



TILTH

MELANIE LITCHFIELD

a short story by LAURA A. MUNSON

Nothing seemed real to her anymore. Life was a blur. She tried to see it in fine detail — her children running in the yard, the lines of their log cabin, her husband's tall frame emerging from the woods with his chain saw — but the edges were obscured by a cloud of mayflies or some trick of sunlight. It gave her headaches, and she retreated to alcohol, which at least provided an explanation for the blurriness.

Sitting on her front porch in the last days of summer, she tried to pull her world back into crisp focus, telling herself, *Puppy digging in the garden; son needs a band-aid; daughter could use help chasing butterflies*. But she had no energy

— or, rather, only enough to open a bottle of red wine and pour herself a glass: no stemware that summer, just an old jelly jar with a chipped rim that caught on her lip, not quite cutting it.

She poured glass after glass sitting there in the bright sunlight, trying to feel her motherhood pulsing somewhere in her heart. The reason for her lethargy could have been that her father had died that Memorial Day; that she'd held his feet in the intensive-care unit as the morphine took over and they pulled out the respirator; that she'd watched him take his last three breaths, then kissed his flaccid lips and gone home.

Or it could have been that two weeks later her dog had been shot and killed by a neighbor with a drug problem.

A friend at her father's funeral had warned her, "When grief comes, ride it like a wave, like a childbirth contraction, even though it might feel like it's pulling you down to the bottom. If you don't, you'll pay the price later. And don't expect anyone to do it for you."

She hadn't expected anyone to do it for her. She had been a master rider of labor pains when giving birth to her two children — without drugs. She found value in pain and was against medication as a rule; she was stubborn that way. But her friend hadn't told her that the ones who can't do the grieving for you are the ones who will make the grieving close to impossible.

At first she had been going along at a good clip, handling well her father's death and the loss of her dog, reading books on grief each morning before the children got up, with their summer expectations of swimming and biking and ball-playing. She had been writing in her journal, something she hadn't done in years. She cooked the family's favorite meals, baked cakes for birthdays, threw a party with pony rides. She made love to her husband and kept the laundry pile down. She chose to cry at night, after everyone was in bed, sitting outside under the stars, wrapped in blankets. And when all of them were busy with their own lives in a way that made her seem almost obsolete — as a mother should seem if she is doing her job well — she rode her horse into the woods alone, something she had always been too scared to do before.

She rode to Murray Lake and let the horse graze in the pine grass while she took off her sweaty clothes and swam naked in the jade mountain water. Then she urged him up long hills — he had a tendency to run too fast on the flats — and at the top, when he was tired and wanting to stop, she gave him some rein and a hopeful squeeze with her thighs so that he might go into a gallop. She liked speed, but not so much that it would carry her away altogether. In the rush of wind over her wet hair and the tingle of lake water on her arms, she believed in herself. And every time she and the horse made their triumphant walk back to the barn, she carried that feeling home with her.

She didn't tell anyone about the rides, because she couldn't afford to have anyone tell her that she shouldn't be galloping alone in the woods — that she could get thrown and be left to die under the wide expanse of the Montana sky. So she'd come into the house with a tempered smile and take a shower and fall back into her role as purveyor of domestic bliss. And it was working — all of it — until she concluded that her husband was very likely having sex with another woman. That's when she lost her energy and her sense of motherhood and all the outlines in her world went hazy and she started to drink the summer away.

It was fire season. The days burned with sun and the promise of smoke, and heat lightning cracked horizontally across the sky at night, but there had been no fires yet. Every day she



prayed for someone to drop a cigarette in the woods and give her an excuse to stay inside with the windows closed and the kids watching television. Every day her children came into her bedroom wearing shorts, bringing the sun with them, and showed off their just-brushed teeth and told her of their plans. Every day she slept later and later, letting the puppy cry in his kennel, letting her husband creep off to work without a goodbye.

She didn't tell anyone about her husband's indiscretions. All the evidence she had was his neglect, which she quietly marked, and his acute attention to something else — something he had let invade their home in quickly ended phone calls, odd new aromas, long workdays, impatient lovemaking. She was stunned, like a bird that has flown into a windowpane and lies in the grass, not sure if it's able to fly again.

At the end of August, while she was sitting on the front porch and her family was inside eating TV dinners, she exhaled and thought of her father's last breath, and the exhale persisted, hot and long, until she was empty. And in her emptiness, she felt strangely full, and she stayed there. When the urge to inhale came, she pushed hard against it with her diaphragm, lingering in the place she had been warned about: the bottom, beneath the waves.



KELLY POVO

She would have stayed there, but something convulsed inside her, and she gasped for air.

She picked up her jar of red wine, walked ten paces into the front yard, and turned. It was a good cabin, with a wraparound porch and a perennial garden surrounded by a stone wall she had built with her husband when she was pregnant with their daughter, now eight. She looked at the pergola burgeoning with honeysuckle and clematis; at the rare perennials she had brought home in wet newspaper from all over the United States, and even once from England; at the gate they had milled and fashioned from the Engelmann spruces that had been felled to clear a spot for the house. She thought of the tepee they had lived in before the kids came, when they were twenty and she'd had the good sense to buy land in Montana with money inherited from her grandmother's estate. They had dug the garden out of the hard clay with pickaxes before the house or the children or the wall. It had been everything to them.

She had not touched the garden all summer. She hadn't pulled one weed, nor clipped back one perennial for a second bloom, nor filled in a single gap with annuals from the farmers' market. She hadn't watered either. Not once. And now the last of the delphiniums and the first of the black-eyed Susans and the surplus of hollyhocks all floated impressionistic in front

of her. Somehow the garden had thrived without her.

She shook her head hard, as if to get water out of her ear, and put down her wine. And she turned to look at her land — all twenty acres of it — and remembered something her father had said once, while visiting from central Illinois, where he raised soybeans and corn for gentlemen-farmers from Chicago: "Where's the vegetable garden?" he'd asked.

Her father loved nothing more than a garden tomato. He held the fruit in his hand as if it were an organ for a sick child. He cut it as if it were his deepest misery. He ate it as if it were manna from heaven. Then he lost two fingers and the thumb on his right hand to a combine, and after that he gardened less, farmed more, fathered only minimally. But he had seemed perturbed by her lack of a vegetable garden. "People in the suburbs have flower gardens," he said.

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