The Renegade

For my fourteenth birthday, my grandmother gave me knee socks with a crossword printed on the shins, the answers slang from a randy thesaurus—boobs, petting, pistol, fondle. Shopping for my prom three years later, she steered me into a shoe store and told the muffin behind the counter he needed to fit me with slinky crimson heels. When he disappeared behind his magic curtain to conjure the match, she grinned and undid the top buttons on my shirt.

“Show your dinners, honey. He’s cute.”

My grandmother was a renegade, a woman who favored no-nonsense operations when it came to lust and love, and marriage, too, so it isn’t her suggestion that I abandon my husband that surprises me. It’s how she’s returned from the blue yonder, sixteen years gone, to prattle in my dream.

I find her in a hotel, deep in the night. It’s the kind of resort I could never afford. The suites have a cordless telephone near the Jacuzzi in the bathroom, a stocked refrigerator with no lock, no tab, and an antique, marble fireplace just for looks. I release my hair from the towel
wrapped like a cotton swab atop my head. My hair is cut short. When I flip on my travel-size
blow dryer, it whines. Any minute, I expect smoke to billow around my head and sparks to fly
from the wall socket, but then my grandmother is standing beside me, and the dryer’s wail settles
into her words:

“I say, you find yourself racing a bad marriage, your husband tailing you, breathing down
your neck like an angry eighteen-wheeler in the rearview, you goose it, Sister.” Her foot tips
downward like she’s giving it the gas, and from her mouth comes this warbling again like there’s
an engine—maybe a hair dryer—revving inside her ribcage.

I hand her a brush so maybe she’ll start styling and stop roaring. “How are you?” I shout.

A turban covers her head left bald by cancer, though her face seems flushed and
brimming, not blanched like paper. She has a fresh manicure, an odd thing since, under the
weight of illness in her last years, she cut loose excess burdens such as beauty regimens. She
smells healthy—Baby Magic hand lotion—a comforting switch from the hospital odor.

She refuses the brush, picks up a comb instead, and tugs on my hair’s tangles. “I’m
losing beauty sleep. Your granddad will join me soon. I’d like to look pretty, too. I can’t come
rescue every grandchild that’s mucking up life.”

“You could have stayed. No one minded caring for you.”

“You watch,” she promises. “You’ll stick it out too long. You’ll start saying—*he’s
different, he’s changed, he’s nicer.* They do that,” she warns. “They sense trouble.” She wraps
a lock of my hair around a curling iron and counts to five before releasing it. “Or maybe our
consciences knot up. We’re desperate to see the good because it’s much kinder than leaving.
Either way—.” She waves her hand to dismiss the conversation.
She tousles my new fuss-free hair. The short curls wiggle like worms on my head. “I can’t get this mop of yours to do anything. Don’t cut your hair so short. Why did you do that?”

“I’m going on a long sojourn,” I say.

“Cut something else.” Her mouth tilts. Her eyebrows cock. Her look says, *You know who I mean.* She yanks on a cowlick, rats it with the comb, then tries to pat it down.

When she hands me a mirror and spins me around so I can inspect the back of my hair, she’s gone. In the vanity, I watch my hair grow longer. It sprouts from my head like tendrils of prairie grass, soft and wavy. Near the bubbling Jacuzzi, the telephone is ringing and ringing and ringing.

The Painter

I wake in a Howard Johnson Motel, nothing like the Shangri-La in my dreams. The remote control doesn’t work; the clock radio is bolted to the nightstand; and I have found a long red hair in the sheets. Still, I’m on the move. Yesterday I chopped my hair, packed a suitcase, and abandoned my marriage, getting as far as Albuquerque and the Sangre de Cristo range. This morning, I head further north, up U.S. 550 toward Durango, Silverton, eventually Ouray. I crack the windows and let the air whistle inside my car. I’ve got some good tunes playing. I pretend to be the drummer I dated once, popping rimshots, twirling sticks, performing with Brooks & Dunn, boot scootin’ boogie down the road. Some men hate C&W. The man I married three years ago has banned it from my life. I’m breaking his law listening to it now. It’s easy to see how crooks, when no one’s looking, stumble into third—three strikes, you’re out—felonies. One crime tumbles into another.
Along 550, north of Bernalillo, the desert is red, raw, a skinned knee. The bluffs stretch then drop, jagged as broken bones. The earth’s skin splits where rain, when it comes, slices veins, spills muddy blood. “Beautiful,” I say, “gorgeous,” because wounds, in an ironic way, pretty a girl up. She’s lived resolutely, climbed life’s rocks without the proper gear maybe, and she could have backed off, but by golly, she’s seen some things.

