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ONE ~ At the Airport

A Romance

My father proposed to my mother in an airport. I like that sentence so much, I can hardly bear to revise it. But I must. The second time my father proposed to my mother, it was in an airport. The first time was in a car. They'd met three weeks earlier, when my father's brother, Sam, asked my mother to be my father's blind date for his own birthday party. He was twenty-seven and she was twenty-five. Back then, Al Brice was holding down three jobs: a mechanic for Pan Am, an after-hours fueler for a jet fuel-supply company, and a logger for his family's fledgling land-clearing concern. Carol Heeks was a public health nurse who'd arrived in Fairbanks in July of 1961 at the wheel of a blue Plymouth Valiant. A New Yorker by birth and temperament, she was unwilling to spend the rest of her life in a frontier outpost so unprepossessing that a person could drive the length and breadth of it—as she once had—without ever realizing she'd arrived.

Hence the need for a second proposal from my father.

And a third.

Nursing and romance don't mix. On her first day of work, my mother's supervisor, Mary Carey, made that abundantly clear. If Miss C. Heeks (known to her former patients at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital as "Cheeks") had driven all the way from the East Coast for the purpose of finding a husband, she could repack her suitcases, slam the trunk of her powder-blue

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Valiant, and head back to the East Coast. What was needed at the Fairbanks Public Health Center in July 1961 was one more dedicated public health nurse, a woman whose sensibly clad feet were meant for pounding the pavement, not dancing the night away; a woman whose calling was to care for other people's babies, not to beget any of her own. What was needed, in short, were more suppliers of medical services, not more consumers. Mary wouldn't tolerate any giddiness over boys. She herself cut a formidable figure: a woman of girth, stature, and intellect. Mary Carey had several chins to go with that Dr. Seuss name, but she wasn't jolly in the least. Had she made herself clear?

When my father showed up at the airport in his white mechanic's overalls to "press his suit," as my mother would say, she felt a welter of emotions: flustered, flattered, confused. She didn't say yes or no. Everything about Alaska seemed strange, including this man who kept saying he was in love with her. Was she in love, too? Enough to give up her job? Maybe. No, she couldn't be. Oh, she didn't know. The only thing she *did* know was that she had to board Pan Am's red-eye flight to New York. Her brother, Bill, would pick her up at Idlewild Airport. From there, they'd drive to Vermont to spend Christmas with the family. In retirement, her surgeon father had reinvented himself as a gentleman farmer. Carol thought of the spread in Vermont as a kind of refuge. There, for the first time in days, she'd be able to think clearly about Al Brice, about herself, and about where she belonged—or didn't.

On the nights when she and my father went out dancing, I thought my mother was as beautiful as the queen in "Sleeping Beauty" or "Rumpelstiltskin," fairy tales she read aloud to me nearly every night. To think of anything or anyone as beautiful, some kind of distance is probably necessary, though—the kind of distance that daily life disallows. One day when I was eight or nine, my mother found me studying the photographs taken on the day she graduated from nurse's training, in 1958. In them, she is younger and more carefree than I've ever seen her. Her hair is like a sable cap, and her skin is as luminous as

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the moon. In one picture, her lips are slightly parted, and her forget-me-not eyes are focused on someone or something in the middle distance. That's the formal, posed photograph. In another, candid one, she wears the same starched blue-and-white-striped nurse's uniform with its detachable collar and cuffs, white apron, and old-fashioned crescent-shaped hat. Here, she bears a wrapped box like a baby on one hip, and a breeze lifts her skirt slightly, pushing her toward whoever is holding the camera. The look on her face is joyful, as if she's just been handed the ticket to the rest of her life.

"Wow, Mom," I breathed, "you were beautiful then."

"You mean I'm not beautiful now?" Her voice was rueful.

