

The Weight of You

Melinda Moustakis

Your brother Jack puts down the net he's been holding up, the signal for "fish on— get the hell out of the way." You had a take-down, the pole slammed and line zipped out, but after he pulls anchor and rows away from the tip of Eagle Rock and you lean into the fight—the king spits the hook. He says, "You're supposed to be the lucky one, Gracie" and you know what's coming next. "God helps you and he fucks with me."

You're anchored up again and he splashes V8 into an empty plastic water bottle, and then fills the rest with vodka. "You want a Holy Mary?" he says with a smile, knowing you'll say no because it's eight in the morning and he's the only one who likes them Holy instead of Bloody.

"I've got coffee," you say and raise the thermos.

"It better be spiked," he says.

"Your island special," you say, which means whiskey and cream. Three hours on the Kenai backtrolling for kings, and you still haven't upped and told him what you wanted to say.

He is five years older than you, married with three kids. One of the reasons you're out fishing is your sister-in-law, Jean. She wants you to talk to him about his drinking and calls you two, three times a day at Fred Meyer where you work as a grocery clerk. He's always been extreme, but she says he's just taken out a second life insurance policy.

"Who needs two?" she said. "He keeps telling me he's going to die young. He just knows it."

For a couple of years growing up, he was obsessed with the afterlife. When things got bad, he had you help him make a list of ways you could get there faster: drowning in a river or bathtub, bullet wound, drinking lighter fluid, ax to the neck, holding your breath, jumping into a fire. He tried once—he climbed as high as he could up a spruce tree in your yard and jumped. But it was winter and Anchorage was having record snowfall and he gave himself a good headsmack, sloshed his brain is what your mother said after he started throwing up, but she didn't take him to the doctor.

A cloud sweeps over and he stands up and raises his bulky arms to

the sky. "Jesus, give us some sun, goddamnit. I only get a couple days a year." The Mathew brothers, who he calls Doormat and Hazmat, laugh in their boat and say, "You tell him, Jack." The tourists stare at your brother—you can tell who they are because they're, as Jack says, "shit on oars," are wearing matching blue jackets, and have already bumped into your drift boat. Peppered beard at thirty-one, biceps the size of your head, and now waving his flannel shirt and telling the clouds to move—Jack is what they'd call Alaskan bush. Tourists come for moose and eagles and to see fish they've only dreamed about. Your brother is a bonus.

"I've got to take a piss," he says and grabs the PVC pipe and steps past you. He faces front with the tourists, unzips his pants, holds the pipe in place. You hear the tourist-woman gasp. "This is how you do it on the Kenai," he says. "Dick in a stick."

He starts on another Holy Mary.

"Maybe you shouldn't..." you say.

"Not you too," he says. "I've given up all of my crazy shit. This is all I got left. This and Drift Mondays. You hear this Hazmat? G-String here wants me to quit drinking."

"Shit," says Hazmat.

"Shit is right," Jack says.

You're the little sister and he's the big brother, but the word "big" doesn't even come close to what he is. He was your kidding wink and punch in the arm, your prince of cards, your freckled mirror. You shared a room in the lunchbox house on Bragaw Street. Foil over the windows to keep out the summer sun. A ball of foil, wide as a dinner plate, hanging from the ceiling, and when the bruising sounds from the living room got too loud, he'd shine a flashlight on it and say, "Tell me about the moon Gracie" and the moon was different every time. But now, he's your hook and line and goddamned captain.

"I'm just saying." And your words ripple toward him. You'll have to wait to tell him your news.

"I got Jean breathing down my neck. I'm working sixty and we just got the new house. How the hell else am I supposed to relax?"

"Maybe you should worry more about living," you say.

"And what do you know about that?" he says.

You've had a frayed string of boyfriends and the last one, you broke up with after you brought him to Jack and Jean's for dinner. The boyfriend came to your apartment off Sterling Highway, near the old fish processing plant, and limply held your hand as you walked to his truck. Your brother opened the front door—"Gracie" he roared and picked you up in a bear hug as if he was the only one who knew the weight of you.

