MELINDA MOUSTAKIS

This One Isn't Going to Be Afraid

NAILS

SHE'S NINETEEN YEARS OLD AND PREGNANT WITH ME. She's nineteen years old and pregnant with me and waiting at the bus stop and it's fifty below in Fairbanks.

One of these times, she rides the bus to a job interview for a secretarial position. She and my father had twenty-three dollars to their name. "They wanted me to do a typing test," she says. "So right there I chewed off my fingernails—every one. I spit them into the trash can while the lady in the suit watched."

Now she keeps her nails long, just past elegant, and paints them blood red to match her lipstick. Mine are like hers, so tough it hurts to clip them, but I keep mine short. There's the woman in red lipstick, sitting around the campfire, watching the sun slink down on Mount McKinley. A cigar glows in her mouth. She made the fire, swung an axe and cut the spruce down to size. "And I didn't break a sweat," she says. She fans out her fingers over the flames. "Or a nail."

BICEPS

We went fishing on the Russian River with aunts and uncles and cousins. The salmon were running, too fast we joked, because no one was getting any hits on their line. The bank, about five feet higher than the riverbed, dropped off into rocks and shallow water; first inches and then deeper as you moved farther out.

My mother took a turn, and cast her line, let the line drift a ways with the current. The rod bobbed with a bump—"Fish on! Fish on!"—and the line paid out. We had four other lines in the water and quickly reeled them in. A bunch of zippers coming frantically undone; that's the sound. The fight began and the pole nodded down and up. She reeled, let the fish run, reeled some more.

We waited. She fought. And the salmon broke through the surface, thrashing against the current. He was a big, fat bullet of a fish. She yanked

and the salmon flew through the air and flopped with a violent smack on the rocks. "Go get him," she yelled. My cousin Jig scrambled for the net but then the swim-crazed fish snapped the line. She saw what we saw—the salmon dancing towards freedom—ditched the pole, slid down the bank, and crashed towards the fish in her waders. Tackled him down and threw him over her head towards us, but he leapt back toward the water. She dove again, and the fish slipped out of her hands. "You piece of shit," she said and jumped after him, wrestling him to the ground. Took five heave-hos before she tossed him up on the bank. Jig bonked him on the head with a rubber mallet until he wasn't moving. She flexed her biceps for the boys. "When you got these you don't need a net," she said. Behind us, the Fish and Game warden stood, arms crossed, head bent in laughter. "I ain't never seen anything like it," he said. What he meant, I know, was that he had never seen anybody like her.

CALVES

My mother drove a gold station wagon when I was younger—the brassy paint a loud announcement when I craved invisibility. But she loved that car, even if it didn't handle snow too well. There's this time on Old Seward Highway and we were humming along to soft rock oldies in the weekender traffic heading back to Anchorage. We'd visited my Aunt Kitty in Sterling, snagged a few reds for the freezer, had a girls' night out. And then a loud clang, like a pot lid hitting the kitchen floor, interrupted "When a Man Loves a Woman." This had happened before. My mother swerved into the emergency lane, parked, and jumped out—leaving her door open. The roar of passing trucks drowned out my yelling at her. I slunk down in my seat as she looked left and then ran across the lanes in her red high heels, her calves sharp angles of muscle. She waved at the traffic that honked at her, gave one man in a white Ford the finger, then picked up the hubcap. Hugging it to her chest, she made her way back. "What an asshole," she said as she slammed the door shut. When we got home, she used her red heels to kick the hubcap back on.

SHOULDER

She went on a hike in the woods with her father and brothers to scout out moose. She carried a rifle about as tall as she was and later, Jack took it because the gun was heavy. Her father told them to climb and sit on the tree stand. He would come back for them when the sun hit the ridgeline. She and Jack sat on the stand and waited. They didn't talk. She let her legs hang over the edge.

"Did you hear that?" Jack whispered.

All she heard was trees.

"I know I heard something."

She tried to see how far she could hang off the edge, facedown, before she felt like falling.

"Stop that. You'll knock your head off," he said.

She didn't fall, but her hat did. She went to climb down the stand and Jack grabbed her arm.

"Don't go down there."

But she twisted until he let go of his grip and she climbed down. She retrieved her hat and put it back on her head—then a growl came from the woods. She got knocked to the ground. She says, "One thing you learn, along with shooting, is how to play dead." She held her breath and covered her face with her hands. There were gunshots. There were shouts. Her body rolled. She felt pressure on her left shoulder. Then she saw Jack.

