

*Cold-Fire*

The cabin where I live, the one my parents built when they were young and strong and fearless, sits on a hill overlooking the valley in front of Mt. Cascom. Mt. Cascom is 3,121 feet. A medium sized mountain for New Hampshire. It's bald on top, sheer granite, rich with glittering mica. Ribbons of white quartz fold into clefts and make you think of snow drifts, though it's summer. From my front porch the fire tower on the summit looks like a tiny spaceship, set down atop the dome.

The fire watchman's name is Gordon. He's a tall man with a long white braid that swings over his rucksack as he strides down the hill those mornings after he's stayed here with me. Though I hate to see him leave, it's nice to know he'll be up there in the tower, keeping watch.

Gordon is fifty-four, fourteen years older than I am. Except for the color of his hair, I wouldn't have guessed him over fifty; his job keeps him fit. His arms are hard cords of muscle, though not thick or heavy; it's as if they have been shaped from straining against hundreds of years of weather. At tree-line there are dwarf spruce—their trunks gracefully knurled and scrolled, forever suffering the wind.

Gordon's quarters are off-summit. I stayed there only once. It was cramped. He sleeps in a single bed. At night the wind wails like ghosts rushing in a fury through the spruce, scraping painfully around the edges of his cabin. Gordon talks in his sleep. Once I heard my name. And then another word which could have been *marry*, or *merry*, or *Mary*.

At dusk I sit on my porch. The silhouette of the ridges makes a giant woman lying on her back. He never comes when I'm longing for him; it's only when I'm busy, not thinking, then there he'll be, hiking out of the woods in his heavy boots.

I remind myself: Don't imagine anything that hasn't happened yet. Don't think about the past. Stay in the space between *then* and *what's-to-come*—it's the only relief.

I'll just say this once, then I won't return to it: My son died when he was four years old. He stepped off the roof with his umbrella and

his imagination, but neither kept him in the air. We have long since sold that house with that roof.

I lose track of my husband Thomas and his many destinations; he's trying to outrun grief. He's phoned from Montana, Washington, Mexico. More recently, a postcard from Vietnam, land of his birth, and where he has a mother he's never met. Do I miss him? What I miss is the impossible—all of us alive and happy and moving into our abruptly-ended future. So, there's no point in dwelling on it. Though hope can still get her hands on me, gripping and greedy. I once saw Gordon catch trout out of the brook with his bare hands.

There's always work to be done—brush to be cut, chimney to be cleaned, knives to be sharpened, carpenter ants to be exterminated, garden to be weeded. I can stay busy all day long. At night, that's when it's hard. Sometimes I bake—sifting, beating, kneading. But I'm usually baking for Gordon—a form of longing. Sometimes, though, I bake for Bella, the old woman who is my nearest neighbor. Gordon calls her Blowsabella because her hair is a huge mess of tangles as if it's been blown crazy by the wind, snagged by branches and angry birds. I'm sure you couldn't get your fingers through it if you tried. She has a grin, full of gaps and gold that can turn an astray tramper's skin to goose pimples.

Now, I slide pans into the oven, thinking about her remedy for keeping slugs out of my garden; I'm pondering what containers to use. Then, behold! Here he comes.

I'm here because there's no one else to take care of this place. My mother passed last year, my father when I was a girl. I can't sell the cabin. They pitched a tent by the brook, skinned logs, mixed cement, hauled rocks. At the end of the day they sat on the roof beams and watched stars surface above the mountain. I can't let it go.

Gordon is here. He breathes in the warm air of my kitchen. "It's heaven," he says.

"It's pie," I tell him. "Peach."

Later, I put one pie away for Bella, and take the other to the front porch where we eat with forks, right out of the pan.

Between bites, he asks how my day was.

"I worked my butt off clearing brush," I say.

"Don't do that," he says. "I'd hate to see anything happen to it."

It's been a long time since I've been admired. In bed Gordon pushes me over on my back and throws the sheet off. Then his eyes rove over me, up and down; he follows where he's looking with his fingers. He slides his fingers between my legs.

Fire watchmen don't look for fire. They look for smoke. Smoke curling up out of the green rolling hills, out of the junipers and scrub at the base of the ledges, and the clearings where there are remote buildings such as mine and Bella's.