"No, I mean, that's not what I meant," I said quickly. It was the first social lie I'd ever told. Whether or not my mother was still beautiful was beside the point. "Mother" and "beauty" seemed to me mutually exclusive categories. One was familiar, homely, accessible, vernacular, spoken in the *tu* form—something I'd learned during my Wednesday afternoon French lessons. The other was exotic, foreign, remote, formal. The mother who read "Lyle the Crocodile," who fixed me cream cheese and pineapple sandwiches, who played gin rummy tournaments with me—that woman was *tu*. The woman in the starched blue-and-white pinstriped nurse's uniform: not married, not my mother, not accessible to me in any way. I could think of her only as foreign or other, as *vous*.

Unlike my father, who is not a natural storyteller—or, more likely, whose early years didn't lend themselves to storytelling—my mother speaks often of her growing-up years. In her stories, the places figure more prominently than the people. It's almost as if she runs through the topography of her life, touching time and again the places on the map that tell her who she is. There's Lying-In Hospital in New York, where she was born; Saint Luke's, where her father worked; Columbia-Presbyterian, where she trained to become a nurse; and Babies Hospital, where she herself worked. There's Bronxville, New York, where her family lived before World War II, and North Adams, Massachusetts, where they lived after. Her grandparents owned an apartment on the Upper East Side, overlooking

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the East River. Her aunts lived in a house in the tiny town of Touisset, on Naragansett Bay. She attended the Emma Willard School in Troy, New York, and Colby College in Waterville, Maine. Her parents bought a farm in Stamford, Vermont. She was married out of Saint John's Episcopal Church in North Adams, and her reception was at the Williams Inn in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

This litany made me feel as if my mother had been meant for a different life—not necessarily a better one, just different. Reciting the place names of her past, she seemed to be seeking a pattern, as if applied teleology might tell her how she ended up in Alaska. It was such a surprise.

In a funny way, my mother's history, as conveyed through her stories, seemed—and seems—more real to me than my own. Certainly, the stories made her life seem richer than mine, which has always had Fairbanks as its point of origin, not its destination. Throughout my childhood, she kept telling and re-telling the stories, sanding their edges, buffing and polishing each one until it was as shining and beautiful as the platters she brought out for baby showers and Easter dinners—sterling silver that gave back a slightly distorted reflection of one's self.

Carol Ann Heeks was born in New York's Lying-In Hospital on July 10, 1936. Her father, William Garland Heeks, was a Harvard-educated surgeon. Her mother, Lucia Bell Page, came from people with enough money they didn't have to talk about it. When my mother was a child, she and her brother and sister would be dressed in their best clothes and taken, on rare Sunday afternoons, to visit Lucia's parents. After kissing the papery cheeks that were proffered, the children would array themselves on a window seat in the front hall. There, they'd pass the afternoon watching boats travel up and down the river. They did not play, nor did they partake of the conversation. If they spoke to each other at all, it was in whispers so as not to disturb the adults.

Orphaned early, my mother's father was reared by doting aunts. He put off love until after medical school, when he

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wooed and won Lucia Bell Page, a finishing school beauty. In her studio wedding portrait, Lucia's expression is solemn, inscrutable, her pose—pivoted at the waist, so her silk train pools at her feet—as stylized as an Alphonse Mucha painting. After the wedding, William settled into a life of daily commutes from Bronxville to the city, Lucia into a routine of shopping, gardening, dinner parties, and volunteer work. There were evenings of martinis and steak followed by one or two rubbers of bridge. Three babies in quick succession—Alexandra (Sandie), then Carol, then William Jr. (Bill)—transformed Lucia's figure from that of a willowy debutante to a prow-shaped matron. She stayed stateside with the babies when her husband, well beyond the draft age, volunteered for the army during World War II. He was sent to the South Pacific. After his return, the family bought a Tudor-style house on Cherry Street in North Adams, where they settled back into their old, pre-war routine. In June the children were packed off to summer camp; in September, they went to boarding school.

