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*Barbara
Kingsolver
Flight
Behavior*

A NOVEL

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Flight Behavior

A Novel

Barbara Kingsolver

Dedication

*For Virginia Henry Kingsolver
and Wendell Roy Kingsolver*

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Dedication

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The Measure of a Man

A certain feeling comes from throwing your good life away, and it is one part rapture. Or so it seemed for now, to a woman with flame-colored hair who marched uphill to meet her demise. Innocence was no part of this. She knew her own recklessness and marveled, really, at how one hard little flint of thrill could outweigh the pillowy, suffocating aftermath of a long disgrace. The shame and loss would infect her children too, that was the worst of it, in a town where everyone knew them. Even the teenage cashiers at the grocery would take an edge with her after this, clicking painted fingernails on the counter while she wrote her check, eyeing the oatmeal and frozen peas of an unhinged family and exchanging looks with the bag boy: *She's that one*. How they admired their own steadfast lives. Right up to the day when hope in all its versions went out of stock, including the crummy discount brands, and the heart had just one instruction left: run. Like a hunted animal, or a racehorse, winning or losing felt exactly alike at this stage, with the same coursing of blood and shortness of breath. She smoked too much, that was another mortification to throw in with the others. But she had cast her lot. Plenty of people took this way out, looking future damage in the eye and naming it something else. Now it was her turn. She could claim the tightness in her chest and call it bliss, rather than the same breathlessness she could be feeling at home right now while toting a heavy laundry basket, behaving like a sensible mother of two.

The children were with her mother-in-law. She'd dropped off those babies this morning on barely sufficient grounds, and it might just kill her to dwell on that now. Their little faces turned up to her like the round hearts of two daisies: *She loves me, loves me not*. All those hopes placed in such a precarious vessel. Realistically, the family could be totaled. That was the word, like a wrecked car wrapped around a telephone pole, no salvageable parts. No husband worth having is going to forgive adultery if it comes to that. And still she felt pulled up this incline by the hand whose touch might bring down all she knew. Maybe she even craved the collapse, with an appetite larger than sense.

At the top of the pasture she leaned against the fence to catch up on oxygen, feeling the slight give of the netted woven wire against her back. No safety net.

Unsnapped her purse, counted her cigarettes, discovered she'd have to ration them. This had not been a thinking-ahead kind of day. The suede jacket was wrong, too warm, and what if it rained? She frowned at the November sky. It was the same dull, stippled ceiling that had been up there last week, last month, forever. All summer. Whoever was in charge of weather had put a recall on blue and nailed up this mess of dirty white sky like a lousy drywall job. The pasture pond seemed to reflect more light off its surface than the sky itself had to offer. The sheep huddled close around its shine as if they too had given up on the sun and settled for second best. Little puddles winked all the way down Highway 7 toward Feathertown and out the other side of it, toward Cleary, a long trail of potholes glinting with watery light.

The sheep in the field below, the Turnbow family land, the white frame house she had not slept outside for a single night in ten-plus years of marriage: that was pretty much it. The widescreen version of her life since age seventeen. Not including the brief hospital excursions, childbirth-related. Apparently, today was the day she walked out of the picture. Distinguishing herself from the luckless sheep that stood down there in the mud surrounded by the deep stiletto holes of their footprints, enduring life's bad deals. They'd worn their heavy wool through the muggy summer, and now that winter was almost here, they would be shorn. Life was just one long proposition they never saw coming. Their pasture looked drowned. In the next field over, the orchard painstakingly planted by the neighbors last year was now dying under the rain. From here it all looked fixed and strange, even her house, probably due to the angle. She only looked out those windows, never into them, given the company she kept with people who rolled plastic trucks on the floor. Certainly she never climbed up here to check out the domestic arrangement. The condition of the roof was not encouraging.

