



*I get paid to watch mountains and forests. From the fire lookout on Palliser Mountain I've memorized the peaks, the avalanche tracks, the bends in the river below, the logging roads and cut lines. When anything looks different I see it.*

*The tower cabin is a standard one-room with a seven-foot ceiling and four walls of four-foot-tall windows, no curtains, the chrome-legged kitchen table and chairs under the east window. My bed is under the south window and my books line the north sill. In the west corner, a sink and a small counter with a bar fridge under it, run on propane. Only the fire finder, a circular table with a topographical map and two sighting apertures, stands above the sills.*

*I go outside to place my pots of basil on the catwalk banister, watch clouds build over the eastern ridge, beyond the outhouse and the patch of grass the Forest Service calls a garden. Below I can see three horses at the foot of the mountain, a grey and two buckskins, the ones Mr. Giacomo lost earlier this summer.*

*Sometimes in that morning light an avalanche track can look like a column of smoke. Golden conifer pollen drifts over the Slocan Gorge, wisps of river fog rise off the hidden bend of the Palliser. Low clouds blow up over the eastern ridge like water flowing uphill.*

*Now that I'm alone, memories float in and out of my mind. I've assisted my mother at two births, one in the spring of 1969, the other this year. Mrs. Giacomo's was the first birth. Her son was born blue, couldn't be*

*made to breathe. While my mother tried for a long time, her mouth over the baby's nose and mouth, I held Mrs. Giacomo's cold hand and she turned to the wall.*

*I remember the baby's puckered, bruised eyes, glued shut with a sticky film and its limp, tiny hands. Finally Mrs. Giacomo reached for her child, to take it out of my mother's arms. She could see there was no hope. She took it under the blankets next to her chest and then she drew the blanket over her head.*

*Even though I was only sixteen years old, I couldn't leave her there alone. I crawled under the blanket to rest my head against her shoulder, and my arms around her felt so weak and useless. She felt like she was covered in ashes. Over her shoulder I could see the face of the still one in her arms. His tiny brow looked puzzled at not entering the living world. His limp hands were delicate, hollow-boned and the skin at his temples pale blue.*

*Later Mrs. Giacomo would blame my mother for the child's death. She would say that my mother had not done enough. That was the end of a long friendship.*

*Then this year Rose's child was born; I was there too.*

*My name is Lacey Wells and I've got a lot to tell you. I know who the father of Rose's baby is. His name is Michael Guzzo. He left last winter before Rose knew*

*she was pregnant, when the Odin Mill shut down because of the snows. He left to travel in Central America.*

*I know why Mr. Giacomo wants Rose's baby and why he can't have him. And I want to make sure none of this is forgotten.*



One night in the winter of '68, over a year before Mrs. Giacomo lost her baby, Rose wanted to see if there was ice on Olebar Lake. She liked to skate and she was waiting for the lake to skin over. She knocked at my window, and we rode bikes in the

dark through falling snow to a beach that was packed with fishing huts.

We'd met the summer before, picking fruit in the Butuchi orchards. The Portuguese Alberto Braz would get us up at 5 AM, hammering at the bunkhouse door. He would drive us into the orchards in the back of his truck, the bed bumping and jarring on the potholed road with a grassy hump up the middle of it and Rose curled up and still trying to sleep, head in her arms on one side of the truck bed. He would really yell at us when we left ripe fruit in the branches that we missed or that was too hard to reach. Sometimes when he wasn't around, we played soccer on the river road, using a hard green peach for a ball.

Now we rode bikes in the dark to Olebar Lake. Onshore, Rose knelt to put her hand in the ripples that were washing through the beach gravel. Surprised, she said the water was warm. I'd heard that there were hot springs in the lake bottom, and that sometimes, on nights like this, warm water was pushed ashore by the wind.

She went out wading, trailing her hands, the snow driving in around her.

I took off my boots and rolled up my pants to follow, the lap, lap of water that smelled of fish around my knees, groping over stones with my toes. Skin ice was splintering way out, but near the shore the lake was quivering like a mirror that had nothing to reflect. Hissing snow was drawing over it in wide curtains.

“Let’s go out as far as we can,” I heard Rose say, laughing. “This water is as warm as a bath. I want to dive in!”

“You’ll freeze biking home,” I warned her.

“I don’t care. This is really wonderful!” she said, the snow collecting in a grey cap on her hair and sticking to her eyelashes.

