cried from the pain. I camped out during the days with her and Eddie took the nights. Leif and Karen stayed away, making excuses that I found inexplicable and infuriating, though their absence

didn't seem to bother my mom. She was preoccupied with nothing but eradicating her pain, an impossible task in the spaces of time between the doses of morphine. We could never get the pillows right. One afternoon, a doctor I'd never seen came into the room and explained that my mother was *actively dying.*

"But it's only been a month," I said indignantly. "The other doctor told us a year."

He made no reply. He was young, perhaps thirty. He stood next to my mother, a gentle hairy hand slung into his pocket, looking down at her in the bed. "From this point on, our only concern is that she's comfortable."

Comfortable, and yet the nurses tried to give her as little morphine as they could. One of the nurses was a man, and I could see the outline of his penis through his tight white nurse's trousers. I wanted desperately to pull him into the small bathroom beyond the foot of my mother's bed and offer myself up to him, to do anything at all if he would help us. And also I wanted to take pleasure from him, to feel the weight of his body against me, to feel his mouth in my hair and hear him say my name to me over and over again, to force him to acknowledge me, to make this matter to him, to crush his heart with mercy for us.

When my mother asked him for more morphine, she asked for it in a way that I have never heard anyone ask for anything. A mad dog. He did not look at her when she asked him this, but at his wristwatch. He held the same expression on his face regardless of the answer. Sometimes he gave it to her without a word, and sometimes he told her no in a voice as soft as his penis in his pants. My mother begged and whimpered then. She cried and her tears fell in the wrong direction. Not down over the light of her cheeks to the corners of her mouth, but away from the edges of her eyes to her ears and into the nest of her hair on the bed.

She didn't live a year. She didn't live to October or August or May. She lived forty-nine days after the first doctor in Duluth told her she had cancer; thirty-four after the one at the Mayo Clinic did. But each day was an eternity, one stacked up on the other, a cold clarity inside of a deep haze.

Leif didn't come to visit her. Karen came once after I'd insisted she must. I was in heartbroken and enraged disbelief. "I don't like seeing her

this way," my sister would offer weakly when we spoke, and then burst into tears. I couldn't speak to my brother—where he was during those weeks was a mystery to Eddie and me. One friend told us he was staying with a girl named Sue in St. Cloud. Another spotted him ice fishing on Sheriff Lake. I didn't have time to do much about it, consumed as I was each day at my mother's side, holding plastic pans for her to retch into, adjusting the impossible pillows again and again, hoisting her up and onto the potty chair the nurses had propped near her bed, cajoling her to eat a bite of food that she'd vomit up ten minutes later. Mostly, I watched her sleep, the hardest task of all, to see her in repose, her face still pinched with pain. Each time she moved, the IV tubes that dangled all around her swayed and my heart raced, afraid she'd disturb the needles that attached the tubes to her swollen wrists and hands.

"How are you feeling?" I'd coo hopefully when she woke, reaching through the tubes to smooth her flattened hair into place.

"Oh, honey," was all she could say most times. And then she'd look away.

I roamed the hospital hallways while my mother slept, my eyes darting into other people's rooms as I passed their open doors, catching glimpses of old men with bad coughs and purpled flesh, women with bandages around their fat knees.

"How are you doing?" the nurses would ask me in melancholy tones.

"We're holding up," I'd say, as if I were a we.

But it was just me. My husband, Paul, did everything he could to make me feel less alone. He was still the kind and tender man I'd fallen for a few years before, the one I'd loved so fiercely I'd shocked everyone by marrying just shy of twenty, but once my mother started dying, something inside of me was dead to Paul, no matter what he did or said. Still, I called him each day from the pay phone in the hospital during the long afternoons, or back at my mom and Eddie's house in the evenings. We'd have long conversations during which I'd weep and tell him everything and he would cry with me and try to make it all just a tiny bit more okay, but his words rang hollow. It was almost as if I couldn't hear them at all. What did he know about losing anything? His parents were still alive and happily married to each other. My connection with him and his gloriously unfractured life only seemed to increase my pain. It wasn't his fault. Being with him felt unbearable, but being with anyone else did

too. The only person I could bear to be with was the most unbearable person of all: my mother.

In the mornings, I would sit near her bed and try to read to her. I had two books: *The Awakening,* by Kate Chopin, and *The Optimist's Daughter,* by Eudora Welty. These were books we'd read in college, books we loved. So I started in, but I could not go on. Each word I spoke erased itself in the air.

