

Sunlight

For Leah the only really good thing about living in the cabin was Sunday mornings when she wedged herself between her father, Calum, and her mother, Marigold, to bask in their warmth like a tabby cat in the sun. Calum and Mari read sheets of music as if they were newspapers, humming parts they found interesting and passing pages back and forth over Leah's sturdy eight-year-old form.

"You are my full-focus child," Calum would say handing her an origami piglet or pelican he folded for her. Leah did not like the black dots and lines and once asked for plain colored paper they had used when they lived in the city.

"This is what we have," Marigold said peering at her daughter over her reading glasses. "Don't fuss or I'll kick you out in the cold."

"Mari," Calum said, "you don't mean that." Leah saw their legs shift under the comforter coming to rest where their ankles locked together in hiding under the sheets. "Mom wouldn't do that, Leah," he said and wrapped his arm around her with a rustle, still holding the music.

"Calum, don't wrinkle the score completely," Mari said but her voice was teasing. "Stay still," she said more firmly, fixing Leah with a stare.

Leah drew in her shoulders and pretended she was a sea lion pup sturdy and small as a football. Inside she smiled. She knew her dad was on her side. He told her once, before they moved to the cabin and the two of them still walked on Saturday mornings to the Amish bake shop for round donuts dusted with powdery sugar and filled with raspberry jelly ruby-red as a princess' lips, that "Mommy can be a little stern." The word, she knew from her illustrated dictionary, meant the back of a boat. That meant that Dad and Leah were in front. Leah could read better than most second graders. Marigold was grateful for that because it kept the kid out of her hair. Calum was relieved because he knew missing a few months of school would not put Leah behind.

Being an only child pleased Leah and she wanted to be good enough at it that her parents would not add to the family. At Thanksgiving, when she said goodbye to her classmates over turkey-shaped ginger cookies and paper cups of apple juice, Mrs. Woll, who helped the teacher, said, "A retreat in the mountains for four months? You could be a big sister by next year, Leah." The other little girls in Leah's row at the picnic table looked at her with wide eyes. A new baby in one family caused ripples of unease in all the children like geological shudders that animals sense. "I don't think so, Mrs. Woll," Leah said. "We're a family of three. We don't even have a dog."

"We'll see," Mrs. Woll teased. "Your mom and dad are still really young."

"No," Leah said as she stood by her seat. "You're wrong. My parents only want me."

Mrs. Woll laughed so some of the children did, too. "Well, aren't you the lucky one." She cleared Leah's cup even though she still had juice to drink.

This Sunday was the eleventh in the cabin. They were more than halfway home, as Marigold said when she drew an orange X through squares on the calendar. The months were filled with Xs beneath photographs of faces made from slices of bell pepper for mouths, olives for eyes, and tomatoes for heads. Leah thought of the Xs as rows of kisses like the ones Calum used to scribble on her brown lunch sack to let Leah know he was sending love with her to school. They should have been happy. For one thing, no one thought they would last so long without television, phone service, an Internet connection or a car. They were survivors and that would make some for some good stories when they got back to the city for house concerts with their friends powered by sushi, beer and wine.

For another, Marigold was thrilled with the score they wrote. This was their first commissioned piece, a children's symphony on rainforest ecology written for a puppet troupe. ("What better place to write about jungles than at 6,500 feet?" Calum joked when they unlocked the cabin in November.) Last week, Marigold spun a cartwheel in the living room to celebrate and Calum kissed her for so long both parents seemed surprised to find a little person staring at them when they parted lips. "I bet no one's

done this since Prokofiev's 'Peter and the Wolf,'" Mari said. Calum reminded her, "There's 'Fantasia.'" And kissed her again.

They should have been happy because once the snow-plow came, which it surely would even to this private road, Calum could walk the two miles to the highway and hitch a ride to the post office. He'd mail off a copy of the score; then they would be paid. They could return the keys of the cabin to Patrick who had loaned them the space, retrieve their things from storage in Calum's mother's basement, and find an apartment. Leah could return to Big Oak School, the Waldorf charter school that the smartest kids attended.

