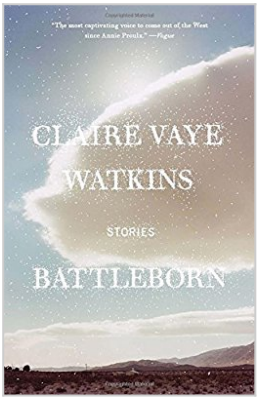

Battleborn: Stories

By Claire Vaye Watkins

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The extraordinary debut collection from the Guggenheim Award-winning author of the forthcoming Gold *Fame Citrus*

Winner of the 2012 Story Prize
Recipient of the American Academy of Arts and Letters 2013 Rosenthal Family Foundation Award
Named one of the National Book Foundation's "5 Under 35" fiction writers of 2012
Winner of New York Public Library Young Lions Fiction Award
NPR Best Short Story Collections of 2012
A Boston Globe, San Francisco Chronicle, and Time Out New York Best Book of the year, and more . . .

Like the work of Cormac McCarthy, Denis Johnson, Richard Ford, and Annie Proulx, *Battleborn* represents a near-perfect confluence of sensibility and setting, and the introduction of an exceptionally powerful and original literary voice. In each of these ten unforgettable stories, Claire Vaye Watkins writes her way fearlessly into the mythology of the American West, utterly reimagining it. Her characters orbit around the region's vast spaces, winning redemption despite - and often because of - the hardship and violence they endure. The arrival of a foreigner transforms the exchange of eroticism and emotion at a prostitution ranch. A prospecting hermit discovers the limits of his rugged individualism when he tries to rescue an abused teenager. Decades after she led her best friend into a degrading encounter in a Vegas hotel room, a woman feels the aftershock. Most bravely of all, Watkins takes on – and reinvents – her own troubled legacy in a story that emerges from the mayhem and destruction of Helter Skelter. Arcing from the sweeping and sublime to the minute and personal, from Gold Rush to ghost town to desert to brothel, the collection echoes not only in its title but also in its fierce, undefeated spirit the motto of her home state.

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Editorial Review

Review
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“A real treat… Through remarkably assured writing that manages to be both bristly and brittle, Watkins chronicles despair and loneliness, catalogs valiant fights for survival and desperate please to be heard, and every time has us rooting for her underdogs.” *–San Francisco Chronicle*

“Dazzling.” *–O, The Oprah Magazine*

“Although individual stories stand alone, together they tell the tale of a place, and of the population that thrives and perishes therein… The historical sits comfortably alongside the contemporary and the factual nicely supplements the fictional… Readers will share in the environs of the author and her characters, be taken into the hardship of a pitiless place and emerge on the other side—wiser, warier and weathered like the landscape.” –Antonya Nelson, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The most captivating voice to come out of the West since Annie Proulx - though it's to early Joan Didion that [Watkins] bears comparison for her arid humor and cut-to-the-chase knowingness." *–Vogue*

“The most exciting book of fiction I read this past year…To me, her gift is akin to that of those rare actors, like a Streep or a Brando, who can totally become a character but retain their own essence through and through…Fantastic stuff.”–Chang-rae Lee, A Year in Reading, *The Millions*

“Exceptional… A writer of great precision and greater restraint, Watkins is a natural storyteller whose material enriches that gift rather than engulfing it… One doesn’t have to be from the Battleborn state to recognize and appreciate literature that resonates like this.” *–The Rumpus*

"[A] breathtaking debut… [Watkins'] stories… carry the weight and devastation of entire novels.” *–Flavorpill*

"Absorbing… [Battleborn’s] true setting is a Faulknerian desert of the heart, where the soil is cursed by its precious metals and one’s personal history can be just as toxic. Clear-eyed and nimble in parsing the lives of her Westerners, one of Watkins’s strengths is not dodging that the simple fact that love can be tragic, involving, as it does, humans so flawed, so often tender and yet incapable.” *–The Boston Globe*

“A powerful new voice that deserves recognition… [Watkins maps] a regional portrait while pausing for detailed sketches, with a strong perspective that blends the romanticized past of Larry McMurtry, heartbreaking characters of Annie Proulx, and bleak timeless landscapes of Cormac McCarthy.” *–The Onion AV Club*

“As if Watkins’ prose embodies the desert landscape of Nevada itself, the stories are stony, unkind, and harsh, though never unattractive… Beneath these confessions runs a spiritual undertow—that salvific beauty can arise when brutality is brought to light… All of her stories left me feeling purged and oddly cleansed, easily making Battleborn one of the strongest collections I’ve read in years.” *–The Millions*

"Her incredible talent fills every page of this raw, wild, soaring debut. She may be the coolest real-life literary lady we've discovered in quite a while." *–Flavorwire*

