

# BURN

*Elizabeth Genovise / From: Posing Nude For the Saints Stories*

I was fifteen when we took our trip to Wyoming, the family vacation that would henceforth be known as *the trip*, the crowning achievement of the Baskin family, destined for Christmas party reminiscing and exaggerated retellings. We made the epic twenty-six-hour drive from our home in Yellowbird, Tennessee, to Jackson Hole in the Rocky Mountains, spending two nights at budget motels in Missouri and Nebraska, all five of us piled into my father's aging Toyota. My parents were thirty-seven years old. My sister Dinah was fourteen, my brother Isaac twelve. We were not a young family by normal standards. But looking back, what I am most struck by is how much we didn't know, how closely we skirted an edge we would inevitably plunge over in just a few precious years.

I can see us so clearly in the Toyota: my father, the mastermind behind the trip, the mad scientist whose recipes for adventure have made our family's poverty nearly irrelevant to our upbringing, is handing out Red Vines over his shoulder as he drives. "Time for Mister Licorice," he's saying. The suffix "Mister" precludes any article of pleasure, as in, "I hear Mister Ice Cream Truck," or, "I believe Mister Paycheck is on its way just in time for the weekend." He is a court stenographer in Knoxville by day and a closet fiction writer by night. My stunningly beautiful mother with her creamy skin and auburn hair is turning the pages of a Yellowstone National Park guidebook she found at a used bookstore. It's what she does all day at work, when she's not greeting customers at the local Chevy dealership: read used books, or else her Bible, from behind a countertop.

I'm sitting behind my father, and in the middle seat is Dinah, with her missalette in her lap, caressing its puffy opalescent cover; she's recently adopted my mother's Catholicism and at night, from across the room we share, I often hear her mumbling Hail Marys and Our Fathers. She keeps a tally of them in a notebook she hides between the wall and the mattress. Smashed up against the far passenger window is Isaac, his eyes concealed by a baseball cap and a sci-fi novel clenched between his knees. He's had a rough final week at school, where the other kids harass him ceaselessly for his skinniness and his ineptness at sports. He's been coming home in tears for months, hiding himself in his room, and his touchiness annoys me at fifteen. Being teased is the lot of a Baskin. All three of us kids are almost inexcusably ugly, a little joke Nature played on our parents, who are both so good-looking that they get double and sometimes triple takes from people in grocery stores. *Sticks and stones*, I often say to Isaac. *And hell, these jocks don't even have the words. They've got half your vocabulary, if that.*

This is accurate. Our parents, in spite of their own fairly limited education, have crammed our lives with books, sitting us down in front of open volumes instead of a TV since we were toddlers. My mother feeds us nonfiction, books on everything from American history to bugs. My father's feedings are far more interesting: he is the story-lover, worshipper of novels and epics, and when I was six he found me a gorgeous illustrated children's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Now, as we cross the Wyoming border. I've got the real *Odyssey* in my hands. I've finished it, and am holding it meditatively, when my father's eyes float up to the rearview mirror and find mine.

"Well?" he says, in that private tone that means, *nobody's paying attention. We can talk now.* He's right—the rest of the family is either asleep or deeply engaged in their own readings.

"I still don't like it," I confess. I steal a glance at my mother, who is hunched over her guidebook. "It's just like the Old Testament. Great stories but I hate all of these people." There is no response from my mother, who is either tired of having this fight with me or else genuinely not hearing me.

"That's my girl," my father says, nodding, eyes moving back and forth from the road to the mirror. "Very disappointing cast of characters when you come down to it."

We discuss this for about twenty miles. I'm disappointed in everyone but gentle Telemachus, Odysseus's son, the one who has to work like a dog to keep the kingdom alive while womanizer Dad is out partying in caves and on the sea, taking his sweet time getting home. I feel protective of him. I'm embarrassed to admit that the Star Wars characters Isaac is obsessed with are a far better answer to my own need for characters to love and admire than anyone who sprang out of Homer's imagination. I've also just begun reading *The Lord of the Rings*, and I am searching for the words to tell my father what it's doing to me, the way I will one day try to tell him about the love of my life when I first meet him: I'm both frightened and kindled, understanding that this is the beginning of a kind of religion, a world of feelings and realizations that will reformulate the arc of my life. But I'm struggling with the words, and my brother, belatedly seizing on my remarks about Star Wars, perks up in his corner and says, "You're damn right Star Wars characters are better. If I found out you could actually be a Jedi in this life, I would — I would do anything."