It was the same when I tried to pray. I prayed fervently, rabidly, to God, any god, to a god I could not identify or find. I cursed my mother, who'd not given me any religious education. Resentful of her own repressive Catholic upbringing, she'd avoided church altogether in her adult life, and now she was dying and I didn't even have God. I prayed to the whole wide universe and hoped that God would be in it, listening to me. I prayed and prayed, and then I faltered. Not because I couldn't find God, but because suddenly I absolutely did: God was there, I realized, and God had no intention of making things happen or not, of saving my mother's life. God was not a granter of wishes. God was a ruthless bitch.

The last couple of days of her life, my mother was not so much high as down under. She was on a morphine drip by then, a clear bag of liquid flowing slowly down a tube that was taped to her wrist. When she woke, she'd say, "Oh, oh." Or she'd let out a sad gulp of air. She'd look at me, and there would be a flash of love. Other times she'd roll back into sleep as if I were not there. Sometimes when my mother woke she did not know where she was. She demanded an enchilada and then some applesauce. She believed that all the animals she'd ever loved were in the room with her—and there had been a lot. She'd say, "That horse darn near stepped on me," and look around for it accusingly, or her hands would move to stroke an invisible cat that lay at her hip. During this time I wanted my mother to say to me that I had been the best daughter in the world. I did not want to want this, but I did, inexplicably, as if I had a great fever that could be cooled only by those words. I went so far as to ask her directly, "Have I been the best daughter in the world?"

She said yes, I had, of course.

But this was not enough. I wanted those words to knit together in my mother's mind and for them to be delivered, fresh, to me.

I was ravenous for love.

My mother died fast but not all of a sudden. A slow-burning fire when flames disappear to smoke and then smoke to air. She didn't have time to get skinny. She was altered but still fleshy when she died, the body of a woman among the living. She had her hair too, brown and brittle and frayed from being in bed for weeks.

From the room where she died I could see the great Lake Superior out her window. The biggest lake in the world, and the coldest too. To see it, I had to work. I pressed my face sideways, hard, against the glass, and I'd catch a slice of it going on forever into the horizon.

"A room with a view!" my mother exclaimed, though she was too weak to rise and see the lake herself. And then more quietly she said: "All of my life I've waited for a room with a view."

She wanted to die sitting up, so I took all the pillows I could get my hands on and made a backrest for her. I wanted to take her from the hospital and prop her in a field of yarrow to die. I covered her with a quilt that I had brought from home, one she'd sewn herself out of pieces of our old clothing.

"Get that out of here," she growled savagely, and then kicked her legs like a swimmer to make it go away.

I watched my mother. Outside the sun glinted off the sidewalks and the icy edges of the snow. It was Saint Patrick's Day, and the nurses brought her a square block of green Jell-O that sat quivering on the table beside her. It would turn out to be the last full day of her life, and for most of it she held her eyes still and open, neither sleeping nor waking, intermittently lucid and hallucinatory.

That evening I left her, though I didn't want to. The nurses and doctors had told Eddie and me that *this was it.* I took that to mean she would die in a couple of weeks. I believed that people with cancer lingered. Karen and Paul would be driving up together from Minneapolis the next morning and my mother's parents were due from Alabama in a couple of days, but Leif was still nowhere to be found. Eddie and I had called Leif's friends and the parents of his friends, leaving pleading messages, asking him to call, but he hadn't called. I decided to leave the hospital for one night so I could find him and bring him to the hospital once and for all.

"I'll be back in the morning," I said to my mother. I looked over at Eddie, half lying on the little vinyl couch. "I'll come back with Leif."

When she heard his name, she opened her eyes: blue and blazing, the same as they'd always been. In all this, they hadn't changed.

"How can you not be mad at him?" I asked her bitterly for perhaps the tenth time.

"You can't squeeze blood from a turnip," she'd usually say. Or, "Cheryl, he's only eighteen." But this time she just gazed at me and said, "Honey," the same as she had when I'd gotten angry about her socks. The same as she'd always done when she'd seen me suffer because I wanted something to be different than it was and she was trying to convince me with that single word that I must accept things as they were.

"We'll all be together tomorrow," I said. "And then we'll all stay here with you, okay? None of us will leave." I reached through the tubes that were draped all around her and stroked her shoulder. "I love you," I said, bending to kiss her cheek, though she fended me off, in too much pain to endure even a kiss.