“As grounded as they are in real places, the stories are fictions, crafted with the skill of an artisan, working from the starting points of Mary Gaitskill and Aimee Bender.” *–Los Angeles Times*

"These stories are as spare and beautifully austere as the landscape of the American Southwest where they are set, the same landscape that shapes and hardens the characters and refines them down to their fundamental elements, working them until they are all sinewy muscle and steely resolve. This is a stunning debut from an important young writer, and if it is a promise of what’s to come in the future of American fiction, we are in very good hands indeed." *–Bookriot*

"Vibrant and assured… The settings of Watkins' home state—evoked with craft that echoes Cormac McCarthy or Richard Ford—were the perfect settings for heartbreak." *–Time Out New York*

"What distinguishes Watkins' work… is her command of time. Nearly all the stories are set in the present, but her characters constantly live with aftereffects of the past. They're not simply "scarred" by history; they're irradiated by it, queasily lit from within.” *–Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

“[An] assured debut… Here’s hoping Watkins will continue to delve into Nevada’s unsound caverns and emerge with such worthy plunder.” *–Dallas Morning News*

“Gloriously vivid stories about the human heart.” *–Kirkus*

“In her debut short story collection Battleborn Claire Vaye Watkins marries character to landscape as well as anyone I have read in years. These stories set in the Nevada desert are gritty and brilliant, and foretell an auspicious literary future for their author.” *–Largehearted Boy*

"A coolly impressive new voice of the American West." *–The Financial Times*

"The people in Battleborn… aren’t characters in stories, but human beings perpetually yearning for warmth… Entering the varied lives is akin to watching a tightrope walker high overhead, moving with steady confidence without a net… Watkins writes with precision and care, the sentences themselves as surprising as the events, the dialogue, and the spare description… There is a purity to the prose that is a constant pleasure to read… There is great originality in these narratives… But the generosity and personal sacrifices of the people are as universal as the stars at night." –Chris Offutt, *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

"Readers... will find much to admire in this arresting collection, which one hopes is merely the first stop along the way for a writer who deserves a sustained literary life." *–Library Journal* (starred review)

“A fresh, fierce, fabulous collection. Watkins writes like the divine Didion—cool and clean with not a word wasted. Where’d she come from? I’m glad she’s here.” –Joy Williams, author of *The Quick and The Dead*

“Claire Vaye Watkins is never, ever satisfied with the ordinary. Each story in this brilliant debut surprises. Watkins offers us amazing visions of a funny, savage, haunted West-and one of the most outstanding short story collections in recent memory.” –Christopher Coake, author of *We’re in Trouble* and *You Came Back*

About the Author

Claire Vaye Watkins is the author of *Battleborn*, winner of the Story Prize, the Rosenthal Family Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a Silver Pen Award from the Nevada Writers Hall of Fame. *Battleborn* was named a Best Book of 2012 by the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Boston Globe*, *Time Out New York*, and *Flavorwire*, and a Best Short Story Collection by NPR.org. In 2012, the National Book Foundation named Claire one of the 5 Best Writers Under 35. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Granta*, *One Story*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, *Best of the West 2011*, *Best of the Southwest 2013*, and elsewhere. A graduate of the University of Nevada Reno and the Ohio State University, Claire has received fellowships from the Writers’ Conferences at Sewanee and Bread Loaf. An assistant professor at Bucknell University, Claire is also the co-director, with Derek Palacio, of the Mojave School, a free creative writing workshop for teenagers in rural Nevada.

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GHOSTS, COWBOYS

The day my mom checked out, Razor Blade Baby moved in. At the end, I can’t stop thinking about beginnings.

The city of Reno, Nevada, was founded in 1859 when Charles Fuller built a log toll bridge across the Truckee River and charged prospectors to haul their Comstock silver across the narrow but swift-moving current. Two years later, Fuller sold the bridge to the ambitious Myron Lake. Lake, swift himself, added a gristmill, kiln and livery stable to his Silver Queen Hotel and Eating House. Not a bashful man, he named the community Lake’s Crossing, had the name painted on Fuller’s bridge, bright blue as the sky.

The 1860s were boom times in the western Utah Territory: Americans still had the brackish taste of Sutter’s soil on their tongues, ten-year-old gold still glinting in their eyes. The curse of the Comstock Lode had not yet leaked from the silver vein, not seeped into the water table. The silver itself had not yet been stripped from the mountains, and steaming water had not yet ?ooded the mine shafts. Henry T. P. Comstock—most opportune of the opportunists, snatcher of land, greatest claim jumper of all time—had not yet lost his love Adelaide, his ?rst cousin, who drowned in Lake Tahoe. He had not yet traded his share of the lode for a bottle of whiskey and an old, blind mare, not yet blown his brains out with a borrowed revolver near Bozeman, Montana.