I've caught my brother watching *Return of the Jedi* all misty-eyed. There is a religion in the making for him, too. My father takes up Isaac's momentum: "I know just what you mean. There's something about that moment when he walks into Jabba's palace, all in black, almost like a priest, but with this potential for violence, violence meant only for good."

"There is no such thing as violence for good," my sister says suddenly, looking up from her missalette. She's wearing a high-collared shirt with a rosary and would probably wear a habit if she could find one at Goodwill.

"Of course there is," Isaac snaps.

My father is a genius at putting a stopper in these moments. "You guys won't believe this—I was going to wait until we got there to tell you—but guess who lives in Jackson Hole?"

"Who?"

There is a dramatic pause. "Harrison Ford," my father says at last. "Han Solo himself."

We absorb this. Isaac is visibly stirred.

"Is that true? Mom?" Dinah asks our distributor of nonfiction.

"Yes," Mom says sleepily. "He built himself a house out there after *Star Wars*. Owns a huge piece of land in the mountains." Then, to my father, "Did you know that the thermal pools in Yellowstone are hotter than boiling? People have fallen in and literally disintegrated in minutes. Down to the bone."

My father glances at her. "That's lovely, Anne. Thank you."

"Han Solo," Isaac says in wonderment.

"Harrison Ford," my mother corrects.

"Can we see his house?"

"Probably not," my father says, "but who knows, we might see him around town. In Jackson Hole."

Han Solo is not my preference—it's Luke Skywalker I was in love with and also fiercely protective of when I first saw the movies—but I'm a bit worked up myself. We all go quiet for the next hour, catnapping and thinking as we Baskins are known to do. The only disturbance is when my mother announces suddenly and loudly that she needs my father to pull over. "It must be the reading in the car," she tells him, hand over her mouth, before she rushes out to vomit in the restroom of a gas station. What she doesn't know is that she is pregnant again — pregnant with a little boy who is stricken, even now in the womb, with cystic fibrosis. A boy whose illness will begin the unraveling of a woman we have always understood to be unshakeable in her hybrid faith in the reliability of God and hard facts.

Jackson Lake Lodge is not a place we can afford, even now, before the Lodge is as ritzy as it is destined to become. But my father has scrimped and saved and done odd jobs after work, and on the sneak. I too have contributed to the fund with babysitting money I've been hoarding in a candy tin for months. Dad and I are always in on these conspiracies together, working on plans the way we talk about stories. I don't know this at fifteen, but when everything goes to hell, he'll be the one I need, the one who always finds a way to resurrect confidence that things could get better. It is his stories I will rely on. Even when fantastical, they communicate something truer, and more promising, than literal truth.

In our family's ease, fiction, including fiction about us, is a cellar filled with survival gear, freeze-dried food and water jugs and warm clothes, things my father has been storing up against a crisis without really believing the crisis would happen. When we step through the doors of Jackson Lake Lodge, we know—we all have to know—that we don't fit in here. But my father convinces us that we do.

"Everyone has to do something like this once in a lifetime," he says as we ogle the majesty of the great room. "We belong here as much as anyone. And we'll remember this place forever. It's a gift that will keep on giving."

So we drag our duffel bags up to our room and then file back down-stairs for dinner. We have not yet ventured into the mountains on foot, but entering the dining room is a start: they are framed in sixty-foot windows and, in the twilight, the snow-capped Grand Tetons rise abruptly from a long field of firefly green. We are all enraptured, not speaking, not opening our menus. Around us, soft music twinkles and other families eat and converse, silver forks tapping their plates, ice dancing in goblets of water. In the world beyond the glass lies a pristine wilderness, its expansive silence palpable. We have never seen the world from a vantage point such as this, much less eaten a meal while doing so.

Our waiter's name is Wally and he has an odd accent. He's handsome in an exotic way, long dark

hair and bright blue eyes, and I'm instantly attracted. My face heats up when I order my salad, the cheapest thing I can find on the menu.

