

I sat up, screamed “GO!”
 And clapped my hands.
 My sparrows leapt to life.
 Father’s leather whirled down from above,
 While sprightly chirping rose into the air.
 My friends, their brothers and sisters,
 All gasped, cheered, pointed to the sky,
 Then ran to tell what they had seen.

RAPTURE

Harrison Hill

It is raining but there is no rain. The clouds move across the hills like jellyfish, tentacles of water evaporating into the scorched green air. I hold out a hand, as if beseeching the sky for a droplet. I feel nothing.

I am twelve years old. My three younger siblings stand beside me, as do my parents. It is our first full day in Montana, at the ramshackle cabin where we will be living for the next three months. That word—*cabin*—may evoke visions of rustic sweetness, but our rental is not rustic. It is not sweet. It is yellowed logs and foam insulation. It is jammed doors and plywood siding. It is the faint scent of mouse poison and a wide wooden porch that looks out on a creek: a curve of greenery in a remote landscape otherwise given entirely over to grey.

It is the beginning of June. We have come from Virginia, some 2,200 miles away. Here in Big Sky Country we will hunt pheasant and fish trout. We will grind our own flour. We will homeschool. We will move to another house at the end of the summer, when it gets cold. Come December, six months from now, we will return east, ready to reenter the tumult of schedules and obligations and soccer practices we have come out here to escape.

The rainless rainstorm continues its slow, strange progress. The air smells of forest fires, acrid and heady.

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My nine-year-old brother Edward and I share a narrow room off the kitchen. We sleep in blue sleeping bags on green folding cots our mother has ordered from L.L.Bean. I place my state quarter map on a ledge just above my pillow. Taped on the wall to my left is a Post-it note where I tally how many times I’ve read each of the three *Harry Potter* books now in print. My Christian radio drama cassette tapes are arranged neatly on the cheap built-in shelves.

When I fall asleep at night, I hear mice scratching in the walls.

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Several weeks in, we are walking through the sagebrush and the nameless

brown scrub that surrounds the house when we hear the rattle we've been anticipating—nervously, excitedly—since our arrival. Dad motions for us to back up. We obey, grateful for the khaki kevlar snake guards wrapped around our shins, and for Mom's insistence that we wear them whenever we venture far beyond the house.

My father draws a pistol from his holster. He aims at the creature, a diamondback coil of disgust and fury. It occurs to me: *There is a reason Satan is a snake.*

Dad shoots. A snap, a whiff of gunpowder smoke. The thing goes slack, collapsing into the dust.

Dad carries the corpse back to the house, where he skins it, pinning the scaly hide onto a plank he finds outside the basement door.

* * *

Every few days we drive half an hour south to Dillon, population five thousand. At the post office I scamper over to box 936 for our daily haul of letters. I receive many, though not as many as I send. Written correspondence has become such an integral part of my daily life that Mom has started calling me "Paper Talk."

We go to the Stop and Shop. We go to the library. We go to the laundromat, where Mom makes friends with Debbie, the owner. Debbie has a cigarette voice and an unflagging sense of purpose; one day she asks if we want to help do laundry for the firefighters battling the blazes now consuming the state. We say yes.

It is a marvel that a person can wear anything so heavy. The uniforms are black and yellow, thick and weighed down with huge straps and buckles. They smell like smoke, but it is a kind of smoke I am unfamiliar with: the smoke of living trees, sweet and sappy.

I watch as the loads tumble in the dryer, as they regain their form in the heat.

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Because my father's work is tied to the stock market, which closes midafternoon Montana time, every day there is time for fishing. There is time for hunting. There is time for the unscheduled, unified lives we have come out here to live. Dad, Edward, and Matthew whip their fly rods back and forth, coaxing fish with the googly-eyed ties they make themselves at the breakfast table. Six-year-old Virginia, the youngest, romps along the shoreline in a faded orange life preserver, smacking the ground with a stick. Mom and I sit in black foldout chairs, reading.