Her car was parked in the only spot in the county that wouldn't incite gossip, her own driveway. People knew that station wagon and still tended to think of it as belonging to her mother. She'd rescued this one thing from her mother's death, an unreliable set of wheels adequate for short errands with kids in tow. The price of that was a disquieting sense of Mama still coming along for the ride, her tiny frame wedged between the kids' car seats, reaching across them to ash her cigarette out the open window. But no such thoughts today. This morning after leaving the kids at Hester's she had floored it for the half-mile back home, feeling high and wobbly as

a kite. Went back into the house only to brush her teeth, shed her glasses, and put on eyeliner, no other preparations necessary prior to lighting out her own back door to wreck her reputation. The electric pulse of desire buzzed through her body like an alarm clock gone off in the early light, setting in motion all the things in a day that can't be stopped.

She picked her way now through churned-up mud along the fence, lifted the chain fastener on the steel gate, and slipped through. Beyond the fence an ordinary wildness of ironweed and briar thickets began. An old road cut through it, long unused, crisscrossed by wild raspberries bending across in tall arcs. In recent times she'd come up here only once, berry picking with her husband Cub and some of his buddies two summers ago, and it definitely wasn't her idea. She'd been barrel-round pregnant with Cordelia and thinking she might be called on to deliver the child right there in the brambles, that's how she knew which June that was. So Preston would have been four. She remembered him holding her hand for dear life while Cub's hotdog friends scared them half to death about snakes. These raspberry canes were a weird color for a plant, she noticed now, not that she would know nature if it bit her. But bright pink? The color of a frosted lipstick some thirteen-year-old might want to wear. She had probably skipped that phase, heading straight for Immoral Coral and Come-to-Bed Red.

The saplings gave way to a forest. The trees clenched the last of summer's leaves in their fists, and something made her think of Lot's wife in the Bible, who turned back for one last look at home. Poor woman, struck into a pile of salt for such a small disobedience. She did not look back, but headed into the woods on the rutted track her husband's family had always called the High Road. *As if*, she thought. Taking the High Road to damnation; the irony had failed to cross her mind when she devised this plan. The road up the mountain must have been cut for logging, in the old days. The woods had grown back. Cub and his dad drove the all-terrain up this way sometimes to get to the little shack on the ridge they used for turkey hunting. Or they used to do that, once upon a time, when the combined weight of the Turnbow men senior and junior was about sixty pounds less than the present day. Back when they used their feet for something other than framing the view of the television set. The road must have been poorly maintained even then. She recalled their taking the chain saw for clearing windfall.

She and Cub used to come up here by themselves in those days, too, for so-called picnics. But not once since Cordie and Preston were born. It was crazy to suggest the turkey blind on the family property as a place to hook up. *Trysting place*, she thought, words from a storybook. And: *No sense prettying up dirt*, words from a mother-in-law. So where else were they supposed to go? Her own bedroom, strewn with inside-out work shirts and a one-legged Barbie lying there staring while a person tried to get in the mood? Good night. The Wayside Inn out on the highway was a pitiful place to begin with, before you even started deducting the wages of sin. Mike Bush at the counter would greet her by name: *How do, Mrs. Turnbow, now how's them kids?*

The path became confusing suddenly, blocked with branches. The upper part of a fallen tree lay across it, so immense she had to climb through, stepping between sideways limbs with clammy leaves still attached. Would he find his way through this, or would the wall of branches turn him back? Her heart bumped around at the thought of losing this one sweet chance. Once she'd passed through, she considered waiting. But he knew the way. He said he'd hunted from that turkey blind some seasons ago. With his own friends, no one she or Cub knew. Younger, his friends would be.

She smacked her palms together to shuck off the damp grit and viewed the corpse of the fallen monster. The tree was intact, not cut or broken by wind. What a waste. After maybe centuries of survival it had simply let go of the ground, the wide fist of its root mass ripped up and resting naked above a clay gash in the wooded mountainside. Like herself, it just seemed to have come loose from its station in life. After so much rain upon rain this was happening all over the county, she'd seen it in the paper, massive trees keeling over in the night to ravage a family's roofline or flatten the car in the drive. The ground took water until it was nothing but soft sponge, and the trees fell out of it. Near Great Lick a whole hillside of mature timber had plummeted together, making a landslide of splintered trunks, rock and rill. People were shocked, even men like her father-in-law who tended to meet any terrible news with "That's nothing," claiming already to have seen everything in creation. But they'd never seen this, and had come to confessing it. In such strange times, they may have thought God was taking a hand in things and would thus take note of a lie.