None of us stays here year round. The roads can be impassable in snow. In the winter Gordon will work as a night security guard for an office complex in Canaan on the other side of the mountain. I'll work for a newspaper, and live on the other side of the state. I do not want to think about this.

Gordon's expressions can be hard to read—his features aren't exactly symmetrical. A while back, he stood me naked in front of the mirror, looked over my shoulder. "Can't you see what I see?" he said. Though he seemed to be smiling, his voice was stern. "No, don't look at me," he said. "There."

Bella bathes in the brook where there's a deep pool. She takes her clothes off and walks right into the freezing water up to her thighs. With a cake of biodegradable soap she suds up from head to knee, then drops below the surface in a quick dunk to rinse off. If a trumper stumbles upon this little known spot, he might see an old woman shooting out of the water, breasts flopping, paunch jiggling, gobs of dripping hair stuck to her face and hanging to her middle. Soap suds drifting away from bowed, craggy legs. And then her eye-biting stare, the grin opening across her face, her hand squeezing a breast as if to mock him before he cuts and runs.

I bring Bella bread and casseroles and sweets. She trades me with advice about maintenance, and tells me stories. In 1921 the mountain burned. Lightning struck a tree and set it on fire. The fire bloomed and hopped incredible distances, fueled by wind and dry wood from a dry summer, and the unexplainable behavior of fire. The flames spun into a huge funnel, which twisted along the ridge, eating everything. Once it was done there were no trees to hold the soil and that's why the summit is exposed.

The first time I saw Gordon was at the beginning of the summer. He was by the brook, lying on his belly across a boulder, sleeves pushed up, arms hanging over the edge, fingers spread, ready. I came upon him unexpectedly. I don't see people in the woods often, especially not at my stream, my rock. I stayed downwind of him as if he were a bear and might smell me. I thought I smelled him. Sweat and wet wool, but also something sweet, like maple sap, boiling-off.

He'd tucked his braid into his collar; later it would surprise me to see how long it was. I crouched low and glared at him; this was my place, and I had intended to nap in the sun. The brook was full from three days of rain, and spun around rocks, creating little eddies and catches of white foam. I could not believe anyone could stay still so long. It was as if he were made of stone.

The side of Gordon's mouth is paralyzed so in one corner his lips tuck together as if they've been sewn shut.

"You make me dansey-headed," he says, and rolls onto his back. We have just made love.

Even though I've never heard this expression, I say, "At least I know you're not talking out of both sides of your mouth."

He smiles, one side happy, one side grieved. His face is on the fence. If you manage to blur his features, you get mischief, you get the devil in him. It's the face of the fire watchman, setting me on fire. Burning me up.

"Maybe," I say, "your mother never turned you as a baby. Maybe the dryads forgot to rip out all the stitches. Maybe you slept on ice for too many years. Good thing I'm here to warm you up."

"You are young," Gordon whispers close to my ear. His voice is like flour sifting through my fingers, soft and cool. "Why are you hiding out here on this mountain? You should be married. You should have a passel of children loving you."

An ache rolls my heart over. There are things he doesn't know.

"I can't let it go to the weeds," I tell him. "The wilderness is licking its chops."

...

Gordon has spotted smoke in distant valleys and reported it. Though lightning is the most common, fires are often started by

people: campfires left smoldering, cigarettes tossed carelessly. Since 1921 there haven't been any forest fires on Mt. Cascom. There was talk once of closing the tower. The State wanted to save money, cut the watchman's job, but it didn't happen. It's a popular mountain. There are good views. Hikers flock to the campground in Canaan. With binoculars I can see people on the top walking around below the steel girders of the tower. They look like tiny iron filings, magnetic, upright.

Gordon keeps the hatch closed when he's up there. He doesn't like hikers climbing the metal stairs, poking their heads through the floor, squinting through his telescopes, leaving fingerprints on the glass protecting his geodetic map, pointing to mountains in the distance and naming them wrong.

I never care to go up into the tower; I went there plenty as a girl. Now, when I climb the mountain, I sit off to the side, away from people milling about, and look out at the valley, at all the greens. The dark olive greens of white pine, black spruce, hemlock, balsam, junipers. The brilliant yellow-greens of birch, beech, maple, poplar.

