Storycatcher

CHAPTER ONE

Following the Beeline

HOW STORY CONNECTS US

Life hangs on a narrative thread. This thread is a braid of stories that inform us about who we are, and where we come from, and where we might go. The thread is slender but strong: we trust it to hold us and allow us to swing over the edge of the known into the future we dream in words.

Story — the abundance of it, and the lack of it — shapes us. Story — the abundance of it, and the lack of it — gives us place, lineage, history, a sense of self. Story — the abundance of it, and the lack of it — breaks us into pieces, shatters our understanding, and gives it back over and over again, the story different every time. Story — the abundance of it, and the lack of it — connects us with the world and outlines our relationship with everything. When the power of story comes into the room, an alchemical reaction occurs that is unique to our kind: love or hate, identification or isolation, war or peace, good or evil can be stirred in us by words alone. The power of story is understood by the powerful, yet the power of story belongs to all of us, especially the least

powerful. History is what scholars and conquerors say happened; story is what it was like to live on the ground.

THE GROUND WHERE I WAS BORN is the butte country of western Montana, a land of reds and oranges, sweeping wheat fields and brown tufts of cattle grass. Here the days begin with a pinkening line along the flattened east horizon like a great eye opening, and the days end with marauding sunsets that disappear like ghost riders into the western crags. I was set down in this landscape, placed into the arms of family, community, nation, and nature.

I have traveled far, but come back from time to time in search of some elusive sense of origin. Driving west out of Great Falls on Interstate 15, the one freeway that dissects these plains, running north like an artery to Shelby and Sweetgrass and the turnoff to Glacier Park, I join a bloodstream of tourists, ranchers, Indians, all going to the sun. Just north of the junkyard, truck stops, and cattle yard I swing onto Trunk Highway 21 — Vaughn Junction — where the roadbed follows a path as ancient as buffalo, as tribal migrations, as the sure-footed Sacagawea, who led her band of white men into the same vista that lies before me unchanged. Unchanged, as soon as my back is turned to the slash of interstate. Unchanged, as soon as the sun hits the pavement on a slant that transforms the road into a shimmering ribbon that might be grass, might be water. I drive half-blind into glint and shadow until the road catches me up and I follow it as mesmerized as a deer.

Beyond Vaughn Junction, there is nothing in the way. Nothing to break the sight line. The first ridge of the Rockies rises beyond the buttes, the Continental Divide drawn invisibly along the upper crest of peaks, deciding what flows back toward me, what flows west toward the sea.

My immediate sight is filled with the shape of Square Butte, an overturned, brown-wrapped box of land sticking straight up out of gullied pastures and wheat fields. The terrain around me is tucked away this October day in tidy strips of harvested grain and baled hay. I am heading toward sixty years of age and this is the first time I have seen my birth lands in any season other than high summer. The land waits for

winter, though this afternoon is cool breeze, bright sun, a cheery day to find myself sitting on a pink marble headstone with my name on it: BALDWIN. Here lie Leo Elmer and Mary Hart Baldwin, my grandparents; Grace Baldwin Ho, Dorothy Baldwin Humphreys, two middle-aged aunts brought back to the bosom of the family to lie. My feet sink ankle deep into the thatch of grave grass.

Fatherland

My father's father, Leo Sr., was a Methodist circuit rider in the butte country of Montana in the early decades of the twentieth century. First by horse and buggy, and later by Model-T, followed by an assortment of farm trucks, he drove the valleys of the Sun and Judith rivers east and west of Great Falls, tending to the spiritual needs of pioneering homesteaders, farmers, and ranchers — marrying, baptizing, burying. He was a smallish man, wiry and strong, with deep-set blue eyes, a strong nose that is still coming down the family line, and composure based on faith and practice. He preached a straightforward gospel of deep reverence for God's creation, not too rigid, not too brimstone. My grand-father loved the Lord, and believed the Lord loved him and his flock in return.

Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.

— Rita Mae Brown

I didn't know him during these early years. By the time I came along, fifteenth out of twenty grandchildren, a caboose born after World War II with cousins nearly old enough to be aunts and uncles, Grandpa was a settled presence in the tiny town of Fort Shaw. The town was barely a bump on Highway 21, the back road to Helena, or a sneak through the mountains to Missoula. Over the years, to support a large family, Leo had become a beekeeper six days a week and a preacher on Sundays at Simms Methodist Church.

I was born here in 1946, in Great Falls Deaconess Hospital, in the same ward where my father had been born in 1920, the seventh of Mary's eight children, his birth the first time anyone thought to drive his mother into town.

There was no question that they'd drive my mother to town. She was young and skittery, enough like her mother-in-law, Mary, that I wonder if tensions blossomed that spring after the war as wildly as flowers. In a time when all civilized births happened in hospitals, women drugged into half slumber, my mother studied a book on natural childbirth and panted her way proudly through contractions, producing her first child — which happened to be me — after only four hours of labor.

Though my parents soon moved and I grew up in cities a thousand miles east, we made frequent summer pilgrimages to the Sun River valley homestead. Heading out of the driveway on the west suburban edge of Minneapolis, we'd drive straight into the eye of the sun, nearly twenty-four hours on road that was two-lane blacktop most of those years: the summers I was 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14, 16, and 22. We didn't stop except for breakfast until Square Butte filled our vision and we rolled over the foothills. Home.

For decades, a passel of kinfolk, changing crews every year, would show up for several weeks in August to bring in the honey crop. Grandpa and the uncles would drive out to raid the hives, five hundred colonies of bees strategically placed in those irrigated valleys to bring in the pure gold of alfalfa and sweet clover. I got used to seeing men in long-sleeved canvas shirts and leather gloves, pants cuffs tucked into boots, bee bonnets draped over their heads and buttoned into collars. Every afternoon the flatbed truck would rumble into the driveway, groaning from the heavy load of hive boxes, or "supers," taken from the hives. Buzzing with drowsy bees still riding on the honeycomb, it would back up to the honey house loading dock. Sweating a combination of man smell and honey, the men hefted the heavy wooden hive boxes into the extracting shed. There they would slice the wax caps off the combs, run the supers through the centrifuge extractor, and warm the honey just enough to make it trickle down troughs, through filter screens, and into big metal vats.

One evening my grandpa called me into his study with a small glass bottle of honey in hand. Under the glow of his desk lamp he spread open the huge old Bible that had been his father's before him. The scent of

honey rose from his skin and his clothing and maybe the Bible itself. "Lookee here, Chrissie," he said, holding the capped jar like a magnifying glass over the words. "Our bees make such pure honey you can read right though it." The letters were slightly wiggled, but I could see them. "Isaiah," he said in his hoarse whispery voice, "that's a good book. Here, read me this." His hands were square with a fleshy palm, the fingers all sinew and big knuckled. Outdoor hands, callused palms. His fingernail, cleaned with a pocketknife at the horse trough where the men sluiced off the dirt of the day before coming in to dinner, pointed to the middle of the page.

I stood on tiptoe, balancing myself with my hands on the edge of the roll top desk. "Isaiah, 55:12," I said, just like they began in church, "*For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*"

"Good," he said, and where he touched my hair I thought it smelled of honey. And where he touched my heart, there is honey still.

STORY OPENS UP A SPACE between people that is unbound from the reality we are standing in. Our imaginative ability to tell story, and our empathetic ability to receive story, can take us anywhere and make it real. In the act of telling story, we create a world we invite others into. And in the act of listening to story, we accept an invitation into experiences that are not our own, although they seem to be. Story weaves a sense of familiarity. We are simultaneously listening to another's voice and traveling our own memories. We are looking for connectors, making synaptic leaps linking one variation of human experience to another. You come with me to the glowing light in the tiny farmhouse study, but you also stream through memories of your own childhood. Who put honey in your heart?