And you weren't surprised when your brother showed the boyfriend his new Winchester, ran his hand along the barrel and said, "I love this mother-fucking country." You were surprised the boyfriend didn't make hunting plans with him, didn't talk skeet or clay or pigeon. And later that night, the boyfriend tells you, "Be gentle," when all you want to do is bite into his Adam's apple, because if there's one thing you know, it's that love is fierce. And then he says, "Is it just me, or is your brother a little off?" *Fuck you*, you say, and you know the boyfriend is right and so you get up and leave before he's right about you too.

Doormat gives a yelp and jumps up to set the hook. Hazmat pulls anchor and starts rowing, follows the king's run upriver.

"Don't you worry," Jack says. "Ours is coming." He reels in and checks his eggs, then douses them in his secret weapon—peppermint oil. "Sometimes the smell of fish eggs with this reminds me of cod liver oil and earthquake stew," he says. "God, never again."

You taste it in your mouth and your stomach turns. You had a pantry full of naked, dented cans with serial numbers that your father, years before that, got cheap from the Good Friday Earthquake. When your mother ran out of groceries, she picked three cans and poured whatever was in them into a pot. Egg fu yung. Corn. Green Beans. On a better day, one of the cans was ravioli. On a bad day, you let vegetables slip off your spoon on purpose, sending little waves to the edge of the bowl and back into the center.

"I visited Mom yesterday," you say.

"Good," he says.

"Don't you want to know how she is?" You're trying again and he's not having it. He's been not having it since he left for the navy right out of high school, and even before that.

"She's got you," he says. "Reel in. Something's on your line."

Your father worked as a juggy—put in seismic line for Western Geo, and he was gone a lot. Which was a relief. But you walked into your parents' bedroom looking to sneak some make-up and you saw he had taken red lipstick, something you don't remember your mother ever wearing, and in a hasty flourish wrote "Sheila, I miss you already" at the bottom corner of the mirror on her dresser. Her name looped and trailed off with a comet's tail so "Sheila" read "Shield" if you hadn't known any better. You wondered how long the crimson wax had been there, proof, like a famous person's autograph, that, yes, she had seen him—he *had* been here. You could see she had washed the mirror and deliberately left it intact, a safety deposit of dust encased the letters. But there were cracks in the cursive, slight fractures where glass glared right back at you.

Her cosmetics bag was filled with concealer and powder and beige bottles, and, while you rummaged for shadows and color, she walked in.

"That's mine," she said.

Your hand froze, your face already pale with what you had put on. And you looked at her and she looked down at the brown carpet.

"Don't," she said, quiet, and you knew you would never trespass again.

There's a rainbow trout on the end of your line—he's eaten all your king eggs and he's small, about the length of a spoon.

"Child molester," Jack calls you.

"It's not my fault," you say.

The hook, made of surgical steel and meant for a fifty-pounder, has pierced through the jaw and gill. Dangling in the air, it looks like you're using the rainbow for bait. "I don't want you," you say to the ink-filled eye. You release him back into the river, but he might not make it. "He good as dead?" you say.

"Never can tell," Jack says. "I was out here once, drifting by myself. I put in at Skilak, and it was calm at first, and then the wind picked up and made a mess of the water. Took me an hour or two to get to The Narrows and by that time I needed to rest, so I let the current take me and swing me wide, beached me up at some marsh near Superhole." He stops to take a drink, a long one.

"And?" you say.

He's always had a stockpile of stories, things he's seen that get him new fishing buddies and free beers.

"And I'm sitting there and I see a duck leading eight ducklings, they're all paddling behind her in a line, keeping close to the bank. Then an eagle flies in overhead, coming toward me and the ducks. All of a sudden, mama swims away from her brood and into the thick of the river, she's splashing and squawking and she's got her wing bent crooked like it's broken. The eagle swoops down with his feathers splayed back, talons going in for the kill, and I think she's a goner and right before he reaches her, she stops flailing and dodges out of the way and swims toward the bank. That eagle looked confused, let me tell you. Flew away and landed on the top of a spruce tree and stayed there like he didn't know what the fuck had just happened."

Doormat and Hazmat return and anchor up again near Eagle Rock. Half of the boulder is above the water—the tide is going out. They hold up a forty-five pound hen, her belly bulging.

"Nice one," says Jack. "You going to give me some of those eggs? That's the tax for saving your spot."