The road turned up steeply toward the ridge and petered out to a single track. A mile yet to go, maybe, she was just guessing. She tried to get a move on, imagining that her long, straight red hair swinging behind her might look athletic, but in truth her feet smarted badly and so did her lungs. New boots. There was one more ruin to add to the pile. The boots were genuine calfskin, dark maroon, hand-tooled uppers and glossy pointed toes, so beautiful she'd nearly cried when she found them at Second Time Around while looking for something decent for Preston to wear to kindergarten. The boots were six dollars, in like-new condition, the soles barely scuffed. Someone in the world had such a life, they could take one little walk in expensive new boots and then pitch them out, just because. The boots weren't a perfect fit but they looked good on, so she bought them, her first purchase for herself in over a year, not counting hygiene products. Or cigarettes, which she surely did not count. She'd kept the boots hidden from Cub for no good reason but to keep them precious. Something of her own. In the normal course of family events, every other thing got snatched from her hands: her hairbrush, the TV clicker, the soft middle part of her sandwich, the last Coke she'd waited all afternoon to open. She'd once had a dream of birds pulling the hair from her head in sheaves to make their red nests.

Not that Cub would notice if she wore these boots, and not that she'd had occasion. So why put them on this morning to walk up a muddy hollow in the wettest fall on record? Black leaves clung like dark fish scales to the tooled leather halfway up her calves. This day had played in her head like a movie on round-the-clock reruns, that's why. With an underemployed mind clocking in and out of a scene that smelled of urine and mashed bananas, daydreaming was one thing she had in abundance. The price was right. She thought about the kissing mostly, when she sat down to manufacture a fantasy in earnest, but other details came along, setting and wardrobe. This might be a difference in how men and women devised their fantasies, she thought. Clothes: present or absent. The calfskin boots were a part of it, as were the suede jacket borrowed from her best friend Dovey and the red chenille scarf around her neck, things he would slowly take off of her. She'd pictured it being cold like this, too. Her flyaway thoughts had not blurred out the inconveniences altogether. Her flushed cheeks, his warm hands smoothing the

orange hair at her temples, all these were part and parcel. She'd pulled on the boots this morning as if she'd received written instructions.

And now she was in deep, though there had been no hanging offenses as yet. They'd managed to be alone together for about ten seconds at a time behind some barn or metal shed, hiding around the corner from where her car was parked with the kids buckled up inside, arguing at full volume. *If I can still hear them, they're still alive* is not a thought conducive to romance. Yet the anticipation of him prickled her skin. His eyes, like the amber glass of a beer bottle, and his face full of dimpled muscles, the kind of grin that seems to rhyme with *chin*. His way of taking her face in both his hands, dear God. Looking her in the eyes, rubbing the ends of her hair between his thumbs and fingers like he was counting money. These ecstasies brought her to sit on the closet floor and talk stupid with him on the phone, night after night, while her family slept under sweet closed eyelids. As she whispered in the dark, her husband's work shirts on their hangers idly stroked the top of her head, almost the same way Cub himself did when she sat on the floor with the baby while he occupied the whole couch, watching TV. Oblivious to the storms inside her. Cub moved in slow motion. His gentleness was merely the stuff he was made of, like the fiber content of a garment, she knew this. Something a wife should bear without complaint. But it made him seem dumb as a cow and it made her mad. All of it. The way he let his mother boss him around, making him clean his plate and tuck in his shirttails like a two-hundred-pound child. The embarrassment of his name. He could be Burley Junior if he'd claim it, but instead let his parents and the populace of a county call him Cubby as if he were still a boy, while they hailed his father, the elder Burley Turnbow, as "Bear." A cub should grow up, but at twenty-eight years of age, this one stood long-faced and slump-shouldered at the door of the family den, flipping a sheaf of blond bangs out of his eyes. Now he would let himself be shamed by his wife's hardheartedness too, or fail to notice it. Why should he keep on loving her so much?