In late June, Gordon watched a woman from his tower, making her way up the granite. He was curious because, unlike other hikers, she didn't come all the way to the top. She didn't carry a pack, no water, no sweater, no lunch, no binoculars, no map. He lowered his telescope and tried to see her face through wildly blowing hair. She reached back, gathered it around her hand—*hair the color of golden wheat*—as if to let him catch a glimpse. Then she let it go, but not before he saw in her face what he calls a *cold-fire*—a fire laid, but unlit. He said he was inexplicably drawn to me.

I'd never seen anyone catch a fish with his bare hands. I heard him grunt and there was a splash, and then a trout came sailing over the scrub and landed at my feet. The fish flopped and twisted, instinctively trying to hurdle itself back toward the brook. Then another came flip-falling from the sky, slapping through the leaves and branches, whipping to and fro. The next nearly hit me on the arm. It was raining rainbow trout.

The morning after that I went to see Bella. She was behind her house, whacking the ground with a hoe. The soil was hard and dry

and didn't give easy, but she'd managed two long rows of upturned dirt.

"What are you going to plant there?" I asked.

"Weed," she said angrily as if she knew it was impossible to grow anything there. Then I realized she meant marijuana.

"What do you know about the new fire watchman," I asked. She didn't say anything. "I brought cake," I said, remembering, and held out a tinfoil wrapped package. "I saw him catch trout with his hands."

She grinned to herself. That grin that scares most people, her cheeks scrunching into a thousand rubbery folds.

"What kind of cake?" she said, finally, eager as a little girl.

"Carrot. With cream cheese frosting."

She nodded, pleased, then swung her hoe for another wedge. She said, "He asked me to cook his fish once."

"Did you?"

Bella gave me a look like I'd just suggested we take a rocket to the moon.

Bella calls me a weatherspy because I watch the sky most every night. It's a habit of mine since I was a girl; my parents and I would climb the ladder to the roof to catch the Perseids.

It was there, when I was stretched out on the still-warm shingles, that I heard him come to my cabin below. I heard his wet boots squeak across the porch, the spring on the screen door chirp. Heat went through me. How dare he enter my house! How dare he clomp his soggy boots into my kitchen? And then a chill when I heard him take hold of the ladder, bounce it against the eave, and begin to climb. I hid behind the chimney, pressed to the cool stones. He stopped at the top of the ladder.

"Are you up here?" he asked.

His voice took me by surprise. It wasn't gruff as I'd imagined it to be, but soothing as a hush.

"Girl?" he said. No one had called me girl for years. "I'm starved. Belly-pinched. I know you bring cake to that disagreeable old woman." He chuckled, then said in a softer tone, "I saw you, by the way."

I knew he meant at the brook. I'd sneaked off when he finished throwing fish my way.

"Take whatever you want," I said.

He laughed, then swung himself atop. I felt uneasy; he was a big man, and I didn't know his temperament. He walked past me, up the slant of the shed roof to the high eave where he sat down, dangled his legs off and leaned back on his palms. It made me queasy to see him that close to the edge.

"Did I say you could come up here?" I peeked around the chimney. He was only a silhouette, except for his glowing braid that I now saw hung half way down his back.

"I come in peace," he said, then laughed.

"You smell," I said, for in that instant an unpleasant waft of fish odor came my way.

He was silent for a bit, then said, "I'm sorry for that." He sounded truly ashamed. I almost apologized, but he rose and went down the ladder, and the hill, until I couldn't hear his footfalls anymore.

Two nights later I was in the kitchen cleaning up when he knocked on my screen door, and walked in as if he were welcome.

"Have I missed dessert?" he said.

I squinted at him. I didn't want to be taken advantage of. But I had unfrosted meringue left over from a Jerusalem pudding cake I'd brought to Bella. His eyes had found it already. It sat lopsided under a clear plastic cover.

"I have always had a yearning for sweets," he admitted as if it were a bad thing. And then his eyes fell on my chest, and slid away. I thought I saw a look of shame come over him, pulling his mouth down—on the one side. Or maybe it was pity. I am forty, small-breasted and thin in that drained way when weight has come off too quickly. I can smooth the flesh around my jaw to see the suggestion of a younger face. My smile has worn out, my eyes are weary. The curves of my figure are unwilling. Four years of grieving must show through my skin like a skeleton. This is how I thought he saw me that night.