Georgia O’Keefe roared through these bluffs like the force of nature that gashed this earth in the first place. Her paintings undress the landscape, exposing its bloody petals, curvy stems, precipices, bruises. I like to imagine she brought passion with her from New York: her paintbrush awoke the virgin New Mexico desert, allowing it lust and love and experience. But maybe the desert roused her.

There’s a photograph Stieglitz took where O’Keefe, in her mid-30’s, has hitched a ride on a motorcycle with a young man, not her husband. Her arm coils around his waist. She leans into him, casts a farewell over her shoulder to the camera. One of her pantlegs hikes above her boot propped on the kickstand. When the motorcycle tears away, her head will jerk back, and laughter will varoom from her throat. She’ll abandon Stieglitz—and his manly landscapes of New York City, all vertical lines, shadows, and steel—to live next to this scenery of woman. Watching the desert flash by, I think I’m driving the right highway for a change. Alone at last, except for girlfriends solid as rock.

The Idol

One year ago, as I neared my thirty-fourth birthday, I hardly felt as revved as O’Keefe, fueled up and ready to turn tail, riding some other man’s engine. Instead, I was breaking down, a
clunker headed for pasture, stripped of its good parts. My sister came to the caprock, where my
husband and I lived, for a weekend of spring shopping. She knew a wardrobe for summer
weather would perk me up. She knew I needed dainty sandwiches from my favorite bakery,
three hours in my favorite store, maybe a movie that evening. After our first day of shopping,
we lay on the bed, pooped, fingering our purchases, and laughing about who spent the least
money for the most merchandise. I showed her a magazine picture of a shirt I bought that
morning, though the shirt wasn’t what I wanted.

“See how her belly’s pierced?” I asked. “I want that.”

“You’re teasing,” she said.

“I’m serious.”

“Get the phonebook then.” She meant to test me the way she did when we were kids and
our parents split up for a year. A vacation, my mother said when she moved us to her parents’, a
ranch with steers mean as branding irons, snakes skulking under the cool shade trees and in the
fish ponds, and my sister, so scared, so lonely, she attempted to kill me every chance she got.

“Let’s play cops and robbers,” she would say. “You be the cop. I’ll heist the bank.
When I flee the scene astride my Harley, you yell, Stop in the name of the law!” I yelled. She
didn’t stop. She rammed that bike—a Huffy, Indian braids dangling from the handlebars like
pretty, deceptive ribbons—between my legs, plowed me to the ground, and sped away with the
Monopoly cash.

Next she said, “Let’s play target practice.” She propped me on a tricycle, commanded,
“Pedal fast as you can, back and forth across the drive. And quack like a duck.” When I shook
my head, No, she said, “They’re only bb’s. They won’t hurt.”
I had long since proven I wouldn’t leave my sister, take an extended vacation from her life, no matter what she did. But occasionally she still questioned my sincerity. “Get the phonebook,” she said again. The Yellow Pages listed two tattoo and body piercing parlors. We scouted them and decided the one next to the car stereo shop, not the one sandwiched between a drive-thru liquor store and the local strip joint, looked the most sanitary. We were in our thirties. We had some sense.

“Let’s don’t tell him yet,” I said, referring to my husband. “It’s our secret.”

“You’re serious,” she said. She knew I had to be to do anything without his permission. I couldn’t cut up a pan of brownies without asking him which knife to use, couldn’t cut my hair without showing him sample styles, couldn’t pack a suitcase without revealing what I’d loaded inside.

“I’ll tell him you were the instigator,” I teased.

At the tattoo parlor, the piercing specialist had short, fiery hair and wore a muscle-shirt to show off her tattoos. Dragons, flowers, butterflies, serpents wrapped around her shoulders, her collarbone, her biceps, her hands. She made jewelry, she said, and was going to grad school. She knew where she was going. She was one of the prettiest women I’d ever seen.

I completed the paperwork and signed the waiver. I let her charge $50 to my credit card.

My sister said, “You don’t have to do this. No one will think you’re chicken. No one will know.”

“I’m fine. I want to.”

When I was a teenager, my father gave me a pair of diamond earrings so my mother would let me pierce my ears. He drove me to the mall where the saleslady at Rings ’n’ Things shot my ears with stud bullets. A flush burnt my face, then traveled to my stomach where it
churned into nausea. When she said *pus might seep* from my ears, no, when she said *pus* period, I collapsed on the floor, a dead faint. Afterward, my father whispered, “Piece of cake. No one will know. Let’s don’t tell your mother.”

