

Gertrude

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Cover Art:
Gabe Flores

Front: "Nature Is a Deceiver: Trust No Bitch"

Caitlin Rose Sweet, Installation (2014)

Back: "I Don't," part of ___ Loves Me, ___ Loves Me Not
Linda Kliewer, Vinyl (2014)

Ice House

The dogs were running full-speed when we turned the corner. I tried to hang on, but the sled tipped and sent Kristen and me face first into an airy snowdrift. The sled bumped along on its side through the woods without us. I disentangled my arm from Kristen's and yelled, "Halt! *Halt!*" The dogs ignored me and kept running—I was fourteen, a girl, and had just started taking them out alone, without my stepfather. They didn't take me wholly seriously yet. I yelled, "Grizzly, HALT!" and the lead dog listened this time; the other five reluctantly came to a stop behind him, whining and shifting from paw to paw. Ours weren't the puffy stuffed-animal kind of husky that sleeps on the sofa. They were wiry and tense, tightly coiled. Once out of their kennels, they wanted only to run.

I looked over at Kristen and she at me, her hazel eyes huge, snow caught in her hair and lashes and starting to melt on her cheeks. "That was incredible," she said, and we started to laugh. I grabbed her shoulders and kissed her cold lips. One of the dogs keened, a yelp whine, and another answered with a cooing howl. We got up out of the snow, righted the sled, and managed to get all the way back on—Kristen sitting in front, me standing and steering—before the dogs took off again down the uneven white trail.

The snow melted coldly in our cuffs and collars, and by the time we made it home, shuttled the wriggling dogs back into their kennels, and closed the shed door on the sled and harness, we were wet and shivering. We ran straight downstairs to my bedroom to change into dry clothes. We didn't tell my parents that we'd overturned the sled. We didn't tell my parents much. To them, and everyone in school, we were newly best friends who slept at each other's houses every weekend, ordinary freshmen; to each other, we were a frightening, marvelous secret. It felt like a tunnel had opened in the ordinary air, a rabbit hole only we two could fall through.

We stripped off our wet jeans, and I took the hem of my shirt and pulled

it up over my head. When I jerked free of the collar, Kristen was right there, and she seized me and I grabbed her and we fell back onto the bed. She pinned me down and nipped my neck. I wrapped a leg around her back and grabbed her hair. And then I heard the doorknob turn.

"I'm changing!" I yelled, but it was too late.

My mother pushed through the doorway with a basket of clean laundry. She let out a sound like an exclamation point. The laundry basket landed on the carpet with a thump. She stepped back and pulled the door shut. "Ed!" she yelled to my stepfather. "What's going on?" I heard my little half-brother, Drew, ask. "Go upstairs," she said. "It's not your problem."

My stepfather took Kristen away with all her things and when he returned home he and my mother came into my room. They asked me questions but I wouldn't answer any of them, not for anything. I was scared to death but I held us secret. They threatened, pleaded, finally decided that until I spoke up I would be grounded, that we would visit the pastor, and that Kristen would no longer be allowed in our house nor I in hers. Weeping, my mother said they loved me. It sounded like a eulogy.

When they finally left I locked the door, uselessly. Unable to sleep, I lay curled up on top of my covers and stared out the window at the woods for hours. Snow had started falling again, coating the yard and trees in a lush white blanket. I thought of Kristen, miles away, thought of the way a little tremor would go through her as she fell asleep, wondered if she slept now, what she had told her parents. I hoped she was okay. Snow sparkled in the beam of the garage light, faded into the darkness. Beyond this house was a whole world. I wanted to escape into it.

I didn't mean to go far; I just wanted to get the house out of my sight for a few minutes. In the entryway, I put on my sneakers and zipped my stepfather's huge, puffy winter coat up over my pajamas. It was thrilling simply to walk out into the dark. The snow had picked up, and the flakes were impossibly heavy and bright, as if the moon had exploded and the pieces were falling to earth. I went into the woods, following the winding deer trails through the brush and trees.

