

1994 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Moonstone Award Winner

THINGS I IMAGINED; THINGS I SEEN

By Joanna Brooks

THE FIRST SUMMERS I CAN REMEMBER, I remember this: the cherry blossoms cracking open, the lightning sharp across the black afternoons. Those first summers, Crystal and I took on the gravel road. School let out in May and we started, tender-footed. Each week we'd make it to a new mailbox. Hopping like crickets and sucking blue popsicles afterwards. By June, we were at the end of the block.

At the end of the block, behind the bright green trees, that's where the lake was.

Just before bed, those first summers, our father came into the bedroom we shared and, first at Crystal's bedside, then at mine, he pulled the quilts up, smoothed the hair off our hot foreheads, and told us "No lake."

No lake, no lake, no lake.

The daylight (so late in June) came across his face, through the basement windows. No lake, no lake, no lake. No questions. He loved us, he said. No lake.

We listened. No lake. No questions. And when the door was shut and the light got thinner and thinner in our bedroom and my eyes went shut, out of his way, I dreamed all night of the lake—of the fire inside it, the witches down in it, my dead mother too, green faces, mossy teeth, stick hair.

In the morning, at breakfast, I'd try to hide my cooling head—the fires and witches smoldering. Cheerios in front of me and yellow kitchen curtains. My good father. Who loved us. No lake.

My good father who said good prayers over breakfast. Keep us safe. From the lake, the witches, the flames. At night we'd pray together, and I'd pray secretly for the dreams to go away. But God didn't go inside my head, and by the time the sun came up I'd have been to the lake and back a million times already, my sheets all wet. Crystal, she was good. She just slept, as far as I could see.

I remember this too: how the cherries turned green and then red, how in the afternoons Crystal and I would go to the school playground and practice a trick on the bars called the cherry drop. That feeling of fall.

And the neighbors' cats. Orange calico. We'd throw rocks. They'd scatter like ants.

SO, my present question is this: what do you do when the place you've tramped through, drunk up, and dreamed about won't have your trappy dreams? What happens when the right version of the story's been settled on, and you're too late?

And you've loved this place with a love deep, deep to the bottom of your bare feet blackened from the walking you've done on the streets of this place you love. And all day long you've really tried to be a good citizen, sitting in school, learning the hows and the history. But as soon as you close your eyes, you're shedding those clothes and running around the hills and the fields, splashing around with the witches. And you're never either one or the other—but both.

At the dinner table, the summer after my senior year in high school, I kept my mouth closed because I never knew which me would speak.

Do you know how it feels when your good father, your very flesh, who loves you, doesn't understand a word you're saying?

And you have different names for everything and eventually you'd rather not see them stop like that, the bread in one hand, the butter knife in the other, and the table just quiet. That's the worst kind of alone. Home, and no one to tell your stories to.

I left, after my senior year. I packed my VW and left.

SALMON season in Alaska, fire crew in Oregon, ski lifts at Purgatory—three years out in all. A new story every town. The highway with little lights every sixty miles. And only me—my memory—linking all of them together.

I was at the end of a long stretch of part-time jobs, junk food, and improvisation when I stopped in Helper to call home. I hadn't spoken to my father in a year and a half.

I didn't have anything to say to him.

I sat in a booth at this truck stop, stacking quarters and thinking about what we wouldn't say when I called.

It was August, late, afternoon-ish.

I watched the lady at the counter fill the sugar dispensers.

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I stacked the quarters, ran my thumbs along the ridges, then shoved them in my pockets and walked outside.

Helper's a mine town, wedged in the mountain's elbow. The sky stuck bright blue overhead and, looking at that comfort blue, that quilt, I felt it might be nice to stick somewhere a while, get tired, bed down.

Three years is a long time to be out.

I wanted in.

It just so happened that Luke took me in.

I was sitting on the bumper of my car at the truck stop when he walked up with a gas can.

"You need some help?" he said, barrel-chested, big arms. "I'm fine."

"You new in town?" he said, looking me over, my car, my clothes.

"No."

"Sure," he said, tending the pump now. He waved to the woman in the window and filled his can.