When Carol entered Lucia's alma mater, the Emma Willard School, she was an overweight, underachieving, and desperately homesick child. In yearbook pictures from 1951 and 1952, she looks lumpen in her gingham-checked uniform. Her shoulder-length hair frizzes out around her face; her legs are as straight and thick as tree trunks in bobby socks and Mary Janes. She looks sturdy and unfeminine, the kind of girl who plays goalie on the field hockey team (which she did), the kind who ends up a potted plant beside the vivacious, popular girls with smooth, butterscotch-colored hair and slender ankles. Even so, she had friends. She was popular. The girls in her circle called each other "Jacques," pronounced "Jake," as in, "Hullo, Jacques. What's up?" "Nothing much, Jacques. You?" Within a year or two, Carol had shed the baby fat. By her junior year, she was wearing her hair shorter, too, in the flattering, face-skimming style she favors today. Never more than an average student, she yearned unrealistically for a Stanford or Bryn Mawr education. A guidance counselor gently steered her toward second- and third-tier schools.

During her first year at Colby College, Carol volunteered

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at the hospital in the working-class town of Waterville. During this era, nursing was still regarded as a glorified form of waitressing—a fallback for women who couldn't type. Even so, Carol convinced herself that her father would be pleased to hear, in the fall of her sophomore year, that she had decided to become a nurse. She was wrong. "No daughter of mine is going to earn a living emptying bedpans," he roared. Carol beseeched and wept, but her father wouldn't budge. Pale and despondent, she went through the motions of going to class until one day her roommate came up with a plan that was brilliantly simple. Carol called her parents for permission to spend spring break in New York City with her roommate's family, and permission was granted. While there, she visited Columbia-Presbyterian School of Nursing. On her tour, Carol saw the student nurses in their starched postulant's uniforms working on the wards. She heard in her interview that she was an exemplar of what Columbia-Presbyterian, in its drive to professionalize nursing, was looking for: young women with at least two years of college behind them, willing to split the next three years between classroom and ward. After that, they'd graduate with a bachelor's degree in nursing. Carol returned to Colby and promptly filled out the application. She said nothing to her parents, figuring it would be better to beg for forgiveness later than to ask for permission now. She spent the next few weeks on tenterhooks until the day, near the end of the term, when a slim envelope was slipped into her box. The letter's tone was apologetic but firm. While the admissions committee felt that Miss Heeks was a worthy applicant in many respects, her medical records revealed that she lacked the strength and stamina for a career in nursing. Carol's first thought was that there must be some mistake. How could she, the former field hockey standout and glowing picture of health, be holding in her hand a slip of paper that said she was too frail to do the only thing she wanted to do?

That night on the phone, her father listened in grim silence while she wept. He said, "I'm going to make some calls. I'll let you know what I find out." Within a few hours, my grandfather ascertained that the admissions committee had some-

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how gained access to Carol's records, which were on file at Babies Hospital, an affiliate of Columbia-Presbyterian. Twice during infancy, Carol had been rushed into surgery for strangulated hernias and intestinal blockage. After the second operation—and after my grandparents returned from an overseas trip they'd taken sans children—my mother's surgeon broke the news that she was unlikely to survive into adulthood. She survived, of course, only to become the victim of that dire prognosis. My grandfather's outrage over Carol's rejection trumped his outrage over her career choice. A couple of calls to highly placed friends and colleagues—a radiologist at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, for one, and a highly regarded surgeon at Babies Hospital, for another—resulted in a happier letter for Carol.

What followed were the headiest, most carefree years of her life. She shared an apartment in the city with three nursing students, including her best friend, Lois Lemmon. She and Lois spent their days off window-shopping on Fifth Avenue and standing in line for tickets to Broadway shows. By then, Carol had shed the chrysalis of adolescence. She was slender and poised, possessed of a razor-sharp wit. She has always shown affection by teasing, and there was no shortage of young men willing to be teased. I imagine those days as a 1950's version of *Sex and the City*: lots of city and very little sex.

