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Medicine Wings

The Edge . . . There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.

-Hunter S. Thompson, Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga (1966)

A road trip from Jackson, Wyoming, to Sturgis, South Dakota, doesn't take that long if you keep the truck at a steady 80 miles per hour. Which is exactly what we're doing to make it to the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally by nightfall.

"Are we idiots? Will bikers drag us off by our hair? How does one differentiate bad news from a mere investment banker in chaps?" I asked as we pull onto the road. Arnica's been to the Rally before, but I'm a virgin.

"I've got a taser." She holds up a plastic pink square that just as well could be a tampon case. "And I've got a .380 in the console. There's a box of ammo in there and more in the driver-side door if needed."

I found us angel wing necklaces for good luck. We're heading to the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. Might as well make a

wish and hang some wings from your neck. When the string frays and falls, your wish will come true. Thing is, we don't know what to wish for anymore.

We're in our thirties. We should know what we want. Instead, we only know what we used to want. Arnica wanted to be a Good Christian Rancher's Wife, living on a cattle operation somewhere between Jackson and Gillette; I, a Conservation Project Director on some far-flung continent. But, in spite of our determination to make things "just so," we're not either.

We're that age at which our femininity is purportedly defined by our status as wives or mothers or corporate career women with tailored skirt suits and the perfect shade of red lipstick. We are to wield one or a combination of these carefully narrated stories or risk falling between the cracks to the terrifying gray space between. Articles in magazines published in some place far away, written by women equally far away, tell us not to settle, to just settle, to not want it all, that we can't have it all anyways. I'd like to take a box of matches and a can of gasoline to this heap of limitations. They're not talking to us, Ladies Who Roam the Rockies. We're playing the hand we've been dealt and dreaming up road trip schemes.

We fuel up in Dubois. At the back of the general store, against an American flag backdrop, a horse-sized stuffed Jackelope is fixed with a saddle for portraits. But we've got no time for a touristy photo. ZZ Top is playing at 10:30 tonight,

and we're not missing the old men, come hell or high water. We'll hear "La Grange" straight from the long white beard, like water from La Becca della Verita.

The Wind River Reservation unfolds like corrugated cardboard. Crowheart Butte rises steely brown into the blue firmament. In 1866 Shoshone Chief Washakie challenged Crow Chief Big Robber to a hand-to-hand duel atop the butte for hunting rights to the surrounding lands. The agreement was thus: the winner would cut out and eat the heart of the vanquished. Big Robber lost. The butte became known as "Crowheart."

We blow past the peeling Busted Ass Ranch, through the rotting trailer rows of Shoshoni, entering the labyrinthine Wind River Canyon. This is where you hide when the nation is invaded-just disappear into the rocks like ghosts. We both know the people we'd band with if it came to that, mountain men who could teach you to stay alive on wild plants and game while the cities turned to panic, dust, and bone.

Raised by survivalist Christian hippies on the edge of Grand Teton National Park, Arnica was the 1998 Miss Wyoming USA, shook Donald Trump's hand and everything. But far as I can tell, her beauty's caused her more pain than pleasure. She was a Republican presidential campaign photographer for a stint and has bags of rice stashed between the walls of a house somewhere in Teton County. I campaigned door-to-door for Obama in '08. We couldn't be more different politically, and we don't give a shit.

We're on a bender of some unknown breed, and we're going to round every corner of every rock wall in this canyon until we find Jesus or break down and hitch a lift with bikers, or until we go over, into the shattering river foam. Our friends will wonder and the neighbors will whisper. Our families will cry, but deep down, will know it was the only way we could go.

"Keep an eye through here for the Shepherd's Cross," Arnica tells me. "A man was searching for his herd in the rain and fell off one of these cliffs. They placed the cross where he fell. It's good luck to spot it."

I crane my neck looking for a glint of white where gray-brown rock meets azul but can't find the totem.

Past Thermopolis and the Wyoming Whiskey Distillery, through Buffalo we go; log cabin motels and American Legion Posts are smudges as we close on our target. Outside Gillette, gas rigs speckle scrubby hills before turning to South Dakota grass country.

We're almost to Sturgis and need to clean up.

"South Dakota has nice rest stops. Look for a big cement tepee," I recall from my drives along the 1-90. One appears in minutes.

I regret my idea as we park; the lot is filled with eighteen-wheelers. My seventh grade pre-algebra teacher drove big rigs in summers. He'd quiz us on trucker code when he wasn't talking about x's and y's, which was often. He kicked his boot heels across the classroom and asked: "'Watch out for

the Tijuana taxi about a mile ahead.' Any of you lightweights know what that means?" He called the boys to his desk to show them the calendar he kept in a drawer, featuring smiling bikini girls with forty tons of Peterbilt towering behind them.

"This is how headlines happen."

"Put the taser in your bag."

In the tiled silence of the sea-foam-blue ladies' room, we spread our supplies across the countertop. I've got one hand on eyeliner, the other on the Barbie taser. The door swings open with a rusted creak. A mother and two children step into stalls.

"You girls working Sturgis?" the mother asks as they wash their hands.

"Yeah, we're going to Sturgis," Arnica says.

"Have fun and be safe," the matron advises before hurriedly ushering her children out the door.

"Arnica, holy shit. She thought we were working girls. We were just mistaken for rest stop hookers."

"Are you sure?"

We pause, aghast. But that was that, our honor lost forever in the eyes of one mother and two young souls. We hadn't reached our destination, and already, we were cloaked in a dank perfume of seediness. For a moment, I want to chase after them, to tell them I hope to have children just like them some day, and I will make them brownies from scratch and read to them mythology-for-kids every night and ensure

they are bilingual violin prodigies by the age of ten. For the time being, I go back to my eye shadow.

"Is this dark enough?" I ask, smudging a cocoa powder into the crease of my lid, clumsily attempting a cat eye.

"Sarah, this is Sturgis, not a ladies' luncheon. More."

