

Without a Map

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“Don’t be mad.” I telegram James, care of the American Express office in Amsterdam. “Am heading off alone. See you in India.” The telegram takes a startling four dollars and fifty cents out of the seventy dollars I have left after paying for my hotel. James has the other six hundred dollars. I feel some concern about this, but I stuff the sixty-five dollars and fifty cents into my jeans pocket and stride out of the telegraph office into the streets of Luxembourg. It is a cold, drizzly, metallic day. I am scared, but I like the feeling.

The city is just waking up; delivery trucks park on the sidewalks, and men in shiny jackets lower boxes and crates down steep stone steps to men waiting in basements below. Bare bulbs hang in the gloom; voices come in bursts of yelling and laughter. I can’t understand anything they are saying. I shoulder my new red backpack—fifty-six pounds, including the lumpy cotton sleepy bag I bought at the Army/Navy store—and shift it on my small shoulders until it feels comfortable. The men on the street stop their work and turn to watch me walk by. One of them smiles and tips his cap. There is a murmur among them and then laughter. I am twenty years old, and scared. I feel shaky and powerful, recognizing a reckless potency as it takes over decision-making. Nothing can hurt me. I smile back at the workers, lean forward against the weight of the pack, and choose a direction. Luxembourg is silver in the morning mist. Men and women come, one by one, out onto the sidewalks to make their way to work. I walk among them, the human stream, but I know that I am not a part of that life.

James and I had lived together in Cambridge for two years, off and on. Mostly on. Lately, our “open” relationship, which meant open on his side, had been more open than usual, with James

hardly around. I felt sad and betrayed, which broke our rules. So I lived for half a year by myself on Dartmouth Street in Boston, in a small shabby apartment with high ceilings and stained glass windows in the bathroom door. At night, I sat in the big bay window at the back of the house with the lights low, watching rats take over the nighttime alley. A man up a story across the alley stood each night at his window, watching me through binoculars. I stared back. Sometimes I filed my toenails for him, or recited poetry. I worked every day managing a xerox shop near MIT, returning each night to the rats, my books, the man who watched me. When James came one snowy November night, I knew this round of “off” was over.

“Want to come to India with me?” he asked, standing in the middle of the room with his leather jacket still on. Snow melted from his red hair and beard. He was stoned.

“Sure.” I said. We hadn’t hugged.

“I knew my old lady would come through,” he grinned.

“What about school?” James was having trouble finishing up at Harvard.

“Fuck school,” he said. “I hate it.”

“When are we going?”

“After Christmas. I’m going home to Sweden to see my grandparents. We’ll take off right after that. Be gone four months. I’ve got more than two hundred bucks saved up. I know you have some. Inja, here we come!” His eyes sparkled.

The plan was that I would fly to Luxembourg on a cheap flight and take a train to Amsterdam, where I would meet James. He would just wait at the station on January sixth until I climbed off one of the trains, and we would start our four month hitchhiking trip to India. I was scared as I flew to Reykjavik and on to Luxembourg. I felt apprehensive about getting from the airport into the city alone, about finding a place on my own to spend the night. I decided I would just sleep in a chair at the train station, but when I got there it was locked up for the night. It was a very cold, damp night. I didn’t have the right clothes; I had packed for India, forgetting the continents in between. As I made my way into a nearby hotel, I felt inept and alone. I went to sleep worried about the train ride to Amsterdam the next day, and what would happen if James, for some

reason, never showed up. He had almost all our money and our maps. Our only line of communication was through American Express, the hub for hitch-hikers in Europe. Our plan seemed, in the damp, lonely room, flimsy and uncertain.

Before it was light, I was up, frightened. I washed in cold water at the stained sink behind the door, watching myself in the mirror. I was a girl in big trouble. I knew that as I stared back at myself, at the guarded, haunted eyes, the tight and closed face. I was twenty years old. I had had a baby when I was sixteen. I was sixteen when my mother kicked me out, terrified, alone. My child was given up for adoption. That baby was somewhere, maybe loved, maybe not. Grief and a sense that I had lost everything in those terrible months—had lost my child, my mother's love and protection, had lost myself—hollowed me out. I could not find comfort, release, and I had lost the ability to trust anyone. I understood clearly that my history had harmed me, had cut me off from the normal connections between people. Every day for four years I had been afraid of this disconnection, feeling the possibility of perfect detachment within my reach, like a river running alongside, waiting for me to step into its current.

Something shifted in the early morning's coming light as I looked back at the broken life reflected in the mirror. The river swept in close next to me, the current smooth and swift. I stepped in finally, reckless and grateful. I walked toward the telegraph office, not knowing that I was shunting onto a whole new path in my life.