Shortly after graduating from nursing school, she was put in charge of a ward at Babies Hospital. The most freakish and hopeless cases ended up there: hydrocephalic and hermaphrodite babies; babies born with hearts that were too small or too large; babies dying of meningitis or hepatitis or leukemia. The nurses, Miss C. Heeks among them, shushed and rocked the babies from sunrise to sunset, until their shifts ended or until the babies died.

A medical resident from San Antonio asked her to marry him, and Carol said yes. He flew her to Texas to meet his family. She has no story for what happened there. She says that Bob's mother, a Texas socialite with big hair and big jewelry, found her unacceptable. Whenever my mother says this, I picture a bejeweled dowager in a broad-brimmed, Ascot-style hat prying

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apart a horse's jaws to check its teeth. Did Bob's mother study my mother's work-roughened hands and see in her guileless face something of the awkward and chubby child she'd been? The engagement broken, Carol flew back to New York alone.

There, things were in flux. One roommate was getting married; the other two had accepted jobs in different cities. My mother would have to give up the apartment. She would leave New York, too, she decided, applying for two jobs: the first as a nurse on the *Good Ship Hope*, which was setting sail for Africa, and the second as a public health nurse in Alaska. She swore to herself that she'd take the first offer she got. It turned out to be Alaska; the *Good Ship Hope* came through too late. She packed her Plymouth Valiant, bid her parents good-bye, and with the neighbors' sixteen-year-old daughter, Susan Bunce, riding shotgun, she headed north.

She and Susan took the long way, crisscrossing the country. They gawked at Mount Rushmore, the California redwoods, Yosemite and Yellowstone national parks. When night fell, they pulled onto a wide spot in the highway, threw down their sleeping bags, and slept under the stars. Gradually, the road grew narrower and rougher until, somewhere in Canada, they left pavement behind. When they got to the place where their map said Fairbanks would be, it wasn't. They drove for a few more miles, then stopped at a filling station.

"How do I get to Fairbanks from here?" my mother asked the attendant.

"Lady, you just drove through it."

Susan boarded a plane for New York the next day, and my mother found herself a $240-per-month apartment in Fairview Manor, a couple of blocks from the unprepossessing brown box that was the Fairbanks Public Health Center. Her salary was $400 per month. For that, she'd be the nursing equivalent of a beat cop, swabbing throats for signs of strep, administering TB tine tests, paying visits to mothers with newborns, the elderly, and the infirm. She'd also track down the partners of patients who tested positive for venereal disease. She'd find them in such bars as The Hideaway and Tommy's Elbow Room, where my mother, acting on a tip from the bartender, would tap them

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on the shoulder then ruin their whole day. Anti-government and pro-privacy sentiments tend to run high in frontier towns, and not everyone would take kindly to the sight of a nurse in her light-blue uniform dress and rubber-soled shoes marching up the walk or elbowing up to the bar. My mother would get the dog bite scars to prove it.

Mary Carey was a martinet of a nursing supervisor. Years before Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, she saw herself and her nurses as fighting a trench war on disease, poverty, and ignorance. To be a good soldier in Mary's army required the elimination of potential distractions, chief among them, suitors.

Mary couldn't stop Carol from making friends, though. She found a handful of bridge partners and joined the curling club. Once in a while, she saw a guy named Sam Brice who, like her, was heartsore. His parents had forced him to break off an engagement to a young woman deemed unsuitable because of her divorce. One day in December 1961, Sam called to ask a favor of Carol. Would she attend his older brother's birthday party as his older brother's date?