"Is it possible to have an appetizer as a meal?" my father asks. "I love French onion soup. It's what I really want." It's a trick he uses at restaurants when we go out, to save money. Later, he'll eat more licorice to fill himself up.

"I suppose so, sir," Wally responds, shrugging. "I don't see why not. Would you like a house salad with it?"

My mother orders next, with the queenly grace and pleasant smile we expect. Wally practically falls over himself to please her, a thing I try to forgive. She does look beautiful in a simple midnight blue dress with a white cropped sweater, her hair in a loose bun. No one would know her clothes were painstakingly chosen from consignment shops. Neither would anyone imagine that in a few years, we will get calls from embarrassed neighbors into whose homes my mother has wandered on her disoriented walks.

"Your turn, Scout," she says gently to Isaac, who is always struck with terrible shyness in restaurants.

"I don't know," Isaac says with a short, heavy exhalation like a bison's.

"How about a hamburger," my mother says, more to Wally than to Isaac. "And fries, please, fries with tartar sauce."

"Tartar sauce?"

"He loves it," my mother explains, giving Wally a winning smile. One of her earrings, another secondhand purchase, glitters as she lifts her head. It works. When the food comes. Isaac's plate bears a heaping portion of fries, along with two big ramekins of the sauce. Isaac immediately uses two fries to shovel up a hunk of it and then grins at my mother around the mouthful.

Just how much he needs her, none of us understands. This is the next thing we don't know: that Isaac will come apart after she does, though it will be a long process. When he is twenty-five, I'll sit with him as I do now, in a restaurant with a view of the mountains, only we'll be in a fast food place in Knoxville, an hour before he boards a plane for Texas. He'll be on his way to join a cult run by a man who recruited him over the space of a year. The members cannot speak to family. They sleep in a compound. They wait for an apocalypse to end a world they can't figure out how to live in. My brother has asked me to meet him before he leaves, ostensibly to say goodbye. But what he really wants is for me to talk him out of it. I'll realize this around the time he boards his plane. But I am a coward, and I will pretend to support Isaac's choice, because I am afraid of losing him if I don't. My marriage is already fracturing. I can't lose anyone else. But I lose him anyway, because he doesn't try to contact any of us again.

My little brother takes a gulp of ice water and says to no one in particular, "Those mountains are actually kind of scary."

"The Tetons? They're not scary," my father says. "You're just not used to mountains that big, that's all. You'll see, once we're in them."

"In them?" Dinah's eyes are huge. "There are bears, you know. I read about it."

"Did you give her the guidebook?" my father asks my mother, who shrugs.

"Bears will leave you alone unless you bother them," my father explains. "We'll be fine if we just stick together and make a lot of noise. Talk a lot. And if we see cubs, we go in the other direction. Let them be."

I'm with Isaac on this one—the mountains frighten me a bit, too. It's their indifference that troubles me. I'm certain that they don't need us, and that they wouldn't help us if we needed them. But I don't say this, because I know how determined my father is to make this the trip of a lifetime. I hold up my goblet.

"To the Baskin family," I say. "Fearless explorers of the American frontier."

My father beams at me over our clinking glasses.

We have precious little time to see and do so much, and in the morning we're up early, dressing for a day trip to Yellowstone National Park. There's talk of Old Faithful and of the canyons and the enormous pounding rivers as we climb back into the car and start north. Dinah has a million questions about the park: "Is it safe? How do people not get sprayed by the hot water? How deep are the pools?" When we pull over so my mother can vomit again, Dinah doesn't miss a beat: "Can you get sick from the gases out there? I mean we're standing on like a volcano right?"

"You should really quit reading in the car," my dad says to my mother when she returns, looking pale.

"I wasn't."

"We're getting low on gas," Dinah says, leaning forward from her spot on the middle seat.

"I know. We'll be okay to the Park. I'll get some when we leave there."

Yellowstone is a shock to us. Not just its massiveness, but the violence of the geysers and the fragility of the ground below us. Park rangers warn us of boiling water hidden underground, of mud flats concealing cauldrons of the earth's heat. Old Faithful erupts seconds after the ranger's speech ends, and it's a high-powered weapon with the clouds in its crosshairs; I have a moment of thinking the sky will splinter from the force of the water.