Her betrayals shocked her. It was like watching some maddened, unstoppable, and slightly cuter version of herself on television, doing things a person could never do with just normal life instead of a script. Putting Cordelia down for early naps while Preston was at kindergarten so she could steal a minute for making intimate bargains with a man who wasn't her husband. The urge to call him was worse than

wanting a cigarette, like something screaming in both her ears. More than once she'd driven past where he lived, telling the kids in the back seat that she'd forgotten something and had to go back to the store. She would say it was for ice cream or bullet pops, to shush them, but even a five-year-old could tell it was not the road to the store. Preston had voiced his suspicions from his booster seat, which allowed him a view of little more than the passing trees and telephone lines.

The telephone man, as she called this obsession—his name was too ordinary, you wouldn't wreck your life for a Jimmy—"the telephone man" was barely a man. Twenty-two, he'd said, and that was a stretch. He lived in a mobile home with his mother and spent weekends doing the things that interested males of that age, mixing beer and chain saws, beer and target shooting. There was no excuse for going off the deep end over someone who might or might not legally be buying his own six-packs. She longed for relief from her crazy wanting. She'd had crushes before, but this one felt life-threatening, especially while she was lying in bed next to Cub. She'd tried taking a Valium, one of three or four still rattling in the decade-old prescription bottle they'd given her back when she lost the first baby. But the pill did nothing, probably expired, like everything on the premises. A week ago she'd stabbed a needle into her finger on purpose while mending a hole in Cordie's pajamas, and watched the blood jump out of her skin like a dark red eye staring back. The wound still throbbed. Mortification of the flesh. And none of it stopped her from thinking of him, speed-dialing him, making plans, driving by where he'd told her he would be working, just for the sight of him up the pole in his leather harness. A strange turn of fortune had sent him her way in the first place: a tree that fell on a windless day, bringing down the phone line directly in front of her house. She and Cub didn't have a landline, it wasn't even her problem, but a downed line had to be reconnected. "For the folks that are still hanging on by wires," Jimmy had told her with a wicked grin, and everything that came next was nonsensical, like a torrential downpour in a week of predicted sunshine that floods out the crops and the well-made plans. There is no use blaming the rain and mud, these are only elements. The disaster is the failed expectation.

And now here she went risking everything, pointing her little chin up that hill and walking unarmed into the shoot-out of whatever was to be. Heartbreak, broken family. Broke, period. What she might do for money if Cub left her was anyone's

guess. She hadn't been employed or even exactly a regular to human conversation since the Feathertown Diner closed, back when she was pregnant with Preston. Nobody would hire her again as a waitress. They'd side with Cub, and half the town would claim they'd seen it coming, just because they thrived on downfalls of any sort. *Wild in high school, that's how it goes with the pretty ones, early to ripe, early to rot.* They would say the same thing she'd heard her mother-in-law tell Cub: that Dellarobia was a piece of work. As if she were lying in pieces on a table, pins stuck here and there, half assembled from a Simplicity pattern that was flawed at the manufacturer's. Which piece had been left out?

People would likely line up to give opinions about that. The part that thinks ahead, for one. A stay-at-home wife with no skills, throwing sense to the four winds to run after a handsome boy who could not look after her children. Acting like there was no tomorrow. And yet. The way he looked at her suggested he'd be willing to bring her golden apples, or the Mississippi River. The way he closed his fingers in a bracelet around her ankles and wrists, marveling at her smallness, gave her the dimensions of an expensive jewel rather than an inconsequential adult. No one had ever listened to her the way he did. Or looked, touching her hair reverently, trying to name its color: somewhere between a stop sign and sunset, he said. Something between tomatoes and a ladybug. And her skin. He called her "Peach."