When I felt I'd gone far enough, I stopped and sat on a fallen tree for a moment. My cheeks had started to sting, and my toes were going numb. I decided to turn back and stood to head home. But the forest I knew had rearranged itself. Where was the stand of collapsed silver birches or the clearing with the giant Norway pine? What was this dense, endless patch of brush I found myself fighting through? I could hardly see for the snow swirling in the air, clinging to my eyelashes, and coating me as if I were a tree or rock. I changed direction, tried to double back, but nothing led back to the house or to any of my private landmarks, and after a while the snow filled my earlier

tracks. My ears and fingers and toes throbbed with cold and began to ache; then the pain ebbed away as the tips turned white. The sky grew lighter but not warmer, and in the icy, colorless pre-dawn everything turned black and white. Bedded in white, the underbrush gleamed pewter, and the dormant trees were dark as sleeping buildings.

I stumbled and fell. My eyes closed and I forced them back open. I saw in the sky ahead an open space where the trees stopped, and I pulled myself to my feet. My yard, I thought. Euphoria spread through my chest like helium. I felt so tired. My bed would be waiting there, covers pushed back. Trudging toward the light, I felt like I was walking in a dream where my feet were too heavy. I pushed through the trees and emerged at the edge of an empty white plane.

It wasn't a yard. It was a frozen lake. I stumbled forward again, landing on my knees, but this time I wasn't able to get up. It's okay, I thought. It's not so cold now. Breathing slow and shallow. A soft, dark flashing in slow motion. My eyes closed and I exhaled a long, soft breath.

Hypothermia is a good way to go, if you have to. As you're dying of cold you start to feel warm. You grow soft and confused and then sleepier, sleepier. Then you lie down and the snow is the inside of giant down quilts. You close your eyes and fall beyond sleep, gently, into a deep cavernous warmth, a hollow ocean of darkness. There are pictures of things: the face of a boy from a television show, the corner of your garage, a pile of white cakes. And they melt into the dark again, too.

I began to surface from the dark, and what I felt was fur against my body. No, not fur, but hair—wiry hairs, a creature's chest, his belly, his thighs, scratching at my skin. *A bear*, I thought. My eyelids parted and dim light seeped in. In front of my face, I saw a neck. A man's neck, with a reddish beard.

I realized I was naked. And then that he was naked.

I felt a twist of fear in my gut, and I tried to say, "Where am I?" The words were slushy in my mouth. I struggled to pull back, but we were wrapped in a sleeping bag, which only twisted and pulled me closer to him. My leg jammed between his, and I felt the warm cotton of his underwear and the bristly hairs of his thigh. He shuddered and stiffened; I gasped and started to cry, the tears painfully hot on my icy cheeks.

"Hey, now," the man said. "You're waking up. Good girl. How'd you get out here?"

I shook my head and whimpered something that resembled "I don't know."

"Never mind. It's okay. Lie still," the man said. "Lie still and warm up."

I weakly tried to struggle away again, and he gripped my shoulders.

"Sshh. You're delirious. Be quiet. Just relax," he said in this patient, gentle voice.

I had been in an ice fishing house before—every winter the lakes were sprinkled with colonies of the pastel wooden shacks. This one had two windows and two folding chairs and a little space heater plugged into a generator. My pajamas were in a heap by the heater. We lay on the hard brown carpet; a few feet away the floor was cut open for the hole in the ice. A rod propped up by a case of Leinenkugels leaned over the hole, the fishing line disappearing into the black water.

I closed my eyes, wanting it not to be real. But he warned, "Don't fall asleep now," and started to rub his hands briskly up and down my arms. They went down my arms and then onto my sides, up my arms and then down again to my hips.

"That's good," I tried to say, meaning that's enough. "I'm okay." I felt like I was talking in my sleep; I couldn't tell if I was really saying it or just thinking it. "I want to go home."

"We have to warm you up first," he said. "Then I'll take you home." His hands touched my ribs. The soft dip between ribcage and hipbone. Over my hip. Down the slope of my thigh. He spread his thumbs on the way back up and covered more. He touched my calves and the thin skin inside my elbows. His hands covered every inch of my body and they were warm and dry, and it was like he was dressing me in something I couldn't take off.

I had to keep my eyes open the whole time—if he caught me closing them, he gave me a little slap wherever his hand was. So I looked behind him and focused on the fishing line and prayed for it to tremble. They were under us, hundreds of them, cold and sluggish, like silver bullets lodged in the frigid water. *Please do something*, I told them. But they lay low or held out for better bait. The line held still.

