

Bear Dreaming

LORNA MILNE

KASIGLUK, ALASKA, AUGUST 1999

“Lorna! Mike!” The villagers have gathered nearby for a summer fair and a few have spotted us walking down from the airport. “*Waqaa!*” they greet us.

I have looked forward to this homecoming for years, to bringing our daughters back to meet our former students. We shake hands with old friends, hug some, then introduce Ryann and Shauna. “*Kenegnartuq!*” (How pretty!) they exclaim over the girls. Mike and I nod our agreement.

Dressed in a purple fleece jacket, jeans, and knee-high rubber boots, Ryann could pass for a village kid. Shy but curious, she stands to one side, watching as we talk, dark eyebrows furrowed over green eyes. My mother says she’s never seen a child study the world as intently as Ryann does. At thirteen, Ryann has a gaze that leans more toward bemused.

A full foot shorter, Shauna stands at Ryann’s shoulder. At nine she’s pixie-like, with braces and blue eyes and bobbed blonde hair. Even with an ear infection simmering, she hiked the ridges in Denali last week on Ryann’s heels, eager to impress the young ranger who led us. She still looks wan, and I’m anxious to lodge her at our friend’s house, where it’s dry and warm and a litter of sled dog pups awaits.

The following evening the four of us dress in the best clothes we have packed and walk to the gym for a reunion with our students. Even those who now live in other villages have traveled here to visit. Soon a table is full of our favorite Yup’ik dishes—fried bread, dry fish, and *akutaq*: berries and fat whipped into a frothy ice cream. My friend Olga notes that Ryann and Shauna enjoy *akutaq*. “We have *Slaaviqs* for their birthdays,” I tell her. “I make the *akutaq*, Mike the fried bread.” Over the next few days I overhear people telling one another that we hold *Selavi*. They seem pleased that we honor them this way by adopting the Russian Orthodox/traditional Yup’ik blend of gift giving and feasting.

Walking home, Ryann says, "People remember you so well. I don't think I'll remember my teachers like this."

"We grew up together," I tell her. "Some of our students were only two years younger than we were. And they watched Dad and me fall in love. It is their story, too."

The next morning we rustle the girls out of bed early because one of our students is helping officiate at the Russian Orthodox service. "Wait until you see the inside," I tell the girls. "They're not afraid to use bright colors." Upon entering, I'm offered a seat at the back in the one row of folding chairs reserved for older women and guests of honor. I'm surprised—I never sat during the services when I lived here. Seeing plenty of empty chairs and knowing how long it will be, I accept. Shauna ensconces herself on my lap, while Ryann sits down in front with the children. The other adults stand, including Mike.

For the benediction, the priests offer blessings for the start of school and Father Sergie thanks Mike and me for helping him prepare for the seminary. Afterward Mike teases Sergie about the three-hour service. "How long were you going to make us stand?" he asks, putting his arm around Sergie's shoulders as people photograph the two of them. I had forgotten how Mike behaves here—not as pushy as he is among *kass'aqs* (white people). He has recognized almost all of our students as adults and guessed correctly at which children belong to whom.

Sergie grins and comes back, "Mike, how come you look so old? Lorna is the same." Mike does appear older, but only because he looked sixteen when he lived here, plus he hasn't shaved in a week. Nonetheless, Mike bristles; he doesn't like hearing it.

Late that afternoon Mike starts for Montana and the girls and I settle in for a week of visiting and berry picking. First, though, I send the girls off to a half-day of school. Shauna joins the other fourth graders and in Yup'ik class the teacher asks if she wants a Yup'ik name. "I have one," she tells him. "*Anuurluq* (grandmother)." She reports that the children respond in concert, *Anuurluq*, *Anuurluq*, teaching her the correct pronunciation. The rest of our stay, the villagers call her *Anuurluq*.

Around noon my friend Anna Barbara calls "to go to the tundra." When the girls come home Anna leads us beyond the airport to her berrying grounds. Bushes are pregnant with berries, more than I've ever seen on the delta. We fill our bags with raspberries, blackberries, crowberries, blueberries, salmonberries. Anna, Ryann, and I meander, enticed by laden patches ahead, whereas Shauna stakes a territory and pivots until she harvests all the berries within

reach. When she stops chattering, I look for her. Tired, she has curled up on a dry hummock in red rain jacket, red rain pants. A small girl berry.



We three share a cold that week and are draggy in turn. One night, hot with fever, I dream:

Mike is cussing at me and I try to leave him but I am stuck. When I finally leave, people ostracize me. B is in it and another woman who is unhappy with me because of what Mike has told her. I try to arrange for the women to meet since they are of the same ilk. The crux is this agonizing feeling of being stuck—unable to break away.