* * *

After a few weeks attending a Lutheran church, we migrate to a Baptist congregation near the center of Dillon. Accustomed as I am to the contained rituals of our Episcopal parish back home, I find the worshippers' flagrant emotionalism unsettling. Why we have chosen this particular church and not a place where people keep their hands in their laps is unclear to me, but I don't give the matter much thought. It is not in my nature to object to what we are doing, to question the movements of The Family.

Services at Dillon Baptist end with an altar call. I live in fear that a parent or a sibling will raise a hand, will shimmy out of our pew, will walk the grey-carpeted aisle up to the buzz-cut preacher at the front. This is a prospect too mortifying for words—not because of its religious significance, but because it would make me so self-conscious I'm sure I would die.

At the same time, there is within me the subtle awareness that I am very much in need of the saving the preacher promises. I know I don't believe like he does, like my parents do. Faith doesn't live within me, glowing and generative. This is not as it should be.

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After church, we go to the local Dairy Queen.

The sodium tang of hot fries. The chemical wonder of vanilla soft serve.

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It is July, a month into our grand experiment, our temporary escape from the tyranny of conventional American life. After another afternoon spent fishing and reading on the river, we return to the house and unpack the car, same as ever. When I walk into the kitchen, I see that something is different, something is wrong. Mom is standing at the sink and I know, as I always know, that she is upset: deeply, inconsolably. A few tears trail down her face as she washes the green enamelware plates left over from lunch. She is wearing overalls, her skinny legs adrift in all that denim.

Dad sees Mom; he sees me seeing her; he motions in her direction as if to ask, "What happened?"

I shrug with a nonchalance that belies the building panic in my gut. I turn and descend the several steps to my and Edward's bedroom.

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We order textbooks for homeschooling. They arrive at the UPS Store in huge brown boxes. I am thrilled and intimidated by the heft of the books, their conspicuous lack of illustrations. Mom is as excited by the prospect of homeschooling as I am; she has been preparing for the start of classes all summer.

Back at the house I stack the volumes on the kitchen table, running my fingers up and down their glossy spines.

* * *

“The Corps of Discovery School”: This is what we call our little home academy, so named for Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery they led west exactly two hundred years earlier. On the first day of class, Edward revolts by hiding under the sink. Matthew, age eleven, runs off into the hills. I try to hold things down. I am irritated by my brothers’ refusal to play along, by their inability to give our mother the kind of success—of purpose—she so clearly needs.

Mom has been crying more frequently. She’d wanted to come west as much as Dad had; she’d been eager, like him, to cultivate a different way of living. But now she says she is lonely. Now she says she misses the green of the East. It unsettles me that she is herself unsettled, but I don’t know what to do other than to continue in my well-behaved ways. The world is a test, and I am an ace student: I will pass, I will.

* * *

It is my birthday. I am now thirteen. We hold a homemade rodeo in a dusty bit of earth next to the house. Matthew plays a bull named Mother-in-Law. Edward chases after Virginia, who pretends to be a wild cow. There is much screaming, much laughing, much pleasure as we assemble afterwards for dry-rub ribs. This is the kind of Montana I think we all expected, or at least hoped for: a place of freedom and wildness, of ingenuity and humor, of golden-hour sunsets and long protein dinners.

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One weekend, Dad drives our blue Suburban to a lake, flatter than flat and high in the mountains. We endeavor to drive down an absurdly narrow road carved into a cliffside bordering the water. I know from the beginning this is a bad idea. My body is breathless as we creep down

the road. This being Montana, there is no fencing; the slightest turn of the wheel will send our vehicle careening down into black blue below. I consider how alone we are up here: If the car goes, no one will see. How long will it take for a wandering diver to come across our seat-belted corpses? Days? Weeks? What if they never find us?

I try to keep my arms, my legs, my teeth, my eyes still as we drive silently on.

