

## **Crossing the McKenzie**

By Kirsten Larson

Early that spring, before I learned to read, before my brother was born, my mom and dad and I ate dinner at the table like we did every evening. My Dad was home from work with moon slivers of dirt under his fingernails. Usually before dinner mom told him to clean up, but that day he still wore his work clothes. He smelled like trees in fall.

From the living room Johnny Cash sang deep about trains. Our house smelled of the meatloaf on my plate, my favorite dinner. I had to put on just enough catsup, not too much or my mother would take the bottle from me.

My mother sat, not eating, but had a glass of scotch in front of her. Her arms were crossed, a cigarette between the long, slender fingers of her right hand.

My mother wedged the cigarette hard into the ashtray. Half-whispering she said to my father, “Why don’t you eat dinner with your girlfriend?”

My father jumped up—his thighs caught the edge of the table. Meatloaf, potatoes, and peas fell off the thin Corning Ware plate onto the yellow oilcloth. Milk glasses tipped. My mother’s cruet of Italian dressing rolled onto its side, oil and red vinegar bled out. I dropped the bottle of catsup onto my plate. My breath pulled in quick, beside me my hands hung useless.

My father’s back was to me, he pushed my mother hard to the kitchen wall; our green plastic clock fell, an awful crack against the floor.

My father’s hands were around my mother’s thin neck, his body pulled back, shoulders down, his arms straight out. She pried at his fingers, gritted her teeth. She growled a noise.

My father’s hands were stained dark and big against her smooth neck.

He held her up against the green and gold teacup wallpaper, in the kitchen of the only house I knew. I didn’t know the words full moon, continent, or galaxy, but when I learned them,

what they meant, they had less claim than my mother and father in that room, in that house, where so much that happened to me happened.

I'd later learn that the only word for something that big is love.

My mother's cigarette burned in the v of the ashtray where she'd put it. Slow smoke curled straight up to nothing. My father let go of my mother's neck. On her feet, hands to her throat, she said, "get out."

When my dad left he slammed the door.

Cruet of Italian dressing. No one uses them anymore. My mother loved to say the word cruet.

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A few weeks after the fight in the kitchen, after long rains fed the trees green, the three of us drifted the Mckenzie River in a small drift boat. The cottonwoods smelled like candy along the forested banks packed with smooth rocks. Flowering trees threw pink and white confetti into our hair, drowning confetti the whole way along the loamy edges of the river the three of us drifted.

I looked over the side of the grey, steel boat, deep down into the clear, green Mckenzie, red and green and grey rocks, swaying silt, and circles of sunlight. A whole world, deeper than my dad was tall. The Mckenzie and all its open secrets right there for us.

My dad stood up, pushed and pulled the oar slow against the oarlock at the back of the boat, back and forth. He steered to keep us off of the rocks.

"See any fish?" he asked.

"I do. I do," I yelled.

So startling. Pink and green and silver fish, sun sparked off their sides. Wild, muscular, jutting faces. They pushed around like there was no current. Nothing to resist. They moved in their own way. We were drifters with them on the Mckenzie, but not of the Mckenzie, like them. We moved down current was all. We moved the only way we could.

My father. My dad. He taught me to look for fish.

All day I hung over the side of the flat silver metal of the boat. Looked at fish and sun. Rocks and silt. I breathed warm air until I was deep tired into my stomach.

The sun had slanted to the other side of the river when my mother saw the car. An old car, submerged except for the very top of the roof, a rusty disk the size of my bed in the water. I'd never seen the top of a car before, but I wanted to then. My mother turned her pregnant belly to the rear of the boat, faced my father. Her back was pine-straight.

“Don, do not hit that car. She’s not wearing a life jacket. This water is still too cold. Do not hit that car, I am telling you. Do you hear me?” I’d never heard her talk like that.

My dad’s smile was small.

He steered with quick strokes, crouched down to look around her stiff body. Looked one way, then the other, then one way, then the other then steered our drift boat directly onto the rusted top of the car.

My hip jarred against the metal boat. Right away we spun around in the current, foamy, cold water dumped over the side onto my hot legs. Wet in my saddle shoes. I hung onto the boat with both hands, threw my head back, closed my eyes and laughed up from my tingling chest. Spun like a ride at the fair. Sun on one side, then the other, dark, and light.

Dad and me, we laughed and laughed.

When the boat stopped turning and we were pointed down stream. I put my head back between my shoulders and opened my eyes. Sweaty hair lifted off my skull by the warm wind. My dad oared again, stood straight up, his face open to me, like anything could happen.

But my mother. She turned to the front of the boat, faced me, the curve of her round belly under the big blue shirt, my dad's shirt. Her face, the same look she gave my father that night in the kitchen. Joy sucked somewhere into my body together with my breath. My breath in at my first betrayal and all the hard downward angles of my mother's face.

She gave birth to the baby the next week. Spring had ended.