We leave the rest stop in one piece. Lights flash in the rearview. The officer takes us by surprise at the passenger-side window, shining a light directly in our faces, making us jump and shriek.

Arnica hands over her license and registration. His light probes the cab. He tells her to get out. She obeys, flustered, opening the driver-side door and hopping out while the traffic flies by. She follows him to the cop car and gets in the passenger side.

They return to the truck. She climbs into the cab. The officer walks to the front and taps on the passenger-side headlight. It illuminates. He waves to us and gives a Howdy-Doody-you-ladies-have-fun-now smile.

"What was he doing back there?"

"My headlight was out. He wrote a warning. Then he gave me his personal card and asked if I'd be around for the weekend. Told me to call him 'Ken.'"

"I should have tasered Ken's face when I rolled down the window."

The pull-over makes us late for ZZ Top. We settle for Ted Nugent down the road at the Full Throttle Saloon.

There are top hats and painted ghoulish faces, skulls, and crossbones on T-shirts, bandanas, and assless chaps with exposed thongs. A zip line runs across the upstairs gallery. A woman is harnessed to the line and launches, soaring over the audience, her G-string pinching above her jeans and below her leather vest, blessing the crowd below. The dancing girls shaking it to pop hits on the bar aren't from Vegas; they're cheaper and their ages show.

Two mammoth men talk to the proprietor of a custom chopper booth. With matching mohawks, black bandanas, and wife beaters, they are twin tanned ogres that tower more than six feet three. They have done so many deadlifts that their butts turn up in the air with almost feminine perkiness. I once saw men like this on the street in Windhoek, Namibia, a group of Eastern European mercenaries. You don't dare to look them in the face, like junkyard dogs. They stick out like sore thumbs and don't care. Everyone knows exactly who they are and why they are there.

With the close of Ted's guitar screeches, the Full Throttle turns to a drunken mash before a Grand Funk Railroad cover gig. We drive to town. It's 1:00 a.m. The crowd is thin. A Jack Daniels Wet T-Shirt Contest at the Easyriders Saloon is the final and only entertainment offering.

The members of rock ballads band Hairball act as judges. They are paste-faced with stringy black hair and sagging black

jeans. They enter the stage like the Evolution poster, hunch-backed and walking pelvis-first.

Women of all ages, shapes, colors, and creeds line up in white tank tops and traipse through a gamut of water guns. The audience respectfully claps and whistles for each.

Two lesbians with half-shaved heads stride through the crowd, standing six feet in heels, wrapped in silk corsets and wearing perfectly painted red lips and blackened beauty marks. With much fanfare, they change into white shirts at the walkway stairs. Taking the stage, they are over-confident, and rightfully so - the crowd loves them, as they hold hands down the aisle and swing their asses over the people as if peeing off the side of a boat.

But there's a dark horse. A spray-tanned, bleached-blonde with massive breast and lip implants takes a white shirt and leaps upon the stage, skipping down the promenade in jean shorts, soaking up the rain. She pulls up the soaked wife-beater and jumps up and down, her meticulously tinted bags bouncing in perfect unison.

The Glamazons-suddenly cognizant of the threat like warthogs catching wind of a nearby hyena-helplessly turn to each other and make out, grabbing one another's breasts, doing their best to outcompete Bouncy in the final leg of the race. The crowd reaches a new level of mania, not sure where to focus their attention.

Hairball is unmoved. The bassist tears a large piece of meat off a roasted turkey drumstick with his teeth. The lead

singer lights a cigarette with one hand and sends a text with the other. The drummer picks at a hangnail.

"Where do you think he got that turkey leg?" I ponder.

"Let's find out. I'm starving," Arnica says.

We purchase a bag of French fries with a side of ranch from a burrito truck on the street outside the bar. We don't know where we're sleeping.

"I saw a sign for a campground, The Cabbage Patch. It's too crowded at the Buffalo Chip campground. This place seemed a little more off-the-grid," Arnica offers.

We drive past crowded campgrounds; RVs are parked inches apart, tents fill every nook. The rare exposed patches of ground look as though herds of elk bedded down for a season. We turn down a dirt road winding through empty fields.

"You saw a sign for this place? We're heading into the Dakota boonies."

"Yep."

We ride in silence and pluck fries from the greasy bag on the console, watching the movie of night unfold through the windshield, just dirt lined with shimmying grass.

"Here we are," she announces, turning into a mowed field.

From a flagpole, the Jolly Roger flies above Old Glory, billowing menacingly in a light breeze.

"Pirates," I whisper.

"Quite possibly."

A pavilion serves as port of entry. A sign with a vintage motorcycle frame strapped to it reads: "Welcome to The Cabbage Patch, Home to the Nation's Most Famous Cole Slaw Wrestling Competition, \$10 per person per night." The campsites are marked with flaking outhouses with glowing interiors. We head for a site at the far end, where mowed lawn meets wild prairie.

're you sure this isn't a meth compound?"

"It's not a meth compound. Look, there are a few campers and a tent. Do you want to go back to one of those Woodstock sites?"

I don't. I want to sleep as a coyote in the tall grass and awaken dry as a bone, surrounded in a nest of billowing grass that moves like crow's wings, filtering sun and shadow in trembling waves.

We set up a counter on the tailgate, pouring water from a jug to wash our faces. It's almost the Super Moon. I cautiously open the door of the outhouse. In the green glow, the cracked dirt floor is reminiscent of foundation caked on a sozzled mime's face. I shut the door and squat before the truck.

Arnica drops the seat between the cab and the covered truck bed, unrolls a mattress and inflates it, plugging the air pump into the inverter running off the truck battery. You could charge a computer or blow-dry your hair off pure Chevy power with that thing. Arnica sleeps in her truck wherever she goes. She'll disappear and we'll find out she's road tripping through New Mexico. She sleeps in parking lots, camp-

grounds, shoulders off the side of the road. Some would call her reckless. I would just say she's a true Pisces.