“I’m nearing mid-life,” I told my sister. “If I can handle a needle stitched through my stomach, I can take control of other things. I’d like to feel stronger. I’d like a symbol.”

The piercing specialist marked two dots on my belly, the point of entrance and the exit. I giggled. “Ticklish?” she asked.


She smiled. “You want a ring or a barbell?”

“I want a gold ring. A perfect circle.” I climbed on the surgical table. She called it that.

“Lay on your hands,” she said. “Put them beneath your back so you’re not tempted to slap my arm away during the procedure.”

I obeyed, but wondered why I was having an operation without anesthesia and a doctor.

She clamped my stomach with forceps. “Whatever you do, don’t look at the needle.”

I checked my sister who stood beside me, patting my shoulder. Her eyes were round as headlights and pointed in the direction of the needle. “She said, *Don’t look at the needle.* You’re with me. We’re both not looking.”

Later my sister told me she saw the needle all right. But at that moment, my sister, the one who held murderous thoughts against me when I was four, strummed her fingers on my shoulder the way she comforted her cat by scratching under its chin, and I thought how life sometimes turned a sudden corner and splendor spilled before your feet. “It’s nothing,” she assured me. “You can do this.”
The specialist pierced my belly, leaning her weight into me, her arm driving the needle as if boring a spike through muscle and bone. The snake tattoo on her left bicep rippled. When I thought she’d finished, she hadn’t slipped the ring in yet. She hooked the sliver of gold, sharp as a splinter, through the fresh wound. Tugging at the puncture, she cinched the ring and clamped it shut with a small gold ball. My hands threatened to squirm free, angry and ready to defend my stomach.

“All done.” The girl hopped backward. Her hands shot into the air as if she’d roped and tied a calf and knew she better jump clear.

My sister offered me a piece of chocolate—a Hershey’s Kiss.

“Good plan,” the specialist said. “Good idea, that chocolate. You lay there and gobble it up before you go.”

We all laughed because the chocolate had melted in my sister’s grip and I had to lick it off the foil. When I stood, I looked in the mirror first thing. My shirt was tucked into my bra, and my pants were undone and folded open like an envelope. The tiny gold ring glistened.

Suddenly I understood why teenagers pierced everything once they got started. When parents and teachers claimed sovereignty over you—every day, every hour, a million rules—it was empowering to punch gold studs in your tongue, your nose, your eyebrows, to staple your body with tags reminding everyone who owned what exactly. My husband might believe a wedding band was a cuff binding my hand to his will, but eventually, fumbling under my shirt, he’d discover this secret ring. When he felt the gold thread of it circling into and out of my flesh, he’d know I was capable of acting on the sly. He’d know I was capable of tolerating the pain of freedom. And he’d be frightened.
We went for burgers afterward, my sister and I. At the counter, the cashier huffed because I ordered mine without onions and ketchup. “This isn’t Burger King,” she said.

My sister punched my arm. “You don’t have to take that crap.”

I nodded. “I’ve had a needle through my stomach.”

“More like a nail hammered into your gut. You amaze me.”

That night, when I showered, I stared at the tiny gold ring. Slick from the soap, it spun easily in and out of the wound. I hadn’t shown my husband yet. I knew that after he stopped grilling me about doing something like that to my body without discussing it first, he would fume. Days later, if I didn’t apologize, he’d convince himself the gold ring was a gift for him. Otherwise, how could he manage it? When I cooked dinner, made our bed, vacuumed, paid bills, dressed for work, he would stroll by, tug at my shirt, and growl. When I showered, he would steal peeks. In the middle of a movie theater, he’d demand: “Show me.” It’s a sad thing to be married to a man you don’t want to share your piercing experiences with.

But that first night, in the shower, the gold ring was still mine. And my sister’s. I lathered it up again. I thought I’d had my grandest adventure: I was in a tattoo parlor, and my sister saw me there. I spun the circle. I rinsed it clean. I amazed my sister, that gold ring said, the one I idolized.

The Nurse

It’s June. I’ve been on the lam for one month, and our third anniversary has passed. In the Colorado pastures, wild flowers squaredance in their pretty skirts, but I feel lame and threadbare as winter. An old college roommate has called to tell me the drummer boy I let escape and his wife are expecting in August. Both of them teach at a university in Fort Worth.
When she tells me this news, my breathing stumbles. A truckload of rocks—regrets hard as stone—has dumped in my lungs.