"Love," she whispered, too weak to say the *I* and *you.* "Love," she said again as I left her room.

I rode the elevator and went out to the cold street and walked along the sidewalk. I passed a bar packed with people I could see through a big plate-glass window. They were all wearing shiny green paper hats and green shirts and green suspenders and drinking green beer. A man inside met my eye and pointed at me drunkenly, his face breaking into silent laughter.

I drove home and fed the horses and hens and got on the phone, the dogs gratefully licking my hands, our cat nudging his way onto my lap. I called everyone who might know where my brother was. He was drinking a lot, some said. Yes, it was true, said others, he'd been hanging out with a girl from St. Cloud named Sue. At midnight the phone rang and I told him that *this was it.*

I wanted to scream at him when he walked in the door a half hour later, to shake him and rage and accuse, but when I saw him, all I could do was hold him and cry. He seemed so old to me that night, and so very young too. For the first time, I saw that he'd become a man and yet also I could see what a little boy he was. *My* little boy, the one I'd half mothered all of my life, having no choice but to help my mom all those times she'd been away at work. Karen and I were three years apart, but we'd been raised as if we were practically twins, the two of us equally in charge of Leif as kids.

"I can't do this," he kept repeating through his tears. "I can't live without Mom. I can't. I can't. I can't."

"We have to," I replied, though I couldn't believe it myself. We lay together in his single bed talking and crying into the wee hours until, side by side, we drifted off to sleep.

I woke a few hours later and, before waking Leif, fed the animals and loaded bags full of food we could eat during our vigil at the hospital. By eight o'clock we were on our way to Duluth, my brother driving our mother's car too fast while U2's *Joshua Tree* blasted out of the speakers. We listened intently to the music without talking, the low sun cutting brightly into the snow on the sides of the road.

When we reached our mother's room at the hospital, we saw a sign on her closed door instructing us to check in at the nurse's station before entering. This was a new thing, but I assumed it was only a procedural matter. A nurse approached us in the hallway as we walked toward the station, and before I spoke she said, "We have ice on her eyes. She wanted to donate her corneas, so we need to keep the ice—"

"What?" I said with such intensity that she jumped.

I didn't wait for an answer. I ran to my mother's room, my brother right behind me. When I opened the door, Eddie stood and came for us with his arms outstretched, but I swerved away and dove for my mom. Her arms lay waxen at her sides, yellow and white and black and blue, the needles and tubes removed. Her eyes were covered by two surgical gloves packed with ice, their fat fingers lolling clownishly across her face. When I grabbed her, the gloves slid off. Bouncing onto the bed, then onto the floor.

I howled and howled and howled, rooting my face into her body like an animal. She'd been dead an hour. Her limbs had cooled, but her belly was still an island of warm. I pressed my face into the warmth and howled some more.

I dreamed of her incessantly. In the dreams I was always with her when she died. It was me who would kill her. Again and again and again. She commanded me to do it, and each time I would get down on my knees and cry, begging her not to make me, but she would not relent, and each time, like a good daughter, I ultimately complied. I tied her to a tree in our front yard and poured gasoline over her head, then lit her on fire. I

made her run down the dirt road that passed by the house we'd built and then ran her over with my truck. I dragged her body, caught on a jagged piece of metal underneath, until it came loose, and then I put my truck in reverse and ran her over again. I took a miniature baseball bat and beat her to death with it, slow and hard and sad. I forced her into a hole I'd dug and kicked dirt and stones on top of her and buried her alive. These dreams were not surreal. They took place in plain, ordinary light. They were the documentary films of my subconscious and felt as real to me as life. My truck was really my truck; our front yard was our actual front yard; the miniature baseball bat sat in our closet among the umbrellas.

I didn't wake from these dreams crying. I woke shrieking. Paul grabbed me and held me until I was quiet. He wetted a washcloth with cool water and put it over my face. But those wet washcloths couldn't wash the dreams of my mother away.

Nothing did. Nothing would. Nothing could ever bring my mother back or make it okay that she was gone. Nothing would put me beside her the moment she died. It broke me up. It cut me off. It tumbled me end over end.

It took me years to take my place among the ten thousand things again. To be the woman my mother raised. To remember how she said *honey* and picture her particular gaze. I would suffer. I would suffer. I would want things to be different than they were. The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods. It took me four years, seven months, and three days to do it. I didn't know where I was going until I got there.

It was a place called the Bridge of the Gods.