"Now, I know road-worn when I see it, and I got this candle shop and you cut wood for me, I'll give you a place to stay, but your type—you don't trust anyone and I don't blame you, but I could use the help," he said, standing up, screwing the cap on the can.

My type, he says. If he knows something about my type I'd sure love to hear it.

So I followed him back to his workshop and storefront and there was an apartment above it and I got set up and rolled out my sleeping bag on the floor.

I dreamt of nothing—a thick nothing all black and murk, my head too full.

SO I stayed in Helper and started days at the shop. Luke ran it tight, precise, the trays all clean. His big voice went everywhere, rattled the tin roof. "Move that." "You didn't get the wax off." "You'll learn."

In the first month of candle-making, I told Luke twelve versions of my "leaving home" story, from the "I won the Texas lottery" version to the "Jim Beam father" version. I'd talked about growing up in Wyoming, South Dakota, and New Mexico. I'd told the story of my first love Ben, my first love Jack, and that nameless first love I met in Juarez over Triple Sec.

Luke just laughed and finished the day's batch.

By month two, we worked out our system, started moving like music.

"Tell me more stories," he said. "You're good."

He drank carrot juice out of mason jars, stirred the bubbling tallow fat and beeswax with a plank. He stood over the big vat, dipped a finger into the soup, and consulted God. "Hotter," he said. "More wood."

Honey mesquite, he used, straight from the creek bed. We pulled the yellow blooms and seed pods, then stuffed it in the oven.

I cut the wicks because Luke's hands were going bad. His fingers fell into each other and his elbows ached.

Luke did the colors. Like the greats, he had a rose period

and a green period. That fall we dusted yellow candles with pollens. Sometimes we stirred flower petals or pine seeds into the cooling wax. Once, Luke got an invitation to an art show, in an envelope of gold foil. We worked all week. Me cross-legged on the floor cutting tiny stars out of the foil. Luke over the stove stirring up a black and silver night.

After the long, slow cook-up and the prep, the process was complicated, and we worked like fingers picking banjo strings, not getting in knots. We left our slow bodies in the corner.

Luke lifted the pot and I held the molds in cool water. There were risks—my hands, the hot wax, his back. Luke had burn scars, smooth and purple, on his fingers and his wrists. The table was covered with spilled wax, swirls of ruin.

With danger bubbling, my head would roll and boil with stories. I would talk urgently about escape and evasion. About winter storms, how the cars would slide down Cottonwood Canyon. I would talk about wildfires. How rabbits and coyotes would run down into ravines, how cows would press up against barbed wire fences.

"How does that sound?" I'd say to Luke.

Luke would puff and blow as he poured the last of the wax out. "I like it," he'd say. Or, "Too much." Or, "Keep going." He'd put the pot down and grab his back.

During the cooling, I'd sit on the wood pile and let off steam, exhausted. Luke would go get a Coke. Or play cards.

That was my favorite part, the still of the cooling. Luke sitting there and me here and his crazy red head, big bristled fingers. Luke liked my stories and he let me stay. And I liked Luke, crazy old man. He started looking like family to me.

Family's frightening when you've been out for a while. Lies and lies keep people safe and away, but what if you come in, finally, and they hate what your bones make you say?

MOST of Luke's color spells lasted a week or two. Three weeks of red in October. But that changed last winter when Luke took to blue.

He brought in dried desert bells and blue-eyes. He dropped blue copper butterfly wings into the wax.

At first, he'd mix real dark and I'd talk stories about midnight. On light days, I'd say "sky" or "eyes."

People came to see Crazy Luke the candle man, and they saw turquoise and rain, or thunder, or ocean.

And the blue dragged on through November and lasted, like cold fever, into January.

Everything changed. Waking into blue, turning off a blue alarm clock, making blue tea, pulling on blue wool socks.

The cooling time widened and stilled and blue was everywhere. And the blue made everything melt. I felt flooded. I soaked. I wanted to stop seeing, stop talking, stop rattling. I wanted to be solid, warm, and good, like fresh wax. I wanted to just be understood.

Luke sensed this. "Tell stories," he said, more insistent, his eyebrows down.

"I can't," I said. "I'm tired." The storm outside picked up.

"Come on, Dawn," he said, "I know that head of yours."