I pop the top on my convertible and drive up Owl Creek Pass, thinking the birth of summer and the mountain breeze teasing my hair will revive my fortitude. Along the road, butterflies play tag, and bees drink punch from the cups of flowers. Overhead, hummingbirds trill like children blowing on kazooos. Welcoming me to the party, the aspen wave their chubby green hands. In the odd way that celebrations can, this one cheers but also saddens me, reminding me of all the revelry I have missed, and by the time I reach Chimney Rock and Courthouse Mountain, the tears rush down my cheeks, a snow-melt years in the making. Course, here I am hiding in Colorado, luxuriating in my husband’s absence, and who, knowing these circumstances, would pretend I deserve joy or a pink-cloud marriage?

After my trip to Owl Creek, I make a long-distance call to my friend, the nurse. “I’m coming home to have a baby,” I say.

“His?”

Usually the nurse speaks in tender metaphors. She describes her day in maternity ward lingo: “I caught a baby this afternoon.” She catches babies like you’d catch a chill, a train, or a touchdown pass. A newborn delivered is kin to a drop in temperature, the commuter home, or a hail Mary launched from the far side of sixty yards in a losing game. I like how the nurse’s comparisons simplify awesome events into the familiar. But today, the nurse reads my life like an X-ray and delivers the prognosis clean, no finessing the subject, no falsehoods about medicine tasting like cherry candy.

“He’s the man I married,” I say. “Whose child do you suggest I have?”

“There’s lots of sperm in this world. Buy some for Pete’s sake.”
Any minute, I might start crying again. I keep quiet so my words won’t trip over the stifled sobs.

The nurse reassesses the situation. “Three weeks in Colorado, and you’ve settled onto solitude the way an old house sinks into the earth before it caves altogether.”

I’d like to try a metaphor of my own. I’d like to explain I’ve always bucked at loneliness, kicking and fighting the tug of its reins, its bit between my teeth. Finally, I’m relaxing. I’m letting solitude steer me like a colt ponied along the trail. I’m the shadow of a mare called One. She knows where she’s going, isn’t afraid of the trip, and I’m happy to follow. “I’m preparing for a long ride,” I manage.

The nurse isn’t impressed. “What do you do for fun?”

“I shop for groceries. I buy outlawed items like Kellogg’s cereals, Del Monte vegetables, name-brand sodas. I decide what I can afford.”

She waits for more. The phone crackles, lurching over the distance.

“I hike to waterfalls. I drive up mountains, navigate canyons. I come home when I’m ready.”

“What about people?” she asks. “Have you encountered any human life?”

“I relish my solitude.” I hope the word relish disguises my fear. One more week on this little vacation, and it might be too late to drive home and salvage the life I’ve married.

The nurse stands firm. “You want to make a life? So make one, all your own.”

The Cowgirl

I meet the cowgirl my fifth week in Colorado when I sign up for riding lessons. She knots her brown hair into a ponytail. Later, when it’s undone, I’ll notice the hints of fire
smoldering in the strands. Her eyes are round and copper. Perfect coins. Her voice rumbles, deep as a rockslide. I’ve always wanted a voice that sounded like gravel. Who would mess with a woman who speaks words tough as rock?

At the barn, she’s all business. She wears work clothes: torn Levi’s, a Carhartt jacket, scuffed boots. She hauls wheelbarrows of wet shit out of the stables and returns with clean shavings for the stalls. Her breathing coasts from her mouth, slow and steady. To her, I must look like a sissy she could plow over with that wheelbarrow. Embroidery adorns the hems of my jeans. My boots are Payless Casuals with clunky, stylish heels. I’m wearing mirrored shades, lipstick, and frivolous, secret jewelry like belly rings. When I offer to help her strip the stalls, she keeps quiet. She isn’t interested in babysitting some kid from the city. She and another woman whisper in the back of the barn.

The cowgirl is the type of woman you have to stand beside for awhile before she acknowledges you. I understand. When I first met the cowboys who work at the stables, I wanted to tuck myself inside the pocket of my city-girl leather jacket and wait for those men to go away. They tell everyone they couldn’t get a word out of me that night in the bar. Sitting so close to friendship, I didn’t know what to say. One wrong word and those men would vanish like the other friends who let go when my husband shook them loose.

Over the weeks, the cowgirl adjusts to me, a colt ponied to her side. She shows me how to groom manes and tails, how to lead a horse into a stall without trapping myself in the far corner, how to lean into a horse’s hip so he balances on three feet and I can pick up the fourth to clean the hoof. When a colt old enough to know better veers into the cowgirl’s path, she yanks the lead rope and snarls: “Back off.” But in the round pen, she pats his breasts, rubs his rump, coos: “Walk. Walk.” The horse relaxes, yields to the lunge line, and strolls in a calm circle.
Finally, she lets me run wheelbarrows for her while she shovels the stalls. And she doesn’t laugh when I have to take a running start to tip and dump the cart of shit or when she moves two stalls ahead and has to wait for me, panting and tired, to haul in the shavings. I don’t notice at first, but she always rolls the full barrows into the alley so I don’t have to yank them over the stalls’ doorsills.

