After the Harvest

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Ten years ago last month, my father left my mother. He pulled into the gravel driveway of our house and parked around back. Our house sat on one acre of land carved out of a pasture. It was mid-morning. He didn't bother to take off his work boots before he walked through the house to their bedroom. He took all his clothes out of the closet and carried them to the pickup. I still don't know exactly what happened to make him do this.

When I try to figure out why he left that day, I trace a line back two years earlier to Verdon's death. Maybe my parents would disagree. Maybe they would say it started long before they ever thought about me, though neither of them has said this. When I think about where this story begins, I reach back to a warm night in late May 1994 when I pulled into the driveway to find a police car.

Because we lived 25 miles from the nearest town, it was the only time I'd seen a police car this far off the highway. The insignia on the side of the car door said Yuma, Colorado. The car's headlights and engine were off. My father sat in the front seat with a police officer I didn't recognize. My sister and I had just finished playing a game of softball for Knode Livestock. Inside the house, my mother sat at the dining-room table with a pensive look. She wore gray sweatpants and a white T-shirt. Her short blond hair was tucked behind her ears.

"What's going on?" Shannon asked.

"Nothing," my mother said. She got up and walked around the counter that separated the living and dining room from the kitchen. Her green eyes searched for something to do.

"What do you mean, 'nothing'?" I asked. "Why's Dad in the police car?"

"I'm not going to talk about it," she said as she grabbed a towel from the refrigerator handle and wiped down the countertops.

My sister and I both knew that my mother would not answer any more questions. I inherited a lot of things from my mother. Along with her passivity, I inherited her stubbornness. I knew by her tone she wouldn't budge.

For the next 20 minutes or so, Shannon and I milled around the house, grabbed snacks, watched TV, pretended not to care that our father was talking to the police just outside. When the door to the garage swung open, my father trudged in. He looked as if an anchor had been attached to him. He still had on his work clothes, boots, and a blue denim short-sleeved shirt tucked into Levi's. His green Pioneer seed cap hid his receding hairline. His face and arms were brown from the sun.

"What's going on?" Shannon asked.

"You didn't tell them?" he asked my mother.

"No."

"There's been an accident." He cleared his throat. "Verdon Franson shot himself and died yesterday."

"So why were the police here?" Shannon asked.

"They think I might've been the last person to see him. They was just asking some questions—make sure it was an accident." I could see the worry in his blue eyes.

"Was it . . ." I paused, not knowing if I should ask the question. "Was it really an accident?"

"Far as I can tell."

It wasn't until a few months later that I learned about the events of the early evening Verdon shot himself. My Gram Salvador said that my father had gone to Verdon's house, visiting. Verdon was in his late 30s and had lived and worked on his family's farm his whole life. He had never left to go to college. While Verdon and my dad weren't close friends, acquaintances take on a different meaning in the country. My dad probably remembered Verdon being born, remembered seeing his name in the paper for different school achievements. He certainly knew what kind of farmer Verdon was.

I imagine the fading sunlight cast traces of pink and red across the straight-edged horizon. I imagine Verdon offered my father a Coors Light as they sat around the shop talking about yields and irrigation systems. At one point, Verdon asked my dad to take a look at his new shotgun. My father was never much into guns. We had rifles for hunting, but he wasn't a hunter by nature. He would have shown interest, being sociable. They even took the gun out into the yard and shot a few cans with it—some of the empties they'd finished. After a while, my dad said he'd better get home

for supper, wouldn't want it to be cold. He hopped into the pickup and headed to the house. After my father left, Verdon started to clean the gun. They don't know for sure when the bullet pierced Verdon's stomach, leaving him half-conscious, bleeding to death by himself.

Our 2,300-acre farm spreads out over a 30-mile radius in Northeastern Colorado. Pastureland, corn, and wheat fields make up the majority of the landscape. My husband, from central Nebraska, says it's the flattest place he's ever seen. I was 18 when I finally saw the ocean for the first time, and it didn't impress me as much as I thought it would. I'd grown up with that kind of vastness my whole life.

Our house stood on land that my father's grandmother bought. She planted 30 trees in the back, most of which died. She and my great-grandfather remodeled a two-room shack into a 700-square-foot house. He built a sheep shed and a wooden brooder house, which still stand today. My parents lived in this house for 18 years and had four children. Even though it was small, I have good memories of this house. I remember, as we watched TV, my mother would sit on the arm of my father's chair, or sometimes they would squeeze together and share the recliner. I remember my mother rocking me in the same chair. In the evenings while putting me to sleep, she would sit at the edge of my bed, sing to me, and rub my back. I remember that everyone was together, and we laughed and played games and had fun.