A hundred feet down the road, my parents decide it is too treacherous to continue. Mom carefully opens the passenger door and squeezes between the mountain and the car and directs Dad from behind. He watches her in the rearview mirror, rolling in reverse at a single, terrified mile per hour.

* * *

Our dog, Spot, a Jack Russell terrier, eats some mouse poison. She dies an awful death, heaving away in the empty room where we have history class.

Mom cries.

* * *

I have been reading the *Left Behind* novels, which forecast Jesus’s return to Earth, his gathering of the faithful back to heaven. In the books, believers are raptured away in a single dramatic moment, leaving behind little piles of their worldly adornment: sweaters, fillings, pacemakers. Those who haven’t accepted Christ are left to do battle on a landscape given over to the devil.

According to the books’ theology, children eleven and under are granted automatic entry to heaven; those twelve and up must account for their faith. It is not lost on me that I have crossed this threshold, that I am vulnerable to damnation in a way I wasn’t just two years prior.

On a drive home from town one day, I hear a radio PSA addressing this vulnerability. It is maybe 4:00 p.m., and the mountains are bathed in marigold sunlight. I am leaning my forehead against the cool car window as the gentle, insistent voice pours from the car speakers.

“Are you searching for meaning in your life?” asks the man. “Do you long to know Jesus?”

I do not move, but my body is listening, ready, eager to hear the answer to the announcer’s questions.

“Call 1-888-NEED-HIM,” he continues. “Operators are standing by.”

I commit the phone number to memory. *1-888-NEED-HIM. 1-888-NEED-HIM.* This is, I realize with a rush of relief, my insurance

policy: If I cannot will myself into faith, if I sense that Jesus is returning soon, I can call this number and anonymously explain my predicament. Relief blossoms in my stomach.

* * *

Dad buys us a new computer, one of those translucent-blue-plastic Macs that looks like a giant gumdrop. Matthew, Edward, Virginia, and I become experts at a game called *Fat Boy Raids the Cookie Factory*. There is no better game in all the world, we are sure of it. *I'd like another cookie, please!* shouts the hero-avatar in a high-pitched British accent. We repeat the line to each other, my siblings and I, with a giggly, maniacal frenzy. We repeat it at breakfast, and in the car, and waist-deep in the Big Hole.

I'd like another cookie, please! I'd like another cookie, please!

* * *

Mid-September we pack up the cabin to move to another house that can better withstand the snow gales that are coming. Positioned above a field of barley in view of a creek bordered by cottonwoods, the flat white house is far nicer than the cabin. We will each get our own room here, as well as proper beds made from rustic unmilled pine. I have hope that this new home—this new landscape—will enliven or relieve something in Mom. Perhaps it will ease her loneliness, will lessen her ache for the East.

Come moving day, I pack up my sleeping bag. I fold up my cot. Outside it is bright and blue; the smoke from the forest fires, so persistent these past several months, seems at last to be lifting.

Mom takes the Suburban off to run some errands in town. She says she will be back in an hour and a half.

Edward and I empty our room. I wander behind the house and then up a hill I've named Sagebrush Mountain. Everything in view is brown.

When I get back to the house, I notice that Mom hasn't yet returned. She's been gone for almost two and a half hours.

I walk around the empty house. Mom has died, of this I am now certain. She died in a crash and is lying in a ditch somewhere, her white turtleneck stained with blood. If only I could alert Dad to this horrifying fact! If only I could work up the courage to tell him! I pace faster, from the kitchen to the porch, to Matthew and Virginia's room, and back to the kitchen. My mother is dead, and only I know it, and I cannot tell a soul.

I am sitting on the floor of my bedroom, head in my hands, when I hear a car driving up the road. It stops. A door opens and then slams shut.

"Everyone ready?" comes the sound of a woman's voice.