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The Oregon State Fair took place in August. For weeks, my mother asked, "You want to go to the Oregon State Fair with us, don't you?" To get me to eat my Brussels sprouts. To get me to run to the closet for another diaper for my brother, who was sick. To get me to pick up toys. To be-quiet, please. To stop with that alphabet song.

I taught myself to read from the alphabet song. I followed my mother's long, dry finger across the page, her words, the alphabet song, letters. A page turned and the code became clear. Just like that I saw the words she said: a, an, the. Then bigger words, then stories, then books. In books, other worlds far away from home. I got there myself. I didn't need her to read to me anymore then, which was fine because the baby was sick with colic.

Several times a day he threw up white foam, and then clear yellow liquid. He screamed and screamed, sometimes so hard his fingers went stiff and he'd turn blue. My mother cried then, she made sounds for him.

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The night before we were supposed to go to the Fair I looked out of my bedroom window like I did most nights after dinner. I had no word for mote, but I watched bits of hanging dust sparkle in the site-gold sunslant over the dry, golden grass in our yard. There were black shadows I knew were cool under the low, milky Cedar fronds.

Home was the smell of sweet grass and trees and sun. Home was silence and watching. Home was my mother and father and brother.

My father was in the living room with the news, my mother clanked dirty dinner dishes in the kitchen.

Then my dad called out. My mother's voice answered, loud. I ran fast to them.

"Fire at the Oregon State Fair," he said. A thick, black, cloudy column rolled up to the sky. It took up most of the TV screen.

"What is that?" I asked.

My mother stood in the middle of the living room with her hands on her hips. "Smoke. A lot of smoke. Smoke means there's fire. I don't think we're going to the fair," She said.

Oh no. I sat back on the brown corduroy sofa beside my father, pushed the hard brown nibs of cloth under my fingernails.

"Sure we are. We're not afraid of fire, are we?" My father's hand shook my knees. He never looked away from the television.

My mother said nothing but looked for a long time at my father and then at me before she turned, chin in the air like she was smelling for the far away fire, the soft curves of her face all down, both arms loose at her sides.

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It was a long ride from our home in Eugene to Salem; you have to be patient the whole way to the Oregon State Fair.

My father drove, his elbow bent out of the car window, the curve of his ears, black hair, the smell of him like pepper. My mother was in the passenger seat, her window closed, both vent windows angled cool air over all of us. Her white blonde hair curved the round of her cheek, which was turned away from my father. I sat in the back, behind him.

Black green Douglas Firs streaked by, sun flashed the backs of my eyes. Summer warmed pine and fir, that sweet, dry scent that lined my bones.

My new brother was on his back, asleep beside me, wedged into the seat on a blue blanket. I rubbed the silky edge of it between my fingers, tapped my saddle shoes together. His fine hair lay against his head wet with sweat. The blue veins of his eggshell eyelids. One arm across his chest, his lips moved like he was trying to say the letter P. His body was tiny under the white cotton onesie; three snaps hid his diaper.

That day he slept in the hot car.

Sick with colic.

We passed the spotted cows that I thought had somehow given my brother cow-lick on his way home from the hospital. Heads down, they chewed golden grasses, their jaws worked side to side. I stood up and looked back, but they didn't raise their heads at the dirt our car rolled up.

Once, my father stopped the car there because those cows were jumping from their front legs to their back legs. All over the field, cows jumped. My dad pulled me onto his lap. We looked out of the open car window.

His hands held me up so I could see. "Well, look at that," he said.

“Dancing?” I asked.

“Jumping for joy,” He said.

“Who is Joy?” I asked, and he laughed and laughed at my words.

Every time we passed the cows my dad said, “Jumping for joy.” Every time we passed the cows I asked, “Who is Joy?” But the day of the Oregon State Fair—he didn’t say jumping for joy. That day I didn’t get to ask about joy.

You want to go to the Oregon State Fair with us, don’t you?

Yes, take me with you.

Bodies spoke a language I had to learn: the position of my mother’s head, smooth white arms crossed over her chest, a language without words.

Our car vibrated hard over the wooden bridge that spanned the rushing Mckenzie. Vibrated up my thighs, my bottom, into my chest, quick through my teeth. We had crossed the Mckenzie.

I don’t know why, on that day, the day we went to the Oregon State Fair, my dad didn’t say “There’s the Mckenzie River,” and open his left arm out of the window toward the river, wind between his beautiful fingers—like he always did. Maybe he forgot, or was lost in thought about the fire, which, it turned out, had been set by a patient from the State Hospital out on work relief.

Arson, was the last word my father taught me.

“Daddy,” I had to yell over the rush of sweet, hot, wind in our car.

“Yes sweetheart.”

“Daddy, that was the Mckenzie River.”

“Yes, baby, it sure was.” There was only a tiny hop of joy left in his voice. He raised his head a bit toward the rearview mirror to find me, but I was too far behind him and he didn’t try any harder.