Eventually, my parents saved enough money to build a new, brick, ranch-style house—50 feet away from the old one. We moved into the new house a few days before Christmas 1984. Each of us four kids received one present under the tree. My present was a basketball.

The new house seemed massive, especially because we had almost no furniture. It would be six more years until we had anything besides our beds, a dining-room table, couch, and TV. Because we were so cramped in the other house, it felt nice to have so much room to move around.

That spring a crew demolished the old house. They covered the foundation with dirt from the new basement. Eventually, we laid down sod.

Verdon died Memorial Day weekend, 1994. This event triggered something in my father none of us knew was there. Around wheat harvest, I noticed my dad had cigarettes in the pickup. I didn't see him smoking, but I saw

the box. He seemed more serious, less likely to tell a joke or tell a good story. He seemed quiet, reflective. I wish I could tell you an exact event, say, "See here, this is the kind of change I'm talking about!" But it wasn't like that. People don't change overnight; it just seems that way because you aren't paying attention. In August, I went back to Greeley, Colorado, for my sophomore year of college. My father's irregular behavior became more noticeable.

Shannon was the only sibling left in the house. My brother, Darren, had already graduated from college and lived in Denver with his wife. My sister Lisa lived in Denver, too; she was finishing up medical school.

One early morning, as I returned to my apartment from a party, Shannon called. I could barely understand what she said through her sobs.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"We couldn't find him."

"What do you mean? Who?"

"Dad, we couldn't find him." Her voice cracked. "He came late to my game, and Mom said he was really drunk. She asked him to go eat at the chili supper after my game to sober him up, but he took off." She blew her nose. "And when we got home, he wasn't here."

Like many places, social events in northeastern Colorado revolve around drinking. But people drank after the sports events, not before. I knew a lot of men who drank all night, slept a few hours in their pickups, and then drove a tractor all day. But my father had never been a heavy drinker. I'd only seen him have a beer at a wedding or at a neighbor's house.

"He never showed up?"

When he finally came home, he sat in his chair and bawled. He told Shannon he'd pulled over to sleep, most likely before he passed out. He didn't ride to the games with my mom anymore, something they'd done together for 15 years. He picked fights with her now, too.

I didn't want to believe this. I still don't. But Shannon wouldn't lie. I told her to call me whenever anything happened. She did. We talked on the phone constantly that school year. She couldn't wait for me to come home.

After my spring semester, one night in May 1995, my mother made supper and refused to let Shannon and me eat. My mother rarely let us eat before my father came home because she wanted us to eat together. In the spring and summertime, with cultivating and replanting corn, he wouldn't come home until eight thirty or later. She'd have dinner warming on the stove.

When we were kids, she'd feed us crackers, salad, and cheese until my father came home. My mother's family had always had supper together. The difference was that her father was an accountant and could leave work at the same time every day.

We knew my father wasn't coming home. We knew he was drinking at some bar. Most country bars in this area are dark, smoky, run-down places where rough people and local alcoholics hang out. If people are still around after hours, the owners won't close the bar until the local police officer comes in to ask the bartenders to stop serving. My father was probably at the Eckley Bar, one of the roughest in the area, but none of us said it. I don't know why he started going to bars. Before Verdon's death, he came home, ate dinner, and had conversations with us. I thought I knew my father, but now I'm not so sure I did. How much do children really know about their parents' lives, their hopes, their disappointments? I had always been so wrapped up in my own life, I hadn't stopped to look at my parents' lives until now, and that was only because everything seemed to be falling apart.

At home, our dining-room table was set. Salt and pepper shakers and a tub of sour cream for the baked potatoes sat in the middle of the table. My mother sat slouched in her chair, waiting. She'd recently highlighted her hair. It seemed blonder than usual. The fingers of her left hand played with her bottom lip as she stared straight ahead, thinking. On the wall across from her hung a painting of an old man at a table with bread and the Bible. His hands were clasped together, praying.

Shannon sat in my dad's recliner, and I lay on the couch. We watched TV. A couple times, Shannon leaned over the back of the chair and tried to persuade her to let us eat, but my mom got unusually angry. "NO! We're waiting for your *father.*" She crossed her arms. Finally, when it got close to ten, we talked to her in soft voices. "Let's eat without him."