We follow a simple plank walkway, no rails, the wood slippery and damp. It winds past smaller geysers and deep thermal pools. The pools fascinate us. Their colors are as vibrant and tempting as a peacock's, electric blue and fiery rose and traffic-light green laced with yellow and orange. Waves of rock form natural staircases into the hot depths. Somehow, even the bluest water looks viciously hot, like the center of a candle flame. Over two hundred degrees, the ranger has warned us. And it is true that people, and their pet dogs, have died in these pools. I have a flash of our ragdoll cat, Maximus, falling into one, and my heart clenches together.

"I can't believe there are no rails," Dinah mutters. "Jesus Christ."

"Mouth," my mother says sharply.

"Good golly goose," Dinah flings at her. It's not like her to snap at my mother, or to say "Jesus Christ," particularly now in her convent stage. She's biting her left thumbnail, tearing it down to the quick.

"You're not going to fall in unless you do something stupid," I tell her. I hook my arm into hers. "It's okay."

An unnamed geyser erupts nearby and we all jump.

"I wonder why God made geysers," Isaac says.

"It's the earth's way of releasing pressure." my mother begins, but my father takes over: "It's a reminder that things can go against the current. Just like people. Water can fall up and we can determine our own destinies." This is vintage Dad Baskin. His stories, even in the coming years, are geyser-like themselves, always climbing air, defying the gravity of troubling realities.

But because my brother is deep into Star Wars, this Yoda-speak rings true, and he appears satisfied. I ruffle his hair because, honestly, I like it, too. My mother shakes her head. "God is the ultimate scientist," she rebuts. It's a favorite phrase of hers. "He's made a perfect working system, a predictable one. Nothing was put here for merely symbolic purposes." She stresses the word *symbolic*, giving my father an irritated look, but he only grins. The man is unshakeable that way.

There is a sudden commotion to our left, down the walkway; a toddler is crying hysterically, shrieking, pointing at one of the thermal pools close to the planks. Her parents crouch down next to her, trying to calm her, but the girl keeps screaming and pointing.

"The water scares her," Dinah says, vindicated, but I have a feeling it's something else. I start toward them and see what the child is pointing to: some kind of stuffed animal, bobbing in the savagely blue waters. It's a toy owl. I feel the little girl's wails in my chest. There is no getting the owl back, and her parents wisely gather her up and hurry her away from the sight. I stay where I am, the muscles in my throat tight. As a child, I used to beg my mother to buy me stuffed animals or toys I found that were deformed—a teddy bear missing an eye, a figurine missing a leg—and I had quite the orphanage going by the age of ten, in a wicker basket beside my bed.

"Don't even think about it," Dinah says from just behind me. "I remember when you tried to fish one of my dolls out of the campfire, that one time."

"I can get it," I say quietly. Our parents and Isaac are still a good distance away, waiting for another geyser to blow. I gesture at myself. "I have my belt. I could kind of fish him over to the edge."

"And then what? Stick your hand in to pull it out? You're nuts. You'll get your hand burned off."

"Just help me, okay? You hold onto me while I try to get it. You know you'll feel terrible about it later if we don't rescue him."

How many times will we have a conversation like this in the next twenty years? What is natural anxiety in Dinah now will become a sickness. She'll marry and have children too young, afraid to enter the world alone, and believing it is what a Catholic woman should do. She'll be convinced that to stray from the laws of the traditional and the domestic will engender disaster. Six months out of college she will be tending a house in Lexington, pregnant and entrapped. In the years that follow, as more children come, she'll call me, predictably as the seasons, to fantasize about coming out to meet me in Louisiana or North Carolina or wherever I am. "I just want a week or so, to find myself," she'll say, as though finding yourself is a game of hide and seek, where you simply have to

open the right door or peer under the right bed to out the person you are supposed to be. Even still, I'll tell her each time to come, and then she'll back away. "I can't leave the kids, or David," she'll tell me. "Or the Church. They need me there."

And then she'll call back later, crying. Sick with a nameless regret.