Boom times.

Lake’s Crossing grew. At statehood in 1864, the district of Lake’s Crossing, Washoe County, was consolidated with Roop County. By then, Lake’s Crossing was the largest city in either. The curse, excavated from the silver vein and weighted by the heavy ore, settled on the nation’s newest free state.

Or begin the story here: In 1881 Himmel Green, an architect, came to Reno from San Francisco to quietly divorce Mary Ann Cohen Magnin of the upscale women’s clothing store I. Magnin and Company. Himmel took a liking to Reno and decided to stay. He started designing buildings for his friends, newly rich silver families.

Reno's Newlands Heights neighborhood is choked with Green's work. In 1909, 315 Lake Street was erected. A stout building made of brick, it was one of Himmel's ?rst residential buildings, a modest design, small porch off the back, simple awnings, thoroughly mediocre in every way. Some say construction at 315 Lake stirred up the cursed dust of the Comstock Lode. Though it contaminated everyone (and though we Nevadans still breathe it into ourselves today), they say it got to Himmel particularly, stuck to his blueprints, his clothing, formed a microscopic layer of silver dust on his skin. Glinting silver ?lm or no, after his divorce was ?nalized Himmel moved in with Leopold Karpeles, editor of the B'nai B'rith Messenger. Their relationship was rumored a tumultuous one, mottled with abuse and in?delity. Still, they lived together until 1932, when the two were burned to death in a ?re at Karpeles's home, smoke rising from the house smelling like those miners boiled alive up in Virginia City mine shafts.

Or here. Here is as good a place as any: In March 1941, George Spahn, a dairyman and amateur beekeeper from Pennsylvania, signed over the deed to his sixty-acre farm to his son, Henry, packed four suitcases, his wife, Helen, and their old, foul-tempered calico cat, Bottles, into the car, and drove west to California, to the ocean.

He was to retire, bow out of the ranching business, bury his tired feet in the warm Western sand. But retirement didn't suit George. After two months he came home to their ticky-tacky rental on the beach and presented Helen with plans to buy a 511-acre ranch at 1200 Santa Susana Pass Road in the Santa Susana Mountains. The ranch was up for sale by its owner, the aging silent-?lm star William S. Hart.

The Santa Susana Mountains are drier than the more picturesque Santa Monica Mountains that line the California coast. Because they are not privy to the moist winds rolling in off the sea, they are susceptible to ? res. Twelve hundred Santa Susana Pass Road is tucked up in the Santa Susanas north of Los Angeles, off what is now called the Ronald Reagan Freeway. Back in 1941, when George was persuading Helen to move again, taking her knobby hand in his, begging her to uproot the tendrils she'd so far managed to anchor into the loose beige sand of Manhattan Beach—*Just a bit east this time,* sweet pea—the city of Chatsworth was little more than a Baptist church, a dirt-clogged ?lling station, and the Palomino Horse Association's main stables, birthplace of Mr. Ed. Years later, in 1961, my father, still a boy, would start a wild?re in the hills above the PHA stables. He would be eleven, crouched in the dry brush, sneaking a cigarette. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

At the heart of the ranch was a movie set, a thoroughfare of a Western boomtown: bank, saloon, blacksmith, wood-planked boardwalk, side streets and alleys, a jail. Perhaps the set dazzled Helen. Perhaps she—a prematurely arthritic woman—recalled the aching cold of Pennsylvania winters. Perhaps she spoiled her husband, as her children claim. Whatever the reason, Helen laid her hand on her husband's brow and said, "All right, George." And though by all accounts Helen came to like the ranch, on the day George took her out to view the property for the ?rst time her journal reads:

The property is quite expansive, surrounded by mountains.

G. giddy as a boy. Not such a view as the beach, though. The road out is windy and narrow, sheer canyon walls on either side. Seems I am to be once again separated from the sea. And what a brief affair it was! Looking west I felt a twinge like something had been taken from me, something a part of me but never truly mine.

Within a week of the Spahns' move up to 1200 Santa Susana Pass Road, Bottles the cat ran away.

But George was more adaptable than Bottles, and luckier. In 1941, Westerns were still Hollywood's bread

and butter. George ran his movie set like he'd run his dairy ranch, building strong relationships with decision makers, underpricing the competition. It certainly didn't hurt business when Malibu Bluff State Recreation Area annexed Trancas Canyon and sold off its many sets, making Spahn's Ranch the only privately owned—and therefore zero-permit—outdoor set for seventy-?ve miles. The Spahns enjoyed a steady stream of business from the major studios, charging them a pretty penny to rent horses and shoot ?lms at the ranch, among them High Noon, The Comstock Boys, and David O. Selznick's 1946 classic *Duel in the Sun*, starring Gregory Peck. TV shows were also shot at the ranch, including most episodes of The Lone Ranger and—before Warner Brothers, coaxed by Nevada's tax incentives and the habits of its big-name directors, moved production to the Ponderosa Ranch at Lake Tahoe—*Bonanza*.

