



Miles City

Margot Kahn



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At a certain time, the boots stumping into the Bison Bar were crusted with shit. It was mid-April, late afternoon, and Lori and I had been there since god knows when. She'd picked me up at the library where I was killing time. I was still too soft for that town, she could tell. My boots were the give-away: clean, crepe-soled Boulets with pink uppers half-hidden beneath my jeans.

"Let's get out of here," Lori'd said, and I'd followed her like a pup across the street, through an unmarked door in a blank, white building. The bar stools were empty, but in the next room a woman was half-bent under a green banker's light shooting pool by herself with a Scotch-and-soda perched on the rim of the table. "That's Franny," Lori said. "She's always here." Franny had lines in her face like the rings of a tree. She didn't look at anyone, kept her eyes on the prize, even hours later when the door opened and the light fell in on us.

The working men who came in then were cast in shadows until they got close enough that we could smell them. Wet wool, blood, tobacco, mud. Merle took the stool to the left of me. Lori was on my right.

"Howdy, Merle," Lori said.

"Lori." Merle touched the brim of his hat and then extended his hand, bent up every which way, in my direction. "Ma'am," he said, "pleased to meet you." He used a foot to lever himself onto the bar stool and some shit mud flaked off his boots and onto the floor.

The warm weather had been good for the calving, and most everything had been going as well as could be expected: a few gone sideways, a few so big they lost the heifers, the orphan calves grafted onto other mothers. Merle and Louise talked about all this across me, over me, through me, as if I were a fence post or an open window. I looked at Merle's hands and imagined them up inside me, up to the elbows, up to the shoulder, pulling me inside out. All those heifers, so heavy with purpose, and Merle, their deliverance.

I was making my way West again, the one place that pulled me. I'd left Ohio years before, gone West, then East, now back again. Ohio wasn't a place where I had deep roots, wasn't where my people long ago staked a claim. It was where my grandparents happened to land during the War, a place they dug in deep enough to give their offspring a chance. For me, that chance looked like someplace else. In Ohio, the lives I saw playing out before me weren't lives I wanted to live: lavender walls and chintz curtains, nose jobs and big diamond rings, country club dinners and unspoken segregation—by race, by class, by religion. So I had been a girl who pushed against everything solid, who slipped through cracks like water.

Again the door opened and the daylight was hanging on. This time, laughter. The seats at both ends of the bar filled up and the stool next to Merle was taken by a younger man in the same thick shirt, the same shit boots, the same hands, only slightly more limber. Merle's voice dropped, and now the conversation required fewer words. Full pints appeared before me and Lori. We looked to the right and then to the left, and there they touched their hats to their brims. We smiled and lifted the new glasses to our lips.

The boys to the right were telling stories. The one about the kid who roped a bear down in Yellowstone, and the sheriff who came out and arrested him and took him in to jail. The kid went before the judge and the judge said, "What were you thinking, roping a bear?"

The kid said, "Well, it's something I've always wanted to do, sir. And there he was, and I had my rope."

The judge said, "Was it hard?"

The kid said, "No sir. The roping wasn't hard. It was the lettin' him go that was difficult." Lori looked at me sideways, like she'd heard it all before...but this one, well. To live here was to tell a good story because, Lord knew, there wasn't much else to do.

Lori invited me to stay the night at her place, a trailer on the edge of town, but the next time the door opened the light had gone flat and the outside world was no longer a place we wished to be. The cowboys who came in now had clean hats and clean shirts and belt buckles as big as pie plates. The tall one with the busted nose ordered a whiskey and tipped his chin in our direction.

"Lori," he said.

Even though she was an unashamed Democrat, a single woman in her 30s who lived alone, Lori had grown up here and was a part of this place in a way I would never be. She had an otherness about her, but also an understanding of the winter and the distances between things. She knew how to accept a drink without it meaning a thing.

"Jude," she said. "Want to tell us about it?"

"Well," he said, turning so we could see the whole mess of his face. "It seems like every time I leave Montana, someone wants to kick my ass."

Lori laughed, but in Jude's voice I was here and there and going many ways at once. The break in his nose, the glint of his buckle, the cant of his boot heel resting so casually at the end of a long leg. There was the place I had left that would always be with me and the place, as yet unknown, where I was going. Striking out was the easy part; it was the letting go that was hard. And if home was the place I left behind, what would I call my place of becoming? How would I know it when I got there?

To let go of a place that was yours because you knew it inside and out, even if it didn't suit you, even if you didn't like it—this was harder than belonging somewhere just because you wanted to. A place of becoming would be a place to become, a place to arrive and be. Here the mountains were too big to push against; they would push against you with strong hands, with unbearable beauty. You should love them, they seemed to say, or you should leave.

Franny and Merle, Lori and Jude and me—we were all, separately, specks of light, small and shining. Jude was drawn up to the bar; Franny was taking a cut shot; Merle and the others were

filtering out into the evening, getting back to the heifers who couldn't be left alone. There are things in this world that are urgent and necessary, and all I could say was, "Don't leave."

Margot Kahn is the co-editor, with Kelly McMasters, of the anthology *This Is the Place: Women Writing About Home*, and the author of the biography *Horses That Buck: The Story of Champion Cowboy Bill Smith*. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Tablet*, *River Teeth*, *the Los Angeles Review*, and elsewhere. She lives in Seattle with her husband and son.
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