



JANE / DIVIDED

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ON THE SECOND DAY OF THE TRIP, December blew hard across Oklahoma with an early-morning onslaught of snow and ice that started at the southern border, as if the vagaries of nature could somehow respect a mapmaker's dotted boundaries. The car crossed over from the Texas side as daylight broke through, and Jane gave silent thanks for the cold clarity of the sun as she picked her way north, her eyes darting at intervals from the newly frozen interstate to the rearview mirror and its assurances that Claire still lay in deep sleep.

That's the gift of youth, sleep amid chaos and as much of it as you want. Jane had been surprised at her strength in carrying the girl from the bed to the backseat, done in the wee hours after it became obvious that her own slumber wasn't going to come and the miles in front of her weren't going to cover themselves. First, she'd left Claire dozing in that pillowy bed at Aunt Glenda and Uncle Jon's house, and she'd showered and dressed sensibly for the day ahead, a pair of sweatpants and the University of Texas pullover that had gone from disappointing Christmas gift to steadfast garment in the four years since Paul gave it to her. It was the only thing touched by his hand that she still owned. After she'd showered and pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail, it had been a simple matter of gathering her things and her girl and carrying them in silent footfalls to the car in two loads, the last with Claire dangling from her arms and her neck, murmuring into the curve of Jane's jaw.

She again checked the rearview, a glance at her heart, and then her eyes turned vigilant to the deepening snow on the interstate. This was all an adventure to Claire, every bit of it, and she envied and felt fiercely protective of the girl and her marvelous ability to bounce up to the world as if it offered only possibility. When she thought of a coming day when Claire might not be so untouched and welcoming, she could feel the hostility rise up in her like a monster.

"You'll be changing schools," she'd said to her daughter, just two weeks earlier when the contents of their lives were still strewn about their apartment in Austin and not on a freight-liner somewhere ahead of them.

"That's OK."

"You won't know anyone."

"I won't know anyone yet, you mean."

"Montana," she'd started, and then she'd stopped, having no idea what to say about a place that was now every bit as foreign to her as it was to Claire.

"What's the Montana state song?" Claire had asked.

"I have no idea."

"Do they have one?"

"Probably. Look it up."

"The stars at night," Claire began, sing-songy.

"No," Jane had said. "That's the one we're leaving."

That was harsh, she now thought. *Necessary, though.*

Her attentions found the road again, and she took in a sign heralding an exit ahead, a place to get fuel and breakfast, the promise of strawberry pancakes being a sure countermeasure for Claire's perpetual sleep.

It occurred to Jane now, as it did that final night in Austin, that the one thing she hadn't delved into with Claire was the absence of the girl's father in Montana. That would have opened a line of discussion that Claire seemed content to keep closed, and one that Jane wasn't sure she could address with requisite equanimity. That Claire seemed to accept Paul's inconsistent visitation and vacillating interest left her relieved, and as was always the case with him, a little angry. There was less damage Jane had to undo, yes, but that couldn't stave off her bafflement at what kind of father could be so coolly detached from his own child. When she'd broached the possibility of the move to Montana—"possibility" had been her word, but certainty had been her intent—Paul had accepted it the way he might greet the news of a change in dinner plans. "It's cool," he'd said. "Gonna be a lot of out-of-town work anyway. We'll figure something out when you get settled." Just like that, he'd let them go.

From the backseat came sounds of emergence. Claire kicked a foot into the door molding and growled a greeting to the morning.

She found her daughter's face in the mirror. "Hello, sleepyhead."

The girl rocketed into a seated position, crossing her legs and then leaning into the opening between the front bucket seats. Once Claire had shaken off the baby fat and begun transforming into the girl she was, she'd been all arms and legs—perfectly slender, perfectly proportionate, the high cheekbones of her father and the smaller nose, thank God, of her mother. But ever since the corner had been turned on 11 years old, Jane had begun to see in her daughter what was to come, the breathless beauty that was part of her, without and within. The former, she figured, would be the source of some difficult days ahead. The latter, she wished she could envelop in bubble wrap and save from the world.

Claire scrunched her nose. "Where are we?"

"Oklahoma."

"It looks like the Arctic."

"And you'd know this how?" Jane checked the rearview, and Claire's grin told her that the jibe had been taken in the good-natured manner she'd intended. She couldn't always be sure of that anymore, another manifestation of the changes at work on the girl and her sensibilities.