My mother got up and left the table. She went to her room and slammed the door. Shannon and I ate, cleared the dishes, and went to bed.

A few days later, I returned to Greeley for summer school. I debated whether I should go home for the rest of the summer after the courses ended. Looking back now, I don't know why I didn't just stay away. But I loved the farm. Maybe a small part of me thought my presence could change things. I don't remember thinking this could be my last summer on the farm. If I didn't think it, I should have.

My mother was less and less stable. This is not to say she was always stable before. When I was younger, my brother sometimes helped my sister and me get ready for school. My mom would be in bed. Some days we came home from school to find her in her pajamas, reading a book, the breakfast dishes piled in the sink. In an attempt to maintain control, she wouldn't allow any of us to start the dishwasher or washer and dryer—even when we were in high school.

She met my father in college and visited the farm once before they married. Very few things would change between that first visit and the way my grandparents' place looks today. Pastureland rests to the south and west of their house. To the east, a field alternates seasons between summer fallow and wheat. Most years, a cornfield blocks the horizon to the north.

A year after my parents married, my mother dropped out of college. They moved to the farm, started a family, and lived four miles from my grandparents' house. But my mother didn't know that on her first visit; she didn't know she'd end up living there for 28 years.

She was well-read and had visited New York City, which made her worldly to the people in the country. Living over 150 miles from a university made it difficult for my mother to ever hope of finishing her degree. She didn't have friends, except the acquaintances she made with mothers of our classmates. She didn't help in the fields or help with other chores, which most farm wives accept as part of their responsibility. She stayed inside the house. But where was she to go? It was over 60 miles to a JCPenny's, and several hours to an art museum or theater. I'm not sure if the isolation caused her social anxiety or just masked it. After my father's behavior changed, she sank into depression.

The morning after Shannon's high-school graduation, Shannon, Lisa, and I laughed and talked until ten in the living room before we realized my mother wasn't up. Lisa went to check on her and came back with a concerned look on her face.

"Mom won't talk to me. One of you guys go see if she'll talk to you."

Shannon and I gave each other puzzled looks.

"What do you mean, she won't talk to you?" I asked.

"She won't answer me."

I knocked and opened the door at the same time. My mother sat propped up by a pillow placed behind her back. Her fine blond hair was matted flat against her scalp. Mascara smudges darkened the area underneath her eyes. The flowered bedspread lay precisely over her lap, as though she had smoothed it to look crisp and neat. My father's pillow lay unused;

no indentation showed where his head should have been. I wonder now if she had stayed up all night in that same position, waiting for him to come home.

"Mom?" I was scared.

She stared straight ahead like a porcelain doll. She hardly blinked and didn't move her head or make eye contact with me. I crossed the room to her side of the bed. The sun streamed through the sheer curtains.

"Mom." She didn't move. I knelt beside the bed and touched her hand. Only then did she look down at me with a faraway look. I tried to take deep breaths. I knew I should stay calm, but I could feel tears coming.

By then, my sisters had entered the room.

Lisa asked my mother, "You want some tea?" She paused for a response. Without receiving one, she said, "I'll bring you some."

Shannon and I followed Lisa out the door and to the kitchen. She put water on to boil.

"Has she been like this before?" Lisa asked Shannon.

"It's never been like this."

There were times growing up when Mom would stay locked in the bedroom for hours, or most of an entire day. Shannon and I would play games, play outside, fix our lunch, watch TV, and she would stay in the dark room. I wondered now if this is how she looked behind the locked door all those times. Eventually we would knock on the door, to remind her we were there, and she'd come out.

"What should we do?" Shannon asked.

"Maybe we should call Dad," Lisa said.

I gave Shannon a concerned look. I thought he might make Mom worse. I knew from Shannon's hesitation she thought the same thing.

"I don't think we should get him out of the field," I said.

"Should we call Gram?" Shannon asked.

"I don't know, I guess we could . . ."

Just then, we heard a noise. It sounded like the first shrill squeals from a teakettle. But Lisa had just turned the kettle on. As it grew louder, we recognized our mother's voice. We ran from the kitchen through the living room down the hall into the bedroom to find our mother on hands and knees on top of the bed, screaming, and punching the mattress with her fists. She kept repeating, "No, No, NO, NO, NO, NO," faster and louder each time. The three of us stood watching, not knowing what to do. Her voice started to catch in sobs. After a minute or so, she collapsed onto the bed, exhausted. Lisa snapped into her doctor role and pulled us into the

hallway, giving us orders. "I'll call Gram and have them meet us. Shannon, you pack a bag. Dana, you go calm her down."

