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Stopping at High River

I'd last run away from home when I was seven, taking my shorn Barbie, an unopened package of colored plastic clothes pins, and a handful of bills from my father's dresser. An hour later when my mother brought me home, she explained that I'd taken the hoard of Italian money saved from their honeymoon eleven years before and I'd not have been able to spend it.

This time, I took nothing. After a trip to Safeway to pick up some things for supper, I glanced one way, then pulled out into the traffic going in the opposite direction. I threw the ground chicken and box of pasta in the garbage can in the 7-11 parking lot when I stopped for coffee two hours later outside Chilliwack. By the time I got to Boston Bar all I could think of was a huge plate of breakfast, slick with griddle fat, a bottomless cup of coffee, both of which Lorraine gave me without registering any surprise or curiosity about why I was there.

Even though we'd not seen each other in eleven years I'd have recognized her thick eyebrows anywhere. When I fetched up at the High River Restaurant, thirsty after the long day's drive, led along only by the road and the need to turn my back on something I had tired of, without knowing what I had to look forward to, she peered at me, then stepped back and laughed. "Well, look at you. When I said you should drop by, I never figured you'd take me up on it. Looking for work?"

She was kidding, but I answered, "Sure. I can serve, even if I can't cook."

In the days since then I've poured coffee and folded paper napkins, swabbed the scuffed floor and stacked menus, falling into a dull sleep in the storeroom at the back of the building after Lorraine steers her Mustang out onto the highway for the two-mile drive home.

She hasn't asked me why I left, why I chose to show up on her doorstep, why I haven't moved on yet, and where I'd go if I did. And I see no point in trying to explain to someone who longs for the kind of life I'd been living, that I couldn't stay for another ten years with a man who asks me what shirt to wear when we go out for Sunday brunch, or where we keep the Band-Aids.

I can't admit that since we'd last seen each other I've become the kind of wife I'd always despised, throwing oblique questions about what time my husband will be home - although I don't really care where he was going—making his lunch, every day the same bologna and mustard, never asking what else he might prefer. Never being told.

While I've waited here, I've often walked through the restaurant parking lot, down the slope through the sparse apple trees, to the scrawny riverside park below. Heaps of rusty rocks hunker along the opposite banks, twisted sagebrush nestles between the gullies the rain has driven through the canyon soil.

I've basked in the heat thrown from the canyon face, inhaling dry air, as I've tried to imagine a life here, tending apples and tomatoes to sell to highway travellers driving East or West. Waiting tables, going to bed each night in the small room down the long hall where the thrum of fridges packed with bagged coleslaw and jugs of ketchup drown out my dreams.

Groups of whitewater rafters often barge past, swigging beer, leaning back into the wind, their voices ramming the cliff walls as they call back and forth to each other. I took that same trip years ago, through the dark pools of Hell's Gate. Sitting against the pontoons of swollen rubber, I studied the Fraser's steep sides from below, and went home with a sunburn, but with no greater sense of the where I'd been than when I left.

The narrow park, a few hundred yards of gravel and dust, follows the line of the river. Planted into the rocks by roots of cement are picnic benches, garbage cans, and barbecue pits, almost all unused so early in the season. Big rigs and recreational vehicles thunder along the highway above, throwing up clouds of dust, flocks of fast food wrappers. A slow but steady stream of crumpled travelers stop at the café for chef salads and chips and milk shakes, but Lorraine seems to spend more time at the window than the griddle, breathing in the relative peace before summer brings overloaded cars of parents hauling freckled kids, nestled in amongst sleeping bags, coolers and lawn chairs.

Each morning, I've woken in the bare room, and felt the ground shudder from the passing traffic. Like the river below the restaurant, it only slows from time to time, but never rests.

It's taken my husband only five days to find me.

I find him reading a menu at a window table when I come in from cleaning the washroom. I detour past the counter, pick up a half-full carafe,

and walk over to his table. "Coffee?"

He pushes a cup towards me. "That all you have to say?" His eyes are in deep shadow, a patch of stubble, like smoke, smudges his cheek. I pour his coffee, set the jug on the table beside his ashtray. Just as I'm about to ask if he wants something to eat, Lorraine swoops past in a rustle of peach nylon. She grabs the coffee. "I'll take that. We do have a few customers, you know."

Geoff's gaze follows her as she weaves between empty tables. "You left this number on the kitchen table."

"But..."

"A buddy at Telus looked up the address."

Geoff's buddies can get you a seat on a full flight, or cheap camping gear long after the sale's over. Over the years, I've become just one more good deal. There's nothing left between us of the heat of yearning, of a gaze that's always restless until it finds home in the eyes of someone it loves.

My husband's told me over and over that he doesn't mind about the children, gone before they were even named. But we've dandled too many silences between us like babies with no solid surface on which to place them.

"I'd have figured you'd have gone to the Island," Geoff says.