"You probably never saw anyone guddle fish," he said, proudly, raising a paw and making a quick grasp at the air.

"It takes patience," he said. "Convince them you're part of the landscape. Find a whirlpool that keeps up a froth. Trout can't see through it."

I remembered that the brook was running fast that day, stirring up foam, keeping Gordon hidden from the trout. But then I wondered about it the other way around—weren't the trout hidden as well?—and this is something I've never understood.

He ate with a fork, smashing the meringue into the tines and licking the fork twice for every mouthful, turning it over and back. He made noises of pleasure, then set the fork down and squashed up the crumbs with his finger, licked them off. When he was done he pushed away from the table.

"Thank you, Kate," he said. Then he was gone, leaving behind smells of wet earth, moss-covered granite, and something softer, like the mint of freshly cut birch. I hadn't heard my name in a man's mouth in a long time.

Bella is arthritic, but she manages. She smokes pot for the pain. Besides canned food and my offerings, she grows vegetables. Her garden is overrun with witch grass and chickweed, but still it produces more than enough. Paper cups full of pee sit strategically at the corners of her garden; animals don't like the smell of human urine. Though groundhogs are another story. They're harder to deter. Sometimes she lies on the roof of her cabin with a .22, waiting for her opportunity.

The other day I watched yellow jackets feed on a ball of hamburger Bella had hung from a tree in a mesh of wire to lure them. They'd been bothering her, dithering in her space, alighting on the rim of her glass of beer. She'd placed a bucket of water under the bait. The yellow jackets gorged themselves until they were too heavy, dropped and drowned.

In the fall a grandson will come and take Bella to New York City where I imagine she's just as eccentric as she is here on the mountain, only perhaps a bit cleaner, dressed more heavily for the cold weather, and unarmed.

Like me, she's reluctant to leave. She loves the deep woods—the every-which-way of branches overhead. The sound of the brook, constant in her ears just outside her windows. Like me, she loves the solitude. But sometimes I look at her and worry. Will I be her one day? Old and alone. Face of a dried apple?



The third time Gordon came to my cabin we made love. His mouth tasted of smoke and wintergreen. He pushed me against the kitchen wall and kissed me for a long time. Then his hands moved over my breasts, and down, finding buttons. He undressed me between kisses. When he felt how wet I was, he sighed like he'd just found a treasure. He said, "You are so beautiful." He pressed his fingers deep inside me, lifted me a little. I was barely able to breathe. I wanted him to grip me, take all he wanted.

"I am *here*," I said, more to myself than him.

"I am too," he said.

Sometimes I think about winterizing the cabin. Gordon and I could live here year round. We could be like two bears in a cave. Hibernate. Only go out occasionally for supplies.

*Stop*, I tell myself. The future is only a fantasy.

The Fourth of July and Gordon and I are on top of the mountain. From here we can see fireworks going off in all the distant towns. It's like watching whales spout sparks out of a black sea. We sit out on the ledge. Blowsabella, Gordon announces, has generously donated some of her homegrown in celebration of Independence Day, so we smoke a little.

Stars are within reaching distance. I put my hand up and swat them. Gordon slides his around with a finger, like moving silver coins on a surface, and forms a new constellation.

"This is Kate's constellation," he says, drawing an outline.

"God should have thought of that," I say. "A heart-shaped constellation. What's with all these dippers anyway?"

The wind picks up, making our perch uncomfortable. We start the trek from tower to timberline. The granite is steep; I have to go slow, making sure the treads of my sneakers hold. Gordon gets ahead of me, and soon, I can't make out his shape. Though I'm still inching along, rock under my feet, I have the feeling that I'm scaling the dark wall of the sky. I am walking my way down the shell of the stratosphere, following the curve of the globe. Below is a black ocean, full of fire-spouting creatures and drowning yellow stars. My lover has vanished. My husband, my parents. My son. I lift my arms to fly.

Next, I smell maple and mildew. Gordon is carrying me to his bed.

That night ghosts scrape around the corners of his cabin. I never sleep there again.