My mom lay with her face in the bedspread, in a fetal position. I sat on the bed beside her, repeating, "It's all right. Everything's going to be all right." As I spoke, my voice cracked, and tears rolled down my cheeks.

I rubbed her back as I watched Shannon rifle through our mother's drawers. My mother's personal items had always been off-limits; we were never to open her dresser drawers or touch her things in the bedroom. Because she was generally affectionate with us, we always found it strange when she drew certain boundaries. But we almost always obeyed them. I could tell Shannon felt uncomfortable placing our mom's underwear and lace bra into the suitcase. When my mother's sobs subsided, she rolled herself onto my lap. Her breath came heavy. Lisa came back to the room with a cup of tea; I propped my mother up onto the pillows. Her face was puffy and red. Lisa told her, "I'm going to take you to see Gram McAndrew." She said it as though my mother was a child. "I called her, and she wants to see you."

My mother slowly shook her head back and forth without speaking, but we encouraged her to go. She went back into a trance and stared at the cup of tea on the nightstand. We helped her dress and walked her to the door. She didn't fight, but she didn't go willingly. With her body limp and uncooperative, one of us on each side and the other following behind, we put her inside the car. Lisa drove my mom to meet her parents. I remember wondering what would happen to my mother, wondering if she'd stay like this forever. I remember being worried that she would be put into a hospital. Now, I wonder how we managed to make it through.

Shannon and I cleaned up the house, packed up our things, and drove to Greeley for the week. I don't remember seeing my father before we left. Maybe we left a note for him. I'm not sure. Maybe Lisa told him. I know he didn't call to ask why my mom wasn't home. I know he didn't go see her.

I should have strong feelings about this, but considering my father's behavior since Verdon's death, his reaction to my mother's breakdown didn't seem strange. Actually, I would have been shocked if he had called or gone to see my mother because it would have shown he cared. I didn't think he cared anymore. Plus, he would have left the field. He never left the field in the summertime.

Memory is such a strange thing. I can remember certain things so vividly, like the way the sun used to shift across the living-room wall in the late afternoon, or the smell of a newly plowed field. But I can't remember if it was one week or two weeks that my mom was gone. I can't remember whether Shannon and I returned from Greeley before my mom came home, or if she was waiting for us. I try to piece everything back together, but it's as though I have pieces to three or four different puzzles. No matter how hard I try, I can't make a clear picture.

I just remember that when we were all together in the house again, my mother looked like a ghost. She had always maintained a lean figure, even after having four children. Now she seemed gaunt. I rarely saw her eat, even when she served herself a plate of food. She moved through the house like a sleepwalker. I knew she wasn't taking sedatives. She hardly let us take medicine, even if a doctor prescribed it.

When I worked in the house, washing windows or dusting floorboards, I would ask several times a day, "Mom, are you all right?"

She would look at me, smile dreamily, nod her head. But I could see in her eyes she was a long way away.

In the middle of cooking or cleaning, she would burst into tears and run to her room. If I left my mail on the counter, she'd demand that I put it away right then. She wouldn't answer the phone or take phone calls from anyone, even her mother. Other times, I'd come home to find her in the office with the door closed, talking to someone, crying. I wanted her to get counseling, but the nearest counselors were over an hour away. She wouldn't go. Even now, I want her to talk to someone. She won't.

The air in the house seemed thick. The weight of depression felt like foam that filled the house—that we all had to walk through to get from one place to another.

I saw my father at home less and less. At night, I was already in bed when he came home. He was gone before I was up. My mother was the only one who knew how often he came home. Sometimes he'd leave a list of chores on the dining-room table.

One of my regular chores was mowing the yard at our house and at my grandparents' place. I would drive the open-cab Allis Chalmer with a mower attached underneath. For hours, I would drive in circles, following the path of freshly cut buffalo grass as dirt and bits of grass stuck to my sun-screened legs, arms, face. I could smell the yellow mustard weeds when I

mowed over them. It took three days to finish mowing both yards. The engine noise blocked out everything except my thoughts. I wondered what was going on with my dad. I wondered if he somehow felt responsible for Verdon's death and if this had to do with his behavior. I wondered if some day he'd just leave. I wondered what my mom would do if this happened. I wondered if she'd leave first. When I couldn't figure out the future, I'd daydream about the past.