"Help me," I say to Dinah again as I kneel down on the planks. Our parents and Isaac have gone even further in the opposite direction now and they aren't paying attention. I wriggle my belt off and get down on my stomach on the planks. With a dramatic sigh, Dinah crouches down beside me and takes a firm hold of my waist.

I nudge the owl to the crusty edge of the pool and then reach out to tap its singed cotton fur with my fingertips. It isn't hot and I bat it toward us. When I've got it out, I hold it up in front of Dinah, who rolls her eyes but breaks into a grin. It's a comically grumpy owl. I don't realize he's soaked to his center with hot water until I give him a squeeze and then yelp in pain.

"I told you," Dinah says. "That's what happens."

The highlight of the trip is our hike to Taggart Lake, another gem my father has been planning for months. To avoid the crowds, we rise before dawn and head out to the trailhead with our worn little daypacks and bottles of water refilled at our lodge room tap. We don't know that a colossal wildfire has just begun in the forests surrounding the Teton Range; we don't know enough about this place to realize that the amber haze in the air is unnatural to a summer morning.

Our hike has all the mythical beauty my father has counted on. As in the great dining room, we hardly speak. The trail begins in sagebrush, then climbs what my mother tells us is a glacial moraine. In the distance, beyond the tops of impossibly tall pines, is the Teton Range, glinting pewter and white in the new sunlight. We cross Taggart Creek over and over again, the rapids singing beneath us with water that has traveled both distance and time we cannot conceive of. I am thinking of this as we hike—the connectedness of it all, the way water moves and survives the ages.

When we summit the moraine, the trail opens into a vast meadow. Snowbrush ceanothus, my mother tells us, her guidebook in hand. The fragrance is heady and foreign and we will never smell it again. At last the trail begins to drop through a forest of lodgepole pines, and it sends us spilling into a second meadow, this one lush with emerald grasses. We pass a murmuring waterfall.

"It feeds the lake," my father says. "And another lake feeds the waterfall, and that lake takes its water from a glacier we can't even see."

And so we move backward through time, leaving behind green valleys that are infants cradled by adolescent forests, forests that in turn huddle beneath white-capped mountains made nonpareil with age. There is no imprint of humanity until we pass a little tower of stones, built atop a boulder like a tiny snowman with larger rocks supporting smaller and smaller ones. It's a precarious structure but has the look of something that has been standing for a long time.

"What is that?" Dinah asks.

"We're getting close," my father says. "That's what it means. It's a cairn. Hikers make them to help each other navigate, or to mark an important place." When Isaac reaches out to touch it, my

father adds, "Don't knock it over. It's here for a reason."

We continue on. My father is right: quite suddenly, we are here. The lake is before us, its surface mirroring the mountains so cleanly that the range above us and the slender pines along the pebbled banks are butterflyed, creating twin worlds of sky and forest. Tremendous stones lie white and undisturbed as tombs beneath the shallower waters and the bones of sun-bleached driftwood arc scattered across the bank. The stillness stops us. Single file, we climb a small rock outcropping and kneel down on its cool surface. We are alone here.

"We should pray," my mother says softly. She reaches for our hands.

We don't close our eyes as she murmurs her prayer. *Lord thank you for creating this perfect world of beauty. Help us to remember this moment together. Amen.*

Her prayer is longer, but this is all I will remember of it. I'm not paying much attention nor am I aware that this faith of hers in an ordered world is precisely what will undo her. What I notice more is the way she looks into the water when it's over. She meets her own gaze in the glassy shallows and seems satisfied with what is there, as though her whole life is represented in that likeness. A good wife and mother, a hard worker, a faithful Christian is what she sees. Perhaps she notes her own beauty too, though I doubt it. I'll remember this look because later on, I will miss it in the years when she checks herself constantly in mirrors, the way you would check the pressure on a tire, dreading a sudden deflation on a lonesome back road. This will be the worst part of her unraveling—the fact that she will be conscious of it as it happens.

After her prayer, we release each other's hands. My mother's camera comes out but she makes no move to use it. There is a muted rustling in the woods above us.

"Is it warm enough to swim in?" Isaac wants to know. His voice is startling.

"Probably," my mother whispers.

"You can see to the bottom," Dinah adds, also whispering. "I think it's safe."