In late July the freezer is packed with jars of pesto and tubs of blueberries. The garden is done with snap peas and most of the greens, but now brimming with zucchini, carrots, cucumbers, and beets. The soup bowls I'd filled with beer to draw the slugs are full of rainwater and dirt. I pour them out, take them in.

Five nights go by and Gordon doesn't come. I tromp on the roof. Pace around the chimney. Where is he? A tree uprooted and pinned him somewhere deep in the forest. Lightning found its tallest point—a man on a ledge. There's someone named Mary in Canaan. No, I calm myself. No.

I bake for Bella. Angel food cake with vanilla frosting—her favorite. Ginger cookies because she craves them. Blueberry muffins, she asked for them.

And then, yes! He is coming through the door.

I don't ask him the reason for being gone so long because I don't want to find out anything that might blacken our days together. I run my fingertips across the grain of his ribs. He breathes half words, nonsense sounds that drop from his lips in his sleep. I think of my mother, lying in this very bed so many years without her husband. *I can't imagine my life*, she told me once, *if I hadn't had you*.

I will never have another child.

Earlier in the summer, Gordon stood me naked in front of the mirror.

"You," he told the image in the mirror. "A beautiful, sexy woman."

I looked away.

"No, don't look at me," he said. "There."

I turned my eyes on myself reluctantly. It was not my own gaze, but Gordon's that opened me. How do you explain it? It's unexplainable. Bella noticed, said I was glowing. I could have sprinted up the mountain. Caught the heels of hikers, leapt over them.

The first week in August Gordon agrees to accompany me to town for breakfast. Every other week I go in for the mail, and groceries; this is the first time he's ever come with me. I glance around the

crowded diner. I am a person like any other. Eggs. Bacon. Not even Gordon's uniform, or long white hair seem to garner any notice. We share a newspaper. I start to feel queasy; the words blur. Too much grease? Then it passes.

There's an article in the paper about a logger who was trapped under a tree.

"Man amputates own leg to save himself," I read aloud. "Idaho. That's peculiar," I say. "Remember, Gordon? There was that man in Pennsylvania just last week? The guy whose tractor tipped over on him?"

I'd heard it on the radio. He'd lain in his back-forty for two days before he'd freed himself by taking a pocket knife to his leg just below the knee.

"And I swear," I say, remembering, "there was another last month somewhere in Oklahoma—a man trapped under his car—did the same."

Gordon reaches for his coffee, takes a side-mouth sip. Puts the cup back in the saucer.

"It seems to be happening all over the country," he says.

I start to laugh, and then more, harder, until my stomach feels like rock. A little boy a few tables over, catches sight of me and laughs too. I can feel how wide my mouth is. Gordon is laughing a little, but then he starts to look concerned, brows arched. I'm laughing, but it could seem like crying. I cover my mouth. The laughing isn't laughing anymore. Merry tripped sorry, Bella would say. Why am I crying?

The smaller summit next to Cascom is called Firescrew because of the spiral of fire that rolled itself along the curve of the valley. Firescrew is also barren, though long ago it was covered with tracts of pasture—golden wheat that grew between stone walls and ancient deciduous trees. If Cascom is the breast, then Firescrew is the swollen belly.

At night the air gets cool and we contemplate building a fire in Bella's fireplace. We are here with fried trout, lightly breaded and browned to perfection; green beans steamed and doused with butter, sprinkled with almond slivers; linguini covered with creamy green pesto; a bottle of dry white wine. Since Bella's chimney hasn't

been cleaned for God knows how many years, we decide against it and make do with sweaters and kerosene lanterns.

We eat at Bella's long dining room table. So many chairs, as if she has grand dinner parties with people we don't know about. She smiles like a queen as we fill her plate, serving her.

I sip wine, watch my people. Gordon, younger in the lantern light, and laughing. Bella talking, telling us stories about misguided hikers—two who thought her house was a public lodge, walked right in and sat on her couch, until she climbed from the roof, .22 in hand.

Gordon says, "You're giving me a cramp, Blowsabella." She punches him in the arm, but she likes the name; she's heard it from him before.

I have to pee again. Bella eyes me as I leave the room. My body is unfamiliar. But I don't want to think about this.