Why should we feel like targets for the unfathomable horrific in our own first-world country? How free are we if we can't pull off our meticulously paved five-lane highways without fear?

I stuff ten bucks under the windshield wiper and leave a note for the instance of a visit by a diligent campground host: "Here's a down payment. We'll settle up in the morning. Promise."

I awaken early, feeling clammy and trapped in the enclosed truck. Arnica is out cold. I wriggle from my bag and get out to survey the outhouse kingdom in long johns and boots. A band of clouds sits low on the horizon before evaporating to blue vacuum. Ten miles to the north rises a lone leather-faced mountain, Bear Butte, in the silhouette of a reclining pregnant woman. The sun climbs, bringing light to the peel and crumble of the campground.

A defunct '78 tractor has rusted to a halt yards from our camp. A dirt-cream camping trailer is the nearest habitation to our outpost, weeds covering the wheels and hitch. Scattered well pumps, a water tank, and the flaking mint-green outhouse shacks make up the geography across flat grass. Next to our john, a lidless trashcan filled with garbage bakes in the sun. Flies stir and buzz.

A shirtless man in jeans and bike boots saunters from the doorway of a distant Airstream. His lady appears in the doorway in cut-offs and a bra, leaning down to wrap her arms around his tattooed back. With foreheads together, they talk. They kiss and he walks to his gleaming bike, leaning on it as he makes a phone call and pulls on a cigarette.

Arnica rolls out the cab door.

Someone's detected us. A black '92 GMC Sierra with a missing grill-the vehicle of the Grim Reaper-ambles toward our isolated camp. A scraggly fellow with greasy brown-gray hair and a three-day's beard hops out. In thick glasses, loose jeans, and a Panama Jack shirt, he reminds me of my high school shop teacher who taught plastic injection molding, at least a hungover version of him. The boys sometimes jammed a machine, and a river of plastic intended for checker pieces flowed across the shop floor. This man moves like a live worm on a hook.

"Holy shit, a blonde and a brunette-had I known what was in my patch last night! How'd ya sleep, ladies?"

He introduces himself as George, Proprietor of The Patch.

"I bought this place in my outlaw days. Came out here to escape from it all and do whatever the hell I wanted. The land was dirt-cheap and the shitters were already here. Only campground around with private shitters for every site that are lit all night. Not bad, huh?"

George is just the guy we need. We pay up in full, handing over twenty bucks.

"Where can we go dancing, George?" We wanted to party with the descendants of Gram Parsons, the grandson of Stephenwolf, the illegitimate children of Guns N' Roses. We wanted to be two-stepped, spun, and dipped while some half-ass honky-tonk band sang a somewhat decent cover of "Call Me the Breeze," where the dancing girls were shaking it to Free and not Katy Perry.

"George, do you know of this place? Does it exist?"

"There used to be The Broken Spoke and The Pyramid. But you know, they've torn down all the old places or rebuilt them. They're all a bunch of circuses. Anymore, I just stay out here and let the party come to me. That's the special thing about this place." He draws a line in the air, as if envisioning his masterpiece in the marquee, and says: "The Patch: You Have To Find It."

"What's the deal with the slaw wrestling? It's today, isn't it?" Arnica inquires.

"I buy 250 pounds of the shit every year, throw it in a heap out in the field and let 'em go at it. Sometimes it gets really rough. Last year a big-ass chick tugged on the nutsack of the only guy who dared to enter. He went down fast. Dirtiest match I've ever hosted. But I'm sick of it. I'm not doing it again after this year."

"You don't mean that, George," I argue.

Arnica agrees. "This is The Patch. You have to offer slaw wrestling."

"No, I mean it. Never again. I can't get anyone to do it this year. The only person I've got signed up so far is the bus driver." He points and waves to the The Cabbage Patch complimentary shuttle, a shortbus with airbrushed cabbage heads on its sides, which has just made the first morning swing through to drop off no one and pick up no one. The driver beeps hello, her flank-steak arm swinging out the window.

"Tell you what, if you girls slaw wrestle this afternoon you can stay free tonight. No one will fuck with ya here."

"We'll think on it. Thanks, George."

"Swing by the bar before you head out for the day," he points to the garage lean-to at the entry. He hops back in his rig, lifts an Intoxalock from the console and blows into the tube, shrugging his shoulders sheepishly as he passes the test and fires the engine.

We sit at a picnic table next to the outhouse, carefully arranging a nail painting station between blotches of bird shit. I set my hands on the pock-marked particleboard, and Arnica paints my nails fire-engine red. I let them air dry as she does hers.

We have no one to call, no one to report to. We have all the time in the world, the freedom to sit in the sun and say nothing while a friend paints her nails a vixen shade.

"Shall we?" she asks after the lacquer thoroughly dries.

We saunter to the open-air pavilion, where George invites us into the bar area. A stripper pole serves as centerpiece in the floor plan. Miller Lite flags hang like stalactites from the ceiling; the faux-maple paneling of the walls are covered in Sharpie messages.

"This place rocks."

"Live to ride, ride to live, 2000."

"George-I fucked your mom."

Rubber marks streak the floor from burnout competitions, in which a rider straddles a bike and holds it stationary while gunning the throttle. The back wheel spins and bums off the tire tread, which spews white smoke and fills the room as the tailpipes fan the fumes. Whoever holds it longest without tipping over or the engine catching fire wins. George offers us cups of coffee, biscuits, and gravy from a Crock-Pot.

"I built this place when I was tweaking. I used to be a crazy bastard. But that's all behind me now."

He came to Sturgis by way of Illinois, where he ran an auto body shop with his son. But that fell to the wayside.

"I dated my son's ex-girlfriend after they broke up. That kinda pissed off my boy. She was 18 and I was 47. She had a baby a few years ago with her new guy, and I was the one who had to go to the delivery room with her. Paid for her hospital bills and everything. I'm always the person people come crying to."

"He's full of shit," one of his buddies walks in. The man pulls a few biscuits from the plastic bag and ladles gravy over them.