Growing up, my favorite time was when my dad and I shot baskets in my grandparents' shed. I'd back up a car and pickup to make room to play in one half of the shed. My father soldered together an iron stand out of scrap metal, and attached a wooden backboard with an orange rim and nylon net. We used duct tape to mark the free-throw line. During the winter, my father tinkered with equipment in the shed. But sometimes, as I shot baskets, he would shoot with me. He was a natural shooter, even as he scooted around the concrete floor in his work boots. Although he was self-conscious about his few extra pounds, he had grace as he shot the ball. He could shoot three-pointers long before we had to add the chalk line on the cement. I would rebound and toss the ball out to him. He would raise the ball up and shoot, flicking his wrist down, the ball arching as it went through the iron rim. Then we'd switch, and he'd rebound for me. I was always a better ball handler than a shooter, but he'd encourage me. "Just a little more arch . . . Make sure you follow through . . . Don't worry about that one, focus on the next one."

Now, when I saw my dad, I could usually smell beer on his breath. I remember feeling heartsick. This was the first time I'd ever felt this way towards my father. I'd learn to feel this way about him a lot. He didn't show up at my college graduation. He almost missed my wedding because he was busy in the field. I walked myself down the aisle.

One day as I mowed, he pulled into the yard and flagged me down. I shut off the tractor. He said he needed help putting disks on the cultivator at Grandpa's house. Growing up, I'd often helped my dad tighten bolts in hard-to-reach areas of machinery. My hands were smaller than his.

I jumped off the tractor and climbed into the pickup. Empty beer cans cluttered the floorboard. I kicked them out of my way as I stepped inside. My father lit a cigarette and inhaled long drags. His face appeared thinner; his shirt seemed to hang on him. I wondered if the cigarettes suppressed his appetite. I rolled down the window and used it as an armrest. George Strait played on the one FM station the radio could get. I'd made this trip from our house to my grandparents' house a thousand times. More often

than not, at some point in the drive my dad would tousle my hair and say, "Ah, Dane, you big knucklehead." He'd chuckle to himself and keep driving.

For the first mile, I looked out at the cows that milled around inside our neighbors' pastures. We crossed the intersection, and my dad slowed down to a crawl. One of our fields sat on the left-hand side of the road. He looked out across the rows of corn that stood a couple feet tall. I never knew exactly what he was looking at. I knew he looked at the coloration of the plants and any signs of abnormalities. I knew he was looking to make sure the sprinkler wasn't stuck. I'm sure there were more things to be concerned with; I just didn't know what they were.

Once we'd neared the end of the field, he sped up. At the corner, we turned west. I noticed a young guy, probably my age or a little older, in a John Deere tractor, disking summer fallow. I didn't recognize him—probably someone's hired man for the summer. I waved, as most people do in the country, and he smiled and waved back.

My father said, "You shouldn't wave at him; he'll be horny the rest of the day."

"What?" I must have heard him wrong. My father had never said anything like this to me before.

"You'll give him a hard-on for the rest of the day."

I sat stunned. I didn't know what to say. I should have told him to watch his mouth. But I didn't. I'd been raised not to talk back to my parents, not to disrespect them. My face turned red, but I stayed silent.

I still use silence as a defense; my husband hates it. He wants me to yell when I'm upset, or at the very least tell him when I'm angry. But I usually revert back to silence. It's what I know best.

When we pulled into my grandparents' yard two miles later, I told him I needed a drink of water. I'd meet him out in the shed. I went inside, drank a glass of water, and convinced myself that the alcohol made that comment. Once I calmed down, I walked out to the shed to help him with the disks.

That summer, I drank as much as I could, as often as I could. I became loud. Shannon and I stayed out all night on the weekends, drinking with friends, staying the night with whoever would let us sleep on their couch, their floor, their bed. There were days when I could hardly make it through my chores because of hangovers and lack of sleep. A couple of times,

Shannon and I stumbled into the house around five thirty in the morning. One early morning, my father sat on a kitchen chair, putting on his boots. The sun cast small rays of light onto the cream-colored linoleum from the window in front of the kitchen sink.

"Coming in a little late, aren't you?" He cleared his throat. "—or is it early?" His voice still had that raspy morning sound.

"I guess." I shrugged.

He didn't bother to look up. He took his boot in his hands, tucked his fingers in the bootstraps, and raised his leg, pushing his foot into the boot.