At some unspoken signal, we all go silent on the outcropping. The water is motionless; the pines are fragrant. A solitary bird passes overhead. The rock beneath us feels ageless and I am clinging tightly to it, feeling it stamping its ancient curves and pocks into the skin of my palm. Our family portrait is reflected in the water. Despite the lake's dazzling clarity, we are somewhat altered, and I am thinking that this is right: people change while the mountains do not. A chill moves through me and I feel as I did at Yellowstone, a little depressed by the indifference of this place. Still, it is beautiful, surreal.

"Just take it in," my father says quietly. "Lock it all up someplace inside you." His gaze on the water is piercing, as though he is looking into the eyes of a lover, or of God.

How can I know at fifteen that my father is searching as intently as I will, when I am a grown woman? To me, he is the harbinger of adventure, giver of experiences. I can't imagine that he is deeply unfulfilled. That he takes it personally there has been no Second Coming in his lifetime and no prophet to enlist him on a quest of vital importance. He is still looking to live an epic poem if he cannot write one. Here at Taggart Lake, where we could be in Tolkien's universe, he is hunting for inspiration, the smallest start. I won't understand this until thirty years later, when he confesses it



all to me after I help him up from a fall in his apartment.

“Dad,” I’ll protest when I recover from my shock. He’ll have voiced what has been in my mind forever, and for a moment, it will be like seeing myself buttoned into his clothes. “You’ve got nothing to regret.”

“Damn right,” he’ll answer weakly, brushing himself off though he’s only fallen on a clean linoleum floor. “You kids were the poem. I know that now.”

My father, strong and energetic, leaps off the rock outcropping and into the water. This sort of sudden display of joy is characteristic of him, too, and so none of us is particularly startled as he swims and splashes in the mountain water below us. My mother simply rolls her eyes and smiles. But what I will remember most is that after a moment, my father goes still, waiting for our reflections to reassemble themselves on the broken surface of the water. Then he swims to our mirrored selves and hugs us. We watch as we dissolve in his arms, like ghosts he cannot quite take hold of.

By the time we reach the town of Jackson Hole for a quick lunch, the wildfires have spread, and radios everywhere are blaring. We can see the smoke from the road. My mother calls the hotel from a pay phone at a gas station, wanting to know how serious it is and whether we will have to evacuate.

“No evacuation,” she reports back in the car. “Not yet anyway. They say this is fairly normal. It’s just—bigger than what they are used to.”

“Bigger,” Dinah repeats. She’s been biting her nails again since the first radio announcement blared into the car. “Wildfires are huge, Mom. We should leave.”

“They know what they’re doing,” my father says. He steers us into the little downtown, which still looks like something out of a Wild West movie. To our surprise, he parallel parks on one of the main streets, where a series of cafes and souvenir shops are still bustling with visitors. “We’re going to enjoy this as long as we can,” he tells us, turning around in his seat. “Look at these people. They’re not panicking, are they?”

We follow him out of the car and up the street. I can smell smoke though I can’t see it from here. I’m scared, and Dinah and Isaac look terrified, but we don’t say anything. I try to get interested in the leatherworks and the stained glass hanging in the shop windows. I try to work up an appetite for a hamburger.

“How about Mister Ice Cream for lunch?” my father suggests, pointing. Ahead of us, in a cul-de-sac, is an ice cream parlor with a white and yellow awning. “Come on.”

In the cool of the ice cream shop, the wildfire briefly becomes an unreality. We order butter pecan in waffle cones, a Baskin family obsession, and stand there licking the sweet cream while my father chats up the attendant. We aren’t really listening until he says excitedly, “You’re not kidding around? You’re serious.”

“What?” my mother demands, stepping up to the counter.

My father turns toward us. “Guess who’s up there, helping put out the fire. Han Solo! The man’s

got a helicopter!"

"Harrison Ford?" My mother addresses the man who scooped our ice cream: "He has a helicopter?"

"Oh, yeah," the man says, grinning. "He's probably up there right now helping douse this fire."

"Just how bad is the fire?" my mother presses. "They've told us there's no need to evacuate but—"

"Lady, we get fires all the time. But it's a natural thing. It's the forest's way of regenerating itself. Any ranger will tell you that."