We might start at my mother's ?rst memory: It's 1962. She is three. She sits on her stepfather's lap on a plastic lawn chair on the roof of their trailer. Her older brother and sister sit cross-legged on a bath towel they've laid atop the chintzy two-tab roof, the terry cloth dimpling their skin. They each wear a pair of their mother's—my grandmother's—oversize Jackie O. sunglasses. It is dusk; in the eastern sky stars are coming into view—yes, back then you could still see stars over Las Vegas—but the family faces northwest, as do their neighbors and the teenage boys hired to cut and water the grass at the new golf courses and the city bus drivers who have pulled over to the side of the roads and the tourists up in their hotel rooms with their faces pressed to the windows. As does the whole city.

Their stepfather points to the desert. "There," he says. A ?ash of light across the basin. An orange mushroom cloud erupts, rolling and boiling. Seconds later, she hears the boom of it, like a ?rework, and the trailer begins to sway. Impossibly, the heat warms my mother's face. "Makes you think," her stepfather says softly in her ear. "Maybe there's something godly out there after all."

The blast is a 104-kiloton nuclear explosion. It blows a hole into the desert rock, creating the deepest crater of all the Nevada Test Site's 1,021 detonations: 320 feet deep. The crater displaces seven hundred tons of dirt and rock, including two tons of sediment from a vein of H. T. P. Comstock's cursed soil, a ?nger reaching all the way down the state, now blown sky-high in the blast. The July breeze is gentle, indecisive. It blows the radiation northeast, as it always does, to future cancer clusters in Fallon and Cedar City, Utah, to the mitosing cells of small-town downwinders. But today it also blows the curse southeast, toward Las Vegas, to my mother's small chest, her lungs and her heart. And it blows southwest, across the state line, all the way to the dry yellow mountains above Los Angeles. These particles settle, ?nally, at 1200 Santa Susana Pass Road.

We might start with George's longest year: For nearly twenty years, George's letters to his son, Henry, back home in Pennsylvania were characteristically dry, questions about herd count, tips for working the swarm at honey harvest; he hardly mentioned his own ranch, which to his son would not have seemed a ranch at all.

But by the early 1960s the demand for Westerns began to wane and George Spahn blamed, among others, Alfred Hitchcock. He increasingly ended his notes about farm business with aggravated rants about "cut-'em-ups," and" sex-crazed" moviegoers' ?xation on horror ?lms, probably meaning Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the second-highest-grossing ?lm of 1960, after *Swiss Family Robinson*. On the ?rst day of February 1966, George Spahn ?led for bankruptcy. By then, unbeknownst to George, his wife's kidneys were marbled with tumors. Six weeks later, at UCLA Medical Center, Helen died from renal failure on the same ?oor where my father would die thirty-four years later. The coroner's report noted that her tumors were visible, and in the glaring light of the microscope seemed "like hundreds of hairlike silver ribbons."

After Helen's death, George neglected the few already tenuous ties he had at the big studios. He wrote Henry often, spoke of the ranch deteriorating, of weeds pushing up through the soil in the corrals.

“I’m tired,” he wrote to his son on July 23, 1966. “Let most everyone [three part-time ranch hands] go. It is hot here. So hot I have to wait for dusk to feed the horses. They get impatient down in the stalls and kick the empty troughs over. Boy, you wouldn’t believe the noise of their hoofs against the metal . . .”

In the end it was the horses, thirsty or not, that kept Spahn’s Ranch a?oat. Spahn rented the horses to tourists for self-guided rides through the hills. Occasionally, a few of George’s old studio friends would throw business his way, sending for six or eight paints when a scene couldn’t have needed more than two. And so the horses became George’s main source of income, meager as it was. The Los Angeles County tax records show Spahn’s annual income in 1967 to be $13,120, less than a quarter of what it was in 1956.

In previous letters, George rarely wrote of Helen. When he did his lines were terse, referring to her only along with other ranch business: “Storm coming in. Your mother’s knuckles would have swelled. Lord knows we need the rain.”

That year, George continued to write even as his eyesight failed, his lines sometimes piling atop one another. He began to write of Helen more frequently, sometimes devoting an entire page to her blackberry cobbler or the fragrance of her bath talcum. These are the only letters in which George, otherwise a deliberate and correct writer, slips into the present tense.

In September, George reported discovering a tiny bleached skull in the hills above his cabin. “Bottles,” he wrote, “picked clean by coyotes.”