HELENA, MONTANA, AUGUST 2000

The phone rings in the middle of the night. We both get up but I let Mike answer, afraid it's news about his father. Mike says, "Yes, I see . . ." I listen for emotion in his voice, and hearing none, I decide I am wrong about the call.

Mike hangs up. "He died about an hour ago," he says. Then he walks down the hall and goes back to bed. Why is he acting so strange, I wonder. Ever since Cliff fell, causing massive hemorrhage in his brain, Mike has been distancing himself from his father. He could be in Connecticut now with his mother and siblings but he came home five days ago, even though they knew Cliff would die within the week. He's hardly talked about his father since coming back.

I wish Mike had hugged me or let me hug him. I go sit on the couch, sad and stunned.



My mother sends me a dream journal for my birthday. I think it is wonderfully intuitive of her because my mother and I rarely talk about dreams. The journal opens the floodgates—I begin having the most vivid of dreams.

Mike and I are crossing a river, swimming. I swim on my back and as we cross Mike supports my torso. The water is turbid, the banks are wild, much like an Alaskan river. I realize I can swim solo but for some reason I am letting Mike carry me.

When we reach the far bank we go under a brown canvas tent and start kissing. I respond eagerly, trusting Mike more than I do in real life. As we make out, part of me splits off enabling me to see both inside and outside of the tent. A brown bear comes and rakes at the canvas, wanting me to stop. I wait for the bear to rip open the tent, wondering where to escape to, when I notice the riverbank is unstable. Then a golden light fills the tent. As I wake, I meld into the light.

HELENA, JULY 2002

I sit in the Trooper after everyone has gone into the house. Something is terribly wrong. Earlier in the week Mike invited me to the county fair because he had agreed to chaperone Shauna and her friends. But the whole evening he walked with his arms squeezed across his chest, as if he was afraid I'd take his hand. On the way home he drove recklessly, nearly ramming the hind end of a car and yelling at me when I asked him to slow down.

I honestly don't know how much longer I can stay in this marriage. Maybe I shouldn't have gone backpacking with Ryann and our friends, right after Mike returned from a three-week business trip. But I had promised Ryann—it was her first backpacking trip—and with Shauna away at church camp, I was able to go. When we were alone in the tent we shared, my friend asked about Mike, saying her husband is worried about him. "It's sad he's gotten so thin," she says. Mike hardly grieved, at least outwardly, when his father died two years ago. Perhaps this is delayed grief. I resolve to call my friend's husband, ask him if he'll talk to Mike. At a loss, I trudge up the stairs to say goodnight to the girls and find Ryann settling into bed.

"I don't know what to do about Dad," I say.

She squirms deeper under the covers. "Don't ask me." Then she looks at me, wise beyond her sixteen years, "Dad knows what it means to be good, but he doesn't want to be. I think he's afraid to live up to his potential."

Even though I am becoming more used to her insights, this one startles me to the core.



I dream: Ryann is practicing the piano and the painting above the piano—a likeness of the girl—falls, shattering into pieces. I can't imagine how anyone can repair it. But a man comes and shows me how to turn the fragments over and sketch them into puzzle-like shapes so we can piece the painting back together. I begin to do so when the scene changes . . .

HELENA, JULY 2002

I say goodnight then go downstairs, where I find Mike typing at his computer. He clicks out of his screen when I approach. I sit on the edge of Mike's desk, startling myself by what I say now. "It doesn't seem like you want to be a part of this family anymore. I think you should sleep downstairs, until you decide what you want."

He looks off into the distance. "Maybe you're right," he says. I am surprised he agrees so quickly; he's never liked to sleep apart. I go upstairs and get ready

for bed then return to the landing. I hear Mike typing: this incessant typing that has been an undercurrent for months. When I asked him about it he said he was keeping a journal for the men's group he's joined.

I begin to creep down the stairs. I don't know why. I haven't planned it. I just know to go. I avoid the squeaky places in the stairs and reach the bottom without him hearing me. He types, then looks off to his left, thinking, brushing his chin across his knuckles in a slow wag like I've seen him do a thousand times. Then he types some more.

I watch for several minutes, growing cold in my nightgown in the warmth of the July evening. My body tenses and my mouth goes dry. When I've seen enough I walk up behind him, looking at the screen. He minimizes his letter when he hears me.

"Who are you writing?" I ask, sitting where I sat earlier in the evening, willing my voice calm. His face, then his throat, drains of color.

"Mike, I know something is going on, you've been acting weird for months. Who are you writing?"

"No," he shakes his head. "I'm not ready to tell you."