One day, I bring sandwiches for our lunch. She hesitates but shares the turkey and Swiss in the sunshine, careful to select a seat out of the wind so we can shed our jackets.

She says, “You’re hiding from something.”

“Bad choices,” I answer.

Her eyebrows perk up. “Been there.” She takes a bite and stares at her sandwich. “This bread is so fresh.”

It never occurred to me the cowgirl would care for soft white bread.

“When I divorced my husband, I was so tired I let him take everything.” She stares across the valley floor, over the highway on the other side, far away to Owl Creek Pass. Unlike the bluffs of New Mexico, the mountains here are aged. They’re the color of dried blood—scabs, not fresh wounds. We’ve suffered much damage, these rocks say, but we’ve healed. A woman could learn to live a sturdy life surrounded by such examples.

The cowgirl looks at me, her brown eyes hard as stones. “You go back, honey. You get what’s yours.”

That weekend, we eat dinner at the True Grit Café where the cowgirl, dressed in stiff denim, half-moons of manure under her nails, sips white wine and hugs the bartender. Sunday morning, we eat brunch at the Bon Ton, a swanky restaurant, her choice, where she orders champagne, eggs Benedict, kippers, wealthy foods I’m not sure I have the manners to savor.
At home on the caprock, it’s my privilege as his wife to orbit close to him, the only luminary in my world. He doesn’t allow lessons from other people, especially cowgirls. They don’t have Ph.D.’s. They wear rugged clothes. In front of such women, he discusses graduate studies, foreign films, literary theories, till they shy away like colts afraid of first saddles.

One night while I’m out singing karioke and shooting pool in Colorado, he tracks down my number. When I slide open the patio door to my cabin, the phone is ringing and ringing and ringing. “Hello?” I say.

“I’ve been calling all night,” he yelps. “Where’ve you been?” This question as if I didn’t leave town seven weeks ago.

“I’ve made friends,” I brag. I’m so proud of this accomplishment, I forget he won’t be happy for me, he knows where I am, he could be here in two days.

“What friends? Male? Female?”

“I’m riding horses.” I may start giggling at any moment, my natural but dangerous reaction to the way he corners me.

“What do you mean, riding horses?” His voice tightens like a cinch choking a horse’s belly. “You don’t know anything about horses.”

“I’m learning. I’m growing muscles.” I rattle on about the lessons I’ve completed.

He interrupts. “You won’t even change our cat’s litterbox, but you’re shoveling horse shit? What a joke.”

I’d like to remind him I had cats for ten years before I married him and managed fine. I’d like to say I’ve been gone nearly two months now, my cat in tow. Guess who’s changing the litter? I’d like to complain that he dumps the litterbox at home because it’s the only chore he has
the stamina for. It takes all of five minutes. Instead, I mumble, “I feel smarter riding those horses.”

“You don’t know anything about horses,” he insists. “You’re being unreasonable. I called to talk, but . . .” I see where this conversation is headed. If I don’t abandon my new friends and quit this runaway nonsense, he’s going to punish me.

I’m silent.

He tries a protective stance. “You just met these people. What if the men rape you in a stall?”

I think of the mountains shouldering the city outside. I think of them as burly arms rippled with muscles hard as rock. “The cowgirl can kick some ass,” I warn, and I’m not sure to which cowgirl I’m referring. I’ve shadowed the true cowgirl for so long our identities have blurred.

“I can’t talk to you when you’re irrational. You call me when you’re ready to apologize.” The phone clicks. The line goes limp.

The cowgirl and I laugh about this phone call. I laugh a lot these days. The cowgirl’s a fine example for someone like me, a careful mix of tough and tender. By the time I’m packing to go home and retrieve what’s mine, we can clean the barn together in three hours flat—her shovel pumping a steady pace, my wheelbarrow tracking in and out like a reliable machine—and we’ve learned to talk to one another in front of men, without even speaking, the way two girlfriends can. One night, a cowboy of ours, drinking beer and talking about fly-fishing says, “I need a good rod.” I don’t hesitate. I flash the cowgirl a grin. Laughter revs from her mouth, and her head tosses back, her neck taut with joy. And there isn’t anything more beautiful than a
grown woman, solid in her freedom, her throat arched with the ache of it, her eyes open, framing
the world as only she can see it.