The summer before, he would have acted like a father. He would have made a comment to ensure we wouldn't do it again. At the time, I thought that he must have been distracted by the guilt of Verdon's death. He must have felt responsible—he should have reminded Verdon to take out the bullet; he should have stayed longer talking to him, and maybe he wouldn't have cleaned the gun. He should have heard the gun fire when he was in the pickup and then turned back and called 911. He must have thought at some point, *It should have been me.*

But maybe Verdon doesn't have anything to do with it. Maybe Verdon's death left an imprint on my mind that gave me a time line to mark the beginning of my father's change. Maybe my father would have turned into this other person even if Verdon hadn't died.

When my father stood to leave, he said, "I need to cultivate the field on the county line. Why don't you come pick me up around seven and take me back to Grampa's place to get my pickup."

I shuffled downstairs to my room, set my alarm for an hour and a half of sleep, then woke up and followed my father's instructions.

I can't tell you how I knew my father was having an affair. I didn't see him with anyone. I didn't overhear a conversation. I didn't find incriminating evidence to suggest it—except for staying out all night. Even that can be rationalized by his drinking. But I knew. The secret became a seed planted deep in my stomach that grew until I could barely eat. I didn't tell anyone.

After my parents' divorce, I learned that his girlfriend, Susie, who he eventually married, had a house about eight miles away from ours. I still don't know exactly where it is; I don't want to know. I learned she graduated high school in Yuma, like my father. I learned she didn't go to college, and worked with her ex-husband in the fields. I learned her ex-husband beat her. I imagine to her, recently divorced from an abusive husband, my

father must have seemed like a chance at a better life. But maybe my father saw her as a second chance, too. Maybe he saw someone who could help him in the field, someone who loved living in the country. Maybe he saw in her someone who could survive the landscape in a way my mother didn't seem capable.

After my father and Susie married, I learned if something happens to my dad, she'll stand to inherit as much of the farm as my sisters, my brother, and me. She'll inherit what my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother paid for.

My mother slowly came out of her haze. Eventually, she would talk to me. We'd have conversations about books, school, and the farm. Oftentimes, I knew more about my dad's whereabouts because he would find me staining the deck or cleaning out the shed or pulling weeds and need me to help him with something. My mom and I never once talked about how he was drunk all the time, or about how little time he spent at the house.

A month or so after she got back from her parents' house, she started to do things that she hadn't done before. She bought a couple new outfits, fixed her hair, and put on makeup even if she wasn't planning to go to town. She made sure the entire house was spotless, clothes washed and hung up, no piles of papers anywhere. She must have been trying to win my father back. But I didn't recognize this at the time. I just liked that she seemed to be getting better.

She started making big meals for lunch, even though my father didn't always come home at noon. He often ate lunch at my grandparents' house because the farm equipment was there. Before Verdon's death, he called on the CB to tell her he wouldn't be home for lunch. Now, he just didn't show up.

One day, he happened to come home for lunch. My mother had made roast chicken, green beans with cheese, mashed potatoes, and white gravy. She'd also made pound cake with fresh strawberries for dessert. My mother had never been what you would call a great cook. Today, she'd outdone herself. The three of us sat at the dining-room table. A plate with several slices of bread sat on the table along with a tub of butter, a knife resting across the lid.

My mom and I talked a bit, but whenever my mom asked my dad a question, he ignored her.

"What field are you at today?" she asked.

I waited for him to answer.

She repeated the question in a slightly louder voice. "Where are you working? Which field?" I noticed she was wearing foundation and pink eye shadow. She had put hot rollers in her hair earlier that morning and set the curls with hair spray.

I looked at my dad. He was focused on his food. He'd taken off his hat to sit at the table. I could see the tan line turn instantly white across his forehead. His dark hair had thinned in the last year. His comb-over couldn't hide his bald spot anymore. I noticed more wrinkles around his eyes.

"Dad, she asked a question, 'Where are you working?'" I asked.

"Oh." He shifted his gaze from his food to the pasture of buffalo grass and blooming cactus. He leaned back and interlocked his permanently greased hands on his lap. He looked out the window, through her, to the trees over a mile away that sheltered an abandoned house. I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to hit him. I wanted to do something. I wish now that I would have confronted him, told him to leave. Instead I told my mom, "He's over at the field by the bins."

"Oh." She pushed the food around her plate. As she sat hunched forward in her chair, she seemed smaller.

She looked up and noticed that the ice cubes in his tea had melted. She jumped up and announced, "Oh look, your ice cubes melted. Do you want some more?" After pulling out plastic ice trays from the freezer, she said, "Here," and plopped two or three cubes into his glass.