But the family was not happy. For three days, snow had fallen steadily. The sky was so dark they relied on the wind-up clock to tell them the time. Leah, who was very sick, was so unhappy she decided not to think anymore. She endured the stinging in her throat like the million nettles growing by Big Oak's creek, the banging in her head like a hammer in woodworking class, and the aches in her elbows and knees that sent sharp pains through her limbs when she shivered.

"We shouldn't have come," Calum whispered, huddled in bed beside Marigold. A propane generator supplied electricity for their heaters and hot plate. The fuel stores had run low. They planned to wait until eight a.m. to turn on the power. "We'll freeze if this keeps up."

Marigold felt more tired than she ever had; more tired, even than the wretched night Leah was born. "Now that we're done I just want to get out of here and..." barking coughs from Leah interrupted her.

"Poor kid," Calum laid an arm over the pile of blankets on his daughter. Then he moved a hand to feel her forehead. "She's burning up."

"But she's shivering." Groans came from the bundle.

"This is so random."

"I know. She's never sick."

"One day in kindergarten. That 24-hour stomach flu."

"Yeah. That was because that ugly kid came to school all snotty." The child's coughs shook the bed. "Calum," Marigold continued, "is she going to die?"

Calum looked at his wife and imagined seeing her words hang in the air like gnats. Unlike most singers who pipe snippets of song, Marigold generally stayed quiet except for the ten minutes she belted out scales in the steamy shower, when they had a shower.

"What are you talking about? Of course not."

"We have nothing to give her. We can't keep pumping her full of watery whiskey and honey. We're out of fruit and juice. We have canned soup."

"Mommy?" Leah said.

"We're here." She turned to her husband. He had the dark brown, almost black eyes, of some blondes. Eyes that until now made Mari feel safe. "She sounds like an asthmatic old man."

They giggled, feeling a tiny bit of relief from the escaped tension leaking out like air from an overfilled tire.

"Don't shake the bed," Marigold said. They sat still, listening to their daughter's tattered breath, sitting in bed dressed in robes and sweaters, hats and scarfs like peasants in a fairytale. Then Leah convulsed with a cough so violent, ribbons of phlegm spilled from her cracked lips.

Both parents tried to hold her but she bounced like a rubber ball. Marigold looked away and out the low windows as snow filled in the last gap to seal them in.

"Oh my God," she said. "The snow is burying the house."

Calum followed her pointing finger. "That is a shit-load of snow." The tiny ice bits looked black from inside, nothing like the snow Calum delighted in as a child in these mountains, sparkling diamonds in the sun.

"Get a towel," Marigold said, covering her daughter's body with her own. "With cool water."

Calum left the bed, careful to keep the heat trapped under the blankets, and did as Mari asked. Cold seeped through the wooden floor, through his socks and into the soles of his feet. He pictured the cabin hunkered on its concrete piers like a hungry animal.

On his way back from the nook with toilet and sink that served as a bathroom, he peeked into the closet they rigged as a bedroom for Leah. A movement caught his eye. He set the towel on the cot and bent to hands and knees. The flashlight's anemic glow silhouetted a family of mice. The mother mouse, maybe the father, looked at Calum accusingly with pinpricks above its quivering nose, standing between him and the bullet-sized babies called pinkies. Calum did not dare tell Marigold. Did Leah know about the mice? She hadn't said anything.

"I'm walking to the road," Calum announced when he returned to the bedroom. His daughter looked foreign, her skin a hollow white against her black hair. Her coloring came from Marigold's side of the family but usually Leah carried a golden glow on her skin, like his, from playing in the sun.

Mari extended an arm for the towel saying, "You can't leave us. There's too much snow."

"Too much snow is why I have to go. We need gas for the generator. We need cough syrup for Leah so she can sleep."