No one else had ever called her anything. Only the given name her mother first sounded out for the birth certificate in a doped anesthetic haze, thinking it came from the Bible. Later her mother remembered that was wrong; it wasn't the Bible, she'd heard it at a craft demonstration at the Women's Club. She found a picture in a ladies' magazine and yelled for her daughter to come look. Dellarobia was maybe six at the time and still remembered the picture of the dellarobia wreath, an amalgam of pine cones and acorns glued on a Styrofoam core. "Something pretty, even still," her mother insisted, but the fall from grace seemed to presage coming events. Her performance to date was not what the Savior prescribed. Except marrying young, of course. That was the Lord's way for a girl with big dreams but no concrete plans, especially if a baby should be on the way. The baby that never quite was, that she never got to see, a monster. The preemie nurse said it had strange fine hair all over its body that was red like hers. Preston and Cordelia when they later arrived were both blonds, cut from the Turnbow cloth, but that first one that

came in its red pelt of fur was a mean wild thing like her. Roping a pair of dumbstruck teenagers into a shotgun wedding and then taking off with a laugh, leaving them stranded. Leaving them trying five years for another baby, just to fill a hole nobody meant to dig in the first place.

Something in motion caught her eye and yanked her glance upward. How did it happen, that attention could be wrenched like that by some small movement? It was practically nothing, a fleck of orange wobbling above the trees. It crossed overhead and drifted to the left, where the hill dropped steeply from the trail. She made a face, thinking of redheaded ghosts. Making things up was beneath her. She set her eyes on the trail, purposefully not looking up. She was losing the fight against this hill, panting like a sheep. A poplar beside the trail invited her to stop there a minute. She fit its smooth bulk between her shoulder blades and cupped her hands to light the cigarette she'd been craving for half an hour. Inhaled through her nose, counted to ten, then gave in and looked up again. Without her glasses it took some doing to get a bead on the thing, but there it still was, drifting in blank air above the folded terrain: an orange butterfly on a rainy day. Its out-of-place brashness made her think of the wacked-out sequences in children's books: Which of these does not belong? An apple, a banana, a taxicab. A nice farmer, a married mother of two, a sexy telephone man. She watched the flake of bright color waver up the hollow while she finished her cigarette and carefully ground out the butt with her boot. When she walked on, pulling her scarf around her throat, she kept her eyes glued to the ground. This boy had better be worth it: there was a thought. Not the sexiest one in the world, either. Possibly a sign of sense returning.

The last part of the trail was the steepest, as far as she could recall from her high-school frolics up here. Who could forget that ankle-bending climb? Rocky and steep and *dark*. She had entered the section of woods people called the Christmas Tree Farm, fir trees planted long ago in some scheme that never panned out. The air suddenly felt colder. The fir forest had its own spooky weather, as if these looming conifers held an old grudge, peeved at being passed over. What had she been thinking, to name that hunting shack for a meeting place? Romance felt as unreachable now as it did on any average day of toting kids and dredging the floor of doll babies. She could have made things easy on herself and wrecked her life in a motel room like a sensible person, but no. Her legs were tired and her butt ached.

She could feel blisters welling on both feet. The boots she'd adored this morning now seemed idiotic, their slick little heels designed for parading your hindquarters in jeans, not real walking. She watched her step, considering what a broken ankle would add to her day. The trail was a cobbled mess of loose rocks, and it ran straight uphill in spots, so badly rutted she had to grab saplings to steady herself.

With relief she arrived on a level stretch of ground carpeted with brown fir needles. But something dark loomed from a branch over the trail. A hornet's nest was her first thought, or a swarm of bees looking for a new home. She'd seen that happen. But the thing was not humming. She approached slowly, hoping to scoot under it, with or without a positive ID. It bristled like a cluster of dead leaves or a down-turned pine cone, but was much bigger than that. Like an armadillo in a tree, she thought, with no notion of how large that would be. Scaly all over and pointed at the lower end, as if it had gone oozy and might drip. She didn't much care to walk under it. For the second time she wished for the glasses she'd left behind. Vanity was one thing, but out here in the damn wilderness a person needed to see. She squinted up into dark branches backlit by pale sky. The angle made her a little dizzy.