The winter air is heavy with sweet coal smoke as I walk and hitchhike, following the Rhone River through eastern France. I am walking blind, with no maps, and learn the names of the cities I am passing through from large green signs: Nancy, Dijon, Lyons, Montelimar, Arles. Everything—buildings, fields, chugging factories, workers' faces and clothes—is gray. Snow falls and turns to slush. I am cold and wet and at peace for the first time in four years. My money is going fast on bread and cheese and hot soup. Each late afternoon, I have one purpose—to find a dry place to sleep where no one will find me. I am furtive as each day closes, slipping into farm sheds and factory storerooms and derelict warehouses. Sometimes I am caught and an angry or indignant man or

woman sends me back out into the night. I sleep lightly, listening for footsteps. If I am near a town in the morning, I like to find a public place—a café or market—and spend a few minutes warming up, my backpack resting against my legs near the sweaty windows. Often, the owner realizes I have no money to spend and shoos me out. Sometimes, a man or a young woman, a mother with a small, wide-eyed child perhaps, smiles and motions me to sit down. My French is poor: “Yes, I am walking to India,” I say. “Thank you,” I say again and again. I eat a pastry and drink a bowl of steaming coffee. Sometimes, the man who picks me up in his green Deux Cheveaux or blue Fiat or black Mercedes pulls over at a market and buys me bread and tins of sardines and cheese. The world feels perfectly benign, generous even, and I go on my way, following the river.

I think of James, hoping he did not sit long in the train station waiting for me before he realized there was trouble, before he made his way to the American Express office and ripped open my telegram. I half-expect to see him waving at me across an intersection where roads meet and part again. I have no idea where I am.

One cold, windy day, as I walk through another little town with no name, I meet a man named John who is AWOL from the British Army. He is tall and very, very thin, with hollowed out cheeks and sunken eyes. His boots are rotting away; he has tied newspapers around the soles. In his dirty, wet canvas satchel, he carries a brown wool blanket, which is thin and filthy, and a miniature chess set. He has no passport. He has not contacted his family for over a year. He looks haunted, as if he no longer belongs to the world. He teaches me to play chess in the back stairwell of an apartment building. He is curt with me, and never smiles. He smells unwashed, but more than that: he seems to be fading from the world. I feel as if I am looking at myself a year from now.

John tells me the next morning, pointing down the empty road, “Go that way until you reach the Mediterranean Sea. Turn left there. It will take you to a warmer place.”

I leave him sitting on a heap of stones at the edge of a field, and head in the direction he pointed.

My backpack is lighter. In dirty Genoa, I sell two pairs of Levis, my high red suede boots, a black lace shirt and a bra to a girl from Chicago who is hitchhiking with her boyfriend. She gives me twenty dollars in cash, and the rising worry about money which I have been trying to ignore eases. I have lost weight in just three weeks, and think about food as I walk.

I see lots of kids traveling together now that I have reached the warmer Mediterranean coast. Like me, they carry heavy backpacks and stick out their thumbs for a ride. They look happy and well-fed, and they sleep each night in a youth hostel they have chosen from their *Europe on Five Dollars a Day* guide. They congregate, little international communities, in café's and clubs and parks in the center of the quaint southern town, finding a common language and sharing tales of their adventures. I avoid them, feeling detached from their youth and the ease with which they travel through the world.

The hole in me grows. I am becoming more and more isolated and recognize that I am walking my way into a dangerous disconnection. I think of my baby every single day. I make up stories: my baby is a boy named Anthony, with black, black hair. My baby is a girl, although I don't really believe this. My baby is a boy, four years old now, lying on his back under a maple tree watching clouds—clouds just like these above me now—spin by on an easterly wind. He has blond curls and crooked fingers like mine. He is shaped like this hole in me. I walk under the weight of my backpack away from home.

(break)

The narrow sidewalks in Florence have been worn down in the middle by centuries of people walking to the market and to work and home and to a mother's or child's funeral, people who have carried burdens on their shoulders and in their string bags and in their hearts. The ancient stone steps of the Palazzo Medici and Pitti Palace are worn so deeply they seem to sag in the middle, as if the weight of all these lives has made its mark forever. I am at peace here, trudging down the center of the sidewalks.

I become a tourist, excited by my first discovery of Renaissance art, of its embrace of pain and beauty. I have no guide books, and wander from place to place. Fra Angelico's frescoes and Giotto's altar piece and Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise and Brunelleschi's Dome at Santa Maria della Fiore come unannounced. I sit for long afternoons staring at Michelangelo's *David* and *Bacchus*, the marble translucent in the soft light slipping through the high windows. I love the beauty, the uncontained genius. The air here is so protected from the world.

I have less than forty dollars left. I am spending precious money to get into the palaces and the Galleria degli Uffizi and the Medici Chapels. I learn to steal oranges and bread and dates from indoor markets, leaving my backpack outside by the door so I can make a fast run with my day's food. At night, I comb my hair and present myself as an American college girl at the doors of *pensions*. Sceptical women in black dresses and stout shoes size me up, but each night someone agrees to take me in. In rapid-fire English, I refuse to leave my passport with them, arguing that I am going to meet friends later and will need my identification out on the city's streets. I cannot understand their answers, but if I get away with it, I find myself in a clean room with stiff white sheets on a high bed and windows looking out on a quiet side street.