"You give us some of that cure," says Hazmat. "And it's a trade."

"Fuckers," Jack says. "You know that's good cure. I get it sent from Oregon."

"You want eggs," says Hazmat. "We got to get something in return."

"What about that new jon boat you got for a steal because I knew the guy?"

"Shit," says Doormat. "How long you plan on using that against us?"

"As long as it takes," Jack says. "Tell them Gracie."

"As long as it takes," you say.

For every story he tells, you think there's another one bubbling under the surface. He has stories about working on the slope in Prudhoe Bay, the circumpolar sun, as big as a mountain, skating on the horizon, circling and circling. He says, "Some of the guys got shit-fucked in the head. Never slept—couldn't handle all the light, all the time. Started acting jumpy, like there was someone following them." You realized, a while back, that all his stories were about survival. "Me and this guy, Doodle, when we started to feel edgy, we'd tank a bunch of beers and then run our asses into the Arctic. There were only a few jerk-offs that could stand that ice-water longer than me." He'll say, "Did I tell you about joining The Polar Bear Club?" to some waitress or couple at the bar and Jean will roll her eyes at you, but you both let him talk; you both listen.

You feel the bump and turn, and the tourists are struggling against the current.

"If you can't row." Jack stands up and points. "Take the outside channel. And stop banging my Willie."

"You know you like it," yells Doormat.

The tourists look confused until one leans over and whispers to the others and you know he's seen the Willie Boats decal on the side. They, and their matching blue jackets, head farther downriver.

"Fucking annoying," says Jack. "But I remember when I first came out here. I hit a few boats—thought maybe I'd get shot at."

"Tell the truth," you say.

"You're right," he says. "I rowed like a bastard. But I didn't want you to think I was good at everything."

"Don't worry," you say.

"I can't help it," he says.

One night, you woke up and he was dragging his mattress off the top bunk.

"What are you doing?" you said.

"Sleeping in the living room."

“Why?”

“Just because. I don’t have to explain.” He must have felt guilty for snapping at you because then he said, “How about I sleep near the door until you get used to that and then I’ll move out.”

You strained your eyes to make sure he was there. Or you’d hold your breath and quickly flick the flashlight on and off, hoping you wouldn’t wake him, your eyes fuzzy with adjusting to the dark. And then the beam glared bright on carpet and he was gone. But when your father came home, Jack would come back; put his mattress across the doorway so nothing could come in.

Your pole slams and he says, “Wait for it. Wait. Now.” You grab the rod out of the holder and jerk back to set the hook, then do a double set.

“What you got there?” says Hazmat.

The pole is noodled into the river and the fish isn’t moving.

“Check your drag,” says Jack.

You can’t reel in and he’s not taking line.

“Pull up,” he says.

“I am,” you say.

“Let me see.” he says. “You got a snag?” He takes the rod and lifts up. “That’s a goddamn fish. And he’s heavy as all hell. I can’t move him.”

You take the rod back and the reel creaks and the fish is taking line and you brace your feet. Then pop, the line goes slack.

“He’s gone,” you say.

“Now you *have* to go into the river,” he says. “You didn’t do it with the last one and now look at what happened.” He has rules: you have to take a dunk in the river after you lose a fish. You have to kiss the ones you catch.

“That’s your thing,” you say. “Not mine.”

You lined up the empty cans on a shelf of snow, aimed the BB gun and fired.

You missed.

“Hold steady, look through the grooves,” Jack says.

Your fingers felt the coldness of the trigger through your gloves. You hit the second and third and fourth, the tinny ring after each hit. You wanted the cans dead.

He put his hand on your shoulder. “Gracie, stop it,” he said and lifted the gun away.

You’d been eating earthquake stew for two weeks. That night, late, the two of you heard the back door open and close. You got up and the outside light was on and through the window, you saw your mother

trudging away from the house, holding a gun. She wore her long-sleeved nightgown that went to her knees and big snow boots, her braid glistening with cold. She lined up six more earthquake cans and when one can was chock full of holes, she let out a puff of breath that froze in a moment of white. Then she stepped back with the gun at her side, and waited, her braid swaying across her shoulders. After a few seconds, she took aim at the next can. Two down. Then three.

Line zips out and you let it go longer this time.

"She's hot today," says Doormat.