"No, I'm not. After her, I decided I was done being a wild man." He holds up his left hand to show us a gold band. "I married a woman who's in prison. We started off as pen pals and just a few months ago we said our vows over the phone. I check in with her once a week. She keeps me honest."

"He's tellin' the truth on that," the friend interjects.

"How much time does she have to go, George?"

"Five years. That ain't too long to wait for true love, right?"

Main Street is filled with people and bikes, the roar of exhaust pipes drowning out conversation and music. It is tempting to lump bikers under one broad category, but from the memorabilia sold in stores and street stands, you can't tell which way the crowd's door swings. There are iron-on patches for every biker category: for every veteran from every war, patches to legalize it, patches for every state, for every ethnicity, Tea Partiers and Libertarians, for grandparents. And bitches. Bitch plastered on every-

thing. Silhouettes of spread-legged women airbrushed across the chest with a simply stated "Bitch" below her gaping cheeks. T-shirts proclaim on the back: "If you can read this, the bitch fell off."

"I don't want to be a bitch," I say aloud. At least not a bitch whose salient trait was to fall off the back of a bike.

Some years ago at a conference, I asked a Miami businessman for his secret to success. We sat at the bar and swirled vodka tonics in highball glasses as he passed on the lessons that an Alabama used-car salesman shared with him long ago: First, cash is king. Second, control your destiny. Third, no partners. Ever.

Finding his words enchantingly mafioso, I pondered this advice, especially "control your destiny." How do you control your destiny? I thought I knew the answer.

"You're saying I have to be a bitch."

"No, no, no," he explained, lowering his voice and leaning in so as to not let the whole world in the know. "You have to be so good at what you do that everyone wants what you have to offer."

Because if you were that good, everyone would have to get the hell outta your way whether you were man or woman or beast. The question becomes: what to offer?

We admire faux-leather corsets and chaps imported from China, cowboy boots from Texas, Native American and Goth jewelry. We mosey past guys hawking back massagers, bratwurst stands, the music of live bands in bars drowned out by the endless moaning and groaning of the bikes. We visit the Indian Motorcycle store and ogle the vintage paint jobs, accented with leather, studs, and fringe.

To escape the late afternoon heat, we sit in the Avalanche, parked under a shady tree with the doors open. As the sun begins to drop, Arnica raises a point: "We need to find guys with bikes. We can't return from Sturgis and tell everyone we didn't ride a Harley."

"I agree. How are we going to procure them?"

"We'll figure it out as we go. But you're not wearing that."

Arnica motions to my skinny jeans, Chacos, royal blue tank top, and gold angel wings-ready for an outdoor poetry reading. She hands me a fringed leather halter-top with buffalo coin snaps. She fishes around in tool compartments lining the truck bed and tosses me fringed brown boots. The strips of suede hanging about my heels feel like tentacles of sin.

"I don't know if I can do this," I say with my head upside down as Arnica hoses my hair with dry shampoo and hairspray. I long for one of my cream cable-knit sweaters.

"The halter top or the boots?"

"All of it."

Arnica's donning a black leather corset, jean shorts, and tall, gray Old Gringos with silver studs. Silver feathers dangle from her earlobes.

"When else are you going to have the opportunity to wear this much fringe? You'll live," she says. We're stuffing money, cell phones and the taser into our bootlegs when two officers approach the truck. They peer inside the open cab while making small talk.

"What's that?" One points to a clear Pendleton bottle that Arnica uses as a water jug.

"We could write you a ticket for having an open container in the cab. Do you want a ticket, ladies?"

A topless woman with the presidential faces of Mount Rushmore airbrushed over her breasts walks by holding a margarita in a monster plastic cup. I pull the cork and hand him the offensive bottle.

"It's water."

"Put it away."

"Yes, officer. Thank you," we say and stuff the bottle out of sight. They follow us for a block as we leave the lot.

"So this is what it's like to be tailed on foot," I say. "I want to run and see what they do."

We find a plumbing-supply-store-turned-Indian-Taco-Stand. Standing in line next to shelves filled with PVC pipe, we place orders before the counter lined with Church Picnic chaffing dishes. A teenage girl heaps shredded pork, lettuce, tomatoes, and beans atop fry bread.

We take our paper plates before the window of a tattoo parlor next door. Beneath the glaring lights on the other side of the window, a man grimaces while an artist punctures "Sturgis 2014" into his bicep. We eat and spectate as orange ink and blood leak from his needle-struck pores.

"Heya lovelies!"

Two strapping Aussies in jeans, black T-shirts, and boots interrupt us. The one looks to be around our age, stocky with clipped hair, a big brown beard, and big blue eyes-Dave. The other is his dad, six feet four and twenty hands wide. Glen. He reminds me of

Hagrid. We chat with them. They manage energy production for mining operations. Solid blue-collar guys. Real bikers.

"Let us buy you a drink," I offer.

Below the black bandana wrapped about his head and above a bushy, mottled goatee, wariness flashes through Glen's brown eyes. But Dave is gung-ho. We walk into the Easyriders. A Johnny Cash cover band howls "Ring of Fire." I buy a round of Jack.

Glen and Dave rode to South Dakota by way of Los Angeles. Dave tells me of life in Outback mining towns. His senior science class at the one-room schoolhouse in Innawanga required students to learn to chlorinate a pool. It was the final exam.

"Is it very difficult to chlorinate a pool?" I ask.

"Nah. You just take two little bottles, fill them with water samples, mix this with that, shake 'em up and there you have it - the correct pH."

He tells me about dragging half-dead kangaroos off the road and how they'll punch at you even though you're trying to help them, about camping in the bush, jumping into bogey-holes, playing footie, spearfishing for barramundi, riding a motorcycle on a road that's melting because it's so hot, about the dust in the air from the mines, about the cyclones. I'm swooning.

"Can we go for a ride?"

"Just say the word, spunk. We're parked just outside."