Or here. Begin here: When a group of about ten young people—most of them teenagers, one of them my father—arrived at the ranch in January of 1968, having hitchhiked from San Francisco, George was nearly blind. Surely he smelled them, though, as they approached his porch—sweat, gasoline, the thick semisweet guff of marijuana. The group offered to help George with chores and maintenance in exchange for permission to camp out in the empty facaded set buildings. Though he’d broken down and hired a hand a couple weeks earlier—a nice kid, a bit macho, went by “Shorty,” wanted to be, what else?, an actor—George agreed, perhaps because he wouldn’t have to pay them. Or perhaps because the group’s leader—a man named Charlie—offered to leave a young girl or two with George twenty-four-seven, to cook his meals, tidy the house, keep up with the laundry, and bed him whenever he wanted.

My father didn’t kill anyone. And he’s not a hero. It isn’t that kind of story.

Nearly everyone who spent time at Spahn’s that summer wrote a book after it was over, Bugliosi’s only the most lucrative. We know, from the books of those who noticed, that a baby was born at Spahn’s Ranch, likely April ninth, though accounts vary. In her version, Olivia Hall, who’d been a senior at Paci?c Palisades High School and an occasional participant in group sex at the ranch, wrote of the birth: “The mother, splayed out on the wood ?oor of the jail, struggled in labor for nearly fourteen hours, through the night and into the early morning, then gave up.” In *The Manson Murders: One Woman’s Escape*, Carla Shapiro, now a mother of four boys, says the struggling girl “let her head roll back onto a sleeping bag and would not push. Then Manson took over.” My father’s book reads, “Charlie held a cigarette lighter under a razor blade until the blade was hot and sliced the girl from vagina to anus. ”The baby girl slipped out, wailing, into Charlie’s arms. My father: “The place was a mess. Blood and clothes everywhere. I don’t know where he found the razor blade.”

Charlie had a rule against couples. The group had nightly orgies at the ranch and before it in Topanga, Santa Barbara, Big Sur, Santa Cruz, Monterey, Oakland, San Francisco, the list goes on. You know this part, I’m sure. The drugs, the sex. People came and went. Tracing the child’s paternity was impossible, even if the

group had been interested in that sort of thing. “There was a birth, I know that,” Tex Watson wrote to me from prison. “Hell, might’ve been mine. But we were all pretty gone, you know?”

Of the mother, the accounts mention only how young she was. No name, no explanation of how she came to the ranch. One calls her “dew-faced.” In his account my father admits to having sex with her on several occasions. He says, “She was a good kid.”

After police raided Spahn’s on August sixteenth, California Child Protective Services placed the baby with foster parents, Al and Vaye Orlando of Orlando’s Furniture Warehouse in Thousand Oaks. Vaye constantly fussed over the baby, worried at her calmness, what she called “a blankness in her face.” During the child’s ?rst ?ve years, Vaye had her examined for autism seven times, never trusting the results. She even hired a special nanny to play games with the child, encourage her cognitive development. Al thought this a waste of money.

Now the baby is a grown woman, forty. She is slender but not slight, and moves like liquid does. She has dark hair and the small brown eyes of a deer mouse. Not the eyes of those teenage girls my father met at Pali, the ones he invited to Spahn’s and introduced to Charlie, the ones, later, with crosses cut into their foreheads, arms linked, singing down hallways, smiling into the camera in archived footage. I’ve looked. These are my father’s brown eyes. Mine.

. . .

Ten years ago, Lake Street—the last surviving vanity landmark of poor Myron Lake, site of Reno’s original iconic arch (you know it, *Biggest Little City in the World*)—was lined with slums: dumpy neglected mansions with ? re escapes grafted to their sides, bedsheets covering the windows, most of them halfway houses. But soon people were calling Lake Street and the surrounding neighborhood Newlands Heights. Op-ed columns parleyed on the topic of redevelopment. Three Fifteen Lake was converted from the single-family mansion envisioned by Himmel Green to six one-and two-bedroom apartments in 2001, one of the last to go. By then, Newlands Heights (named, of course, for Francis G. Newlands, Nevada senator, prudent annexer of Hawaii, irrigator of the American West, and great civilizer of savages) was lined with post–Comstock Lode Colonials and Victorians, their lavish parlors and sunrooms partitioned into open studio apartments and condos with hardwood ?oors. They’ve even torn down the original arch—it attracted vagrants and teenagers, they said. I was assured, back when things like this meant anything to me, that the city was erecting a replica, in neon, across Virginia Street, closer to the big casinos.