I request that the hot water burner in my room be turned on, an extra cost. While the widow turns the gas valve and lights the match below the heater, I smile my gratitude. The woman doesn't smile back at me. Left alone, I put the lamp on and ease into the long tub. I soak clean in the deep steaming water, easing some of my aloneness in its embrace. I climb out, then wash my clothes in the tub and lay them for the night across the chugging radiator. In the morning, the woman brusquely brings me a tray of hard-crust toast and sweet butter and strawberry jam in a little white pot. Later, of course, I lift my backpack onto my shoulders and quietly take the stairs past her rooms. I enter the day in Florence clean, well-slept, my hunger appeased, and weighted with guilt. The beautiful old city wakes slowly while I watch, the red tiled roofs catching the coming sun as it rises over the Arno.

I make my way toward the rising sun. I no longer care about India. I have no destination. I speak most days to one or two people, but I am worlds away. The road is leading in. The walking is a drug.

I cross mountains and find myself again on a sea. Rimini. Ravenna. Ferrara. Venice in the springtime, a liquid pink city. I am a thief in these cities, stealing food and a bath and sleep. I sell a red dress I like very much and black tights and four tee-shirts. I put the fifteen dollars in my pocket. I study a French girl's map and see that I am headed away from tourist cities, from food and beds, a roof. Worry nags at me. I linger in Venice, sitting in San Marco Square or on the boulevard looking across to the Lido. Men in the freight boats on the canals call out to me with white smiles. Sometimes I smile back and a man throws fruit and small parcels of nuts or olives to me. I wave my thanks. I am thin, and wonder if they see yet that hollowed-out look I met in John.

My child is no longer a baby. He turns five on Memorial Day, as I walk out of Venice. I will not try to hitch a ride today. I feel my son with me, a light, and I want to be alone with him.

It has been several months since I have had a real conversation with anyone. I am not at all lonely. I choose this way of being in the world. I know I would scare people at home. But I have nothing to say to anyone. I have not been in touch with my family since I left to meet James in Amsterdam, and their voices are finally silent in my head. My backpack is lighter. I hum Bach's *Partita No. 2* and head through Trieste to the next place that waits for me.

I am in northern Yugoslavia. It is muddy, a cold, black, knee-deep mud. I have lost the road and am slogging across a vast series of fields. It has rained for five days and finally the sun has come out, bright but without warmth. I am wet through, and struggle to stay upright in the sucking mud. I am very tired, and believe, as the afternoon wears on, that this will be an awful night.

I can see a cluster of farm buildings ahead of me, dots of white in the sun, and hope a road leads from there to somewhere. A farmer, tall and stooped, calls to me from a rise in the distance; here, he beckons eagerly, this way, and he leads me with his pointing hand on an invisible path

through the mud to the high ground. He wears an old woolen jacket and high black rubber boots. Smiling and bobbing, he takes me home to his wife. In their cobble-floored kitchen, which is warm and is lit by a shaft of afternoon sun, we eat barley soup and heavy bread. The old woman, whose name sounds like *Helja*, is kind and attentive. I think they are happy to have a visitor to while away the time until their fields dry out again. The woman has taken my filthy clothes, giving me a red sweater, wool skirt and hand-knit wool socks. My clothes, even the pieces from my pack and my boots, have been washed and are drying by the fire. We all smile and nod as they speak to each other, but they never seem to ask what in heaven has brought me to their little piece of mud-sunk land, miles from any road.

It is comforting to sit with them. Their small house—with no electricity and no furnace, with a rooster and shiny white hens in the gravel dooryard, with small sheds for a horse and two cows and a dozen goats, with fields stretching away to distant neighbor farms—feels like a home. It makes me nostalgic, as if I have missed something in my life I can't name. I sleep at night in a small warm bed above the kitchen. I can hear the kind old man up several times in the night to tend the fire. The rooster starts the day early; after a big breakfast of eggs and bread and crumbling goat cheese, I put on my warm dry clothes. The woman presses the red sweater on me, which I gratefully accept. The old man walks silently in front of me for several miles, leading the way across high ground to a small paved road. He gesticulates down the road one way and then the other, his voice rising in question. This way? Or this? he asks. I look down the road in each direction. Above the muddy bottomland, Yugoslavia is emerald green, soft and rolling and lush, one of the most beautiful places I have been. It doesn't matter which way I go. But I don't want to frighten the old people, who will expect me to be going somewhere, to have a purpose and a goal, to have someone waiting for me at the other end. "Oh," I say cheerfully. "I'm headed this way." I point down the winding road, shake his hand, smiling, and follow the road. I turn several times, and each time he is standing, waving, smiling, urging me on.

Beograd: I am up to my old tricks-- thieving food, a bed. I horde the thirty-six dollars in my pocket. Summer has come to Yugoslavia. I like this enormous country very much. Tito watches me from posters and framed photos in every building and home. The Danube makes its lazy way past the city and on to mysterious places far away. I get rested, and ease my constant hunger for food. My jeans hang from my hips. My legs are strong. I ask a soldier, "What way is Greece?" and follow his finger.

There are fewer and fewer hitchhiking kids as I move from farm town to farm town. Boys drive oxen with goad sticks, stopping to stare open-mouthed as I walk past. I sneak into barns and sheds at night, pulling my thin, old sleeping bag snug against my neck because of the rats and mice I hear in the hay and chaff. The nights are still cold and my Army surplus bag offers no warmth at all. I curl my legs tight to my chest, trying to get warm enough to slip into a tired sleep. I have learned the arc of the sun; each morning, before the roosters call the day to a start, I slip out into the dewy gray light, orienting myself, continuing on my way.