We round up our posse. Arnica and I climb onto the backseats of the Aussies' Harleys. Dave bought a 1994 HD Heritage Classic from a Hollywood producer. It's modified with a twenty-one inch front wheel, lowered suspension, twenty-inch ape hangers, and

long shot exhaust pipes. On the black rear fender, a grinning skeleton gives the peace sign.

"Had to pull the handlebars down a bit. Coppa pulled me over in Utah and told me they weren't street legal."

He hands me a heavy leather jacket to wear. We embark for the Full Throttle Saloon. The tailpipes on the bike make a popping exclamation. I holler a war whoop.

"You just hang on back there, missy," Dave chastises. "Don't want to fall off the back of the bike, do ya'?"

'bsolutely not. I'm not that kind of lady."

Glen and Arnica cruise ahead. We follow the whip of her blonde hair. The almost-Super Moon hangs low and ripe on the horizon. We join a mass of bikers on the roadway like geese finding their flock mid-air.

We park in the packed lot and enter the Full Throttle melee. There's a sideshow tonight. A man with long white hair is pinched by the skin of his back and hanging from a trapeze bar affixed to the ceiling. Below him, a morbidly obese woman in a black string bikini and black lipstick gyrates. She swallows a stick of fire and slaps her breasts with an electrified ping-pong paddle that shoots sparks with each hit.

The dancing girls rage on the bar in costumes. With four dollars, I buy Glen a go with a 45-year-old babe in a silver leather gladiator bikini. He stands at the edge of the bar and looks up at her. She smiles down at him. For a moment, I think they might have fallen in love, like they know each other from another lifetime. She turns around and bends over, shimmying down until

she sits on his bandana-ed head and shakes her silver booty. He giggles like a little boy on Christmas morning.

On the edge of the parking lot, we stand by the bikes while the guys smoke and take in the illuminated grassland moon-scape. Bear Butte glows in the distance, a watchful sphinx. Arnica hops on Dave's bike.

"How do you start this?"

He fires it up. She shifts into first and putters along for a jaunt, turning a slow, wide circle in the middle of the packed dirt back toward us.

"OK, here she comes, don't tip it over," Dave says, nervously coaching her on the stop.

But she hits the throttle, shifts gears and guns past us, uphill, the headlights catching the top fringe of grass and then gone. The loud punch of extended tailpipes fades. The Aussies are dumb-struck.

"Well, there goes your bike," I announce after some moments, "'... her long blonde hair flyin' in the wind.' Just like a Neil Young song, huh?"

"She's comin' back," they postulate hopefully. Minutes pass.

"I don't know," I lightly say. "She's pretty crazy about Harleys. She might end up in the next county, the next state, on the Pacific Coast. There's just no telling where she'll end up."

'Ah, fuck. Now I'm imagining her tipped over and trapped with the pipe burning her wee legs," Dave frets.

"Could be." I shrug my shoulders. "Poor thing's in jean shorts."

Glen has had it but is a gentleman anyways. He hops on his bike and heads uphill.

Dave grabs me by the bulky leather jacket and kisses me in the middle of the road. Cars approach. We dive into the tall grass and crawl through the field until we are face-to-face on our bellies.

"Do we need to worry about dingoes? Or snakes?" he asks with sincerity. This guy's seriously never left the Outback.

"Only ticks. They carry Lyme disease."

He takes my cheek in his hand. I take his bearded chin in my palms. The traffic goes by, and we smooch like middle-schoolers. It's like nuzzling a buffalo.

"I'm really sorry about this nasty beard," he says. "Me old fella told me I had to grow it for Sturgis or I'd look like a regular nancy."

"It's OK, Dave," I reassure him. "I never wear this much fringe."

We hear the roar of bikes and sit up like prairie dogs at the edge of a den entrance and scramble back to the gravel. Glen and Arnica pull up in tandem.

"She tipped it over on the turnaround. But no scrapes. I can't believe how far she made it. Rides like a pro," Glen says.

Arnica comes to a stop and parks perfectly, daintily touching her booted toes to the ground.

We saddle up and head to town, Glen and Arnica ahead. Under the voodoo moon, we glide with the silence of owls, the snap and thunder of the exhaust drowned out in the perfect space of speed and the contentedness of hanging on.

Police lights flash off the high chrome handlebars. Dave brakes. We don't talk. The officers approach on both sides from behind, shining lights on us as if spotlighting gators in a swamp.

"License and registration," the one on the left requests.

"I have an Australian driver's license."

"Where's your passport?"

"Left it back at me camp. I didn't want to lose it out on the town. I can have someone get it for me and bring it to youse."

Had I dated him for three months rather than five hours, I would chastise him. I hold motionless.

"Get off the bike. Get in the car."

He listens. I'm still frozen. They haven't seemed to notice me, like a built-in accessory on the bike. I sit there for some time and finally dismount.

I stand in the headlights, peeking sidelong glances into the cab. One cop is standing outside the car. Dave is lit in the front seat of the interior. The other officer is in the driver's side, fiddling with a clipboard and papers.

One of my past bosses could sell snow to an Eskimo. He told me that if you acted submissive-yet-helpful with cops and if you narrated every move you were making, that you could squeeze your way through anything. They think you have some kind of law enforcement training and relate to you, subconsciously thinking you're one of them.

"Sir, would you like to see my license? May I reach into my boot to pull it out?"

're you from Australia?" he asks.

"I have a Montana license. May I reach into my boot? I would be happy to show it to you."

"No. I don't need to see it."

"May I reach into my boot for my phone to let my friend know where I am?"

"Yes. Call your friends and tell them to pick you up."

"What did he do? What are you going to do with him?"

"He crossed the white line. The Feds don't like this no passport stuff. He'll spend the night and get a good lecture in the morning. Make your call."

"OK, I'm reaching into my boot now," I carefully narrate as I stand on one foot and dig into my right bootleg.

The Avalanche pulls up on the other side of the median before I have a chance to dial.