These days, they say Newlands Heights is worth quite a bit, and for all my bitching about gentri?cation, I don’t mind this. A person feels just as guilty living among the poor as she does living among the rich, but at least you can be angry at the rich. I can afford to live at 315 Lake only because the landlords, Ben and Gloria (nice people, Burners turned bourgeois, role models to us all) hired my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend—J to do the cabinetwork on the building. J ended up, as he does with so many of his business associates, smoking a bunch of pot with Ben. J considers marijuana the universal ambassador of goodwill, and himself its humble steward. Gloria was pregnant and Ben was desperate, pouring money into a building with no tenants. One afternoon, J and Ben sat on a pallet of bathroom tiles passing a joint between them, and J persuaded Ben to give me a deal on the only unit they’d ?nished, a studio on the ?rst ?oor, number two. It was probably the last nice thing I let him do before he left.

I lived through nine months of construction noise and paint smells, the rest of the building a hollow skeleton.

Once, I heard someone working in the unit right above me and went up there to see who it was. I was thinking if it was Ben I'd give him my rent check, see if he had any weed I could buy off him, or that he'd just give me. But it was Gloria, standing in a room painted a crisp robin's-egg blue, splotches of the paint on her hands and overalls, speckles in her blond hair. Clear plastic drop cloths billowed in the breeze from the open windows. She rested her hands on her globe of a belly and turned to me. I saw then that the room wasn't entirely painted. In front of her was a patch of wall the size of a playing card, dingy beige.

"I found it when we scraped the wallpaper," she said, her eyes teared up with sadness or paint fumes or both. She had a paintbrush in her right hand. "I've been avoiding this spot for a week." I bent to examine the patch of bare wall and saw there, scrawled in charcoal or heavy carpenter's pencil,

H. loves Leo, 1909.

"How can I do this?" said Gloria. And she said it again as she slopped a stripe of blue over the writing.

This was just before my mom died. Before Razor Blade Baby moved in. I didn't know what to say. Now I know better. I see Gloria in the yard, and I'd like to give her an answer. She's had her baby and puts a playpen under the willow tree and sings over to the girl while she gardens. She named her Marigold. I'd like to say: You do it because you have to. We all do.

And here we are.

The day my mom checked out, Razor Blade Baby moved in. Upstairs. Number four. Right above me. We are neighbors at 315 Lake Street, Newlands Heights, Reno, Nevada. That ?rst day I heard the ?oorboards above my bed creak, then the hall stairs. When I opened the door, Razor Blade Baby invited me to see a three-dollar matinee at the old Hilton Theatre. Though I like their popcorn (stale and ?uorescent yellow, salty enough to erode a gully in the roof of your mouth) and their hot dogs (all beef), I said what I would say every Sunday: No. No, thank you. I closed the door, and she sat on the stairs as she would every Sunday. She stayed there all day.

My father, Paul Watkins, met Charles Manson at a house party in San Francisco eleven months before Razor Blade Baby was born. He and Charlie wrote songs together and camped around the bay until December, when they set out for L. A., bored with the city, sick of the rain. Paul was eighteen and handsome. Or so my mother would tell me later.

At Spahn's, Paul moved his things into the old jail set: a sleeping bag, candles, his guitar and ?ute. He looked younger than his age, young enough to enroll himself in Paci?c Palisades High School, though he'd already graduated the previous spring, a year early. He would become fond of pointing this out in interviews. (To Maureen Reagan on *Larry King Live*, August 23, 1987: "We were bright kids, Maureen. Not delinquents. I was the class president." Larry was out sick.) Paul went to Pali, home of the Dolphins, for two months to meet girls and bring them back to the ranch. He was good at it.

Years later, well after he was ?nally swallowed up by Hodgkin's disease, my mother, after one of her attempts to join him, wherever he was, called my father "Charlie's number one procurer of young girls." I couldn't tell whether she was ashamed or proud of him.

She also said, lying on her bed at University Medical Center, bandages on her wrists where she'd taken a steak knife to them, "When you go, all that matters is who's there with you. Believe me. I've been close enough enough times to know."

About once a year someone tracks me down. Occasionally it's one of Charlie's fans wanting to stand next to Paul Watkins's daughter, to rub up against all that's left, to put a picture up on his red-text-on-black-background website. Far more often, though, it's someone with a script. Producers, usually legit ones—I Google them: *True Lies*, *The Deer Hunter*. They offer to drive down from Lake Tahoe, take me out to dinner. They never want my permission to make their movie or input on who should play me (Winona Ryder); they just want to know how am I.

"How *are* you?" they say.

"I'm a receptionist," I say.

"Good," they say, long and slow, nodding as though my being a receptionist has given them everything they came for.