Athens is beautiful, crisp green and white in the searing summer sun. It is crawling with travelers, and I feel thrown back into a forgotten world. People speak to me in English and French and I understand what they are hoping for from me—momentary connection, shared experiences. I pretend I don't understand and back away without smiling.

I sell my boots to a shoe vendor on a dead-end street and buy a used pair of sandals from him, giving me an extra seven dollars. I sell the red sweater and all my socks and a yellow jersey. I have twenty-one dollars left. I sit for long afternoons in the little parks lined with orange trees, considering what will happen when I actually can't raise more money. Going home is not an option I consider.

I have lived inside my brain for months now. The walking is an underlying rhythm for my thoughts, like an organ's quiet puffing drone below the hymn. I have accomplished the disconnect, and my wanderings are entirely solitary, free of any voices from the past. Grief is my companion. As

the child grows bigger, the hole carved in me grows, too. Silent, solitary, moving— step by step, I measure the distance between me and the woman I thought I was going to grow up to be.

Three times I try to cross the Bosphorus and enter Istanbul. Gathering speed in Athens, I sweep up the coast of Greece, through Larisa and Lamia, up through Thessaloniki, through Alexandroupolis, walking, catching rides, and each time I balk at the border, unable to broach Turkey. I am twenty. I am hungry. I have less than ten dollars left. Each time, at the door to Asia, I stumble at the threshold, afraid.

In Greece, it has been all dry, pink light, clean and hot. I have been stealing food, and sleep—sometimes in a starched linen bed in an old woman's house, or in a little hotel with three or four rooms and a brilliant white courtyard where I can wash my clothes and air out my dirty, mildewed sleeping bag. But this has been only a pause; I am in motion, headed away from home as if I have no choice.

Now, as I move across Macedonia, I face the dark mystery of Turkey. Asia lies behind a curtain, masculine and remote and secretive, having absolutely nothing to do with me. In northern Greece, as Europe changes to Asia, dark men smoke *hookahs* outside their shops. They stare as I walk past. I feel naked, lost. There are no women anywhere. Small dusty-legged boys run in packs beside me, screaming their excitement as they jump to touch my sun-bleached hair. I am all white, a floating apparition; their dark hands and shrill voices chase me in the village streets. Nasal prayers blare from minarets, and the sun sears the land.

I slide back down the coast to Athens, confused and worried because there is not enough room here to move; I feel trapped. I remember the free-hand maps we drew in seventh grade. I know the world opens and extends beyond the Bosphorus, and I want to be lost in its expanse. Again I roar up the coast. I walk fast. Sometimes rich men in Mercedes pick me up. They feed me at restaurants hidden in the hills and smile at me, baffled and aroused. Again and again I approach the shadowy world which sprawls beyond Europe.

Finally, too tired to turn around again, I slip into Istanbul at night and let a young student lead me to the cellar where he rents a room with four others. I do not go out for three days, paralyzed with fear. And then one morning, pushing myself to recklessness again, I leave the dark hideaway. I gather my things and enter the Bazaar. It is dark and dreamy and heavy; wool rugs and pungent spices and dates and plastic dolls tumble from doorways into the alleys. I spend one dollar on a length of dark cloth and a needle, and, sitting in a wavering pool of light within the gloom, I sew a shapeless shift, long and loose. I sell my last blue jeans and my bra and my sandals and, finally, my pack. I save my belt, which I pull tight around my rolled sleeping bag.

I have heard I can get three hundred dollars for my passport. I make my way slowly through the labyrinth of shops and paths, watching for men who might return my gaze and invite a deal. I wander slowly in the labyrinth, making eye contact with the dark men who embody danger.

Everywhere, men slide next to me, touch my arm insistently, and whisper, “Hashish? Hashish?”

“No money,” I say, emboldened, and then, “Passport? Passport?” The men move away quickly. I know I have scared them.

I am lost. The Bazaar is an ancient city, roofed with great vaulting tunnels of stone. It is dark and very noisy. Children run past, barefoot and dark-eyed. They pull back against the scarred walls when they see me.

I walk slowly, watching the men. “Hashish?”

“No. Passport?”

Finally a man stares back at me, and signals for me to follow. A small man with a sharp nose and scuffed-down shoes, he leads me for five minutes through the maze, without glancing back at me once. He stops at a stall selling spices from big wooden barrels; the bright orange and green and yellow and red and brown spices fill the alley with a rich, heavy smell, mysterious and seductive. The man speaks to a younger man sitting high behind the barrels. That man stares at me coolly. I make myself stare back. He nods, then says something to the older man, who turns to me and says in English, “Twenty-five dollars. ”

“No,” I say. I am shocked—I know that what I am doing is a serious crime. It has to be worth it. “No. Three hundred dollars.”

Both men return my look of shock. They shake hands with each other, and the younger man motions me away. I hesitate, but he yells something at me and I turn away. I am shaken. My plan seems naïve and unworkable. Later, I spend four dollars on a large, peaty chunk of hashish; I sew it into my hem to sell when I need money.