"You have to tell me."

"No," he says.

"Mike, I'm not going away."



... We are in a house similar to ours and it starts to rain. Soon we can see that it is going to flood. I run around trying to find life jackets. Ryann seems to be okay, but Shauna can't swim. She is still in diapers so I have to clean out the diapers in the floodwater, getting messy in the process. The one thing I remember, besides trying to rescue the girls, is people telling me, your house will never be the same after a flood.

HELENA, JULY 2002

"Maybe it is time," Mike says.

In the family room Mike sits on the toy box that I bought Ryann with my first check from freelancing. I sit far away on the couch, wondering if he'll warp the lid.

"I'm writing Monica," he says.

"Monica?" I try to place the name.

"My family's exchange student."

"Oh," I say, vaguely remembering that on his mother's last visit she brought a letter from Monica. I came downstairs to say good night when she was showing Mike the letter, but I didn't take the time to read it.

As I listen to Mike, I begin to tremble. The last time I shook like this I was with Mike in our village's phone office in Alaska, and my mother was telling me that my beloved grandmother had died two days earlier. "Stop shaking," Mike had said, all those years ago. He didn't hug me, or touch me, just told me to stop. I remember trying to stop, but I couldn't.

This time, Mike begins a veritable list that I'll hear variations of in the weeks to come: he doesn't love me anymore; he hasn't loved me for years; he married me because we lived together in Alaska and he felt obligated; he loves Monica. Then he adds something that reveals his state of mind: he doesn't feel loved by Ryann and Shauna. I want to say, it is your job to love them; they are your children, you are not theirs. But I don't say anything. It is obvious Mike has rehearsed this moment for a long time—he is leaving his family in the way he approaches most everything: methodically. Only I have upset his timing.

"We can do this gracefully, Lorna," he says. I look hard at him, shaking my head in disbelief. Having heard all I can bear, I go up to bed. I don't believe Mike, that he doesn't love me. But he believes it. Some unaccounted for anger is behind all the hurtful things he has said; I saw flickers of it cross his face.



A dog starts to bite me. At first the bite is mild nipping. Then it bites harder and harder, and I am in a lot of pain. I am on my knees and a number of men stand in a half circle around me. They can see I am being hurt but they don't care. None of them help me.

HELENA, JULY 2002

Lying on my side I face the small ceramic lamp on our bedside table. My mind reels through the last eight months: Mike obsessively exercising since Christmas, nine hundred sit-ups some days, push-ups, lifting weights to the point that he injures a shoulder, growing his hair long, tanning on his lunch hour. And his not eating: taking a yogurt for lunch, having a small salad for dinner. One night at supper Ryann said to him, "You eat less than I do." By March I found myself eating for him, trying to give sustenance to this man who was both hardening and disappearing before our eyes. In April I called a friend who treats anorexia and asked her about the symptoms. Then, after a visit from my parents in early May, when they too expressed concern for Mike, I called my doctor's office and made an appointment for him. I asked the nurse to alert the doctor that Mike had lost at least twenty pounds in five months and I was concerned.

Around 3:00 AM I switch the lamp on for company. In the light I remember the one phrase I was able to read before Mike clicked out of his screen:

“The vision I have for our family.” With a jolt I realize he isn’t referring to our family; rather he is so far down the road with this woman that he is envisioning their family.

I search the shelf for the black Bible Methodists give to their third graders and turn to the Psalms, finding enough comfort to sleep for half an hour. When I climb out of bed the next morning, on the day we have scheduled a hike to celebrate my forty-fifth birthday, I am aware there is one thing my daughters and I need. And that is my strength.



I am driving down Ninth Avenue, taking the girls to school, when a tornado hits and a bare tree with thick limbs crashes to the street. A female presence in the passenger seat, a composite of my closest friends, says, “Swerve and you’ll miss the tree.” And I do. Then my dashboard grows higher and I can’t see ahead of me.

HELENA, JULY 2002

The hike is a disaster. I can’t stop crying and am dizzy with fatigue. We hike a short distance along the Continental Divide, Mike’s mind somewhere else, the girls confused about my tears. At one point Mike and I drop behind the girls and I ask him if he knows what he’s doing. “You have such a nice family,” I say. “You might replace me, but you’ll never be able to recreate Ryann and Shauna.” Mike looks stricken, as if I’ve said the one thing he can’t rationalize his way through. Then he bolts.

Poor Ryann, when we get home she has terrible diarrhea, which continues on and off for the next several months. I tell her that Dad is having an affair and I’ve asked him to move out. Her eyes well up, but she doesn’t cry. I can’t bring myself to tell Shauna. Not yet.