"Books, Mom. You've heard of them."

"I have, indeed." She gave Claire a mirrored grin. "I thought your generation didn't need books anymore."

Claire bounced forward, shoulders now all the way through to the front compartment.

"Whatever. What time is it?"

"Just after 6."

“What time did we leave?”

“Just before 4.”

She felt Claire’s head settle into her shoulder. “I didn’t get to tell Aunt Glenda and Uncle Jon that I love them.”

“They know.”

Now, the kinetic force that was Claire dropped fully into the backseat again. “I’m hungry.”

“As it happens,” Jane said, pointing ahead to the clustered assemblage of buildings that constituted the roadside exit, an upward blip on the endless horizon.

“Pancakes!” Claire said.

“Of course.”

And a cup of coffee, Jane ticked off in her head. *And a chance to tell myself, again, that this is all for the best.*

As Jane wheeled the car into the parking lot of the restaurant—she’d seen the billboard miles back and fixated on the manufactured hospitality of the advertisement—a rear tire caught a patch of ice that sent them fishtailing into a parking space.

“Wheeeee!” Claire said.

WHILE THEY WAITED FOR THE FOOD TO arrive, Jane showed Claire on her phone the route they would be following, how Interstate 35 went through Kansas like a gut shot, but that they would turn west at Salina before turning north. That was all a day away, she said. They would spend tonight in Wichita, at Teryn’s place.

“You remember her,” Jane said. “She used to bring you gum.”

“Oh, yeah!”

What Jane didn’t say, because it was moot and there was no need to chance a quarrel, is that Claire would be staying with Teryn’s 15-year-old daughter, Sabrina, for a few hours, that she and Teryn needed nothing so much as time together and a few beers and maybe some appetizers, so she could unload all this stuff she’d been carrying alone.

It wouldn’t be right to say Teryn was an old friend. They’d known each other only briefly, both of them working a temp job building spreadsheets in those days after Jane had left Paul and the house and was rubbing pennies together to make the rent. Their employer, in the process of closing up in Austin, had offered both of them jobs in Wichita. Teryn had accepted, blowing out of town like her life depended on it. But what they had lacked in time invested had been covered by unshakeable fealty—the occasional Skype chat, handwritten letters from Teryn that were all breadth and no depth but welcome just the same, texted memes that would launch Jane into peals of laughter.

“When do we get to Montana?” Claire asked, driving a stake back into now.

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Will I like it?”

“I think so.” *I hope so.*

The food arrived, billowing pancakes for Claire, eggs and bacon for her.

“The stars at night ...” Claire began.

She took the girl’s hand and squeezed. “Still not the right song. Save it for the car,” she said. “Eat now.”

HER BELLY FULL, Claire found sleep again on the road. Jane had shushed the girl and felt bad for it, but Wichita remained a few hours away and the car’s interior couldn’t contain Claire’s high spirits and Jane’s own need to concentrate. Her daughter had made one last stand against going under, another lament about not saying goodbye back in Fort Worth, and Jane assured Claire that they would both write a letter once they made it to Montana.

What Claire didn’t know is that her mother had already left a note behind. After their belongings had been loaded up and taken away, at the end of a long day, Fort Worth was as far as they’d made it. Jon and Glenda had seemed surprised, as anyone would, that Jane had taken them up on “drop by any time,” but they’d offered a bed and a meal. The note was an explainer of sorts for the way Jane had parried the entreaties about why she was headed home after all these years, what had happened with Paul (as if that could be covered over a meat-loaf dinner), and what her larger plans were. For one thing, she hadn’t wanted to get into it while Claire was bouncing happily in her chair, chasing kernels of corn into her mashed potatoes. For another, she hadn’t wanted to get into it at all. Such questions supposed a linearity, as if any single decision could be traced to any single stimulus. For Jane, the answers carried no such order, and decisions were made by necessity first and expediency second, with wisdom often running a distant third. She could not account for them and frankly was not inclined to try.

Dear Glenda and Jon, she’d written, thank you for giving us a place to rest and recharge. We didn’t want to put you out, so we’ve gotten an early start on the day. I’m sure we’ll talk soon.—Jane.