The day after Razor Blade Baby moved in, I rode my bike across the Truckee River to work. Razor Blade Baby followed, wearing a blazer, trailing behind me on a violet beach cruiser with a wicker basket, her long hair ?apping behind her as though tugged by a hundred tiny kites. She followed me up the courthouse steps and sat in the lobby in front of my desk. She stayed there until lunch, when we sat on a bench beside the river, me eating a burrito from the cart, her dipping celery sticks into a Tupperware dish of tuna salad made with plain yogurt instead of mayonnaise. After lunch I went back to work, she back to the lobby. At ?ve we rode home.

Some days she brings a roll of quarters and plugs the parking meters in front of the building. Others she crosses the street and browses the souvenir shops. I watch her from my o?ce window, through the shop's glass front, running her ?ngers along the carousels of T-shirts. When the sun is very hot she simply sits on the courthouse's marble steps, drinking a cherry Slurpee, her palm pressed to the warm rock.

Some weekends I go out, and Razor Blade Baby comes along. One night, about three months after she moved in, I went to a dinner party to celebrate a friend's new condo, built high up in the hollowed-out bones of the renovated Flamingo. A row of one-legged bird silhouettes was still left on the building's facade.

It was a ?ne party, good food. I wore a poufy emerald green cocktail dress with pink ?ats, a pink ribbon in my hair. My friends, trying their very best for normalcy, sometimes pointed across the room and asked, "Claire, sweetheart, did you bring your auntie? You look just like her."

"Oh, no," I would say, swallowing the last bit of prosciutto or salmon dip or whatever it was. "That's Razor Blade Baby. She goes everywhere with me."

That night Razor Blade Baby and I left the party and started our walk back to 315 Lake. It had been raining heavily up in the Sierras for two days straight, and the Truckee was raging—the highest I'd ever seen it. The water was milky and opaque, and in it tumbled massive logs that had probably lain on the river's bed unmoved for years. Across the bridge two concrete stumps with rebar worming out the tops stood on either side of the street like sentinels, all that was left of the original arch. We stood there for a long while, Razor Blade Baby and I, sort of hypnotized with the high water thrashing by, not sure whether it was safe to cross or what we'd do when we reached the other side. I imagined taking very small steps down the wet, slippery bank and wading into the current, my pockets weighed down with silver.

At home I got stoned and thought—as I often do after tracing my ?ngers over the frosted glass of my cabinets, my butcher-block countertops, sanded and varnished by his hands, all that's left of him, in my life

anyway—of calling J. But I was no more capable of giving him what he needed than I was the day he left.

I didn't call. Instead I smoked myself deeper into oblivion and watched my hot breath billow at the ceiling, Razor Blade Baby no doubt on the other side, and fell asleep.

I believe I fell in love with one of them, these producers. He e-mailed me, said his name was Andrew, that he wanted to have dinner and talk about a ?lm he wanted to make about my father, about how he was Charlie's number two in charge (true), how he came to live in an abandoned shack in the desert (true), how he got sober and testi?ed against Charlie, then fell off the wagon again, blacked out, and woke up in a van, on ?re (mostly true). I agreed to let him buy me dinner, as it is almost always my principle to do.

I met Andrew at Louis' Basque Corner on Fourth Street. Razor Blade Baby came along. I take all the movie guys to Louis', or I used to before Andrew. Now I take them to Miguel's off Mount Rose, also very tasty.

"What's good here?" he said. He had an easy, loose smile.

"Picon Punch," I said. "If you come here and don't order the Picon Punch, you didn't really come here." This was my bit. My Picon Punch bit.

Picon Punch is the deep brown of leather oil. Only the Basques know what's in it, but we all have a theory—rum, licorice root and gin; top-shelf rye with club soda and three drops of vanilla extract; well vodka, gin and a splash of apple juice; Seagram's, scotch and a ground-up Ricola cough drop—all theories equally plausible, none of them the truth. One Picon Punch will make you buy another. Two is too many. That night we had three each.

For dinner we ordered the sweetbreads and two Winnemuc ca coffees and ate at the bar playing video poker, Deuces Wild. Razor Blade Baby played Ms. Pac-Man in the back.

We talked quietly, closely. Every once in a while Razor Blade Baby ?oated over and stood at my elbow. I did my best to shoo her away. I gave her another roll of quarters and found myself leaning into Andrew. He smelled of strong stinging cinnamon, like a smoker who tried hard to hide it.

A casino can make an average man lovely. The lights are dim, the ceiling low and mirrored. The machines light his face from below in a soft sweet blue. As they turn to reveal themselves on the screen, the electric playing cards re?ect in his eyes as quick glints of light. The dense curtain of cigarette smoke ?lters the place fuzzy, as if what the two of you do there isn't actually happening. As if it were already in the past. As if your life wasn't a life but an old nostalgic movie. *Duel in the Sun*, perhaps. You don't want to know what a casino can do to a man already lovely.