I dream that an old boyfriend, the first boy I loved, is visiting me. He has brought a brown suitcase full of paraphernalia to remind me of our time together. He opens it to chronicle what’s within: he plays an old song that we liked, shows me old photographs. We have no sexual attraction, rather it is a remembering of this original love and I feel so loved. When I wake, I still feel loved.

HELENA, AUGUST 2002

I stand at the top of the stairs, waiting for Mike to go. He has said good-bye to the girls, who are in the backyard crying. Sometimes—when I can think about others, my concentration is so poor—I wonder about our neighbors. I have called all of my family members from the Adirondack chair on the back

deck, broadcasting the sordid details. I feel badly the neighbors have become unwilling witnesses, but I need to be outdoors when there is so much pain inside, just like the girls do now. Last night Shauna and I camped in our family's favorite site on the Blackfoot River just over the divide, while Ryann camped with her friend's family. Mike spent his last night in our house packing.

He is taking too long to leave, I think, watching him hesitate on the stairs. Then he turns, his color ashen. "I've been with Monica," he blurts.

I stare at him, not comprehending; Monica lives in South America.

"She was with me on my business trip," he says. Then he runs out the door.

I feel this news sifting through layers of disbelief. A raw guttural scream fills the room—I am furious that I have allowed myself to be deceived. Furious at Mike. The girls come running.



I dream that Mike is loading his Trooper to go somewhere and I am following him, or there is a sense that I am watching him prepare. We end up in a garage, not ours, but it's similar. Standing on the steps, looking down into the garage, I scream, "You are leaving three of us for one. Three for one."

HELENA, AUGUST 2002

At Ryann's first cross-country meet of the season, Mike tells me he has ended his affair. "Can I go to Glacier with you?" he asks.

"No," I say. "You're too unstable. I can't do that to the girls. Besides, the car is full."

In Choteau, after two wrong turns, we find the log cabin café where we often stop for dinner. When Shauna and Ellie make a beeline for the bathroom, I tell Ryann and her friend John that Mike has ended his affair.

"Really?" they say in concert.

"Yes," I say. "But I don't know how I feel about it." John, who has spent considerable time in our home over the past few months, has told Ryann that he suspected Mike was having an affair but he didn't know how to tell us.

After dinner, I ask John to drive a short stint because my eyes are tired. The narrow windy road makes him nervous so we take it slow. Cresting a steep hill, John slams on the brakes—something is on the road.

"Bear!" John exclaims.

"Mountain lion!" Ellie yells.

"Buffalo," Shauna says.

"No, elephant," Ryann quips. We laugh.



I am taking a course called “The Feminine Face of God” led by our female minister. We reinterpret women found in the Bible, casting them in a more favorable light. After the first class I dream:

I am on the way to Teller Wildlife Refuge for the writing conference to speak to a roomful of folks. When I arrive, I am seated at the table and the participants begin to ask me questions I can't answer. They mistake me for someone else, I think. I'm not who they think I am. This line keeps repeating itself in my dream: I'm someone other than whom you think. After a while I can answer one woman's question. Mostly, though, I have a horrible sense of disappointing them. It is nearly time to eat and I'm not sure if I'll be included in the meal. I go to the kitchen where I find Mary, the cook. She is grumpy (at the real conference she was kind), and she tells me, yes, I can eat. I then find the director and tell him, "I'm not who they think I am." When I say this, it is very freeing.

GLACIER NATIONAL PARK, MONTANA, AUGUST 2002

In Glacier we choose a thirteen-mile hike to Iceberg Lake. Shauna and Ellie trail behind to discuss the start of seventh grade, “The first day let's wear . . .” John and Ryann alternate between hiking with me and ahead of me. I am grateful for their company as well as for the time alone.

I hike tirelessly, driven by adrenaline and a need to move. I have been poring over my journals, thinking about whether or not I want to stay married to Mike. In the early years in Alaska I hear a young woman whose prose distances her from acknowledging that while she may love her husband, he isn't good for her. She shoulders more than her share of responsibility for their problems, continually readjusting to what Mike wants from her. And she worries about the way he flirts with other women and has persistent dreams about him leaving her. She writes, “I don't understand the anxieties I experience with him and women.” It is painful to read; she has so little psychological sophistication and is trying so hard.

At graduate school in New England, Mike spends his time with his fellow business students. Back in school and rarely seeing my husband, I regain some of my former confidence and begin to set boundaries, telling Mike how I feel when he twists what I say, changing the meaning and intent. I quickly learn that Mike cultivates misunderstanding and conflict: when things are going well, or after we make love, he picks a fight. It seems he doesn't want to be close, or to be married.