ACROSS THE KANSAS LINE, Jane stopped for gas, and she made mental calculations of what that \$35.52 would do to the dwindling resources at her disposal. She had enough to get where they were going, anyway, assuming there were no surprises. She peered through the window at Claire, who was coming out of groggy slumber in the passenger seat. She rapped a gloved hand against the

glass, and the girl turned her way.

“Need anything? Bathroom?”

Claire shook her head and nestled back into the seat.

Jane blew frosted rings on her way into the convenience store. Once inside, she chose strawberry licorice for Claire and a cup of coffee for herself. Her phone’s GPS program told her she had 69 icy miles left. Then, tomorrow, Denver and a hotel room, an unspeakable, unaffordable luxury. Then, the next day, Billings and a rental condo on the South Side and it would be done.

Back at the car, she tossed the candy into Claire’s lap, and the girl tore into the packaging.

“The stars at night ...” Claire began again.

“Honey, please.”

“You don’t like my voice.” The girl effected a pout.

“It’s beautiful. You know this.”

“You don’t like my song?” More pouting, betrayed by an impish grin.

Jane made a right turn out of the gas station and joined the access road, building careful speed toward the interstate. She reached for Claire’s knee and she squeezed.

“I love everything about you.”

THE AMBIENCE AT THE BAR AND GRILL PULLED them in like a hug, and Teryn wanted to know everything about everything, a request so audacious that it couldn’t be scaled. Nonetheless, a glass of beer gave Jane the gumption to at least try.

“You have to get the carrots,” Teryn said when the server (“Geoff,” she’d giggled upon his introduction) came by for their orders.

“That good, huh?”

“The best,” Geoff said.

“See?” Teryn said.

“OK, the roasted chicken and the carrots.”

“The same,” Teryn said, and when Geoff left, she turned back, clinked her beer against Jane’s, and set in again.

“Seriously, tell me everything.”

Jane tipped her head and offered a shrug. “There’s not so much to tell.”

“But Montana. It’s so random.”

Jane tipped her glass and let the beer linger on her tongue before swallowing it down. “It’s where I grew up. Not random at all. Now, Wichita. Wichita is random.”

“Wichita has been a good thing,” Teryn said.

“I can tell. You give me hope.”

Teryn reached across and clasped her hand, and Jane gave a squeeze back and a tight smile, bottom lip snug over the top.

“But seriously,” Teryn said, “this guy you knew in college just calls—”

“High school,” Jane interrupted. “I knew him in high school, and, well, on Facebook now, of course. But yeah, he knew I’d kept my certification, and he said he was losing an English teacher at Christmas break, so he invited me—”

“It’s a Christmas miracle!” Teryn giggled. She was already a beer ahead and intent on stretching her lead.

“I don’t know about that. I’m scared to death.”

“Why?”

“It’s been years since I’ve been in a classroom,” Jane said. “You know, I kind of thought they’d take a look at my application and say, ‘No thanks,’ but they didn’t.”

“Maybe this guy—what’s his name?”

“Tim.”

“Maybe Tim put in a good word.”

“More than that. He made it happen. I think he knows I needed something like this. He’s been a good friend.”

“Maybe more than a friend?” Teryn goosed the innuendo along with an arched eyebrow.

Jane, heaven help her, could only laugh. Two beers, a third on the way, and her long-distance friend was lit. Her own glass sat only half-drained.

“Yeah, that’s all I need,” Jane said. “An affair with the boss. Sorry, but I’ve seen that movie, and I know what happens.”

PULLED-COTTON CLOUDS HOVERED OVER THE CITY, casting the night in a diffused brightness. Effluent steam rose up from gutters, and in the cold stillness Jane found it reminiscent of the place she was headed, if she didn’t look too closely at the particulars and if her memories of Billings from nearly 30 years earlier were still reliable. Here, in the sturdy little homes that hugged the curbs and in the patchwork business districts that mingled the high-end and the ordinary, she could see, at least in this light, how Teryn might have found something she could love in Wichita. She sat up straight and adjusted her hands on the wheel, putting them at 10 and two, as she’d learned from her father in driving lessons atop the Rimrocks all those years ago.

Beside her, Teryn spun out of drunkenness.

“What about Paul?”

“What about him?”

“What’s he think of this?”