I wonder what Carol Heeks thought of Al Brice. Two years older than she, he stood a few inches taller, roughly five-foot-nine to her five-foot-five. He had an overbite that stopped just shy of buckteeth, and he was going bald. On occasions such as weddings and funerals that called for a tie, serious effort was required to locate his neck. In high school, Al had had the biggest head and the smallest feet of any player on the football team. Yet he was fit from years of felling trees and hauling them through the swamps of southern Georgia and northern Florida. Among the portraits in the upstairs hall of my parents' home hangs a large-format, sepia-toned print of Al and his brothers Sam, Thom, and Andy sharing lunch on a fallen log. They're in their late teens or early twenties, and they're wearing work boots, belted khaki pants, and (except for Al and Andy) bare chests. My father is wearing a colored T-shirt, which, on him, looks even sexier than a bare chest. The boys (as their mother called them) look muscular enough to wrestle alligators in the swamp where they were stump logging. Underneath their caps, there's a sweet, aw-shucks quality to

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their smiles that almost—but not quite—belies the manliness of the sinewy arms, tanned chests, and work boots. My father and his brothers were the originals that James Dean and his ilk could only hope to imitate.

In short, he made hardly any impression on my mother at all.

What my father saw when he looked at Carol Heeks was a slim, stylish woman with Irish coloring: nearly black hair, pale skin, blue eyes. In her off hours, she wore oversized shirts on top of slim-fitting ankle pants and penny loafers. Then as now, she had a disarming smile and a way of looking at you as if you were the only person in the room. She was also an unrepentant tease.

Carol definitely made an impression on Al.

A few days later, they met again at a sledding party. Carol loved such parties, and even today is rarely more herself—ebullient, competitive, uninhibited, even a bit silly—than within the formal constraints of a toboggan run or Scrabble game. On the way back to town, Al engineered the seating so that Carol would ride alone with him. Then he promptly drove the car into a snow bank. Waiting for a tow, they had their first real conversation. Carol recounted how she'd driven across the country in her Plymouth Valiant, with no one but her sixteen-year-old friend for company. Al thought (but didn't say) she had grit as well as good looks.

Later, he drove her back to her apartment and walked her up the stairs.

"I was afraid he was going to try and kiss me," my mother says, in response to a question from me. She wasn't the kind of girl who kissed on the second date. Ten feet from the door, he abruptly said good night, turned, and walked away. Turning the key in the lock, Carol felt a bit hurt that he hadn't even tried.

A few days later, he took her for a drive. On a wide curve overlooking the Tanana River, Al pulled over. He asked Carol if she'd ever considered staying in Alaska beyond her two-year contract with the Public Health Service. She had not. Why would anyone want to live in this godforsaken place, where, in the winter, the temperature rarely rose above zero and a body could duck into the post office while the sun was rising only to emerge a few moments later and see it sliding down the sky?

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"The reason I asked," Al said, "is you're the kind of girl I've always wanted to marry."

The guy's crazy, my mother thought. *I don't even know him, let alone love him.*

Out loud, she said she'd think about it. Given the ambiguous nature of the proposal, she wasn't entirely sure what she was promising to think about—staying in Alaska after her contract was up, marrying Al Brice, or both.

A couple of days later, she was on the ice at the curling club when her friend, Betty Waldhaus, said, "Hey Carol, who's the guy in the stands with the fish eyes looking at you?"

She looked up, and there was Al in his white mechanic's overalls. He waved. Carol glanced away. A few seconds later, he was gone.

Betty cornered Carol after the match. "Out with it," she said.

Carol burst into tears. With a wadded up handkerchief in her hand, she told Betty the whole story.

"Do you love him?" Betty asked. Tiny as a wren with a wren's piercing eyes, Betty was a decade older than my mother. A fellow public health nurse, she was possessed of the no-nonsense manner that comes with years of marching up to strangers in bars and handing them a prescription for gonorrhea.

"I don't know. I barely know him," my mother replied. Then, "Promise you won't tell Mary?"

Betty promised, but only after observing tartly that my mother couldn't lead the poor sap on indefinitely.