By the time we settle in my home state our marriage is constrained. Yet we have Ryann, then Shauna, to focus on. And I do. Mike expends most of his energy managing a Computerland franchise, but he never misses the girls' events.

In hindsight it is easy to read how naïve I was—hoping for the best in Mike, believing in it. It makes sense, though. I was raised in a rural setting by good people tautly bound to perseverance and hard work. I expected Mike to grow and offered comments when I didn't see it. Mike heard what I said as criticism and it made him mad. When we met for coffee last week to talk, Mike spat, "All those times we went to counseling, I didn't listen. I'm not interested in changing."

Even so, Mike's new life isn't as enviable as he envisioned. He comes to our door saying he doesn't think he can leave his family, he misses coming home. That's often how it felt—Mike liked the idea of a marriage and a family but not the reality of the work or the sacrifice. His sister describes him as tortured; when she tells him to put his daughters first, he protests, "But what about me? What about what I want?"

At the trail's end I find Shauna and Ellie resting on the pebbly shoreline. They've renamed the lake and its icebergs "the graveyard of the whales." Ellie leaves us alone and I tell Shauna her dad has written Monica and ended their affair. She parrots Ryann's and John's disbelief, "Really?"



Mike and I are traveling somewhere in a buggy. He is cursing at me again and I get rid of him. I don't think I push him off the buggy, or murder him, but he is gone. When the buggy stops a group of angry townspeople encircle me and accuse me of his disappearance. I have no answers for them.

HELENA, AUGUST 2002

After dropping off Ellie and John, the girls and I drive back across town. "Dad will call tonight," I say. "How do you feel about his news?"

Neither of them wants Mike to come home. The last eight months have been harder than any of us appreciated—Mike withdrawn and defensive, trying to make it easy to leave—and now that the house is peaceful, we are reluctant to give it up. I reassure them that I haven't decided anything for certain. I've told Mike that he can't come home anytime soon, and only if the girls are comfortable with him returning.

"Mom," Ryann says. "He'll just hurt you again. You're the only one who worked at it."

"Do something else," Shauna says. "Write a book."

How can they be so clear, I think, when I feel so muddled? Pulling into the driveway I notice that the lawn is left unmown. Mike had said he'd come up to our house and do yard work, trying to make amends.

When he calls I let the girls answer before I talk to him. Right away I can tell something is wrong. “You didn’t write her, did you?”

“I was confused that day,” he says.

I hang up knowing I have to divorce him. If I had any inclination of taking him back, it is gone.



I am at a formal ball and there are six different dances, six choices I can make. I can’t make up my mind which one to choose.

HELENA, AUGUST 2002

Mike wants to mediate a divorce—this man who competes at everything, who now hopes to secure a new wife at little expense to himself. My father forewarns me, “Mike doesn’t want the responsibility of a family. He thinks you can take care of the girls, and he’s going to let you.”

I call two women I know who have gone through a divorce, retain a good lawyer, and file. I leave Mark’s office shaking; I know this will be a contest in which I will have to work tirelessly to receive my rightful share.



I am in a big, white, light room with someone who is at first charming and whom I trust. Then he begins to bite me, taking big chunks out of me. He starts with my torso then proceeds to my arms. I try to protect my hands. Even though I am being consumed, I can’t get out—the room becomes a cage.

HELENA, SEPTEMBER 2002

The college where I teach brings in a Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, to talk to the students about sexuality. I take Ryann, who is two years from college. Although Rohr focuses on the experience of college students, he is an expert on men in midlife in developed countries.

Rohr says our society is experiencing a crisis in spirituality, especially the men. He says we are the first culture that hasn’t naturally taught the mystery of descent, and it is a terrible lie and illusion that society is one upward movement. Therefore many men, at least men who have led privileged lives, don’t know how to descend when they encounter a crisis. He says that in the past women have learned early the mysteries of descent, although this may change for younger women who are experiencing more success and upward momentum than in previous generations. Men, he says, have to be taught how to deal with their pain or they will try to remain a perpetual adolescent, stretch out

the ascent, keep playing games with money, power, women. At some point, Rohr says, a man shouldn't have to keep telling the world why he's the center of the world.

What Rohr says makes more sense to me than anything else I read or hear: if people don't know what to do with their pain, they almost always project it, make others responsible. Rohr reminds the students that great spirituality is always telling you to change.



I am holding a naked baby on my lap and an animal is attacking me. The animal isn't recognizable; it is mostly fangs. I am afraid it is going to take the baby, which seems to represent my reclaimed self. It takes me a long time to decide what I'll give up, what piece of myself—I know I have to give up something. Finally I decide it can have my leg, not my arm, nor the baby. I kick out my leg, hoping I'll be strong enough for its bite. I am terrified of how painful it will be.