I need food. A fat man with serious eyes watching me from his stall calls me to him. He doesn't smile as he puts me in a chair and lays a tin plate in front of me. He hacks the head off the lamb roasting in his brazier and places it on the plate. I spend an hour picking and sucking every sweet bit from the skull. The man shakes his head when I offer him money. I wander through the Bazaar, watching at the end of each tunnel for the light outside, the path out. Then I head south with seventeen dollars.

Beyond the city, across the Dardanelles, I am free in that vast far-off space I remember from my childhood maps. This is where I want to be. Nothing here is like home. The disconnect is complete. I sleep alone under the trees at night. It rains some nights, and I am cold and wet. I share dark sheds with small animals, rats I think, and I sneak out before dawn when men come to do their chores. The land is spare and mimics my stripped life. Voices call across the hills, shepherds as alone as I am. Goat bells answer. Everything has slipped. I am not me any more.

It is late summer. I have been walking since January. It is warm in southern Turkey, and very dry. I am always thirsty. My bare feet are strong and calloused. The land is beautiful, rolling and arid and silent. This is an enormous place. I am lost in it.

For several days I have been following a dusty track winding south. I don't know how far away the coast is and can't remember how it fits on the planet. I think the Middle East comes after Turkey, and I head that way. I have forgotten about India, the hitchhiker's mecca. I am wandering. The track has been getting smaller and smaller, and now I know I am on an animal trail, or maybe a shepherd's path. It winds up and over the dry brown hills. I have not seen a house or shepherd's hut

for two days. Sometimes I hear the heavy tonk of goat bells on the distant hills. I am not lonely. I hear my steps muffled in the stonedust, and the pulse of blood in my ears. I hum a fragment from Bach, the same bit over and over. I am hungry.

Night comes quickly here. In the near-dark I feel the clinking of pottery under my feet; I am walking on tiny mosaic tiles. Fragments, brilliant blue and yellow even in this erasing light, stretch for hundreds of feet in the sparse grass. I know nothing. I know no history. When did Homer live? The Trojan War—could that have been here? Crete. Minoans. Phoenicians. Did they lay these bits of clay? I have no sense of what belongs where, or when. I am old, an old woman walking across time in the dust. Other women have walked here. Other women, I know, have been alone. I feel a momentary jolt of connection, of steadying order.

A small stone building, round and low, rises in the dark. I feel my way to a door. I have to step down three feet to the floor, where more tiles crackle each time I step. It is damp and smells green inside. I feel for the roof—it is a low dome, and tiles clap to the floor when I touch them. There is a raised platform in the middle, an oblong, covered in tiles. I listen, but hear no rats. Pleased with my find for the night, I spread my sleeping bag on the platform and wrap myself up as well as I can against the coming cold.

I wake abruptly in the night, knowing suddenly that this is an ancient tomb. I am a trespasser. I am in over my head. The old, deep shame creeps back to me. Glued to that altar all night, I stare straight into the pitch-black dome. At dawn, I crawl up into the faint light, the air, the patterns of lives etched for millennia in the soil. On my hands and knees, I study the mosaic design, searching for clues, a map for how a life gets lived, how it all can be contained, how the boundaries can hold against the inexpressible and unnamed. How I can hold against the past. People called to God in this place, a god who was, I think, furious and harsh. I am not ready. I may never be ready. I gather my sleeping bag and walk toward the rising sun.

Night is coming. I am somewhere in southern Lebanon, on the coast, in a place I can't name. I need to find somewhere to sleep before it is dark. On a narrow beach I discover a cement-

block house still standing, its roof and one wall gone. Its white-wash gleams in the dusk, and it is oddly tidy. The shattered glass, the splinters of wood, the furniture and clothes and dishes that must have been left behind when the Israeli mortar shells flew through the night—everything has been scrubbed clean by the winds and shifting sand. Eddies in its corners have left tiny dunes. I push them flat with a sweep of my arm and drop my sleeping bag. It is all I carry now, this bag rolled and bound with my belt, and my passport; my pocket knife and matches are tucked into the foot. I shake out the bag, dirty and musty, and lay it neatly in the corner of the ruins. I slide my passport back inside, and lay the matches on top. I keep the knife in my hand. In the deep dusk, I wander the beach, gathering driftwood. The little fire whooshes up, and I am home.

I have not eaten today, and have no food for tonight. The bats are out, as always, their syncopated bursts felt but not seen. The Mediterranean Sea is not dramatic. It pulses in and out softly, in and out in the dark. Sparks snap and rise. Although it is June, the nights are chilly and I am cold. I am always cold at night, my body too thin now to generate enough heat. My bag is lumpy with wadded cotton batting and only serves to keep the bats from touching my skin. I am almost content. I am free from most things. Recklessness has become a drug, and I am walking stoned. I have not had a conversation with anyone for several months; I live in my head, all eyes and ears, a receptor with nothing to return. I have no heart anymore and cannot be afraid.