He felt apart from the mother and daughter, who forged a complete unit without him. When Leah was an infant, Marigold nursed her reluctantly, concentrating on whatever was on the music stand, not gazing with a saintly glow at the baby like in the Renaissance paintings they both admired on a trip to the Passages Museum with Mr. Hartswell during an advanced art class senior year. They fell in love in the Pierce Gallery, they liked to say, and each of them still used photos from that trip as wallpaper on their cell phones. The phones that lay useless in the bottom of their duffel bags.

Looking again, Calum found Marigold's fresh maternal show exciting and unsettling. "I have to go," he repeated, lifting his parka from a peg. "I'll use the good snowshoes and be back by the end of the day with help and supplies."

"Help?"

"Someone's bound to have a plow. Or a snow mobile."

"But it's still snowing. I can tell by the sound. It's spookily quiet."

"It's an easy walk along the private road and I can navigate by the trees."

"Navigate? You use a phone app to figure out what bus to take across town." She shook her head. "This is a bad idea."

"I'll be fine."

"Calum," she faced him. "We're city kids." She closed her eyes like she did when hearing a new melody. "You'll die out there lost in a blizzard."

"No, Marigold, that's the thing. We're not kids. And we have a child. And we need to get serious."

"You're telling me about getting serious?" She pulled him into the hallway.

"Mommy, don't go!" Leah cried from her nest of blankets.

"I'll be right back," she called cheerily, ignoring the child's automatic whine. To Calum she said, "I'm the one who had a kid two weeks after graduating high school."

"Oh, this is how it's going to go?" Calum dutifully ascended to the moral high ground. Mari followed him into the kitchen. When she flipped the generator switch, the house kicked to life.

"What are you doing, for Chrissake?" Calum said. "We need to save fuel."

"The mother of your child is heating the last cans of soup to feed you before your expedition and to keep her from dehydrating. She needs fluids."

Calum looked puzzled.

"Do you know the first thing about anything?" Mari sawed through the lid of a tin of Manhattan clam chowder with the dull-edged blue can opener.

"I know I can get to the highway."

Mari sighed. "Take my hat. It's warmer." She removed the fleece cap and placed it on his head. "Take water. And the flashlight. We'll wait."

"Really?" He took Mari in his arms. She nodded against his chest.

"Eat," Mari said and pulled away.

Soggy ridges of saltines floating in the soup reminded Calum of gutter sludge but he ate it quickly, leaving the red-stained bowl in the sink among the detritus of limited circumstances.

Getting out proved a challenge. The weight of snow on the roof had settled heavily on the roof. The door did not budge. Calum innovated, sliding open the window above the kitchen sink, pulling the snow into the basin where it could melt among the crusted spoons and smudged glasses. He climbed through the window.

"This is wild," he said looking back at Marigold who shivered inside. "The snow is so high I could walk on the roof."

"Don't."

"Right?" He beamed back at her, snow crystals catching in his mink-colored beard and sticking to the green wool hat. He adjusted the duffel strap over one shoulder and across his chest.

"Close that window." He sounded authoritative, like when he spoke to the parents of his guitar students.

She wanted to kiss him but it was too late.

Leah coughed from the bedroom; the sound split Marigold. She closed the window and through it watched her husband attach the aluminum snow shoes to his boots. Those were the same tan boots he wore the summer Leah was born. Calum worked construction and in two months went from a skinny star science student at Archipelago High to a buffed out blue-collar man-boy. He put the boots away when they decided to make it as artists, teaching and writing music, unearthing them again only for this mountain sojourn.

Marigold left the dirty dishes. It took energy to run the pump for the sink and she'd rather use what power they had for the electric heaters and lights. She was afraid of the dark. The unsteady light of candles made secret shadows and scary things lurked in corners. When she was Leah's age Marigold slept with a lamp on all night. Even now she had to trick herself out of her fear, closing her eyes before switching off the light and not opening them even once until morning light.