I gave up and stared at the little square window up high, which looked out on a blank white sky, and while he kept stroking me I tried to imagine that just outside that window was the safest, most ordinary thing, and that I could will myself out into it. What came into my mind was tractor dancing, this thing my grandparents would do in summer at the fairgrounds. It's square dancing but with tractors: the tractors are the dancers, the riders guide them, and a caller calls out the moves. My grandfather always wore a straw hat, and my grandmother would put on large brown-tinted sunglasses and clip a red bow into her curls. They both wore snap-front red shirts and khaki pants and rode matching John Deeres painted red with cream trim. Fiddle music would start sawing through the loudspeakers, and the pairs of tractors would start up, moving in tandem and then apart, crossing and rejoining in shifting patterns. The ancient caller had gone blind, but he still didn't quit because he could recognize every tractor by the sound of its engine. I would sit there

in the fairground stands sweating in the shade and drinking orange soda and watching all the old people steering this slow, heavy machinery toward their mates, getting older and older together. It was boring and beautiful. I felt a pit of longing in my stomach. The window on the white sky looked like an empty picture frame and I thought, *Everyone who now looks after me will be dead.*

My shivering had stopped. The man felt it and looked at me.

"Will you take me home now?" I lowered my eyes. "Please?"

He wiggled out of the sleeping bag and pulled on his clothes. "Yours might still be wet," he said. "Hang on. Don't move."

He went outside. I heard a car door slam and then an engine turn over after a long chugging sound. I curled up inside the sleeping bag and pulled my head inside like a turtle. How hard the floor was underneath me. The door creaked open.

"Had to warm up the truck," he said. "Come on now. Straighten out so I can pick you up." Without looking at him, I unfolded myself. He slid his arms underneath the sleeping bag and lifted me up, still inside it, and carried me out into the icy air. Everything was white: the morning sky, the frosted trees, the snow-topped icehouses. He put me in the passenger seat and strapped the seatbelt over me, sleeping bag and all.

"Where's your home?" he said

"Far Portage Road."

"Just around the corner, then." He shut the door.

I rested my head on the cold window and stared at the dark trees along the road. When I saw our mailbox, I mumbled, "Turn here." He slowed and turned off the paved road and onto my driveway. Snow groaned under the tires. We passed the gap in the trees where the dogsledding trail started. The truck turned around the bend of the driveway and he stopped. "No getting up that hill before it's been snowblowed," he said.

"I'll walk," I said.

"You sure?"

"Yes."

I managed to free my arms from the sleeping bag and unbuckled the seatbelt. I opened the door and slid out of the truck, caught the sleeping bag around my chest. He handed me the big puffy coat and a plastic bag that contained my damp pajamas. I turned my back and said, "Thank you," because no matter what I felt, he had saved my life. I put on the coat, dropped the sleeping bag, and jammed my feet into my wet sneakers. Then I slammed the door and ran up the rest of the driveway, hardly aware of the snow brushing against my bare legs. After a few moments, I heard the truck back up and pull away. I didn't look back until I was sure it was gone.

As I got closer to the house, I saw the television flickering in the family

room in the basement, where my little brothers were watching the earliest rounds of Saturday morning cartoons. Upstairs, my parents' window was still dark. The dogs were all asleep in their kennels, muzzles buried under their lush tails. I let myself in through the downstairs door and shut it quietly behind me.

Drew and Ryan were under a blanket on the couch, still pajamaed and bedheaded, staring wide-eyed at the antics onscreen. On the floor at their feet were two cereal bowls with puddles of pink milk in them. Drew looked up at me. "Were you outside?"

"Yeah."

Now Ryan looked up. "Why? What were you doing?"

"What are you doing up so early?" I said. "You should be in bed. We should all be in bed." I went to my room and put on dry pajamas. Then I went back out to my brothers. I didn't want to lie there in my bed alone.

"Can I get under that blanket with you?" I asked. They moved over, and I sat down between them.

"You're cold," said Ryan. "What happened?"

"Am I?" I said. "Come here. Warm me up. Tell me what's happening now." The boys moved in close to me, and Ryan tried to explain the plot of the episode. It was so simple. I pulled the blanket up over all of us and closed my eyes. My brothers were small and warm, and their hair smelled like sleep.