"Is that your friend?" the cop is gaping.

Arnica's hopped out of her rig, standing in the grass highway divider in her black corset calling to me, a blonde mirage between the flash of passing cars, bikes, and police siren lights, like goddamn Bridget Bardot on a battlefield. Get back in the truck, run away, Arnica, run away before they arrest both of us for a crime we did not commit.

"Her? Yes, sir, that is my friend. May I walk to her vehicle?" I feel like cops like the word "vehicle" as opposed to "truck."

"Yeah. Get outta here."

"May I talk to him? I have his jacket."

"Give me his things. Get outta here."

I listen like a trained guinea pig and take it off. He gasps at my fringe as I thrust the jacket into his hands.

"I'm crossing the highway now," I narrate. He's staring. Fine then. Give the people what they want and don't shake in your boots.

Cue "Sweet Emotion" and play me in slow motion: I pull my shoulders back, toss my brunette mane behind my shoulder, my brown eyes flashing red and blue as I turn to face the police car and give Dave a sad little wave, knowing it had been sweet, perhaps we would meet again, but it was probably doomed with him being from Australia and all. I turn to face the road and walk across, the fringe on my boots hovering mid-air, the leather strips on my halter-top swinging like pensive cobras side-to-side. I reach the median. Resume normal speed. A car flies by. I make it to the truck.

Glen is in the passenger seat. A biker in a truck looks like a rhino on a lawn in suburbia. It cannot hold him, too small for his body and being. I climb in the back and tell them the deal.

"Take me back there. I've got to get me boy," Glen says. Arnica pulls a U-turn. A tow truck driver arranges Dave's bike on a flat bed. The cop car is gone, off to the station.

We drop Glen at his bike and form a motorcade to the cop shop, the Avalanche leading the way down an empty Sturgis Main Street.

"We are going to hell," I moan with my face in my hands.

"But we've done nothing wrong. We've been harassed three times in one-point-five days. This is just bad luck, all this police nonsense," Arnica defends.

"Well, we're wanted, dead or alive."

We pull up to the police compound downtown. I scrawl my phone number on a scrap of paper and run to Glen's bike.

"Go to that office." I point to an illuminated window in the precinct where a receptionist sits at a desk. "She'll tell you what to do. You have your passport on you?"

"Yeah."

"Don't make a fuss. Just ask where he is and if you can deliver his documents. Here's my number. Tell him to call me. And give him a kiss for me, Glen."

"I'll give 'im your number. But no kissing."

I pat his tree trunk shoulder and tell him it's going to be OK. He's not a man that requires this kind of reassurance, and I feel sheepish.

Our Aussie wingmen are in the hands of the law. We're frantic. There's no way we're driving back through the police gauntlet to the comfort of George and The Patch.

"This is all so wrong," I lament. "I'm an occasional jaywalker. And now I've sent an innocent man to the slammer."

"We're going up the mountain, to Deadwood. We just need to sleep and evaluate in the morning," Arnica says.

We make like bandidas, winding into the Black Hills, to Deadwood, fifteen miles southwest of Sturgis. The old mining town is built on land that was originally designated to the Lakota through the Laramie Treaty. When Custer found gold in French Creek, a white settlement formed. Renowned for lawlessness and prostitutes, it's where Wild Bill Hickok met his end playing poker at the Number Ten Saloon on August 2, 1876. He was shot holding the

two black aces and two black eights, the Dead Man's Hand. He's buried on a hillside next to Calamity Jane.

"Let's find a wide shoulder in the road and sleep there," Arnica suggests, scanning dirt turn-offs for suitability.

"½. Arnica, this isn't the Dust Bowl. We can't just park wherever we please like roadies. Drive on."

Deadwood's cobblestone main street is deserted. Our panic magnifies against the ghost-town backdrop, bouncing off the tunnel of darkened brick and wood storefronts. The Avalanche creeps down the street as if tiptoeing through enemy territory. Arnica spots a hotel-casino with a sign in gold Old West font.

"The Bullock! I love the Bullock!" She abruptly brakes before the familiar oasis. "See if they've got any rooms."

I hop onto the street. The Pendleton bottle rolls across the cab floor. It catches perfectly in the slam of the door and shatters. The tinkle of glass and splash of water upon stone reverberates from the buildings like a bone china teacup dropped upon a marble floor at a debutante's tea party. We both scream.

"What is this devilry?" I shriek. My voice bounces off the faades. Arnica shrugs her shoulders in the cab, lipping, "I don't know."

It's the ghost of Wild Bill taunting us. The tidy clicks of his boots near. He whistles and swings a gold pocket watch from a chain with one hand, pulls on his long moustache with the other. The big-eared bastard catcalls us like brothel girls: "You ladies ever been spanked by a Dead Man's Hand?"

I flee into the Bullock lobby. It's empty except for a swaying drunk standing below the chintzy chandelier. I walk around him like a poorly placed piece of furniture.

"Hello?" I call. "Hello?" The place is empty. I peer into the casino. There's not a soul to be found, just rows of blinking slot machines and fleur-de-lis commercial carpeting.

The scruffy drunk mocks me, "Hello, howdy, hello!" His body is perfectly still; only his hands move in rolling gesticulations, like a magician introducing himself to an audience. I exit the lobby and run to the truck.

"½.ny luck?" Arnica asks.

"Too creepy. Next place," I tell her.

She pulls a U-turn in the street and stops before another hotel. I bust through the doors. What the hell-the drunk has made it here before me! How did he do this? How? He's leaning on the counter and tips his hat at me. I walk to the counter without giving him my eyes. He stares at my profile as I make my inquiry.

The woman behind the desk stares at a computer screen, compulsively clicking the mouse. She stands five feet three with long white hairs sprouting from her bar-leathered chin.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I was wondering, do you have any -"

"Can't help ya. No rooms." The clicking stops. She looks away from the screen to smirk at me. It's 3:00 a.m.