I hear men shouting suddenly. They come nearer. I can hear their pant legs swishing up the beach, and the clatter of what I instantly know are weapons. I wait in the dark, hoping they will march past me, past my small fire, past this already ruined house. They stop in the gaping hole that was a wall, soldiers in camouflage with automatic weapons drawn. There are six of them. I stay sitting, wrapped in my flimsy bag. They are very young, some with no hair on their cheeks at all. One of them, short and thick, is older, my age, maybe twenty or twenty-one; he shouts at me. I cannot tell if they are Israeli or Lebanese. Maybe I have walked out of Lebanon and into Israel along the shore. I don't know where I am, or what the soldiers are protecting, and I know I am in trouble.

“Passport?” the stocky one demands. I know enough not to hand it to them. It will bring them quick cash and I will never see it again. My answer is long, as if there is a logic to my presence

on their beach, as if there has been no War of '67, as if I know what I'm doing here. He shouts at me. I don't know if it is Hebrew or Arabic. "Passport!" I hear in English.

Suddenly one of the boys jostles another, points at me with his elbow, and says something. I know what it must be. They all laugh, excited and a little embarrassed. I flare to life after all these months and I am suddenly afraid. I do not dare to stand up, My dress is thin and I have no underwear.

My fire has died to a glow. They shove each other and giggle and jostle as if they are drunk, but they are not. They are soldiers, a team, and no one knows I am here. They sit in a semicircle around me, their rifles across their laps, their smooth olive hands and cheeks luminescent in the night. They are quiet for minutes at a time, watching me. Then they burst into joking laughter. I sit silent, tense, surprised that I care so much suddenly what happens to me. The bats flick down onto our legs and heads and shoulders. The stars are out, the Milky Way stretching across two seas to my other life. I am sitting on my passport, my little knife gripped in my hand. I stare back at these boys, these boys with guns, and I am puffed like a frightened bird to make myself seem brave.

I sit, stiff and cold. Suddenly all the walking away from my past, from my home, from the baby I abandoned in a hospital, alone, five days old; from my mother, cold, her love evaporated; from the child I was myself—all the walking has taken me nowhere. Here I am, alone and scared. I remember the days after my baby was born. My young breasts, still a girl's, were large and tight and hard, swollen with milk. My shirt was soaked. I stood over the bathroom sink, crying, pressing the milk from my breasts. I could hear my lost baby cry for me from someplace far away, as if my own cry echoed back to me. My milk flowed and flowed, sticky and hot, down the drain of the sink.

I clutch my arms tight to my breasts and face the soldiers who surround me. The night goes on slowly, hour by wary hour. The tides are small here, and the creep of the sea is no measure of time. Occasionally the stocky leader shouts at me, asking for my passport. "American?" he asks. "Yes. American," I say emphatically. "Passport!" he demands again and again. I shrug my shoulders, gesturing no, as if these are my lines in the play we are all rehearsing. Not one of us moves. The constellations reel around the polestar, and we sit through the deep night. In the quiet minutes, one

or another lifts his rifle, clacking and clipping metal against metal as he opens and closes the breach. The sound bangs against the bombed-out walls and echoes back to us. They laugh.

At the first seep of light, the leader suddenly rises. The other boys jump to their feet, brushing sand from their laps. They all look frayed with sleeplessness. The leader stands upright and nods to me. They all turn without speaking and move back down the beach in a slow drifting line. I shake my bag out, place my passport and matches and knife in the foot, and strap my belt around it. Images rise: my mother's face turned from me; the white and metal place where I left my baby; my swollen breasts, my milk slipping slowly in thick lines down the sink. The sand in the bombed-out house is scuffed in a half-circle around me. Suddenly I don't know if these boys spent this long night threatening me or protecting me.

I don't know where I am. My fear settles again as I walk. I head north, pretty sure I'm in Lebanon.

(break)

I am not brave. I have always been afraid. But walking mutes the past. I do not imagine a future. I walk in strange places, the unquiet of losses sliding below the rhythms of moving, step by step, away.

It is my birthday, my twenty-first. I want ritual. This place in Lebanon is called Jbeil. "the beautiful place." I wash slowly in the Mediterranean Sea at dawn, dipping my head back into the cool, still water, an anointment. I wash my dress, and sit for the rest of the day on a long smooth ledge which falls away into the water. I have been feeling the silence acutely, the absolute lack of attachment. It frightens me sometimes, because I know I can easily slip into the deepest current and not come back. But I like the narcotic of walking and will not stop. I know the roads to Damascus and Latakia and Tyre. The walking claims ground as mine, and I am as much at home here as I have been anywhere since I was sixteen.

Between me and my mother, me and my child, beyond this quiet sea, is the dark and raging Atlantic. The sun on the Mediterranean stuns the mind. I am blank. I am here, in this beautiful

place. I am a twenty-one-year-old girl. I am alone. I have nothing. I am impure. I am guilty. I left my child. No matter where I walk, I am guilty.

It is summer—dry, brown, peaceful in the hills. I wander from Syria to Jordan to Lebanon to Syria. I am among Palestinian refugees. Soldiers with machine guns lie behind sandbag bunkers on every corner in every country. The low, flat roofs are sandbagged, and soldiers train their rifles on the dusty streets below. I know that Israel invaded Palestine in 1949. I know that Israel occupied Jordan's West Bank and Syria's Golan Heights in the War of '67; armies of American kids joined the kibbutz movement to help the Jews come home. I don't know anything else, except that the Palestinian refugees suffer. They live in vast tent cities along every highway, and in crowded warrens of shacks in every town. Everyone has lost someone; some have lost everyone. They try to tell me their stories, and weep. My own grief feels smaller here.