It wasn't long before we were turned facing each other, and my right leg, dangling off my stool, found its way between his legs, nestled into his groin. We ?nished off the sweetbreads with our hands, sopping the small sinewy pieces of young lamb glands in onion sauce.

He asked about my father. I wanted to tell him what I told you, but that's nothing that can't be found in a book, a diary, a newspaper, a coroner's report. And there is still so much I'll never know, no matter how much history I weigh upon myself. I can tell you the shape of the stain left by H. T. P. Comstock's brain matter on the wooden walls of his cabin, but not whether he tasted the sour of the curse in his mouth just before he pulled the trigger. I can tell you the backward slant of Himmel Green's left-handed cursive, but not whether Leo loved him back. I can tell you of the silver gleam of Helen Spahn's tumors, but not whether she

felt them growing inside her. I can tell you of the view from George's front porch, of the wide yellow valley below, but not what he saw after he went blind. I can tell you the things my father said to lure the Manson girls back to Spahn's Ranch, but I can't say whether he believed them. I can tell you the length and width and number of the cuts on my mother's wrists, and the colors her skin turned as they healed, but I couldn't say whether she would do it again, or when. Everything I can say about what it means to lose, what it means to do without, the inadequate weight of the past, you already know.

But the whiskey in our coffees was doing its job. I was feeling loose. So I told him what I could. I told him of the heavy earth scent after a desert rain, three or four times a year. That it smelled like the breathing of every thankful desert plant, every plot of soil, every unfound scrap of silver. That it had a way of softening you, of making you vulnerable. That it could redeem.

After dinner we watched Razor Blade Baby until she killed off her last life. Andrew walked us out to our bikes and helped us unchain them. He kissed me then, or rather we kissed each other, right in front of Razor Blade Baby. It was an inevitable kiss. A kiss like I had caught the hem of my skirt on the seat of my bike while trying to mount it, and toppled. A kiss like we had fallen into each other, which I suppose we had.

Afterward, Razor Blade Baby and I rode home to 315 Lake, headlights lighting us from behind. When I closed my front door, my cell phone rang.

"Come outside." It was Andrew, his voice breathy, sweetly slurred.

"What?"

My doorbell buzzed. I pulled the curtain of my living room window aside, saw him swaying slightly on the porch, glowing phone pressed to his ear.

"Or come and live with me," he said.

"You're drunk," I said.

"So are you. Let me in. We'll move to L. A., down by the ocean. You can ride your bike up and down the coast. Or forget L. A., we can live here, in the mountains. In the desert. Whatever this is. That thing you said about the rain. You and me, Claire. Just let me in."

And I wanted to let him in. It wasn't that I didn't want to. I was swaying now and reached for the wall to steady myself, trying to stop the swirl of Picon in my head, my chest. Tried not to think of the words written there under the paint. *When you go, all that matters is who's there with you. Believe me*. I rested my head against the front door and wanted badly to open it. But the story was too much, wherever I began: the borrowed revolver on the ?oor of a cabin near Bozeman, Montana. The sweet sizzle of Himmel Green's skin as it melted into Leopold's. Helen Spahn's withering uprooted tendrils. Bottles's dry bleached bones. My parents' own toxic and silver-gilded love. Razor Blade Baby, the simple fact of her.

"Good night, Andy," I said. "Please don't call me again."

When I hung up, I heard the sound I had already come to know: a quick creak in the ?oorboards above me. Razor Blade Baby's body shifting. The unpressing of her ear from the ?oor.

Then Razor Blade Baby came to my door the next morning—this morning—I did not say, No. No, thank

you. We rode our bicycles to the old Hilton Theatre, down Lake Street. Her hair ?apped behind her as though lifted by George Spahn's Pennsylvanian swarm.

I bought a hot dog before the matinee from the concession stand. I covered it with mustard, onions, kraut, jalapeños. Razor Blade Baby nervously ?ngered a Ziploc bag of peeled carrot sticks hidden in her purse.

Here in the theater I know I ought to try, ought to carry that weight, ought to paint over the past. But I can only do my best. I hold my hot dog near her face. "Want a bite, Razor Blade Baby?"

"Claire," she says. "I could be your sister."

And though we have known this since she moved in—well before—this is the ?rst time either of us has said it aloud. And I admit now, it sounds softer than it felt. There is something thankful in the saying.

I nod. "Half sister."

The lights in the theater dim. Technicolor ?gures—ghosts, cowboys, Gregory Peck—move across the screen. In *Duel in the Sun* Pearl Chavez asks, "Oh, Vashti, why are you so slow?"

"I don't rightly know, Miss Pearl, except I always have so much to remember."

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