After several more minutes of silence, she asked me a few questions. When my father got up to leave, she called after him, "So you'll be home for dinner, right? I'll make a roast or something." He walked out the door without saying goodbye to either of us.

I'm not sure why this meal stands out to me above the countless other meals that occurred the same way during this time. Maybe it's because for the first time, I allowed myself to think that my father might not ever be the same person again, that the father I knew wasn't coming back.

Harvest had always been my favorite time of year. Even though we worked 14-hour days for two or more weeks straight without a day off, I didn't mind. While my father enjoyed almost all aspects of working on the farm, he enjoyed harvest the most, even when the crops didn't do well. As July neared, I began to wash grain trucks, tractors, and the combine. My dad tested the moisture level in the wheat. When the wheat was dry enough, we started harvest.

I learned to drive the grain cart when I was about 14. Driving the grain cart is a precarious job. Ideally, you want to unload on the go, meaning the combine and the grain cart are moving at the same time. You have to keep the tractor tire parallel with the combine's sickle and stay about five feet to the side of the header. The combine's auger extends out to the grain cart pulled behind the tractor and transfers the wheat from its bin into the cart. But as the combine circles the field, the wheat is cut in an uneven line. You have to watch the line of wheat and stay parallel with the header, anticipating the combine driver's actions. If you make a mistake, the tractor tire could run over the header, causing thousands of dollars of damage not only in the cost of repairs but also in time out of the field.

I was always a nervous driver. I sometimes pulled too far away because of my fear, and grain would fall to the ground. My father never yelled about it. He said it was better to lose some grain than ruin the equipment. I eventually got better, more confident, less fearful.

But this summer, my dad drank all the time. He had a cooler of beer in the pickup. He had a cooler of beer in the combine. He drove erratically. I never complained about it, and he never apologized. When I would catch a load of wheat, I feared he would run into me. I was constantly avoiding an accident. In the past, I could watch the line of wheat, knowing the combine's metal guide would be at its edge. I could trust my father. Now he swerved too far out, entirely too close to me. I would veer away, meaning more grain on the ground. He'd overcorrect and pull too far in, leaving a thin strip of wheat standing. I'd finally get back into position, only to have him swerve out again. On a normal day, I would have to unload on the go anywhere from 15 to 20 times. The past six summers, I would get the wheat from the combine, unload it onto a truck, park the tractor, and read a book until I could see the metal extensions of the combine raise, indicating that the bin was full. Usually I could relax, sit in the sun, and enjoy the downtime. Usually I was excited to see the combine's bin full, because the less time I had to relax meant the better the wheat, and the more money my dad would earn. But this harvest year, I began to dread the sign that the combine's bin was full. I was thankful when harvest was over.

I haven't been home for harvest for ten years. The first few years were difficult. My father didn't call and ask me to come back to help. Maybe he knew I would say no. Even still, July makes me more lonesome for the farm than any other month. I hope that every year he feels just as lonely as he hires other people instead of having his family there.

Yet, for the first time since the divorce, my sisters are considering taking their children back for harvest. They've each managed to create some sort of relationship with my father because of their children. While he's gone to visit my sisters, he's never visited me. I don't know how I would react if he did. Maybe I delay having children because I realize having a child would force me to confront a relationship with my father. But maybe he's just as nervous about cultivating a relationship with me. Maybe he worries about doing and saying the wrong thing. Maybe he worries that after ten years of strained relations, I could decide to have nothing to do with him. I could make sure my children, if I have them, do the same.

On most days during that summer, I would wake up and take a run, even if I was hung-over. Then I'd eat breakfast and start on the list of chores. One day, as I returned sweaty and winded from my run, my mother told me to sit down at the dining-room table. She sat in her chair, the one that faced the dining-room wall; I sat in my father's chair, the one that faced the window out to the pasture.

"I've talked to everyone else. They've promised not to say anything about what's going on . . . with your father." She paused, placing her folded hands on top of the table beside her teacup before adding, "But you're the one I'm worried about. You have to promise me you won't write any of this down. You can't put it in your stories or in your journals where someone else might find it." She paused again, tucking a loose tuft of hair behind her ear. She wore one of her new tops, and her makeup seemed too dark for so early in the morning. She asked, "Do you promise?"

I didn't know what to say. I was so confused by what she meant, and hurt that she didn't trust me. My mother had always been a very private person. In small towns, everyone knows everything—most people probably knew what was going on with my father. I can understand now the fear she must have felt about what people might ask her or tell her at the grocery store, at the bank, at a softball game. I think my mother didn't want me to write something that others could find and confirm what they already suspected. At the time, I could only take it personally.