You get the rod out of the holder and double set, yanking the tip high over your right shoulder.

"Careful," Jack says. "That's my favorite king rod."

The fish submarines straight across the river, line peeling out.

"Pull your anchors," Jack yells. "Get the fuck out of the way."

The king turns left and heads straight upriver.

"Hold on," he says, grabbing the oars. "We're going for a ride."

You and Jack sat in the living room, five empty ravioli cans in the middle of the floor. You paced around them, said the serial numbers out loud, backwards. Trying to find the code for ravioli and sick of earthquake stew.

"It's no use," Jack said.

And that's when you both saw antlers, big like trees, attached to a mountain of a moose.

He'd been watching you. Now you were watching him.

The two of you got your jackets and went upstairs and climbed out the window onto the top of the awning. You leaned over the edge on your stomachs.

"Hey there, Grandpa," Jack said.

Grandpa had a black muzzle and a silver, scraggly beard. His antlers were shedding and you reached out to touch them; he let you. A piece of his velvet came off. You thought he might be hungry, that he'd like a piece of bread.

"We don't have any bread," Jack said. He suddenly sat up. "I think I know." Grandpa took a step back, but didn't leave. Jack went to the window and crawled back inside.

Grandpa breathed out a quick huff.

"I've got nothing to give you," you said.

He leaned back and lifted his front legs off the ground and made a nasally sound, calling a drawn "noow, now, noooow."

"What do you want?"

He pushed off again, boxing the air. His hooves hit the ground. One two. One two.

"Gracie, I broke the code," Jack yelled. You put the velvet scrap in

your pocket and hurried into the house.

Jack rows and you reel in line. He's fighting the current and you're fighting the fish, reeling in as you follow its path. And then the king turns, heads straight for the boat.

"Reel, goddamnit," he says. "Get rid of that slack."

You've got the butt of the rod jammed into your hip and you're hunched over, reeling as fast as you can.

"I still got him," you say, when you catch up and the whole weight of the fish tugs on the line.

"Pull up. Reel down," he says. "Pull up. Nice and slow."

Your arm and shoulder are worn out, but you hunker down, keep tension.

He drops anchor. "We'll fight him the rest of the way here," he says.

You see the green metallic flash of the plug—the king is a couple of feet below.

"When you see the spinner, direct his head to me," he says.

The king dives, takes line.

"Let him take it," he says. "We got time."

Every inch you've gained is lost, and you're back where you started.

"Pull up. Reel down. There you go."

You don't want to tell him to take the rod, that you're arm's about sapped. "Come on you motherfucker," you say and dig in.

You see the plug, and follow the king to the bow of the boat. He dives again and you bury the rod in the water.

"What a shit," Jack says.

You circle the boat, switch places with Jack. Then you see the spinner, the shadow. "Lift," he says. He shoves the net into the water to bag him, yanks the handle up. Jack heaves the net into the boat and the king, the size of child, thrashes on deck. "Get the bonker," he says.

You look around, look in the stowaway, under the seat.

"For Christ's sake," he says. The king is slapping his tail against the deck and Jack kneels down on the net to hold him.

You hand him your thermos. "This is all we've got."

"Get me the knife then. We'll bleed him out." He stabs the gills, and he has to wrestle the fish to turn it over, and stabs again. Then he drags the body to the side and muscles the net back into the water, against the side of the boat, the current washing away a cloud of red.

"What a monster," he says. "Sixty-pound chromer, fresh as they get. He's still got sea lice on him."

"Jack," you say. You're finally going to tell him. "I got that job in Vancouver."

But you know and he knows that there's a difference between *got* and *took*, and you realize this as soon as you've said it.

Grandpa was in the yard—his antlers bobbing along with his bulky stride.

You found an old package of saltines and went outside, the snow swallowing your ankles and shins. You walked slowly and he didn't scare off.

"Are you hungry?" you said. You held out your hand.

"Here, you can have it." He was tall and big and beautiful. He moved a little closer and stopped.

"Gracie, move out of the way."

You looked behind and saw your mother holding a rifle. She had aim. But you were between her and Grandpa. "No," you said and he spooked. The thud of his hooves. You ran straight toward her and she side-stepped you and took one shot. But it was too late.