The poor sap showed up at the airport a few days before Christmas, while Carol was checking in for her Pan Am flight to New York. Once again, Betty saw him first. She nudged Carol and nodded in the direction of Al, who was, again, wearing his mechanic's overalls. Taking her husband, Fred, by the arm, Betty withdrew to give the two of them some privacy.

Al didn't waste a moment. He told Carol there was a diamond ring in her name waiting at Tiffany's on Fifth Avenue in New York. Picking it up wouldn't commit her to anything more than thinking about whether she could ever bring herself to wear it. Was she willing to do that much for him?

I'm in the middle of a Cinderella story, Carol thought.

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Out loud, she said, "Well, I guess I could do that."

Her flight touched down at 4:00 a.m. at Idlewild Airport. Her brother, Bill, was waiting in the terminal, groggy but game for the drive to Vermont. Hesitantly, Carol explained that she had to run an errand in the city first.

"What kind of errand?" Bill asked.

Carol told him.

"Boy, are you ever going to be in trouble with Mom and Dad."

"Promise you won't say anything?"

Bill and Carol drove into Manhattan and then drowsed in the car until ten o'clock, when the security guard unlocked the front door of Tiffany's. Rumpled and red-eyed from her overnight flight, my mother sensed that everyone was watching her as she stepped into the store. She was right. All of Tiffany's was agog. The manager hovered and the salesladies fussed over the girl who'd flown all the way from Alaska to pick up her engagement ring. They were brimming with questions. How cold does it get there, really? Have you seen the northern lights? Is it dark all the time in the winter? Aren't you afraid of the bears? And what about this guy? What a romantic! How'd you find him? When's the wedding?

The next day, the florist delivered a dozen yellow roses to the Vermont farmhouse. And the day after that, more roses came. As Carol fetched a second vase, her father raised his eyebrows but said nothing. She, too, was silent. The ring was still nestled inside its blue velvet box at the bottom of her purse. On her third day in Vermont, the telephone rang. In those days, roses were cheap compared to long-distance calls from Alaska. Carol took the call on the upstairs extension. She'd barely begun speaking when her father walked into the room and plunked a three-minute egg timer on the table beside her. After she hung up, he said, "I don't know who this guy is, but if he loves you, and you love him, marry him. Tell him to save his money."

The next time my father called, my mother said yes.

"I'm on my way," he said.

They married in North Adams, Massachusetts, in February, a few days before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent,

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which would have meant no wedding until after Easter. The dress fittings, cocktail parties, rehearsal dinner, and wedding seem now to belong to a glamorous but magical world, a kind of Brigadoon that my mother can summon from the clouds with the force of nostalgia. Whenever she trots out the story of her wedding, it has the unconscious effect of making every other wedding seem poorer, more overdone, banal, and tasteless by comparison.

For the ceremony, Carol wore a raw-silk gown with tulle underskirts and a detachable train trimmed with fabric roses. A veil of Alençon lace was bobby-pinned to her hair. The veil, along with the gown's high, unembellished neckline, gave her the look of a postulant taking vows. For the drive from the church to the reception, at the Williams Inn in Williamstown, she borrowed a white fur capelet that heightened the pallor of her skin, the red of her lipstick. Her bridesmaids wore red velvet cocktail dresses and carried white fur muffs trimmed with holly.

My parents honeymooned in northern Europe, flying there on Pan Am passes. Afterward, they settled into married life in Fairbanks. Mary Carey went apoplectic the first time my mother wore her Tiffany's diamond to work, but she got over it and grudgingly allowed my mother to keep working at the health center. By March of 1965—three years and one month after their wedding—my parents had three children: a preschooler (me), a toddler (Sam) and a newborn (Hannah). My mother had to quit working. As a joke, my uncles had nicknamed me "J. P., the Lumber Baroness." (The P stood for Page.) It was a joke because Al and his father and brothers had yet to get their land-clearing concern up and running. My parents were renting a drafty, coal-heated house on First Avenue. They'd furnished it with beds and tables and chairs purchased on a payment plan from Nerland's. The bills were piling up. I imagine that, to my mother, everything about her life must have felt fragile and provisional. Everything, that is, except for the Tiffany's diamond on the ring finger of her left hand.