Jack held her under her arms and dragged her to the base of the tree.

"You got to climb. The bear might come back." Jack's eyes were wired open.

He stood her up and placed her hands on the wood footings. Everything looked smaller and clouded and everything smelled rotten. She climbed her way up the stand with Jack behind, pushing and shoving. Her shoulder throbbed, as if it suddenly remembered what happened, and Jack wadded up his flannel shirt and tried to stop the bleeding.

When she's visiting me in California, she'll wear a tank top and people ask about the puckered scar on her shoulder. She'll say, "I got mauled by a grizzly in Alaska." And they believe her. They believe Jack fired the rifle and they believe she climbed back up the tree onto the stand, blood seeping from the wound. The hook digs in deep and then she'll say, "Actually, it was an accident. I snagged my shoulder on a metal spring while hiding under the bed." They chuckle with relief. "Man, you had me going." Kids and a game of hide-and-seek. But they don't ask what she was hiding from. The truth is there are grizzlies and there are fists and bottles and belts. There are choices: play dead or hide.

HANDS

There were bets, when she said she was getting married, on how long it would last. One week. Two months. She was seventeen and still in high school and he was twenty. "We were two po-dunk kids in Alaska," she says. When my father went to ask for her hand, the conversation was brief. He went into the garage where her father, Larry, was fixing his truck.

"Sir, I'd like to marry your daughter."

"Which one?" Larry had screws between his lips.

"Co—"

"Oh I know which one. Colleen." Larry kept on with the monkey wrench. The sound of tinkering went on for a long while. "You still standing there?" he said. "Hand me a flathead."

My father waited and then Larry said, "Well, if you can feed her you can have her." And my grandmother figured a man who borrowed a gun and cleaned it up real good before returning it couldn't be all that bad, so she and Larry signed the release form because my mother was underage. At the ceremony, my father put a borrowed wedding band on her finger because he couldn't afford to buy one.

My mother wears a ring now topped with a boulder of a diamond and calls herself a "sparkling bitch." Every one of her fingers has a wide, inner tube of a knuckle; an obstacle a ring has to fit over. Both of her pinkies are crooked—boomerangs she says—breaks that weren't allowed to heal properly. Her sisters have the same hands. Her brothers have worse; they are missing tips and parts of fingers. They all have stories—funny accidents and slips and remember-whens and they laugh about it all… but their hands tell a darker truth.

FEET

"I can hear it in your voice," my mother says. "You're disappearing." She's visiting me in Bakersfield and we sit on the concrete in my backyard smoking vanilla cigars, feet in the pool.

She's going to tell me how they all had to clear land—they felled spruce trees and chopped them up and stacked the wood. They dug up roots and dragged rakes over the hard-packed dirt. And there were rocks. "We made piles and piles. For days all we did was shovel up rocks. I remember looking up at the sky and it was going to storm. There was lightning flashing in the distance. I told the big man up there—you take lightning to that branch above me and send it crashing down, knock me out, because I'm not doing this anymore. But he didn't listen. All he gave me was some pittering rain. So I went behind the shed, raised the pickax, took it to my foot. I sat on the porch in a bandage—no more rocks." My mother leans back on the heel of her hand and I brace myself for the punch. She says, "You don't know what you can endure."

I asked Uncle Jack about it. "Did she really pickax her foot?"

"No," he said. "That was Kitty. But it could have been any one of us."

SKIN

Bathing was a production. First, Jack soaked in the water, lathered up and rinsed. Then her. Then Kitty. Then John Paul. And so on down the line, oldest to youngest. The people changed; the water didn't. The order reversed, youngest to oldest, the next week. On a good day, the water was lukewarm. On a bad day, she got into the tub and the water felt cold and filmy. She said, "Maybe that's why we all have good skin. That and having to choke down a spoonful of cod liver oil every day."

She looks at least ten years younger than her real age. And she knows it. I learned to anticipate the questions before they were asked. "Yes, really. Not my sister. My *mother*." She jokes that we'll be senior citizens together—that eventually our age difference won't matter anymore, that we'll be two of the same person. I think of years passing and see myself grow old, wrinkled, while my mother stays young because she's told time to leave her the hell alone and it wouldn't dare disobey.