MISSOULA, MONTANA, SEPTEMBER 2002

After I drop Ryann off to catch the team's bus, I begin to cry. Mike's plane for the East Coast, where he will meet Monica, leaves within the hour. In the last four weeks I have discovered that his brother Scott hosted Mike and Monica's tryst in July, and now his mother is receiving them at her house. Only one sister sees it for what it is; Mike no longer calls her. Having believed that I had a good relationship with his family, I am so hurt my whole body aches. Mike could not have contrived a more dishonoring and painful way to separate, short of shooting me.

On the two-hour drive to Missoula I sob, grateful for the quiet roads. At the meet, a large invitational, Ryann's stomach is hurting again. Halfway through I lose sight of her and am afraid she has dropped out, but she ends up running an incredible race.

There is no father to witness it.



I dream that Monica is coming and I have to confront her. A friend is helping me flee through a cornfield, while another person is haunting me, lurking between the rows. Then I am trapped, or agree to a meeting, a reconciliation of sorts at the edge of the field. Members of Mike's family arrive in shadowy forms; the dead come too. The ones I remember are his grandma (we have the same birthday) and behind her a shade of her husband—we never met but we share a love of ornithology. Scott is old and his wife is really small, half Scott's size. They line up and approach me, not speaking, drifting like spirits. I receive them one by one.

HELENA, DECEMBER 2002

When it is dark and I am alone in my car, driving to pick up one of the girls, I scream. I scream until my throat hurts. I scream I am so mad. Over the last year Mike has not made one decision benefiting anyone but himself.

Currently, he is in Argentina for a month. It is the third time in six months that Mike has left the daughters with whom he claims he wants a relationship. Two days before he flies out, one week from Christmas, I meet him in court because he has stopped all financial support. In a maneuver to set himself up to pay as little child support as possible, he testifies that he is available any time to take or pick up his children, so yes, I should be seeking additional employment.

A ride home from school? From Buenos Aires?



Seven days after discovering Mike's affair, I dream of two young lionesses weaving through the countryside. They are close, their movements in sync, a strong lovely pair. There is confusion, though, a sense that they are being misled and have lost their direction in the tall grass. The lionesses take a few steps, pause, then glide forward again. Despite their plight, they are beautiful to watch.

For days the image of the lionesses' bewilderment pricks at me. Then in one blessed moment, on a day when I feel adrift in a muted underworld, I grasp that the lionesses are Ryann and Shauna: it is they who have lost the most. They have lost the rare security an intact family can provide—advantages they were used to and deserved, as every child does—and a father they can look up to. Although their feelings for their aunts may deepen, I doubt they'll ever recapture their original affection for their paternal grandmother. By not holding himself accountable for his behavior, and by involving his family, Mike created even more loss for his children. My daughters, however, will have to make some sort of peace with their father. I cannot know how this will happen or what it will look like, given Mike's current state. Yet I remind myself, the lionesses are a strong lovely pair.

HELENA, MARCH 2003

By its nature, divorce is a process of humiliation. Nonetheless, there are actions people can take on your behalf that help: the bank teller and credit card operator who closed joint accounts when I told them my story; the kindness with which my doctor treated me; the respect my lawyer gave me; the many, many people who asked, how are you, how are the girls.

I didn't put on facades in public when I was unhappy with Mike, which

made me vulnerable to criticism. What becomes apparent, though, is that most of the advice I receive is colored by people's own experiences or obsolete beliefs about divorce. I begin to appreciate that not many people read others' lives accurately—we are essentially still a mystery to one another. In sifting through the comments, some rise and sustain me on bad days. One friend says, "This isn't about how you and Mike got along, it's about Mike." Another reminds me, "It wasn't that good before, was it?" And my counselor, "No one can meet all those needs" (in reference to Mike's list). And the friend who loved us both, after weeks of trying to reach Mike through reason, "I'll always believe it would be best for Mike if he returned to his family, but I'm no longer sure it would be best for you." And Ryann, "Dad lived in our imaginations."

These and other things ground me: especially the weekly coffee dates with three dear friends who clear their calendars on Friday mornings to listen and give advice as I navigate through legal and emotional morass. Hilarity isn't a stranger to us—in March we clink our cups in a toast to Montana when sixteen inches of snow dump on the day Monica arrives to visit Mike, three months before our divorce is final.