"No rooms," the drunkard parrots. "No rooms for you, lady. Where you gonna sleep tonight? There's no place to rest." He hiccups.

I turn and face him.

"I . . . don't . . . fuck.ing . . . know."

He and the surly night desk receptionist exchange a look, raising their brows at one another knowingly, as if *I'm* the lunatic in this trio. I turn on my heel and stride out.

I climb in the truck, empty-handed.

"This town is possessed. We should drive on."

Arnica hangs a left and a left and a left, her salmon-like homing senses leading the way. We're in a campsite on a steep, wooded hillside. She speeds the truck to the top of the mountain and backs into a space. I don't bother to put cash on the windshield. We crawl into our bags, delirious.

'rnica, he's going to prison. And it's my fault." I'm reeling, on the verge of tears.

"George's wife is in prison. Dave is not in prison. He's in jail for the night."

"Same thing."

"Prison and jail are not the same thing."

"Well, if he gets out of jail, I do hope he calls."

I sleep somewhere between the angelic and the animal and awaken in a fluster, drenched in sweat, feeling the way Bonnie would if she had thrown Clyde to the wolves. I should have gone with him and at least slept in the waiting room with all the other inmate girlfriends.

I fish out the truck keys and hop in the driver's seat, fire the engine, hitting the gas in my socked foot. I am getting us the hell out of here. Devils Tower, that's where we'll go. I fire up the

engine and lurch from the parking spot. Arnica awakens with the jostling and bags sliding into her head and asks what I'm doing.

"We're blowing this joint. I'm driving to Devils Tower. Just go back to sleep."

I roll the truck down the steep grade in second, past biker groups who are crawling from their tents and RVs, lighting the first cigarette of the day. Arnica comes to.

"Wait! Just wait a minute! We're in no shape to travel! We've barely slept!"

She hops in the passenger seat, throwing fringed boots, deodorant, silver feather earrings, a bottle of glowy-tan lotion out of the way. The truck interior is a pink and leather hoarder's delight. She turns to plead with me.

"You're sure you don't want to stay for the day? Maybe he'll get out of jail and ride up here to meet you for lunch. Get your head on straight! You can't just *leave* Deadwood!"

We're a mess, bleary-eyed from truck-sleeping, the adrenaline of running from the law and not showering for three days. Our spray-on dry shampoo has hit a breaking point. I pull up to a gas station that's been converted to a diner. After breakfast, I reluctantly agree to stay.

We wander about, stepping into the Number Ten Saloon, wading through sawdust on the floorboards. Wax portrait busts of famous outlaws glow in glass cases over the bar. The chair in which Wild Bill was shot is enshrined in a red velvet-lined glass case that hangs over the door. A holster is slung over the back of the seat and the sign below reads "Wild Bill's Death Chair." It's creepy as hell, that little death chair.

We wander further up the street. A shopkeeper sweeps glass from the pavement before the Bullock, muttering, "Damn troublemakers."

"How funny," she says, "there's my shattered Pendleton bottle."

"I should offer to clean it up."

"He's got it."

A sidewalk sandwich board invites us to an art show in the lobby of the Gold Dust Casino. We're shocked by the sophistication at hand, our systems remembering some temporarily shriveled part of ourselves.

Within each gilt frame, epic people share canvas space with Harley-Davidsons throughout the decades. On a six-foot-tall canvas titled *The Reckoning*, Steven Tyler bursts from a hotel entrance riding a motorcycle like a bucking bronc, one fist raised to the air as he howls. Below the front wheel, dumbstruck paparazzi photographers fly through the air. In another painting, the spectacled Pope, dressed in black and holding an umbrella, circumspectly examines a motorcycle parked upon the cobblestones of St. Peter's Square.

A series of intaglio prints stands out from the bike paintings, titled *Divine Intervention* depicting a black-haired angel in three phases. In the first, she sits naked on a pedestal above the clouds, her body covered in symbols. A bare branch rises through the clouds parallel to the pedestal. A chimpanzee perches on the limb, smiling and extending an apple to her. Her hands are clasped tightly in her lap. The two float in the clouds, an ungrounded offer and choice.

"Hey, that's the Eye of Horus," I point out. The Egyptian eye is painted on the angel's right calf.

The artist hears us and approaches. He introduces himself as David Uhl. He's Harley-Davidson's legendary designer and painter, responsible for the logo T-shirts with eagles and wolves wrapped in flames. He is also responsible for all that fills the gallery space, a virtuoso of talent who can appeal to the masses or the Old Masters. He explains these prints.

"This series is *The Illusion*, the story of the Fallen Angel. In the first image, she is given a choice, the apple extended to her. She takes the fruit and falls to Earth, losing her angel wings," he says, pointing to the next print. "Finally, she is redeemed, taken back to the light. Her shadows are washed out to sea."

David attended Catholic schools his entire life and studied the mystics, numerology, and sacred geometry. On his right hand, he wears a platinum ring. He takes it off and lets us hold it to the light for examination.

'ter - I met Pope Francis and toured the Vatican," he nods toward the painting of the Inquisitive-Pope-with-Harley, "I was inspired to design this ring. I studied religious iconography for a long time and was intrigued by what I saw in Rome."

Each side is engraved with the caduceus, the two serpents wrapped around a staff. He points to them: 'n - ancient depiction of DNA. To me this represents the energy that sits in our spine and holds our greatest potential, the Kundalini which must be released from sacrum to skull."

"The large eye on top," he points to the crown of the ring, outfitted with a large garnet, "is the Eye of Providence, the Eye of

God watching over all of humanity." Carved rays burst in a halo around the all-seeing *eye*, creating the setting.

"I designed one of these rings for Steven," he says, pointing to the Aerosmith-Running-Over-the-Paparazzi painting. "He's a dear soul. A very spiritual man."

He guides us through a Women of Harley-Davidson series. Before a World War II plane, wearing a tank top and dungarees, a female mechanic stands beside a 1945 US Navy Edition Harley-Davidson. She wipes her forehead with the back of her forearm, posed and sculpted in oil as perfectly as a Renaissance Venus.