She raised her arm, ready to strike and you winced; no one had ever hit you before. When you opened your eyes, she was pulling at her hair with both hands.

"Go inside," she said.

"I'm sorry," you said.

"Don't. I don't want to look at you. So go."

As you walked away you heard her saying the same thing over and over. "Give me the strength," she said. "Give me the strength."

You could see through the window as you went up the stairs. She sat in the snow, head bent forward, hands clasped behind her neck.

"Tell them about when you fell in love with a moose," Jack will say. "We were starving and one came to our backyard and Gracie wouldn't let us shoot him."

"Alaska's in your blood," Jack says. "This is your home." He looks down at the king in the net. "What do you say, fish? Has she even thought about Jean and the kids?"

You start to say something, something like, "But what about making my own life?" and you stop. Your life has been made and unmade, your life is not your own. Once, the pastor of a church your mother dragged you to on Christmas and Easter said, "You were bought with a price," and you swear he was looking right at you. You wondered how anyone could be bought and owned and if you had any choice in the matter. You don't wonder anymore.

Jack lifts the king back onto deck. "You have to kiss him," he says.

"No," you say.

"You're the lucky one. I'm just fortunate. Don't mess with my fishing laws."

"I'm not going to kiss that fish," you say. But you will, you always

do.

When your father came home for the last time, the two of you found him on the couch. You tried to leave, but he woke up.

"It's been a while," he said. He sat up.

You didn't know what to say. Jack stepped in front of you.

"Your mom went out for a bit. Is that you, Gracie?"

You stood there, not answering.

"I know what'll fix us," he said. "How about I teach you some cards?"

You sat around the kitchen table. He shuffled and gave each of you five from the deck.

"Now there's the straight, the flush, the full house..."

That night you heard them fighting again and Jack got up from his mattress near the door. "Stay here," he said.

And what happened, happened, and then your mother, with a swollen face that make-up couldn't cover, packed the two of you up and you left. But you wouldn't know the whole story until years later.

"That drunk bastard," Jack said. "He was hitting Mom and I tried to get in between them and then he got up in my face with a shotgun and said, 'You want to be a man? Let's see if you can act like one.' He points the gun at Mom and says I have to choose. 'Her or your sister. Who lives?' And I was pissing my pants, trying not to cry and he got right back in my face with the gun. 'Choose, you little piece of shit.' No, I said. He shoved me. I pointed at myself. I'll take it, I said. You let them alone. 'Pussy,' he says. 'I said choose.' Mom's standing there, doing nothing, hanging her head. And all I could think about was you, just a kid and all." He grabbed your arm. "I chose you, Gracie. Then he beat the shit out of me, told me who the fuck did I think I was, playing God?"

You drift downriver to Eagle Rock and the tide has gone out, exposing a large chunk of the boulder.

"Show them your fish," he says.

You strain against sixty-pounds, lift up the king.

"That's what I'm talking about," says Hazmat. He whistles.

"Charged so fast he had sea lice on him," Jack says.

"No fucking way," says Doormat.

"Tell them, Gracie."

"Covered all over," you say. "Looked like moss."

Jack puts the oars up. "Looks like we're going to call it a day, boys," he says and gets into a life-jacket.

"Why do you need that?"

"Lose a fish..." he says, and jumps into the river.

Everyone turns to watch you. He grabs the side of the boat and now you are someone who needs saving, an eagle diving into a mistake.

"I like your style," says an old fisherman in a camo vest.

Jack's up to his neck in glacial water walking the boat, with you in it, toward the bank. And you, you're standing in a field of white, the crunch of snow beneath your feet. He wants you to tell him about the moon, but you tell him about the sun—it's big and bright and hovering on the horizon, the whole eye of it, circling. You run towards that gleaming hole, the point-blank end of the barrel, your arms in the air. Here, you wave. Pull the goddamn trigger.

But you get to shore, take the keys, and get into the truck. He's sopping wet but you stop at the bar on the way home. He tells a story or two, and you let him. Then you drive him to his house and when Jean sees you, she knows. "Help me punch out the rolls," she says and when you're both in the kitchen, kneading dough, you understand that in the rise and fall of her hands she's saying, "Give me the strength." She's saying, "I can't do this alone."