In the summer of 1965, my father's company won a contract to build a runway for the village of Noorvik, which is on the Bering

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Sea, just north of the Seward Peninsula. The lease was nearly up on my parents' house, so they put their furniture in storage, and then flew to Noorvik with the three of us—Sam, Hannah, and myself. My mother had barely unpacked and settled into our quarters in the village armory before news crackled over the village radio. The warehouse in which my parents had stored not just their furniture but appliances, photo albums, wedding presents, clothes, and books had caught fire and burned to the ground. There was no insurance. My mother flew back to Fairbanks to sift through the ashes. Beneath the burned-out hull of what had been our refrigerator, she found our baby books, volumes into which she'd painstakingly pasted pictures and snippets of hair, and where she'd recorded shower gifts and first words. The books were scorched around the edges, but a few pictures from each were salvageable, protected from the worst of the fire by the bulk of the refrigerator. The only other things she found were my fourteen-carat-gold christening cross and baby bracelet, soldered together by the fire's heat. Everything else was gone.

In a photograph from our days in the Arctic, my mother kneels beside a sled bearing the three of us kids. She's wearing a pine-green corduroy parka with a white fox ruff. We, too, wear parkas with wolverine ruffs snugged up around our faces. Our feet are laced into caribou and sealskin mukluks. After Noorvik, my father had taken a second Bush job, this one in Wainwright, a tiny village perched precariously on cliffs above the Arctic Ocean. With no house or possessions waiting in Fairbanks, my mother went to Wainwright with us kids. Because there was no runway (Brice Inc. had yet to build it), my father set down his single-engine Aeronca Champ on a smooth stretch of beach. From there we rode partway in a skin boat then walked half a mile across the wind-scoured tundra. We staggered into Wainwright nearly hypothermic in skimpy windbreakers and sneakers. It was October. A few days later, three ageless Iñupiaq ladies brought gifts of fur-lined parkas and mukluks for everyone. (The nineteenth-century explorer Mary Kingsley writes of "that ever powerful factor in all human societies, the old ladies." My charming mother won them

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over.) My parka zipped up the front, which I loved; Hannah's went over the head, which she hated. In the photograph, it's possible to see that even Sam's parka is trimmed in the Iñupiaq way, with ricrac and colorful ribbons stitched around the pockets, zippers, and hem.

On the second day in Wainwright, my father left for the job site early. (I'd say "before dawn" except that, in October in the Far North, there is nothing that resembles dawn, just a pinkish glow that suffuses the horizon toward midday.) The rest of us hunkered down, still asleep in a house heated by a primitive coal-burning stove. When my mother awoke and tried to light the stove, it balked. Frustrated, she threw a bit of fuel on it. There was a loud *bang*. My mother says she felt nothing until she looked at us. Sam and I cowered in terror. The explosion had singed off her eyebrows, eyelashes, and much of her face. After a series of radio calls (a schoolteacher in Wainwright was able to raise someone at the newspaper office in Fairbanks, who telephoned my grandmother. She telephoned someone at the Barrow hospital, who dispatched a Medevac flight to Wainwright), my mother ended up in a hospital bed 230 miles from her family. The moment must have felt like the aphelion of a life whose perihelion was her East Coast society wedding. There she lay with her face on fire, being tended to by strangers while her children, too, were entrusted to the care of elderly Iñupiaq women in a one-room shack in a godforsaken Arctic village where her husband was working twenty-hour days and where she and her children were living by default, because they had neither furniture nor rugs nor dishes nor flatware nor blankets nor dishtowels with which to make a home. The next day, in defiance of her doctor's orders, she checked herself out of the hospital and flew back to Wainwright.