I could hear the low chug of a barge coming across the water. A house appeared in the issuing greyness and in a gabled second-storey window I could see Mr. Giacomo peering out in lantern light as if watching the shore for drift logs. The pilot cut the engine and I could hear the rattle of the anchor chains. The house drifted quietly before us. I could see Mr. Giacomo quite clearly in the second-storey window. His father was an Italian stonemason from the valley and his mother was Japanese. Though

he was in his fifties, in the lantern light his skin looked smooth and clear, like a young man's, and I liked him for it.

"Ah," Rose said, standing beside me, "that house is for Mrs. Giacomo."

The window was drawn open and he was standing there with his hands gripping the sill, looking out for a long time. The barge rocked and I could hear the crackle of the old floors and walls. Sometimes I, too, have felt that anxious need to make things better: if only this would go right for me, I might get what I want. There was no house like that in the village. He had bought it in Burton for his wife who had come from Burton. She had always dreamt of that house being hers. When she was a girl, the owner of the house, a judge, used to hold Saturday night parties for people in Burton who had money. She'd stand outside at night while the doctor, the mayor, the logging contractors and their wives passed by the uncurtained living room window in some glorious dance. Later they would settle at the brightly lit dining room table, the women smoothing out their fine dresses. I've always wanted a life like that, she'd told my mother.

When the judge died the house stood empty for a long time. There was a dispute over his will. Then it went up for sale, and Mr. Giacomo bought it with its Burton memories for his wife.

Now Rose asked the question that our village always asked: “Where does he get his money?” He told people he made his money logging in the Nachako country after the war but some people said he’d come home from occupied Japan already rich.

Though we were still and all you could hear was water rummaging along the shore, Mr. Giacomo called out, “Who’s there?”

Rose gripped my hand, touched my cheek and pushed me to the beach, trailing her palms to quiet the water around her knees. Sometimes she could be like that: shy and wanting to get away before she was called out or recognized.





More than anyone else in the village, my mother could heal birds and other animals. Once I brought her a robin that I'd scared out of the mouth of a village cat and she set its wing. When she left to work in the canning factories of Westbank, she

left the bird in the care of my father, and when she returned to find it dead, she was furious. My father told her that he'd done everything he could to keep the bird alive. He'd fed it worms from the compost and he'd placed it in a straw-lined cardboard box near the stove in his one vat paper mill and still it had died. I believe the missing ingredients were touch and voice. When my mother attended a birth, she would stroke the woman's back and belly and she would sing in a strange, low way, not really words. Mouth music she called it, sounds that entered the woman's body as the touch of palm and fingers enters the skin of a drum. You felt that whatever she was singing came from inside you, from your belly and knees.

Once when I was ten or twelve, Mr. Giacomo called out to me: "I need your mother! One of my horses is ill."

He was calling to me from an upstairs window in the Blackwater Mountain Lodge. It was spring and I was coming down from the Illecillewaet snowfield with my father's paper.

He got me to come up to the upstairs room. On a plain wooden table there was a clay bowl.

With pride in his voice, Mr. Giacomo told me the bowl was from the seventeenth century, Tokugawa period. He said that a dress spread on bamboo on the north wall was a Shikoku kimono, things he'd brought back from the war.

I'd heard that he'd bought the Blackwater Lodge and that he ran a summer trail riding camp and that he kept Savona River horses up there. In late spring and summer he took groups of girls onto the alpage, and they were often accompanied by priests from their parish.

The Blackwater Mountain Lodge was built in the twenties by Italian stonemasons from Friuli. They were hired by the railroad to repair the stone trestles in the pass. For the lodge they used shards of mountain stone, and the walls were two feet thick. In winter they used to ski there, Mr. Giacomo's father among them. After two winters he married Susan Tanabe, who came from the Yokohama prefecture in Japan. They went to Vancouver to live on Powell Street, and just before the war they returned to Japan. Mr. Giacomo, their only son, stayed behind in Vancouver. He was sixteen or seventeen then, and on his own.

The sick horse was tethered in the courtyard. “There was a storm last night,” Mr. Giacomo said, “and a large oak branch fell in her corral. She ate the new leaves.” He asked me to check her pulse and then to hurry down the logging spur to fetch my mother. He asked about the wooden rack I had on my back and about the paper tied to it. He smelled of new wine and lavender soap, and he began to walk the mare around in the courtyard, talking to her.