I walk with no plan, through Ba'albek and Masyaf and Saida and Sabkha and back through Masyaf. In every place, men and women greet me with hands extended. They smile, drawing me in as if I belong to them. I have no idea who they think I am. They share food with me, flat bread and warm tangy yogurt from the bowl on their doorstep; it always means they leave their own meal hungry. A woman beating a rug in her yard calls to me as I walk by her house. She looks sad and tired, like all the people here. She holds up her hand: Wait. I sit against the low cement wall surrounding her dusty yard. In ten minutes, she comes to me with two eggs, fried warm and runny and life-saving, and flatbread to sop it up. She stands smiling while I eat, her black skirt and thin black shoes powdered with dust, her hens wandering near us, pecking in the dirt.

Several teeth ache. Sometimes in the city I steal packets of aspirin from vendors. When I can't sleep, I lay one against the gum. It burns the tissue, but I sleep.

I sell my blood to the Red Cross whenever I am in a city. Three dollars, enough for a visa to cross back into Syria or Lebanon or Jordan. I try to hide the bruise from last time; sometimes they scold me and send me away. Sometimes they need the blood badly and reach for the less-bruised arm. I feel vestiges of a familiar shame, broad and deep, with these American and European

workers. They ask me if my family knows where I am. I always say yes. They ask, “What are you doing here?” But I have no answer for them and leave quickly with my three dollars.

Nothing can happen to me. I am not afraid. Dispassion. Disconnect.

Abraham offers me hot bread from the doorway of his shop. He speaks some English, and tells me that he is getting married. He brings me home to his mother in the As Sarafand refugee camp south of Beirut. She chatters at me in Arabic while she and four other women crowd around the pit-fire to cook for the feast. There is joy here. I have forgotten this kind of happiness, happiness that looks forward. I stay in this tiny plywood and tin house for three days, basking in the large, soft peace of family. I sleep with Abraham’s sisters on mats on the floor; his father snores, and his mother murmurs to him in the night until he stops. I leave on the morning of the wedding; I have never met the bride, and neither has Abraham. Abraham’s mother wraps a black and white *kafiyeh* around my shoulders as I leave. I feel a stab of dread as I walk away, unsure in which direction to head.

I am stopped at the border. I never know which country I am leaving and which I am entering. I cross these boundaries as they appear before me. I have no plan.

It is still light. A French businessman has picked me up on the road and has driven with me in silence for the past several hours. He knows where he is going. At the tiny border station, he is motioned through, but I am held by the two soldiers in the guard house. The driver looks very concerned; his fear is contagious, and I try to get back into his car. Rifles come up and the guards shout at him to drive on. He leans across the front seat, closes the door, and drives away, looking back at me in his mirror, as if he is memorizing my face.

The guards speak to me in Arabic and motion me to sit on a small bench inside the hut. It is late summer, and very hot in their shack. I think I am entering Syria near Al Qusayr. A few cars pull through, and then no more after dusk falls. The soldiers come inside and close the door. A bare bulb

hangs in the gloom. The men sit in chairs facing me, our knees almost touching. They still have my passport. I want to sleep. I am hungry, and suddenly feel too tired to face them. It is absolutely quiet outside, and I can't see lights anywhere in the no-man's-land of the border.

They talk, pointing the ends of their rifles at me and clicking their tongues. They burst into laughter. I sit hugging my sleeping bag to my chest. Finally, one of the men gets up and goes outside. The one left with me taunts me and stares silently, and taunts again. When the first man returns an hour later, he has a young civilian with him, a buddy. They are agitated, and make jokes for each other. Sometimes the civilian touches my face or arm, or pulls my hair tight in his fist, and they all laugh, their teeth white and shiny in the hard light. They make me stand sometimes, and the men behind me speak in low, rough voices. The clock over the door ticks the seconds and the minutes. It is 2:30 in the dark of the night.

A car pulls up to the gate and the soldiers jump up as if they have been caught at something. I stand quickly and demand my passport. The guard hesitates, then hands it to me, smiling ingratiatingly, and lets me push past him out the door. Without asking, I climb into the front seat of the car. People here know trouble and the driver, a middle-aged Arab in a *jalaba* and *kafiyeh*, never says a word. They pass him through and we drive on into Syria.

The air has changed. It is October, and the nights are very cold. I have no jacket, no sweater, no pants, no shoes. I squat by my little fire, the *kafiyeh* wrapped around my head and neck. I am always hungry. I have slept on this rocky beach in Syria for two weeks. The first few days, just before dusk, a very old man walked the length of the beach with his sheep; he murmured to them as they rustled, grazing, among the debris of seaweed and trash. He didn't look at me.