Jane’s intended chuckle came out rueful. Paul hadn’t come up at dinner, which had surprised her, given that the friendship with Teryn had been built, in part, on unloading their mutual ex-husband acrimony during lunch breaks.

Once the circumstances of the job offer had been unpacked and set aside, and once Teryn

had exhausted her supply of ridiculous innuendo about new-boss nookie, they had settled into old, shared topics at dinner. How to guide daughters through this world. The perilous journey of finding well-fitting clothes. Seemingly out-of-reach fantasies like home ownership with their divorce-blitzed credit ratings.

“He didn’t have enough thought to form a complete sentence,” Jane said at last, and a bit too acidly even for her own taste. “Honestly, I think he’s happy any time his responsibilities are reduced, which they are now.”

“Have you decided on visitation?”

“Nothing formal, no.”

Teryn shifted in the seat and let loose a hoppy belch and then a string of laughs that popped off like firecrackers. “Oh, I think I’m gonna pee,” she said.

Jane, hands clenched around the wheel, said, “Please don’t,” and Teryn, chastised, stifled her giggles.

“Sabrina’s dad never comes to see her,” Teryn said, and that abrupt turn from mirth to seriousness gave Jane a case of emotional whiplash. “Never brings her up there to see him. She might get some money at Christmas or a card on her birthday, but never both. I get a check every now and then. But it’s pretty well nothing. I think it bothers her, but she doesn’t talk much about it, and I don’t know what to say that would help. Most of what I want to say I’m better off keeping to myself.”

Jane cast a quick glance over at her friend. Teryn’s head hung, and she clasped her hands together in her lap.

“Pretty much the same from Paul, although he’s been good about the support money,” Jane said at last. “Claire seems to know the score. I tell myself sometimes that it’s good feminist training. You know, the whole idea that she needs a man. Good to dispense with that nice and early. But he’s her dad. He disappoints me.”

At the apartment, they found that the girls had filled the time amply if not productively. Claire’s face was slathered in makeup, her first experience with that sort of thing, and she’d made all the predictable, regrettable choices—the most strident shades for every surface, leaving the girl with pink cheeks and electric-blue eyelids and lips the color of movie blood. They all had a laugh about it, but when Jane told Claire to wash her face before bed, the girl pitched a desperate argument, complete with road-weary tears, and at last Jane relented. In the morning, Claire would see the horror, and like so many things before and so many yet to come, it would serve as both a chastening and a lesson.

She and Claire folded themselves in together on the futon in Teryn’s spare bedroom. An angry wind scratched at the window, and Jane drew up covers to swaddle them.

“I like Sabrina, Mom.”

“That’s good.”

“She knows about a lot of stuff. Boys, especially.”

The skin across Jane's face tightened. She'd hoped for another year, at least, before this became part of the motherly deal. Bras and boys, the two coming topics of intense interest. One Jane could handle, and the other, she knew, was devoid of simple answers or good examples.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

Jane exhaled. "So you had a good time?" she asked.

"I loved it," Claire said.

"I'm glad."

Claire turned onto her left side, away from Jane toward the wall, but burrowed her backside until it was against her mother. The girl's frame was angular and harsh as her body's growth outpaced the filling in that would come later. Jane turned the same way and draped her right arm across Claire's stomach.

"I love you, Mom."

It wasn't the declaration she usually got from Claire, the one with the rising notes and the attendant request ("I love you, Mom. Can I have some chocolate?"). It was plaintive and sincere, and in the calm between one long day on the road and the two more still in front of them, it caught Jane square in the most tender part of her. An echo was all she could muster, lest more tumbled forth.

"I love you, too."

Claire squirmed closer, and Jane tightened her grasp.

"I get to see Montana the day after tomorrow?" Claire asked.

"Yes, you do."

"Will I love it?"

Jane thought it odd, this pairing of the words "love" and "Montana," as she hadn't considered the possibility. This was about escape and re-establishment, about control and finding something that could belong to them. And yet, her memories now rushed with pictures from her own turn as a pre-teen, before she ran away, before decisions no longer seemed to belong to her in any equitable way. She thought of where it had happened, what she had seen, and those blooming feelings she'd tried to manage, and damned if love hadn't underpinned it all once. And now she—they—were headed back there. Maybe it could again.

"I hope so," Jane said. "Now go to sleep."