What's truer than truth? The Story.
— Hasidic wisdom

The distances all seem reasonable now. The thirty-one miles west of Great Falls to the homestead is simply thirty-one miles. Years ago, fueled

by impatience and the belief in destination, it seemed to take as long to drive these last thirty-one miles to Grandma and Grandpa's as it had taken to drive all the way from Minneapolis. We hung over the backseat, myself, eventually two brothers, a sister, breathing hotly on the neck of whichever parent was driving — Mother usually, as we would be gone for a month or more at a time, cruising in that year's carefully outfitted station wagon through the homes and hospitality of relatives. My father would join us only for the first or last two-week stretch when the caravan of his family ventured into ancestral territory.

Many years later I discovered there were families who went to the lake cabin, children who spent weeks at fancy camps, tours made to Europe or the cities of the East. We went to visit relatives. Most of my father's brothers and sisters stayed in a constellation to the family home, scattered throughout the West like pony express stations until I thought we Baldwins, like Wyatt Earp or Annie Oakley or Buffalo Bill, had some claim on the place. *Our* butte, *our* benchland, *our* mountains. With two brothers in California and a sister in Oregon, my mother's country was a string of lighthouses that introduced me to the sea: the landscape between Minnesota and saltwater was fatherland.

When we opened our suitcases, our clothes would steam with released Minnesota humidity. They dried out fast — my shorts and flounce-edged halter-tops, one Sunday dress, jeans, and sneakers. I shed my city self and dashed straight into the landscape, filled my nostrils with dust and earthy scents of cows and horses. I hung over fence railings at my uncle's ranches and strode, veiled and brave, in and out of my grandfather's honey house.

There was a railroad spur at the edge of town, out near the grain silos. Each year, little vials of honey, like the one through which I had read the blessing of Isaiah, were sent to food marketing cooperatives such as Sue Bee in Iowa and the Finger Lakes Honey Co-op in New York. The companies sent back their orders and "Baldwin and Sons Beeline Honey" left in boxcars sending our sweet cache to blend with the darker nectars of eastern fruit trees, buckwheat, and sorghum. Harvest over, school

looming in the shortening days, my parents, my brothers and sister, and I would turn reluctantly east and head into the darker strains of our life in Minneapolis the other eleven months of the year. We always took a sixty-pound tin home with us. We prayed before we ate, and we ate a lot of honey.

The stories of the West, the homestead, the history of this family, were fed to me with dinner, the table buzzing with jokes and repeated tales. One of the uncles would start, breaking into the raucous stream of words with the beginning of a story, "Did I ever tell you children about the time your father got caught climbing the water tower?" He pointed a long table knife down the row of family faces. The knife was veneered with honey, and lined along the flat edge of the blade was a row of peas that he slathered into his mouth with one smooth curl of his tongue. Even if we had heard this story a dozen times, we'd shake our heads, "Nooo…," and off he'd go. I don't know if Uncle Willard always ate his peas with honey, or just did it for effect. My little brother, Carl, who avoided green food as much as possible, shivered and rolled his eyes in my direction. The renditions of our father's exploits around the town were always slightly changing, embellished here and there, sometimes causing him to jump in and defend himself, or come up with a story of one of his brother's misadventures. No matter the variation and how it differed from the night before, Willard always concluded with a chuckle and the phrase, "Now, that's the gospel truth. Yes it is, yes it is."

I eat my peas
with honey,
I've done it all my life.
It makes them taste
so funny,
But it keeps them
on my knife.

— Children's rhyme

The Essential Element of Narrative

We understand that story is not the gospel truth, or journalism, or courtroom testimony. Story is life seen through the honey jar, slightly distorted by personal experience, perception, inclination, and fancy. This is the nature of story. The fish gets a little bigger, the storm gets a little wilder, the love gets a little stronger, our bravery or disappointment gets