Calum said it was a two-hour walk max to the highway. With luck he would catch a ride the last mile into town. She pictured the route in her mind, on the clear days when they had walked it as a family. Last week red flowers bright as pomegranate seeds had emerged. Calum said they were called snow flowers but were actually a parasitic plant. Their tropical vividness prompted Marigold to add cymbals to their score that would sound to the audience like sunlight on glossy leaves.

Returning to the bedroom, she wondered for the first time how Calum knew these things about plants. Maybe he would be okay snowshoeing through a blizzard.

"Mommy!" Leah's delight cut through the thick mucous lining her throat.

Marigold smiled involuntarily at the welcome and sat on the edge of the bed. "Yes!" she trilled.

"You came back," Leah said more softly.

"Yep." Mari reached out her hand to take Leah's.

"Did Daddy go?"

"He did. He walked out to get us some things."

"Is it because I'm sick?"

"Yes and no. He needs to go anyway."

"Will he be okay?"

Marigold was thinking about the generator. The fewer appliances she ran, the better, she supposed. She stood to turn off the lights in the kitchen. "I'll be right back."

"I know!"

In the kitchen, Marigold found the snow from the window still solid in the sink. Outside of the bedroom, where three space heaters burned, coldness jimmied its way inside through the gaps in the planks that formed the walls and floor of their temporary home. She turned off the kitchen light. In the dimness she lifted a bottle of water from the rows stacked along the wall. As it tilted she felt an ice chunk shift. She grabbed five bottles by their necks. The extra pair of snowshoes, awkward rectangular paddles made of old leather and what looked like pvc pipe, caught her eye again. She had managed about a half mile on them the day they went exploring. Calum, on the lighter snowshoes had pulled Leah on the toboggan. She called him "Balto" after the dog that saved a storm-bound Alaska town with a delivery of penicillin.

To the hum of electric heaters, Leah and Marigold played Crazy Eights and Snap with the Yogi Bear cards Mari had toted to every sleepover since she was a child. Leah had perked up. She coughed less and her eyes had lost that feverish glow. She got up to pee by herself and said her tummy felt better.

Mari watched her daughter nibbling marshmallow from the graham cracker of the Malomar cookie and drinking powdered milk, holding the bottle with both hands like a drunkard eager for reprieve. Images of her own mother drifted into her mind, small and snug in an Icelandic sweater, setting down on the wooden table hand-thrown bowls of homemade granola soaking in pungent creamy goat's milk. They lived in redwood country, the best part of California, forests without snow and ice. There was a lushness, she recalled, yellow banana slugs slowly crossing a soft path, streams with dancing leaves.

That all ended when her mother was shot by a hunter's rifle. It was an accident. Marigold was nine. Her father had the body cremated immediately. The funeral consisted of the two of them, and the goat, walking their favorite road, sifting ashes to the ground behind them. "Think of your mother and you'll be able to find your way home," Mari's father said and never spoke of that day, his wife's death, or their little farm again. He sold the property and the goat, cut his hair, shaved, and took a job in the city as a project manager at a tech start-up. At work, when Marigold visited, he joked with his colleagues and played ping-pong with her in the company lounge. At home, in their airy apartment, he was angry and rarely spoke at all.

Whether or not she knew it, Mari's mother, who was also named Leah, had been trespassing. The hunter was acquitted of any crime, not even fined. "Imagine what that guy has to live with," Calum said when she told him the story. "You're out for a day in the woods to bag a deer and you kill someone." They had cut classes to be together by the bay watching seagulls beg for sourdough bread from the tourists along Fisherman's Wharf. Later that day, as they were waiting for the cable car he said, "Just think, if your mom hadn't died and you hadn't moved to the city you would never be where you are musically."

Mari had pulled out of his embrace but didn't look at him. "My mom was teaching me piano."

"But you wouldn't have been able to take conservatory classes as a kid."

"I think I would have rather had a mom," she wanted to say but instead said, "I guess so. My dad was really supportive of my music."

"That's what I'm saying," Calum said, handing her a ticket to board the car. "You're lucky."