I don't remember the stove blowing up in my mother's face. I was only three. But I remember darkness so thick it seemed palpable, the wavering flame of the seal-oil lamp, the chamois-soft hands and throaty giggles of Nannie and Mae in their cotton kuspuks. They told my mother stories: an eight-year-old girl left for a neighbor's and never returned. In the spring, the melting snow gave up her body, lying between the

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two houses. A twelve-year-old girl fell out of a top bunk and broke her back. She languished in bed for four months before dying. A few years after Wainwright, my mother would become a founder, along with the minister from the Episcopal church, of the Resource Center for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. She would return to graduate school, earning a master's degree in education that would enable her to start a successful family counseling business. Eventually, she would serve on and even chair the Alaska Children's Trust under two Alaska governors. Her life as an activist was shaped by our stint in the Bush, but not in obvious ways. What others might have seen as unconscionable cruelty on the part of Native parents toward their children, my mother came to see as a kind of fatalism born of extreme duress—heartbreaking, yes, but not irrational or incomprehensible. Where people live under the harshest imaginable conditions, modern medicine and modern justice have little sway.

When it was time for me to enter nursery school, my mother flew back to Fairbanks with us children. She rented a street-level apartment on Fairbanks Street, near the University of Alaska campus. My father stayed in the Bush. The next summer, August 1967, the Chena River overflowed its banks. With water lapping at our stoop, my mother boxed up the only possessions she cared about, our restored baby books, and carried them upstairs to a friend's apartment. The water kept rising. She threw some clothes into bags and bundled us children into raincoats and boots. A stranger in a canoe paddled up to the door. Did she need help? One at a time, she handed us into the stranger's waiting arms. The gunnels of the overloaded canoe barely cleared the water. When my mother tried to hand the stranger our husky, Chitina, the man said no. She was firm. If the dog stayed, she stayed, too. Short of paddling off with three motherless, howling children, there was nothing the man could do. With Chitina in the bow, he paddled through the parking lot, where the antennae and roofs of cars poked through the brackish water like branches or islands. Then he paddled up the street to the base of the hill on which the university—like so many institutions of its kind—perched. There,

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National Guardsmen lifted us and the other refugees out of motorboats and canoes and swung us onto the back of troop trucks. Our truck ferried us to even higher ground, a radio tower on Farmers Loop, a few miles north of Fairbanks. There, a second stranger gave us a ride in his car to my grandparents' home in the former Fairbanks orphanage, ten miles from town. We stayed nearly two weeks at the farm, as we called my grandparents' spread, even though they never kept animals there. With customary generosity, my grandmother had thrown open her doors to all comers—family, friends, and anyone else who drifted in. She and my grandfather owned a car, but it was useless without any way to buy gas. Every couple of days, my mother and a sister-in-law walked two miles to a Red Cross distribution center, where they waited in line for milk (for babies only) and emergency rations. When the floodwaters receded, my mother returned to the apartment, expecting to find that she had, for the second time in as many years, lost everything. This time she was lucky. The water had barely crested our threshold.

Eventually, my father returned from the Bush and found land-clearing work closer to Fairbanks. For a few months, he came home every evening. My mother began working more hours. One spring morning, she left for several days to assist a pediatrician studying strep among children living on Saint Lawrence Island. According to my memory (which seems suspiciously pat), my father drove us straight from the airport, where we'd put my mother on a plane, to the car dealership. There, he traded in the family's cream-colored, wood-paneled Plymouth station wagon for a four-wheel-drive Toyota Land Cruiser. It had bench seats and a rear-door latch that was accessible only after one unhitched the spare tire. We kids thought it was the coolest thing we'd ever seen. Our father even let us pick out the color: powder blue. It was to be a surprise for our mother.

Meanwhile, she and the pediatrician and a second nurse examined the children in the village of Gambell on Saint Lawrence Island. Then they left by dog team for the village of Savoonga, on the other side of the island. A member of the Alaska National Guard rode the runners of each sled, and each