Her heart thumped. These things were all over, dangling like giant bunches of grapes from every tree she could see. *Fungus* was the word that came to mind, and it turned down the corners of her mouth. Trees were getting new diseases now. Cub had mentioned that. The wetter summers and mild winters of recent years were bringing in new pests that apparently ate the forest out of house and home. She pulled her jacket close and hurried underneath the bristly thing, ducking, even though it hung a good ten feet above the trail. She cleared it by five. And even so, shivered and ran her fingers through her hair afterward and felt childish for fearing a tree fungus. The day couldn't decide whether to warm up or not. In the deep evergreen shade it was cold. Fungus brought to mind scrubbing the mildewed shower curtain with Mr. Clean, one of her life's main events. She tried to push that out of her thoughts, concentrating instead on her reward at the end of the climb. She imagined surprising him as he stood by the shack waiting for her, coming up on him from behind, the sight of his backside in jeans. He'd promised to come early if he could, hinting he might even be naked when she arrived. With a big soft quilt and a bottle of Cold Duck. Lord love a duck, she thought. After subsisting for years on the remains of toddler lunches and juice boxes, she'd be drunk in ten minutes. She

shivered again and hoped that was a pang of desire, not the chill of a wet day and a dread of tree fungus. Should it be so hard to tell the difference?

The path steered out of the shadow into a bright overlook on the open side of the slope, and here she slammed on her brakes; here something was wrong. Or just strange. The trees above her were draped with more of the brownish clumps, and that was the least of it. The view out across the valley was puzzling and unreal, like a sci-fi movie. From this overlook she could see the whole mountainside that lay opposite, from top to bottom, and the full stand of that forest was thickly loaded with these bristly things. The fir trees in the hazy distance were like nothing she'd ever seen, their branches droopy and bulbous. The trunks and boughs were speckled and scaly like trees covered with corn flakes. She had small children, she'd seen things covered with corn flakes. Nearly all the forest she could see from here, from valley to ridge, looked altered and pale, the beige of dead leaves. These were evergreen trees, they should be dark, and that wasn't foliage. There was movement in it. The branches seemed to writhe. She took a small automatic step backward from the overlook and the worrisome trees, although they stood far away across the thin air of the hollow. She reached into her purse for a cigarette, then stopped.

A small shift between cloud and sun altered the daylight, and the whole landscape intensified, brightening before her eyes. The forest blazed with its own internal flame. "Jesus," she said, not calling for help, she and Jesus weren't that close, but putting her voice in the world because nothing else present made sense. The sun slipped out by another degree, passing its warmth across the land, and the mountain seemed to explode with light. Brightness of a new intensity moved up the valley in a rippling wave, like the disturbed surface of a lake. Every bough glowed with an orange blaze. "Jesus God," she said again. No words came to her that seemed sane. Trees turned to fire, a burning bush. Moses came to mind, and Ezekiel, words from Scripture that occupied a certain space in her brain but no longer carried honest weight, if they ever had. *Burning coals of fire went up and down among the living creatures.*

The flame now appeared to lift from individual treetops in showers of orange sparks, exploding the way a pine log does in a campfire when it's poked. The sparks spiraled upward in swirls like funnel clouds. Twisters of brightness against gray sky.

In broad daylight with no comprehension, she watched. From the tops of the funnels the sparks lifted high and sailed out undirected above the dark forest.

A forest fire, if that's what it was, would roar. This consternation swept the mountain in perfect silence. The air above remained cold and clear. No smoke, no crackling howl. She stopped breathing for a second and closed her eyes to listen, but heard nothing. Only a faint patter like rain on leaves. Not fire, she thought, but her eyes when opened could only tell her, *Fire, this place is burning*. They said, *Get out of here*. Up or down, she was unsure. She eyed the dark uncertainty of the trail and the uncrossable breach of the valley. It was all the same everywhere, every tree aglow.