When I come back Bella has unearthed a guitar. She holds it toward me and says, "Sing for us, Kate."

I shake my head. I don't sing anymore; she knows this. And besides the guitar has only five strings and looks like it's been used as a river paddle.

"I beg you," Gordon says.

"No," I say firmly so they'll stop. Bella nods and takes the guitar to the other room. I'm relieved to see it go.

Gordon takes my hand, pulls me to his side. "Will I ever hear your voice?"

"This is it," I say.

Bella surprises us with a pan of brownies for dessert. One half regular, one half pot. Without asking, she drops a regular one from her spatula onto my plate. Gordon chooses his own brownie, regular too. Bella eats three pot brownies before we are saying goodnight, turning on our flashlights and following the trail back to my cabin.

"I'm worried," I tell Gordon.

"She's all right," he says, mistaken about what I intended to say.

Late August: A letter from Thomas. He's located his mother. She doesn't speak English, and he speaks only a little Vietnamese. Still, they manage to communicate. She gave him up because his father was a missing American soldier; *half and half* babies were outcasts. Missionaries took Thomas to America to be adopted. She put her hand on her breast to show him how it pained her to let him go. He

has three sisters—half, that is. At the end he writes: *I miss you, Kate*. When I read these words my heart splits, one part turns back.

Bella smokes the last of last year's stash. She sits on her front stoop, holding a match over the filled pipe, sucking the flame down.

Her knuckles are knobby with arthritis. I don't know how she can bend them. She looks thinner to me; the collar of her sweater hangs low, revealing a skinny, plaited neck. She tokes on the pipe, squints with one eye through the smoke.

"Near September," she says, and I know she means that summer is coming to an end and soon her grandson will come fetch her.

I put a bag of muffins on the stoop next to her. She nods at the bag, grins around her pipe.

"What are you going to do?" she asks.

"About what?"

She gives me a look like I just asked the Pope what he thought about abortion.

The mountain is already changing colors. Dabs of red bloom amid the greens. The garden has produced cabbage, broccoli, more tomatoes than anyone can eat. The brambles at the edge of my field are heavy with fat blackberries, threatening to drop at any time.

"I have in mind a blackberry pie," I tell Gordon.

"My darling," he says. He lies next to me on the roof. "What will I do without you?"

"Why should you be without me?" I put my fingers on his lips, afraid of what he'll say.

"That's funny," he says. He presses his own fingers against the corner of his mouth.

"Gordon," I ask. "Would you cut off your leg if you were trapped, pinned, say, under a tree, and you knew that no one would ever find you?"

Gordon is still testing his lip. He reaches for my finger and uses it to poke himself. "I'll be the devil," he says. "I'm feeling this."

I stretch, yawn. "That's because I've decided to turn you into a human being."

"You are a stitch," he says. Then he answers my question: "I believe I would."

That night I dream of a great fire. It roars down the mountain, pauses at the brook, sways madly, then as if it's summoned its twin, the opposite bank ignites. Trees explode. The fire rushes up the valley toward my cabin. From a distance I see Bella and Gordon twirl like witches, hair flying out, urging it on. The fire springs onto my roof, engulfs it, burns the place down to its stones.

And then . . . I am free.

When I wake up I feel sick and guilty. Gordon breathes next to me in the dark.

"Gordon?" I whisper. He doesn't stir. "I had a bad dream."

I hear an owl, its haunting call—three staccato notes, one long, guttural. Another owl echoes the first, farther away.

Gordon's hair is a cobweb across the pillow. His arms lie slack on top of the sheet. In this non-light, it seems as if I'm sleeping with a very old man.

On Labor Day Bella's grandson comes to take her back to New York City. Before she goes she gives me a jar of carrot marmalade, a flask of blackberry cordial, and a baggie of pot for Gordon. Her grandson turns off the pump, drains the pipes, yanks the circuit breaker, locks her doors. Bella moves slower, talks less. It's as though she ages instantly at his arrival. The grandson has his one duty—to retrieve his grandmother and bring her back to civilization. He's pleasant enough, tolerant, patient. He cringes, then laughs when I tell him what's in the paper cups around her garden.