* * *

There is a TV at the new house. Every afternoon, at three o'clock, when the Corps of Discovery School has closed for the day, we settle down to watch *The Waltons*. Though the show is set in Virginia, it was clearly filmed in the West, in an arid region more like Montana than our home state. Still, we love the show, the jaunty theme music, the moonshiner widows. It seems to make Mom feel both better and worse: better because it reminds her of home, and worse for precisely the same reason.

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In November, we watch the election results. "Gore just won Florida," I shout to Dad as he chops wood outside.

"I'm not so sure about that," he says.

* * *

I do not call 1-888-NEED-HIM.

* * *

Weekday afternoons, after *The Waltons*, I bake brown sugar bread. Edward and Matthew set iron traps among the cottonwoods. Virginia lassos a plastic cow head affixed to a rectangular bale of hay at the front of the house. We have settled into a rhythm in this new house, a rhythm I am comfortable within. Class, chores, TV, dinner, computer: Some days I can almost forget the extremity, the supreme weirdness of our lives. Other times I feel a shock of pride for what we have managed, however imperfectly, in this strangest of strange states.

I knead my dough and delight in the way it takes form, in its yeasty becoming.

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It gets colder. We trudge through the snow-covered hills behind the house. The snow here is different than any I have seen before: dry and hard as the dirt, like 500-grit sandpaper that smooths the otherwise ferocious landscape into something with a more uncomplicated beauty.

I come inside and kick off my snow boots and burrow into my room,

where I write letters and listen to Christian radio dramas and do my homework. I go to Matthew's room in the basement and listen to the wail of snow outside. The whiteness inches its way up the window in real time.

* * *

At dinner in early December, Dad announces that we will be heading home, to Virginia, a few weeks early. He doesn't explain why. We all know why.

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The sunsets: They are the color of birthday cake frosting, so exaggerated and extreme as to seem chemically induced. But they are, somehow, real.

I pull the sliding glass door and step onto the porch. I lift my head to the sky. You can practically *hear* the color. I jump from one bare foot to the other until both are frozen numb. I stand still for a moment, gripping the railing. Is God out there? Who's to say.

Sky! Sky! Sky!

* * *

Again, we pack. Whatever eagerness I have to return home is tempered by my awareness that *expressing* such eagerness could be seen as snubbing our time out here. I have no desire to do this—both because I want my parents to feel confident that I have had a Very Meaningful Time participating in their grand experiment, and because of the respect I have developed for this place. It is not love, what I feel for Montana. It is, instead, akin to what astronauts must feel on their way home from the moon. A sense of humility, of wonder, of fear. Of things having shifted, simply by *being here*.

* * *

We finish packing. We depart. Not half an hour out, we hear a hard *thunk* from beneath the car. Dad pulls to the side of the road, slowly, carefully. I can feel the momentum of the U-Haul strapped to the back of the Suburban pushing us homeward.

It is around 4:00 p.m. and already growing dark outside. On getting out of the car, Dad discovers the axle has snapped, irrevocably, in two. We marvel at the car's timing: It survived half a year of back-roads abuse, only to give out now, at the very last possible moment. It is as if

the car doesn't want to head back to Virginia, wants, instead, to remain in Big Sky Country.

Tractor-trailers careen past on the highway, rocking our car with the force of their downdrafts.

Mom tells us to get out, to put on our jackets and gloves, to wrap ourselves in our fleece blankets. We do as we are told, walking maybe twenty feet into a field of decapitated cornstalks. There we stand, a shivery huddle of five, as Dad circles the vehicle, trying to decide what to do.

After a few minutes, he comes over and confers with Mom. She then turns to us and explains she is going to run to the farmhouse several hundred yards away.

Mom pulls her own fleece blanket more tightly around her shoulders and leaps deeper into the snow-covered field. She is like an antelope. Up, down; up, down. I watch as she fades from view, as she knocks on the farmhouse door, as she disappears inside to call for help.