"See?" my father says. "It's a good thing."

"That doesn't mean it's not dangerous," the attendant says, leaning forward. "I'm not telling you to panic and run to the airport, but listen to your radio. And the simple rule is, if you see actual fire—not just smoke—get the hell out."

Shaken, we exit the ice cream parlor and stand on the sidewalk. The street seems abruptly abandoned, as though we missed a crucial announcement while we were indoors. The man's last words have temporarily wiped out the extraordinary revelation about Harrison Ford. I'm trying to reiterate to myself that the fires are a natural and positive force. This is all new to us, the destructive power of Nature.

It is suddenly dark. We look up to find smoke passing between the buildings in heavy grey gusts, like storm clouds on the move. Something cold slithers over my arm and I look down to find my ice cream cone melting.

"Our ice cream is melting," I say, and watch as my parents and siblings jump out of their frightened reveries.

"We have to get out of here," Dinah says frantically. "Let's go, Dad."

All my life, I will have this desperate need to create lockets of time from which a moment of happiness or love cannot escape. My inability to accept the mortality of things will ruin my marriage and leave me always hungry, always alone at my keyboard, typing up the stories and poems in which I try to resuscitate what has passed on. This is one of those moments. We are standing on this street in Jackson Hole in the clutches of a very new fear when a sound like a fleet of titanic hummingbirds shakes the wind above us and draws close. We all look up just in time to see a helicopter flying low. It's a private one, unmarked. It passes over us, then zooms toward the mountains on an errand of life.

"That was him! I *know* it was him!"

"Han Solo!"

My father pumps his fist in the air, calling after the helicopter: "You get 'em, Han!"

My brother's eyes are dancing. My mother is laughing, her hand at her cheek. Even Dinah has relaxed, for what child, no matter what age, can help believing that all will be well once Han Solo has arrived at the scene? I look at my father with a strange rush of gratitude, as though he is the one to have flown the man past us.

Isaac, in the car on the way back to the Lodge, quotes Star Wars lines: "Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter." "Never tell me the odds." "Fear, anger, hate. The dark side are they."

"I don't think it's 'hate,'" my father interjects. "Right? I thought it was 'despair.' That's the worst one."

He doesn't get a response. We kids are all distracted, overexcited. The sun over our heads is shrouded with smoke, but we're looking straight ahead at the banner of the highway, only too happy to be imagining what might come next.

I feel the same way about the West at forty years old as I did as a teenager. It's cold grandeur, its postcard perfection and its many dangers hold little appeal for me. I am still in love with land that needs me; I make my home on the storm-torn Louisiana coast, where swampy islands tremble like lanterns above the ferocity of the Gulf. And yet I'm here again, in Wyoming, alone. My divorce is finalized. My brothers are gone. My sister may as well be. And my mother, having left my father years ago, is a ghost at large, still wandering into the homes of strangers for all we know. There are steps you take in life that are not at all the next logical ones. They just happen, magnetic forces of memory or maybe a survivor's instinct packing our bags and placing us in cars and on planes. I've splurged on a room at the Jackson Lake Lodge. It is the only place this side of the Mississippi that holds any warmth for me, and this is because we were here, all of us during that time before everything changed.

I make a long-distance call to my father in his apartment in Clinton. He answers immediately. When I tell him where I am, he berates me for not telling him of my travels first; I say nothing, knowing his real source of frustration lies in the knowledge that he could not have accompanied me had he been asked. I wait for the moment to pass and ask him if he remembers the wildfire, the way smoke billowed out of the forests and eclipsed the sun over Jackson Hole as the five of us stood there in front of the ice cream shop with butter pecan melting down our wrists.

"Of course I do," he says. He's almost yelling; he can't hear himself very well anymore. "That was when Han Solo himself flew over to save the day. You remember."

I lean against the window of my lodge room and watch the sun lower itself over the Tetons like a violet veil as my father begins to retell the story of our trip, starting with helicopters and heroes. I delight my father by chiming in bits and pieces as he unravels the tale, and we work ourselves into the old energy, the force of hope building between us stone by stone, flimsy as a hiker's rock cairn balanced on a ledge, but something you could navigate by nonetheless if you were lost and alone in the wild.