"I like it here." Only as I speak the words, do I realize they are true. There's no room for artifice in Lorraine's world. Customers come and go, eat and pay up, tip or don't bother. Every few nights her boyfriend calls from whatever pit stop he's parked his rig in, and she complains about receipts, recounts how the griddle caught on fire, asks whether he thinks she should let Jo Moss leave his van out front, just until he gets the manifold fixed. Then I hear the smoky rattle of her laugh as she lowers her voice, and when she turns from hanging up the phone, she'll be blushing.

The restaurant is clean but shabby, the cabinet under the glass counter empty except for a sprawl of faded road maps and a half-empty box of breath mints. But the food's good enough to bring customers back on their return journey, and since my first day, I find I'm happy spending time between orders watching the dark stream of coffee trail from the stainless cone into the glass pitcher below.

"You hungry?" I ask my husband.

Geoff scrubs the palm of one hand across his face, and through his fingers I hear him say, "Where're you staying, then?"

He follows me along the narrow hallway, past the bulletin board of faded signs advertising backhoe services, a Friday night whist game. We lay down on top of the sleeping bag, and hold each other for a long time without speaking. He's still wearing his shoes, and my slick uniform fills the narrow space between us like water we cannot cross.

"What would it take?" he mutters into my shoulder.

I know he's asking me to come home, but doesn't know how.

"Too much." I feel his deep shuddering sigh against me. Then we both sleep.

Later, after Lorraine has made Geoff an omelet which I serve him garnished with a sprig of parsley, we walk down to the park and sit on the dusty picnic table.

I watch the breeze seep through the cottonwood leaves overhead. "We were going to travel. Why didn't we?"

Geoff's reply is tossed away by a gust of wind and he doesn't bother to retrieve it. I gaze up towards the highway, counting passing vehicles until he speaks again.

He asks me what he should do about my sewing machine, and the new end tables that are to be delivered on Thursday. He says nothing about my job, and I don't ask what he'll tell his mother whose fierceness I'd always loved, even though I've always been slightly afraid of her. Glenda would not approve of wives who leave their husbands and hole up in highway restaurants: I know she'll use her disappointment as the knife to slice me out of her life.

I think about the petunias I planted under the kitchen window, and the screens Geoff needs to hose down before he puts them back on the windows. His new pants are still in the sewing basket waiting to be shortened.

But I say nothing. I've already given up the right to mention these things, although it's all we've ever had to talk about.

Soon after we met in Port Coquitlam, when we were too young and nervous to discuss what mattered, even if we'd been able to identify it, we went to a dance in the Agricultural Hall. Geoff held me against him, the planes of our bodies resting against each other, devoid of promise but still comforting and somehow familiar. I remember how his hand slid up the small of my back, slick against the fabric of my dress, in the same way his hand, older now, rougher and scarred, moved up my body as we lay together for the last time on the cot in the room behind the

kitchen. Long ago on the creaking dance floor, the music shaking the walls, we'd found nothing to say to each other.

"Why did we never go dancing?" I ask. "Not since that first time. Remember that time at the Aggie Hall?"

"Didn't know you wanted to," he says.

Above us, an eagle wheels in the thermals, then turns to follow the river glittering between steep shady banks.

Although I love it here in the restaurant hanging above the valley, I can't stay. The place is hung with a film of grease, and in a couple of months there'll be no peace even down by the river. The heat will glaze the valley and the travellers' faces with a dense silence that will be too familiar to be comfortable.

Gravel crunches under our feet as we walk back up the slope. We stop beside the red Acura Geoff bought home one Saturday without consulting me. I lean against the passenger door for a moment, wondering what it would take to lean down and grasp the handle, open the door, and ease myself in.

A truck pulls up, throwing out gravel and dust. Geoff coughs and wipes his hand down his cheek. "Where will you be, then? Just in case."

I turn one way, then the other, trying to imagine the place where the ribbon of road runs out. But I have nothing on which to base an image of the landscape in either direction. "Here, for now. I guess. A day or so, maybe."

Lorraine is knocking on the window; she's been on her feet since five, and will be wanting a break before the supper traffic rolls in. I shrug at her, then turn back to my husband who for just one moment smiles in the guileless way he first looked at me from the scrum of a game his team was about to lose. But then replacing the brief smile I see something that might be the glitter of tears, or just the sun's reflection in his eyes.

I pat the front of his shirt, not letting my hand rest long enough to register the heat from below the fabric. I'd like to tell him I'm sorry. But it's too late to start lying. Instead, I lean forward and place a dry kiss on his cheek.

As I watch his car turn out of the parking lot, slowing for a moment before Geoff eases into the traffic, I think of the women who've told me they'd leave it all, start again, if they could. If they knew how.

Understanding their fear, I stand in the only place that matters, while the dust of the highway billows out in both directions.