My childhood friend and I are at Chico Hot Springs for our annual getaway. Cindy is waiting for me in the lobby while I walk my dog. When I come in from the cold I notice that I am wearing boots of different colors, as well as shirts upon shirts. Cindy begins to help me peel the shirts off, layer by layer.

HELENA, MAY 2003

My lawyer and I meet with Mike and his lawyer to clarify some accounts. Twice Mark and I leave the conference room because Mike argues relentlessly on each issue. As we leave the second time Mark says, "I can't believe how wearing he is. I'm exhausted." Then he adds, "We're getting you out of here."



I am in a fire in a basement, a deep basement. A man is climbing the stairs beside me to escape. As we climb, small fires flare up between the risers, forcing us to stop and smother them. We are getting closer to the top—light filters through a crack under the door—yet fires continue to spark.

HELENA, JANUARY 2004

I think about the slow grace of these days. Always before the tension of not getting it right: wanting Mike to care more than he did, wanting to show more affection than I did.

I could have been a kinder partner to Mike. People say to me, you are better off without him. It is true: I am better off because of the way things went, but all of us would have been best off if we had become a healthy family. I remember once, after a long period of not being affectionate toward Mike, I kissed him and asked him how he was doing. He responded, "Me?" as if he couldn't believe I'd ask after him.

Before we had children, when I saw Mike didn't really want to be married, and I had been a good candidate to save him from isolation in Alaska, I should have mustered the courage to leave. Perhaps I wanted children too badly. I am so sorry I didn't take care when I knew on many levels this relationship was not a nourishing one. That we caused one another so much pain.



One night I dream:

There is a man I am attracted to. He is dark-skinned (the husband I have yet to meet), perhaps Native American. We are flirting, drawing closer. A woman watches: she is both guardian and conscience in one. I know she's close by but I avoid looking at her. She offers me a necklace, says it will keep me from getting pregnant. It is in the shape of a serpent and when I put it on it brands me. This man whom I desire so much, we make love, but tentatively.

COTTONWOOD GARDENS, HELENA, AUGUST 2004

I meet Jon at a picnic concocted by good friends of his and mine. He is the first man I date after divorcing Mike, and the last. Jon has been single for six years, going out some, but mostly intent on raising his two daughters who are close in age to Ryann. Jon tells me that his younger daughter left this afternoon to begin school in Minnesota. By his description, he is in rough shape.

Three days short of a year from when we meet, Jon and I marry, surprising even our matchmaking friends. Shauna benefits from Jon's care and protection all four years of high school, and he often travels to Ohio with me to visit Ryann at college. After spending a fall remodeling, we move into his hundred-year-old farmhouse; Shauna joins 4-H and raises pigs, to round her out, Jon likes to say.

Jon and his farm soothe the three of us. He helps Ryann through financial disputes with Mike over college and gives ballast to Shauna. Shauna sees Mike on occasion; she reports that Mike treats Monica better than he treated me, and he hopes to retire in Argentina.



The winter before I marry Jon I have four jobs, one of which is substitute teaching in the high schools. In an art class I show a film on symbolism that

says bear dreams are useful in healing, and in some Native American cultures, bear dreamers obtain power that is helpful in warfare. Ursidae, it seems, don't discriminate—they're willing to help kass'aqs too. I wonder if I'll ever dream of bears again. Then late that winter:

I am hiking along a trail in springtime and come upon a large track clearly imprinted in the mud, facing away from me. When I bend to examine it, I see by the broad pad and the four-inch claws that it is a grizzly. Normally bear sign frightens me, but I am aware this bear has moved on and bodes me no ill will.

COTTONWOOD GARDENS, HELENA, JULY 2006

Even though I have no reason to feel as I do, I cannot shake my apprehension. Much of the summer Jon and I have anticipated this evening of potluck and barn dance: cleaning and burning and sowing and watering. My parents have driven across Montana to be with us, as have our daughters plus a niece and her boyfriend. I should feel content and safe, certainly the dominant feeling of these past two years. Rather, I feel disquieted. Usually I can shake bad feelings with a good night's sleep, but this one came on yesterday and was still in me this morning.

I scan the crowd for Jon. There, a tall, dark, broad-nosed German, he's easy to spot. He stands with his hands clasped in front of him, his feet planted: his lawyer look, Shauna calls it. I'm again struck by how much I like him. Two women and a man visit with him. I have a wife's hunch that one of the women is attracted to him, yet I understand her attraction: he is kind and steady and interesting to talk to. Many people are attracted to him. Tonight, neither my understanding nor the reassurance that he is the most loyal of husbands composes me.

Hungry, I head for the tent, hoping food will help—I am determined to enjoy the barn dance. Having been married for only a year, Jon and I have had few opportunities to dance. And I know I'll eventually figure out what ails me.