"Not even in my journals?" I asked.

"No."

It took me a few seconds to answer. I thought about the stacks of journals I kept in my room, journals that mentioned everything that was going

on in my life. How could I not write about something that would affect me so deeply? How could I not listen to my mother?

"I promise."

In August, Shannon and I left for college in different states. I don't pretend to know what my mother felt, living in the house for the next eight months by herself. I imagine her sitting in her chair at the dining-room table from early in the morning until late at night. Not moving. I imagine her shuffling around from one room to another, trying to decide what to do. I imagine her taking old clothes in trash bags to Goodwill, packing up books, board games, and linens. I imagine her scared of leaving, tired of staying, lonesome, bored, depressed, crying, screaming, exhausted, miserable. I imagine her staying up all night waiting for my father. I imagine some days she woke up late and didn't change out of her pajamas. My father no longer came home except to change clothes once in a while.

I'm not sure what my father was thinking during this time. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been at times to live with my mother, who I think wanted more from her life but didn't know how to ask for it, who enjoyed aspects of the farm but knew another life existed beyond the horizon.

I like to think that the decision to leave weighed on him, that it infiltrated his thoughts while he drove the tractor, fixed fence, smoked cigarettes. I like to think that it tortured him in a way that only life-altering decisions can torture someone. But I don't know if it did. I don't know what made him stay so long, or what made him leave.

My mother often left for a few days to visit her parents. But she always went back and waited for things to get better. I started to question my mother's commitment to a marriage that was broken beyond repair. Why did she stay? Why didn't she leave? Does being stronger mean you're able to endure more? Or do people show they're stronger when they fold a bad hand, cut their losses, and walk away? I'm still not sure.

My mother later told Shannon and me she stayed as an example to us that when you make a promise to someone, no matter what happens, you need to keep your promise—you need to be the better person. She told us even if we make mistakes, like our father, we can change—we don't have to be stuck in the same bad decisions. She has never badmouthed my father in front of me. She has only expressed sorrow at how things turned out. I know she thinks she was the better person for not leaving, and maybe she was.

But sometimes you have to break a promise, even one you thought you'd never break, to preserve yourself. Placed in the same situation as my mother, I like to think I'd leave.

In the spring of 1996, my father left. My mother struggled for several years to get her life together. She went back to school in Greeley. I lived with her for two years. I found the apartment where we lived, helped her register for classes, helped her write papers, helped her adjust to college life and life on her own. I wouldn't trade how close we became. But while my friends worried about classes, grades, and boys, I constantly worried about my mother—a job I thought should be my father's.

She finished her degree and earned a full-ride scholarship to Denver University to get her master's. She works as an accountant in Omaha now, hardly leaving the house except to go to work and to the grocery store. She has acquaintance friends at work, but no real friends. I talk to her almost every week and visit at least twice a year. Sometimes I wish she would find friends, or maybe meet a nice man to take her to the movies or out to dinner. My siblings and I have all told her that we don't care if she dates or gets married again. She hasn't gone out with anyone since the divorce. Even though it's not the life I would want for her, she seems happy, as happy as she was before the divorce. My husband says we should just be glad she's held down a job for two years. He says I shouldn't pressure her to be more social. And by the same token, he doesn't pressure me to have a relationship with my father.

The last couple of years, my father has called me more often than his previous biannual, random calls. I think it's because my paternal grandparents have both passed away. He knows I have no reason to go back to the farm. He calls from a cell phone when he's on the tractor or feeding calves and talks over the engine noise or the cows' bellows. These sounds are as familiar to me as his voice.

I wonder if my father misses me the way I miss him, the way I miss the farm. I wonder if this is the reason he calls in the middle of chores. Sometimes I want a relationship with my father, but always on my own terms. Maybe some day I'll bury all my hurt and anger and disappointment and heartache into the ground. Maybe I'll walk away from these things and embrace a relationship with my father. But after ten years, I'm still too scared to do this. I can't quite let go of the past; I can't quite trust the future.

The day my mother told me about my father leaving, she picked Shannon and me up from the airport from our spring-break trip. She blurted, "Your dad left. He came and got his clothes and left." She said it with a sigh of relief, and in many ways, it was a relief. It was probably a relief for him, too.

I wanted to run the car off the road and into the ditch. I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell and yell and yell, but I knew it would do no good. I kept quiet, nodded my head, and drove on.