Before he helps Bella into his jeep, I stand in front of her. I want to kiss her. I've never touched her, much less kissed her. It seems impossible to do it, but I must. And then I do. Her cheek is supple, and soft; my lips stick a little. She's startled, maybe embarrassed, but when I pull back I see her eyes full of water, and her grin breaking out, almost pretty, then she waves me off and takes her grandson's hand. My nose tingles, but I won't cry in front of them.

"Go home," Bella says.

I have the feeling she doesn't mean my cabin, but I say, "I am home."

Bella gives me a look like she wasn't born yesterday.

Soon Gordon is leaving too.

"No," I say. "No, you can't leave." We stand in front of my fireplace, though we haven't lit the touchwood—not cold enough yet.

I laugh because we are kidding; it's not really goodbye—we'll return weekends through the fall. But this is when the other worry is creeping up. This is when I finally hear the words in my head: *Are you pregnant?* If true, no point in telling; I'll never have it. Then: *Joy, joy, joy. You want this!* No. I do not. Besides, it's impossible; Gordon has been sterile for years. *Haven't you been sick and having to pee all the time?* Stop.

"Please stay." I tug his sleeves, teasing him. "What will I do without you?"

"I really do have to go," he says, but a little too seriously.

An ancient fear passes through me.

"No," I whisper. "Everyone leaves."

Everyone leaves.

And then I do too.

The thing about the future is that it does come, and instantly is not the future anymore, and so you look forward again, making the fantasy, the one you hope for.

I didn't return to the mountain until the first weekend in October. The air was frozen. I built a roaring fire, roasted one side, then the other, until the room was warm enough so I could move away. There was the lookout tower, bright, sparkling. I didn't think about him.

I didn't. But wouldn't he see the smoke from my chimney? Wouldn't he come?

It took me so long to come back partly because of Thomas. More letters came with more details of his new family. Photographs: smiling Vietnamese faces surrounding his own Vietnamese face. He looked good, healthy, young.

I was paralyzed. My period was three weeks late. I lay on my back and ran my hands over my breasts, my swollen belly. I couldn't make myself find out for sure. It seemed safer to remain in a state of suspension.

I wrote reviews and worked late at the newspaper. Then, my period came. I couldn't believe it. Amazing. My body had been fooled by its own desires. How convincing it was. I was stunned.

I was relieved. No decision to make after all. No fate laid in my lap. No child to fetch me back to civilization.

I laughed into the mirror, until it wasn't laughing anymore. Where was the little girl who was going to grow up and live on the mountain just as her parents did? Where was the woman who married Thomas with her heart practically jumping out of her mouth? And the mother who tumbled softly in love with her son? Where was the girl who once sang songs with her father? Where was she if she wasn't me?

I think of Gordon, looking out his windows, watching the woman make her way up the granite. This time she doesn't stop short of the tower. If she glances toward the windows she won't see him because he has moved back, busy with a radio call, making sure it's nothing important.

I reach the metal stairs, surprised to see the hatch is open above. I feel a flutter-tug in my belly—a little fish whipping its tail? I wonder if this is what it's like to lose a limb and still feel as if it's there.

Then my head is through, and I see boots and the green pant legs of his uniform. My heart is booming. I come all the way, hoist myself up by the rail and stand.

A man looks at me. "Nice day, isn't it?" he says.

I look around the small space for another face. There are the windows, the mountains in the distance.

"I thought Gordon," I say. I can barely get enough air.

This new watchman is young, husky, like a Marine—all buttoned collar and crew cut.

"The watchman," I say.

It takes him a moment, then he nods, remembering. "Gone. Went south somewheres, I think."

"South? He'll be back?"

"Not as far as I know. I'm stationed here permanent. He retired. Had family, or his wife's family in Texas, I think it was."

"You okay, Ma'am?" He takes two quick steps forward, but I have gripped the rail.

The woman takes a different trail down. It's a sharp descent over sheer granite, until the trail hits a straightaway through dwarf spruce, and meanders along the easy ridge to Firescrew. Up close,



the white braids of quartz woven into the granite are tinged with rust colored veins. The plateau has more growth than she remembered. Yellow grasses, fine and tall with delicate feathery seeds; junipers and low blueberry bushes everywhere.

I cross the height-of-land, then down the mountain under the new hardwoods, still holding fast to their fire-lit leaves.