Right before waking, I dream I am trying to get to class but am barred by several beautiful draft horses with shiny chestnut coats. I cower as they encircle me, afraid one will bite me. Instead, they bend their heads, lift me with their noses, and carry me across the stable. When they reach the far wall, they place me in front of a doorway. Seeing the door for the first time, I think, "If I walk through that door, I will be at peace."

In one month's time Jon and I will drop Shauna off at college in St. Louis. We have never lived without children in our home and we are both excited and anxious, hence our trip to Alaska. On our third day in Denali Jon signs us up for a ridge hike led by a five-foot-two-inch former gymnast. Because the fog curtain hangs low, our guide scraps the ridge, selecting a tundra ramble. Blueberries are ripening by the hour so I tuck away a plastic bag to gather them in. After dinner last night, I donned Jon's heavy black raincoat and rain pants over mine and continued plucking until I had enough for a pie. Not an obsessive berry picker, Jon attended a slide show instead. Meeting back in our room, he recounted how the mountaineer interrupted his slides with: "Look, a black bear's eating berries." Jon looked out the window, then laughed, "That's my wife."

A few hours into our tundra hike, Jon and I observe that our gymnast-guide is disoriented. After several compass readings and keen listening for the gurgles of Moose Creek, our destination, she decides to backtrack. Or this is her aim. Lost in fog, we dip too far south and become trapped in a drainage, which requires several willow crossings. In Alaska it's best to avoid willow thickets because bears lounge in them, especially in bad weather. Even in ideal conditions one can't see more than five feet ahead.

Our group members range from college students to a sixty-nine-year-old. All of us are prepared, but only the guide carries pepper spray. I follow the sixty-nine-year-old, retrieving her from the willows when a branch springs and upsets her balance. She is fit but small, and bushwhacking requires experience and mass. I step on the branch, secure my footing, then shift my weight, a technique I learned tramping underbrush while hunting with my brothers. Jon, who has spotted nearly every specimen of wildlife on every bus since arriving, is behind me. Knowing he won't see a bear in time to warn us in these conditions, he has turned his attention to the ground. Specifically, to look for scat. We had black bear scat in our garden last fall but grizzly scat is monstrous in comparison, long hairy braids of waste. I remind myself that Denali's bruins are mellow, mostly vegetarian, and we are eleven strong, but scat is everywhere and some of the deposits are as fresh as the day.

We begin to see bear digs as well, after the spunky arctic ground squirrels that have been chirping at us from their perches. Do they chirp when they spy grizzly, I wonder? At the edge of one thicket Jon points out a pattern in the grass: a sunny sheltered animal couch. Just the right size for the two of us.



I dream of Cliff, Mike's dad, who has been dead for eight years. Having lived his last eighteen years with Parkinson's disease, Cliff walked so bent over by the time he died that it was difficult for him to see ahead. But in my dream he looks vibrant: standing tall, in light clothing, his white beard neatly trimmed, his skin and eyes healthy. He is collecting items, hand-sized: they look like puppets. He assembles three of them (I believe me and my daughters) in front of him.

BOB MARSHALL WILDERNESS, MONTANA, AUGUST 2008

Ryann, who is house sitting and garden tending for us, chases us down in Alaska. She wants to know if I'll go backpacking with her and Shauna the day after we get home. "Not far," she says. "Up the Dearborn." She wants Jon to come too, asks almost shyly, but he has to go back to work.

"Okay. You girls get the gear ready. Lay it out in the living room." Later I remember that the last time I hiked up the Dearborn was on Ryann's first backpacking trip six years ago, right before I found out about Mike's affair.

On the way out of town we stop and buy a small can of pepper spray to supplement a can we're sure is shot. We make it to our campsite by mid-afternoon; I am pleased by how strong I feel, how willing the girls are to take the lead. But that night, when it comes time to sleep, I lie awake listening. It has been years since worry of bear has kept me awake; since the girls were little, really. Maybe it is the fast transition from Alaska to Montana that's unsettled me. I know I miss Jon, who shares the burden of care with me. Here it is just we three again, and it is I who am responsible for my daughters' safety. Such a practical piece of evolution—a mother's drive to protect her offspring—so strong it prevents sleep in even the weariest. I work out a strategy, put the bear spray where I can reach it, say a prayer, and fall asleep. Despite my ritual against danger, I dream a bear sniffs at our tent and yell out a warning. Shauna wakes me with, "It's okay Mom."

Then, as night shifts back toward day, I see my daughters unzip the tent flap, waltz out in the dark, and crouch in the tall grass.