Then one night, he came across the beach toward me, his sheep following. He was very thin and everything about him was dark—his frayed wool jacket and his old shoes and dirty cap and his lined face. He smiled at me; he had two teeth, both on top. He spoke softly to me in the same vowelly voice he used to herd his animals. Kneeling by my small fire, he took a leather sack from his belt. He used the little pot inside to milk out one of the ewes, the milk hissing again and again

against the tin. She stood for him without moving. His voice hushed in the falling light, he put the pot on the fire. The milk quickly boiled up. He jerked it off the fire and dumped a brown clump of sugar into the creamy foam, stirring it with a stick. He gave it to me. Sitting back on his heels, he waited while the milk cooled, smiling and nodding and talking. He watched me drink it down, delicious and sustaining. I came to life. He nodded and smiled and smiled.

Every night now he stops and warms ewe's milk and sugar for me, talking to me softly like a father might to a child. His old hands are creased and knobby. I don't want him to leave. and I drink the milk slowly, holding him to me. I am nourished, and have a friend. All day I wait for him, feeling how mute I am, how distant I have become from anything I once knew.

One night I try to tell him that I have a child. I hold up five fingers, and show my belly large and round. I point to the west, across the sea. I very much want him to understand. He finally makes a loud, kind noise of understanding, laughing knowingly, smiling and nodding. But I know he cannot imagine what I am talking about. That night I feel alone under the black sky.

I leave the beach the next night. I say good-bye to him after I have drunk the milk he offers. He smiles and nods at me, and turns several times to wave good-bye as he makes his way with his sheep, their bells tonking their hollow, peaceful course along the shore.

It is always almost night, the time when I must find a place to lay down my sleeping bag, a place to attach myself to for a few hours. The decision feels enormously important every night. When I am tired, the unspoken thoughts which ride under the rhythms of my walking begin to seep out and over an edge I cannot protect. I feel at this haunting hour like a stray, desperate for warmth of any kind. Each night I watch the country go gray, then black. I keep walking. Voices I know—my mother's, mine, the squall of a newborn—press at my back.

I move in the dark alone. I search for lights on the arid hillsides, in the steep valleys. I float toward them with an intensity of longing; my outsidership feels contemptible, a failure of a magnitude which hits each day at this time. There are voices coming from the lights, from behind secure walls—fires, and food, and entangled lives. The oncoming night leads me to them; I want, for

a little while, to weave myself into their web. I do not want to sleep out in the open again, cold and apart, the dry wind swirling the stars out of place. I do not want to be alone. I creep toward the lights. Some nights I sleep in the dirty sheds with chickens and goats. Some nights I lie against the low cement walls, close enough to hear the voices, hushed or shrill. Most nights there are no lights anywhere, no secure walls, and I lay my bag down where I am and curl against the cold.

I walk. It is November. I have been moving for eleven months. In a dusty field, twenty women stoop, preparing the rocky soil for the fall planting. Many of them have babies tied with bright cloths to their backs. Small children stand listlessly by their mothers in the sun. I am walking on a track from nowhere that skirts the field. Heads come up and watch me, but they continue their work. The children stare, slowly turning to follow me with their eyes as I pass. The dust rises. The barren hills lift behind us onto the high plain. Suddenly, at a signal I cannot see, the women stand and call their children out of the field for their midday meal, moving together toward me on the path.

I am suddenly struck with shyness. I cannot remember how I got here, what it is I am looking for. I don't know if I have found it, if it can be found. I am outside the world, drifting. I don't think I am lost, but I cannot explain where I am. I want so much all of a sudden. I am empty and very tired. I don't know where to walk next. I don't want these women, with their babies and their gray dusty feet and hands and careful eyes, to wonder what brought me here. Things gone rise up in a flood. Suddenly I am frightened, scared of myself and of how far I have drifted.

The women do not speak to me. They grab baskets they have left by the road and sit to eat their lunches on the little ridge of hard dirt beside the field. I walk along in front of the women and children, feeling exposed. We eye each other; the children lean against their mothers. Goats bleat far off in the hills.

Suddenly a woman smiles up at me and wags her hand—Stop. She is wearing a 1950's short-sleeved Banlon sweater, bright red. She swings her dark-eyed baby onto her lap from her back and

opens her bag. She lifts her sweater up over her swollen breast, her skin the same soft dusk as the soil around her. Holding a dented tin cup under her breast, she presses milk, creamy white, hissing again and again, into the tin. She smiles against the brilliant sun as she hands it to me. I hesitate, then take the cup, sitting down beside her in the dirt. She lifts her child to the same breast. The other women nod and smile while I sip the milk. It is hot and thick and sweet. For a few minutes, I am bound to this woman, a mother, to her baby, to these women and their children. I remember what it is to belong, to be loved. I imagine my child loved somewhere.

For a few moments. I am suspended within this circle. But I do not belong here, and when the cup is empty, I slowly get up. Nodding again and again, I wave to the woman in the red sweater. A different hunger steals into me. Memories of my old life—when I was a girl in a family, a girl with dreams of the life coming to me—flash white and clear as I start to walk away. I want to go home, home to my adult life, with its losses carved forever in my path, with its possibilities, like unformed clouds lit from within, calling me forward. I head back the way I came, orienting myself north and west, back toward the Atlantic. The sun is warm. Behind me, I can hear the women and children talking and laughing as they eat and rest. Their voices rise in soft floating prayers as I walk.

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