The logging spur leads from the Illecillewaet snowfields through a pine forest to the railroad tracks and then it’s a two-mile walk to the village along the grade. The paper I carried weighed twenty pounds and I kept watching the weather, which was uncertain. Above me stood the Dawson Glacier across which storms came into our valley, changing the weather suddenly. My father had made paper for the internment camps in New Slocan and Bay Creek, and now he sold to the artists of Baltimore and New York. Some of his paper was snow-bleached and some of it was sun-bleached. I would carry my father’s paper into the Illecillewaet snowfields, to bury it in powder snow. The light filtering through

ice crystals bleached the paper, and it acquired a pure, enduring whiteness that made it rare and valuable.

I liked being up there on my own. My father would only let me wander on the gentle slopes just above the treeline where there was no chance of an avalanche and if the weather was bad he wouldn't let me go up there at all. I loved standing at the edge of the treeline, looking out over the snowfield and listening to its stillness. I loved the weightless feel of the snow that I heaped on the paper, the way it sparkled and flashed in the sunlight. And it made me feel important that I was helping my father in that way.



Bright early morning, the western sky full of stars. My mother and I had walked up the logging spur to the lodge, the wind over the forest an unpacked sail. The mare stood tethered in the courtyard among girls from the east who were enrolled in Mr. Giacomo's riding camp. She must be kept walking, my mother said, and she must not lie down. I remember climbing a stone flight to the

balcony where Mr. Giacomo sat as the girls, one by one, led a horse from the stalls. The courtyard with its flapping geese and many cats was bordered on two sides by high stone walls and on one side by horse stalls under a slate roof. Mr. Giacomo poured out a glass of cider for my mother. Below, the girls were being directed by the priest who had travelled with them from Montreal.

Mr. Giacomo poured out the cider with its sharp, frothy smell of windblown apples. I was watching the priest lift the last of the girls into her saddle. The most patient horse had been chosen for the youngest. It stood there unmoving with a drooping head, both ears alert. Last night, the riding party had slept in the attic. At breakfast I'd watched them climb one by one down a ladder into the dining room, the bread and bowls of hot chocolate set out on three long tables. Those girls didn't even look at me; I envied their chatty excitement, the way they laughed and carried on over their bowls, their privilege.

"Something big, something big," Mr. Giacomo was saying and his opened hands on the balcony table were a question. The riding party had gathered

under an oak outside the courtyard, waiting for the priest. In his brown cassock he rode out among the scrub oaks.

“I’ve got something big planned,” said Mr. Giacomo, opening his arms. “I want to plant vineyards south of the village, Italian vines.” My mother looked at him with questioning eyes. They walked along the icy balcony strewn with sand that the sun never touched. He said that the weather was changing in the valley, winters were milder. It was now possible, he believed, to plant wine grapes. Did my mother know, he asked, of any land that might be available?

“I’ve been wanting to ask you this,” he told her. “You’re a midwife; you hear things that other people don’t hear. Maybe you know a family that’s thinking about selling its land.”

“I’ll ask around,” she said.

She and the Giacomos were friends in those days, years before their baby died. She and Mrs. Giacomo had been friends since high school.





About a year after the Burton house arrived by barge, my mother and I drove to Mrs. Giacomo's in Mr. Giacomo's car. I was stretching out my legs in the back, on a seat that smelled of wine lees and green alder shavings. Big flakes were sticking

to the windshield. Mr. Giacomo had turned on the wipers. When we left our yard, the Columbia Avenue street lights had come on and I could see fresh prints that horses had left in the snow in the street. There was the Mallone café, the shades pulled. I watched the snow drift under the streetlamps and gather in the corners of the darkened café windows. Above the streetlamps and above the rooftops you could feel a cloud had come into this valley and the snow fell in silent ripples. There was hardly any wind. Mr. Giacomo told us he hadn't changed over to winter tires and now and then I could hear the summer tires slip on the icy street and the engine revved.

My mother was quiet tonight. Usually she would be chattering on about this or that. But she didn't turn around to look at me. She was holding herself still, not looking to the right or left. I couldn't hear her breath over the wash wash of the wipers. Earlier that morning she had delivered twins in the Palliser Valley. She had been up all night with Mrs. Sandez and the twins were born in the morning, one after the other, around 6 A.M. She'd had only a few hours to sleep before the call came from Mrs. Giacomo.

While we were waiting at home for Mr. Giacomo to come for us, she poured well water from a small stone pitcher into clay cups the size of thimbles and she said, Drink up Lacey, Mrs. Giacomo's baby will be born tonight. I saw her hands tremble when she packed the rubber sheets, the thermos of pepper tea that she'd left to simmer for an hour on the stove to make it stronger.