From the bedroom doorway, Marigold saw both Leah's sleepiness and reluctance to lay back down. "Crawl under the covers and I'll teach you cat's cradle." Using a piece of clothesline knotted end-to-end, Leah and Marigold made cat's cradle, manger, cat's eyes, diamonds and candles, between their hands. "My kid's smart," Marigold thought. When Leah's eyelids won against her desire to stay awake, Marigold succumbed to her own fatigue and curled around the small body to rest.

Her watch read 5:50 am when she woke stiff with chill. The darkness in the room was deep and broad. Marigold pressed the button on her watch for a dab of light. The heaters were off. Marigold preferred the cave of her own mind to the one she found herself in. Logic told her the generator quit. They had no power. As she shifted, she noticed the bed was wet and put her nose to the sheets. It wasn't urine but sweat. She touched Leah's forehead, reaching gently in the dark. She felt cool and dry. She had sweated out the fever. But she needed to get off the wet sheets.

Marigold imagined herself gliding a waltz. She crept from the bed and moved one-two-three. Sway-rise-fall. Sway-rise-fall. She made it to the living room, running a hand along the hall wall. She knew this cabin and could hum her way through it, filling her mind with music to squeeze out fear. All the utility candles lay collected on a table the wooden matches. The cardboard box opened easily. She struck a match that flared like a firecracker to light four candles. She lit four more with another. She counted 24 matches remaining. Calum's mother, who had never suffered any real losses, loved to read "The Little Match Girl" to Leah in an attempt, Mari supposed, to form her into someone prudent. The character dies at the end of the story, lighting all her matches to generate a succession of fantasies while she freezes in the real world. Marigold carried a candle to the kitchen window, bringing the flame close to her face for the comfort of its weak heat. Snow still sat solidly in the sink. Outside, though, the flakes had stopped spinning. After a moment she realized she knew this because of moonlight. That meant the sky was clear. The sky is clear, she thought. The storm was over.

She took her time melting wax onto a tray to make a flaming tableau of candles. From the tattered sofa she pulled the flowered sheet that served as a cover and tucked it under her arm. Holding the tray with both hands, she returned to the bedroom. Leah opened her eyes to see her mother's face pink in the glow. It looked like Christmas Eve at her grandmother's church.

"Mommy," she said experimentally.

"We have to use candles for light, Leah." Mari set the tray on the square table she had been using as a desk. "Scoot off the bed and wrap yourself up in a blanket. I want to put this fresh sheet on."

"Did I wet the bed?"

"No, your body sweated out the fever. You feel better?"

"I'm thirsty."

"Help yourself to some of that water." Leah indicated the bottles. She marveled at the focus in a child's walk, how if something exists that they need, or want, they march over and take it.

Into the freshly made bed they scrambled, Leah content to watch the candles flickering. After awhile she asked, "What are candles made from?"

Marigold set aside her worry to answer. "Animal fat or beeswax. Or these days oil, like the oil in a car."

"Can we eat them?"

"That's not a good idea." Leah asked reluctantly, "Are you hungry?"

"Really, really, really hungry."

Marigold nodded. "Me, too." After a moment she said, "Your dad isn't back yet."

They sat side-by-side like patrons waiting for a concert to start with nothing to do but watch the stage. If we weren't so hungry, Marigold thought, this would be okay. Leah fell asleep, leaving her mother to examine her thoughts. She dozed briefly, comforted and emboldened by the candles when she snapped awake and saw them still burning in good company. When the sun rose she was ready for it. Its rays wrapped the cabin which creaked its thanks. Marigold imagined the sun knocking on her east-facing window. A new day kept her going, it always had, doing, making, going, composing, all ways of shaking a fist at death.

She slipped from the bed, taking care to tuck every blanket around her daughter and to mound a scarf around the crown of her bare head. Lifting the tray of candles, she went into the living room to get ready. In a backpack she placed water, a package of Malomars (they had brought enough for a year!), and her cellphone, in case. She wrote her name and address on paper and tucked it inside. Should something happen to her, the note would direct the reader to the cabin. She brought a book. Because her father taught her to always carry a book and his wisdom had proven out. She brought matches, packed to stay dry in an empty cinnamon jar, and two pristine utility candles. Light pooled on the tan squares of linoleum in the kitchen. The mound of snow in the sink had started collapsing. Outside, the ice crystals melted so quickly to water that Marigold wondered if it could be raining. Heaps of snow plopped from the eaves.