"The model for this one was Jessi Combs, the racecar driver. She's known as the fastest woman on four wheels."

After her, there's a whole series of lady Lone Rangers, vampire slayers, pioneers. Bitches who definitely did not fall off the back of the bike.

No word from the Aussie. We imagine him in handcuffs, escorted by the Feds and shoved into a dog crate in the cargo compartment of an unmarked plane. We drive back through the heart of Wyoming, to Devils Tower and then Thermopolis.

Arriving late, we beg a waiter at a closing Mexican eatery to make us a plate of nachos. Outside the restaurant, the fat moon glows behind an empty building with a white cross painted onto its brick face. A metal sign swings and creaks in the lifting wind.

"Let's indulge and get a hotel," Arnica suggests.

We find a red-log cabin motel compound in the heart of town. The proprietor looks to be about twenty years old and sits on the

porch of the main house with friends, smoking Marlboro Reds and playing poker.

"Yeah?" he glances up from the game.

"½ny rooms?"

He nods and tosses us a key.

I pull back the comforter on my twin bed to be greeted by a manure-colored blanket that looks like it came straight from Marsha Brady's hope chest.

"Sleeping bags," we assess, plucking the sheets away.

We pack our sleeping bags and roll out the next morning. Thermopolis is on the map for hosting the largest mineral hot springs in the world. Several water parks are built around the source, filled with slides, arcades, and screaming children. We opt for the bargain deal, the State of Wyoming Bath House. For one dollar each, we get a threadbare rental towel and a twenty-minute soak in a shaded outdoor pool.

The sun beats down and the water boils up. Steam rises from the surface of our bobbing arms as if from thermal basins, like humans just arrived to earth, cooling from the speed of light. Beyond the chain-link fence enclosing the pool lies a prehistoric landscape of bare orange-yellow terraces and gurgling mineral pools. The muffled din of laughing children from the neighboring water park drifts over the pool. An elderly German couple slowly walks to and fro creating small trembling wakes. A Shoshone family arrives. The grandmother holds the feet of her little grandson and sways him on his back, his long black hair waving in smoke-like tendrils. Our twenty minutes end. The water oxidizes

the coating on our angel wings; my gold turns copper and Arnica's silver is flecked with leaden streaks.

In town, we sip smoothies at a health foods cafe. My phone rings with an international number on the screen.

"Dave! You're alive!"

"Yep. Still kickin'."

"Were you forced to do chin-ups?"

He reported his tank comrades to be very friendly.

"We were all mates by the end. Ya know, the blue heelers pulled me over because of those boots you were wearin'. Said the fringe was flying all about and looked unsafe."

"They are a hazard," I agree.

He was free and on his Harley once more, pointing the steel horse north to the Montana Hi-Line. Maybe he'll loop south and visit, he offers. I wish him luck either way and apologize on behalf of the country.

The drive to Jackson takes on a quality that we couldn't appreciate in our previous haste. We are alone on the two-lane road, the crinkled buttes and swaying grasses not ours but only ours to see for the seconds in which we pass. It belongs to us and we to it, because it's all we've got and we're all the landscape's got, until the next travelers come through.

The sun sets in a rainbow sky behind the peak of the Grand Teton. We make it to Arnica's studio apartment in downtown Jackson, a few blocks from the hat shops, Western art galleries, and elk antler archways.

"I'm going to pass out," I say.

'nd bypass dancing at The Cowboy? We can't end this journey with sleep," she insists.

I drag my feet to The Million Dollar Cowboy Bar. Its knobby wooden columns and ranch memorabilia stretch half the width of the block. And the dance floor-the best square of parquet in America, most would agree. It's not big, but it's where people still dance like there's no tomorrow.

Arnica and her on-again-off-again cowboy take to the floor. They dance Western Ballroom styles as few of the living know how, like ghosts from a honky-tonk legend. Beyond their spinning silhouettes, a gargantuan buffalo skull glows in chiaroscuro.

I see a man in head-to-toe black. Ralph. I ask him for a spin. He dances at bars five nights a week and doesn't drink an ounce. Nobody is quite sure how he came to be. He could be forty-five or sixty. No telling which. All you know from that square of floor is that the man can dance Western Swing like the devil, and if you can't, he'll make you.

He takes my right hand aloft and braces my back as the band plays the Travis Tritt version of Bruce Springsteen: "Well, it's Saturday night, you're all dressed up in blue, I've been watching you awhile, maybe you're watching me too ... "

He steps forward and back for a bit and twists us into the window, our arms lifted up to one side in reflecting circles, spinning clockwise. He drops our arms to change direction, and I don't follow.

"I'm hopeless, Ralph, like a horse that can't be broke."

"That ain't true," he says. "You just need to be gentled right. Try again."

He drops our arms into a pretzel again, and I duck my head, gliding underneath the tangle of hands and elbows. We stand again, gazing through the window of our arms, whirling in the opposite direction.

The song ends. Ralph dips me back low, my toe pointing to the ceiling, my hair sweeping debris from the floor as he circles me around to standing. He takes off his cowboy hat, presses it to his chest, and kisses the back of my hand.

"You know, you and me, I think we got something," he says.

"I know what you mean, Ralph."

It's midnight. I find Arnica and our blistered feet carry us home. I'll leave early in the morning to make my shift.

"Do you think we'll awaken or turn to silver dust?" I ask.

"Silver dust."

At the foot of moonlit mountains, sleep creeps and I ask between this world and the next: What to wish for next? What right have I to feel safe in this world with the mere promise that the next thing will show up around the bend?

I've got angel wings around my neck, tied taut until something becomes certain. And there might be an Aussie coming my way, over the Continental Divide. I've got my ear to the wind, listening for the thunder of tailpipes, my eyes to the highway horizon, watching for a glint of sun reflecting from chrome.