She cupped her hands over her face and tried to think. She was miles from her kids. Cordie with her thumb in her mouth, Preston with his long-lashed eyes cast down, soaking up guilt like a sponge even when he'd done no wrong. She knew what their lives would become if something happened to her here. On a mission of sin. Hester would rain shame on them for all time. Or worse, what if they thought their mother had just run away and left them? Nobody knew to look for her here. Her thoughts clotted with the vocabulary of news reports: dental records, next of kin, sifting through the ash.

And Jimmy. She made herself think his name: a person, not just a destination. Jimmy, who might be up there already. And in a single second that worry lifted from her like a flake of ash as she saw for the first time the truth of this day. For her, the end of all previous comfort and safety. And for him, something else entirely, a kind of game. Nothing to change his life. *We'll strike out together*, she'd told herself, and into what, his mother's mobile home? Somehow it had come to pass that this man was her whole world, and she had failed to take his measure. Neither child nor father, he knew how to climb telephone poles, and he knew how to disappear. The minute he breathed trouble, he would slip down the back side of the mountain and go on home. Nothing could be more certain. He had the instincts of the young. He would be back at work before anyone knew he'd called in sick. If she turned up in the news as charred remains, he would keep their story quiet, to protect her family. Or so he'd tell himself. Look what she'd nearly done. She paled at the size her foolishness had attained, how large and crowded and devoid of any structural beams. It could be flattened like a circus tent.

She was on her own here, staring at glowing trees. Fascination curled itself around her fright. This was no forest fire. She was pressed by the quiet elation of escape and knowing better and seeing straight through to the back of herself, in solitude. She couldn't remember when she'd had such room for being. This was not just another fake thing in her life's cheap chain of events, leading up to this day of sneaking around in someone's thrown-away boots. Here that ended. Unearthly beauty had appeared to her, a vision of glory to stop her in the road. For her alone these orange boughs lifted, these long shadows became a brightness rising. It looked like the inside of joy, if a person could see that. A valley of lights, an ethereal wind. It had to mean something.

She could save herself. Herself and her children with their soft cheeks and milky breath who believed in what they had, even if their whole goodness and mercy was a mother distracted out of her mind. It was not too late to undo this mess. Walk down the mountain, pick up those kids. The burning trees were put here to save her. It was the strangest conviction she'd ever known, and still she felt sure of it. She had no use for superstition, had walked unlucky roads until she'd just as soon walk under any ladder as go around it, and considered herself unexceptional. By no means was she important enough for God to conjure signs and wonders on her account. What had set her apart, briefly, was an outsize and hellish obsession. To stop a thing like that would require a burning bush, a fighting of fire with fire.

Her eyes still signaled warning to her brain, like a car alarm gone off somewhere in an empty parking lot. She failed to heed it, understanding for the moment some formula for living that transcended fear and safety. She only wondered how long she could watch the spectacle before turning away. It was a lake of fire, something far more fierce and wondrous than either of those elements alone. The impossible.

The roof of her house when she saw it again still harbored its dark patches of damaged shingles, and there sat her car in the drive where she'd parked it. With her mind aflame and her heels unsteady from what she'd seen, she tried to look at the vinyl-sided ranch house in some born-again way. Whatever had gained purchase on her vision up there felt violent, like a flood, strong enough to buckle the dark roof and square white corners of home and safety. But no, it was all still there. The life she had recently left for dead was still waiting. The sheep remained at their posts, huddled in twos and threes. The neighbors' peach orchard still rotted in place on its

perfect grid, exposing another family's bled-out luck. Not a thing on God's green earth had changed, only everything had. Or she was dreaming. She'd come down the mountain in less than half the time it took to climb, and that was long enough for her to doubt the whole of this day: what she'd planned to do, what she had seen, and what she'd left undone. Each of these was enormous. If they added up to nothing, then what? A life measured in half dollars and clipped coupons and culled hopes flattened between uninsulated walls. She'd gone for loss and wreckage as the alternative, but there might be others. A lake of fire had brought her back here to something.