Marigold gathered coloring books, storybooks, scratch paper and markers. In the bedroom she found Leah sitting up watching the remaining candle. The first heat of the day had already melted snow away from the window and natural light seeped into the room.

"Should we make a snowman?" Leah asked.

"Later," Marigold sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm going out now that the storm is over. It's early so I'll be back before dark." Leah reached for her. Mari gently settled the girl's arms back by her own sides. "What do you want for dinner? Mac and cheese? Hot dogs?"

"Lima beans!"

"You're kidding."

Leah shook her head so vigorously strands of hair whipped around. She needed a bath. "Lima beans and green beans."

Mari shrugged. "You got it." Without pausing, she piled the papers and markers on the bed. "You have water, markers, coloring, cards, cookies." Leah made a face. "I know. I'll come back with some real food."

"How will I know when you're coming back?"

Mari looked at her watch. It would be helpful for tracking her own travel. "Run out and get that clock your dad likes."

"Tick-tock clock, tick-tock clock," Leah repeated running as fast as she could to the kitchen and back. What a little waif, Marigold thought. Reluctantly, she took in the scene. Piles of blankets and throws, cookie crumbs, empty water bottles. The useless electric keyboard beside Calum's guitar. One candle looking more and more lonesome the smaller it shrank. She sighed. What a disaster.

Leah jumped back into bed.

"Careful!" her mother said, taking the clock as it hit the pillows. She checked the time against her watch. "I'll be back by the time the small hand is on the six."

"Draw it for me." Marigold drew a clock face on Leah's forearm like a tattoo. "Got it!" Leah said, in the same tone her father used when he tapped a grocery list into his phone. "Should I stay on the raft?"

"Yes, stay warm." Marigold blinked back tears. "Good girl!" She walked away. From the living room, she called, "Bye, Leah!"

"Bye, Mommy!"

With a sturdy shove, the front door opened. Leah's eyes narrowed against the bright light. She put on her sunglasses, changing everything to amber. There was no need to lock the door.

Her body came alive as she lifted each leg and set her weight, held by the basket of the snowshoe, on the slushy crust. The beauty was inescapable. Light glittered. Birds with blue and black feathers glided from pine to pine. Ice encrusted trees turning them to sculpture. Leah was startled to see a fox staring at her from the top of a boulder.

The pack's weight made her feel steady. The cold air freshened her mouth. She bent to scoop snow from a bank with her mitten, bit into it and chewed. Moving forward felt as natural as breathing. It was possible Leah stood in the bedroom window and perhaps Marigold should turn and wave. Momentum pulled her ahead and she surrendered to it.

At first, Marigold searched each mound for the green hat, for Calum's gray pants. The farther she traveled, though, the surer she was that he was safely in town. Knowing her husband, he was drinking coffee and waiting for a ride. She kept her eyes forward expecting to see a truck or snow mobile coming her way.

At the top of the first hill, she paused to catch her breath. Her empty stomach made her feel light and with that lightness came power. The water from the bottle was so cold her teeth ached. The fluid sloshed in her belly. She was alone. Buried under snow, structures, rubbish and all the remains of humans' passings were rendered irrelevant. How hushed the world must have been once upon a time, Marigold thought. This is how quiet my heart is. She returned the water bottle to the pack and looked forward, then down at her wristwatch. She was making good time. The cabin was too far away to see, somewhere around the bend in the road.

It was the sight of her own tracks, sunk evenly in the snow as a plover's prints in damp sand, that decided her to turn around. "She might as well come with me," Marigold said out loud in the glittering day. She felt confident she could hike this same route again, pulling the toboggan and her bundled daughter aboard.