TEETH

She went ice-skating on the pond at Huffman Elementary. They were playing tag and she was it. She chased after John Paul in his blue-striped scarf. He skated faster and faster and she followed, reached out with her hand and right before she got to that scarf she hit a chink in the ice and fell, smashed her face.

She lost some blood, and half of a front tooth, but her mother didn't take her to get it fixed. A chipped tooth was useful; with the sharp edge she cut fishing line and thread. But her mouth swelled up, her lips. "Then I got a fever and green shit started coming out of my nose and gums," she said. When her temperature was 103, her mother took her to the doctor and the doctor yelled because the infection was spreading toward her brain. "If you had waited any longer," he said, "she would have died."

Her brothers called her Snaggletooth, but she didn't cover her mouth with her hand when she laughed. "Those fuckers. I smiled more, just to spite them."

At fifteen, she started working at an ice cream shop in the Diamond Mall. My father was working there as a janitor and one day he saw her, wanted to know who that girl was with *that* smile. Over the years, she tried to get the tooth repaired. Crowns wouldn't fit, and always the base was black and unhealthy. Right before she turned forty-five, she finally got a crown that looked like a normal tooth. "I told that damn dentist that I wanted my teeth to look like snow bricks in an igloo." My uncles still call her Snaggletooth, say it's still there, underneath.

EYES

We went to the Homestead for Thanksgiving. Thirty people crammed into a one-room cabin with a woodstove. Uncle Jack made seafood chowder in a pot you could bathe in. The secret, he tells me, pour the bacon grease in with the whipping cream. The adults played pinochle, one game on each end of the table. I picked up my mother's stack and arranged them by suit—she'd let me even though I'm cursed at cards. She'd look at her hand and say, "No marriages, just like Jack," and he'd say, "Fuck'em and leave'em." They drank Caroline's Irish Cream and homemade cranberry lick straight from the bottle, passing them down, sip after sip.

She stepped outside and I went with her. She was a little tipsy, happy-tipsy. We turned to the back of the Homestead, arms linked, headed toward the outhouse. The clear night freckled with ice-picked stars. We were trudging along in the snow and stopped. Above the ridge, serpentine green ribboned the sky, tangled and bright. I'd never seen them—neon streamers making love to the darkness and I couldn't help but watch.

I haven't seen them since. But that color, that electric green, she carries with her. It's in her eyes when she's telling me that I don't understand, telling me about scouring the house on Bragaw Street with Jack. "Jack and I went for so long without dinner. It must have been months. There was a closet upstairs. When Larry came back from Korea he hid old K rations and twenty-pound bags of oranges in the crawl space behind the closet. Late at night, Jack and I'd sneak back there like rats, like fucking goddamned rats." They were poor and there were five children and one on the way and sometimes they didn't have enough food. But, growing up, she and Jack pissed the bed and as punishment, they didn't get to eat dinner. I didn't want to believe this story. I didn't want to believe that she ate K rations and rotten oranges, and I didn't want to believe her when she said, "I got so skinny my hair fell out." And then, when I didn't say anything, she laughed. "A goddamned bald rat. So fuck you."

STOMACH

"I was pregnant with her all winter. God, I was fucking depressed. We were living in Fairbanks then and all that darkness, thought I was going to lose my mind. The only thing that I could keep down was ice cream, so I ate my way through gallons. Turned into a fat ass, which made me more depressed. And then . . . " She points at me. "She was this dinky little thing that only weighed about five pounds." But she blames me for the sprawling stretch marks on her stomach. Tells everyone that I took a shit inside the womb.

"And she's been giving me shit ever since," she says and winks.

My father told me that she didn't know what to do with me at first, that she held me like she was holding a shotgun. She'd throw me up too high in the air. "This one," she'd say to him, "isn't going to be afraid of anything."

CHEEKBONES

She has her mother's and her grandmother's bone structure. My face has a roundness, has two half-moons, where they have chiseled features. Ice Queens, I call them. I imagine they were once glaciers, hard and melting, split by a fist that came down from the clouds. In one photograph of the three of them, they have braided hair at the napes of their necks and are standing next to a 130 pound halibut hanging up on a hook, its broad, white belly as big as a tablecloth. A line of black bass and ling cod lie dead in front of their fishing boots. My mother and grandmother and great-grandmother smile wide, smile with their whole bodies, but to me, their bones speak a louder truth. They say: We are stronger than you.