To what? A yard strewn with weathered plastic toys and straggling grass, devoid of topsoil, thanks to her father-in-law's hasty job of bulldozing the pad for the house. One neglected rosebush by the porch, a Mother's Day present from Cub, who'd forgotten roses made her sad. The silver Taurus wagon in the drive, crookedly parked in haste, the keys in the ignition where she always left them, as if anybody around here would drive it away. The faint metal sound like a pipe dropped on its end when she put the car into gear. It could not be more tedious or familiar, any of it. Sadness filled her like water as she turned out onto the highway and clicked on the radio. Kenny Chesney was waiting there to pounce, crooning in his molasses voice that he wanted to know what forever felt like, urging her to gallop away. She clicked Kenny right off. She turned up the drive to her in-laws' place and their old farmhouse came into view with its two uncurtained windows upstairs that made her think of eye sockets in a skull. Hester's flower beds had melted under the summer's endless rain, and so had the garden. They'd finished tomato canning almost before they started. Hester's prized rose beds were reduced to thorny outposts clotted with fists of mildew. It was Hester who loved roses. For Dellarobia their cloying scent and falling-apart flowerheads opened a door straight into the memory of her parents' funerals.

When she got out of the car she noticed one bright spot of color in the whole front yard, a tiny acid-green sock on the stone step where she must have dropped it this morning when she brought the kids. She swiped it up and pocketed it on her way up the steps, abashed to confront the woman she'd been a few hours ago, dying of a sickness. She opened the door without knocking.

Cramped indoor odors met her: dog, carpet, spilled milk. And the sight of her kids, the heart-pounding relief of that, like the aftermath of a car accident narrowly avoided. The two of them sat close together on the living room floor in a tableau of brave abandonment. Preston had his arms around Cordie and his chin nested on her fuzzy head while holding a picture book open in front of her. The collies stretched on either side in alert recline, a pair of protective sphinxes. All eyes flew up to her as she entered, keen for rescue, the grandmother nowhere in sight. Preston's dark, plaintive eyebrows were identical to his father's, aligned across his forehead as if drawn there by a ruler. Cordelia reached both hands toward Dellarobia and burst into tears, her mouth downturned in a bawl so intense it showed her bottom teeth. The TV drone in the kitchen died abruptly, and Hester appeared in the doorway, still in her bathrobe, her long gray hair coiled around pink foam curlers. On her children's behalf Dellarobia gave her an injured look, probably just a slightly less toothy version of Cordie's. It wasn't as if she asked her mother-in-law to watch the kids every day of the week. Not even once a month.

Hester crossed her arms. "The way you run around, I wasn't expecting you back so soon."

"Well. I thank you for keeping an eye on them, Hester."

"I wasn't in there but a minute," she pressed, tilting her head back toward the kitchen.

"Okay, you weren't. It's fine." Dellarobia knew any tone she took with Hester would be the wrong one. These conversations wore her out before they began.

"I was fixing to heat up some chicken fried steak and greens for lunch."

For *whose* lunch, Dellarobia wondered. It sounded like one that would require more than baby teeth, not to mention some table knife skills. She said nothing. They both watched Cordelia stand up precariously, red-faced and howling. She was wet, and probably had been all morning. The diaper bulge inside her yellow footie pajamas was like a big round pumpkin. No wonder the child couldn't balance. Dellarobia took a drag on her almost-finished cigarette, trying to decide whether to change Cordie here or just get out of Dodge.

"You shouldn't smoke when you're around them kids," her mother-in-law declared in a gravel voice. A woman who'd probably blown smoke in Cub's little red face the minute he was born.

“Oh, my goodness, I would *never* do that. I only smoke when I’m lying out getting a suntan on the Riviera.”

Hester looked stunned, meeting Dellarobia’s gaze, eyeing the boots and the chenille scarf. “Look at you. What’s got into you?”

Dellarobia wondered if she looked as she felt, like a woman fleeing a fire.

“Preston, honey, say bye-bye to your Mammaw.” She clenched the filter of her cigarette lightly between her teeth so she could lift Cordelia to her hip, take Preston’s hand, and steer her family toward something better than this.