Sometimes when I wake up I feel unsure of myself, too. I just look around before dawn, no bird chatter, and the night table and the wardrobe and the mirror in my room at home don't have their shapes yet, and I feel their wanting, as if in my sleep I haven't given them the smile or touch that calms them; and I feel sometimes that things, too, are afraid in their passing, cowering a little.



Mr. Giacomo drove into a tire-rutted yard in front of the Burton house. Grey for want of paint, the house that had crossed Olebar Lake on a barge now stood on a high bluff above the Palliser River. It was too tall for our village, with peaked brows over the upstairs windows. A harsh light shone in the

downstairs windows, as bright as the arc lamps in the train yard.

We walked up springy planks to the front door.

Inside, my mother didn't say much about how unprepared the house was for a birth, not even when she heard the roar of the propane heaters inside the front door, glanced at the arc lamps casting sheets of light on the drying plaster walls. The water in the kitchen was a garden hose stuck through the window, the stove to heat water and to warm the pepper tea was a camp stove.

This was one of Mr. Giacomo's biggest plans — to present a fine home to his wife — and the lack of order in the hallway and in the kitchen frightened me. It made me feel tired just to look at the kitchen shelves covered with a fine plaster dust and the stacks of labelled cardboard boxes. I wanted to go home.

Bothered by the lack of preparation, my mother spoke to Mr. Giacomo in a clipped, flat voice: John, she said, when she walked into the kitchen and saw the garden hose stuck through the window and all the pots still in boxes, I need pans and hot water.

Yes, he said, I'll get those for you. You go ahead

and check on my wife. He moved boxes around on the floor, reading their labels.

The pots and pans are in here somewhere, he said, hurrying now. I'll find them!

When she climbed the stairs to the bedroom, her hand gliding along the varnish-flecked banister, I saw my mother slow and turn to me with a look of disbelief, for the upstairs, much disused, still smelled of mould and rat droppings and the amoniate smell of squirrels' nests. She shook her head, kept climbing to the bedroom.

I think Mrs. Giacomo was in too much pain to even notice me; the contractions were coming on full. Her head rested on a green cushion, a cushion from the sofa in the hallway downstairs. She looked at my mother, her mouth a small round O of pain and her fingers clasped on her belly. Her eyes were the colour of the bloom on ripe plums.

I was helping John to move in, she apologized, in the way that people do when they feel they're being inconvenient.

It happens, my mother said. You can't always

be exactly sure when a baby is due. She went about hooking the rubber sheet on the mattress corners. She told me to go downstairs for water and towels.

In the kitchen, Mr. Giacomo, pulling open boxes, asked me how things were going. He placed two clay bowls on a shelf above the counter.

When our baby is born we'll drink from these!

Those bowls looked as lumpy as cooking apples.

I was eager to help, and even now I wonder at how helpful I wanted to be, thumbs pressed on a pot lid as I carried steaming water up to the room, by the drying plaster walls. I wanted to show my mother that I could be useful. Still, I felt something was wrong and I kept busy in order to ignore the feeling.

My mother's voice was sharp and bitter, and I kept asking what can I do and I didn't mind when she snapped at me, I can't keep telling you, placing towels under Mrs. Giacomo's hips, her back propped with pillows, and Mr. Giacomo calling from the foot of the warped stairs, What do you need?

I went up and down those stairs to fetch towels and water, by the shadowless flare of light on the muddy-smelling walls. When I climbed the stairs

for the last time, my mother called out of that hot, steamy room with its painted-shut windows, her voice calm now, and I thought to find some delightful baby that you lift in your arms to feel its struggling, wailing life.

I walked into the room and my mother turned the wrapped infant towards me. I saw it take two gasps like a trout drawn onto ice, and then it lay still in her hands. All of a sudden that room smelled of the winter lake, of the warm, lichen-coloured water that sometimes welled to shore, spreading out from the deep hot spring.

She just leaned over this baby, quiet, as if listening for some far, piping tune, her eyes wide and still, without reflection.

Later she would tell my father that she had immediately brought the baby to her mouth to breathe for it, but that was after Mrs. Giacomo had shouted at her, Do something!, to shake her out of a dream. And even then she had to think of what to do, like someone who has awoken and doesn't recognize where she is.

I don't think she even heard Mrs. Giacomo shout at her. She just stood there at the foot of the

bed with the still one in her arms, just stood there. I could see by the bewildered look in her eyes that she had suddenly lost all confidence in herself. I could feel her cold grief creeping into my belly and along my inner arms, and I clapped my hands to startle her.