"What you know's all lies, Luke. I'm tired of telling you sto-



"The witches swim around beneath me. Mrs. Luke sits above me, knitting a web of stars across the sky."

ries."

At this point, Luke put the plank down. He turned the sign on the storefront to "Closed." "Sit," he said.

"You know I've been telling you stories since day one."

"Yes. You're a great storyteller."

"I'm a great liar and I've been lying for so many years now I don't know what the real me might say."

Flames on wicks do flicker, but sometimes they get still and hold. We held, two humans. The wind picked up, we held down the shack, stoked the fire, and Luke talked some sense into my head.

"I'm an old man, Dawn. I didn't get old sorting truth from lies. Truth and lies are good ideas, but what you do every day to keep yourself alive is different—some kind of half-breed. I'm a mutt, Dawn. I pick weeds and mix wax and hope that what I make lights up some house somewhere, sitting on a kitchen table with a waiting mother, burning for some lonely old grey bird."

"But all I've done is lie to people I love."

"You've made a safe place for their love, Dawn. You could do a lot worse."

But I wasn't so worried for them. As selfish as it sounds, I was worried for me. They hear the stories and stay safe. I stay

bad, betraying. I stay out, circling the house. I wanted inside, for once, home.

THE rest of the winter went quiet and I kept my mouth shut. The blue of the wax got lighter and lighter. By March, we were pouring white wax, sipping chamomile tea.

In April, the cold broke. Helper's yards filled with lipstick color—crocuses, tulips. Luke let me pick the colors for the new batch. At night, I stole the neighbors' flowers in armfuls. We poured pink wax, lilac, lavender.

"You're still not talking, Dawn," Luke said.

"You're right," I said.

"If I can't bring you back, I know someone who can."

Luke shut the shop and led me out. We went down back alleys, along an old sheep road, over a thawing brush flat, then left again, through the barnyard. Luke's house stood in a small brushy valley no one wanted. It was old and beat and dirty snow stood in the shade.

Something moved deep in the house. Like an engine barely turning over.

Mrs. Luke answered the door. She had eyes like purple snapdragons and held knitting in her hands.

"You must be Dawn," she said, holding the screen door open for me.

The house smelled like dogs and horses, carrot tops, long life. Across every sofa, from every curtain rod and corner, on every armrest and table, Mrs. Luke's fine needle lace work hung like web.

"This is all mine," she said, to explain. She turned her face to me, red bruise on her left cheek. She smiled. Luke smiled too.

"Luke always said we were two of a kind," she said to me. "Come into the kitchen." The red bruise hurt me to my knees. I followed her deeper into the house.

In the kitchen, blue candles burned—on the stove, in antique china saucers, in pink-flowered teacups, on the top of the icebox, in pans.

She looked at me with her purple eyes, with the red bruise that was an eye that saw right through me.

"So I hear you've stopped telling your stories," she said.

"I told Luke I was tired of lying."

"And what did he tell you?" she asked, smiling.

"That the making's more important than the lying."

"Dear, I make and make and make this lace and I give it to people I love and I know what happens—sometimes it sits on a shelf and sometimes it covers a Christmas table. And I understand that not everyone wants what I have to give, but I keep giving anyway. When you make, you take it for granted that sometimes you'll be understood and sometimes you'll be ignored."

"But I'm tired. I'm tired of being out, of lying. I want to come home."

"Dawn," she said, "your home is in the making. Your making makes you alive."

Her needles clicked. Stories welled up inside me and ran down my face. The candles did not go out. The radio was on, low, like the Holy Ghost, humming. There was blue light, blue heat.

"Now, there's someone out there who needs your stories," she said. "I can feel it."

I felt it too. Deep in my bad bones.

THE snakes came in May, through the cracks in the sidewalks, like grass through my fingers

The snakes—some green, some yellow—moved across the state highway out to the sandy creek wash.

I followed them through waist-high rabbitbrush. May, the Susans were already tall and gangly, soft-boned teenage girls. Ants crawled out of the Susans' black eyes.

The snakes threw pollen off the bushes. I walked down the alley, dragging my hands along sideboards, paint peeling off water blisters.

I felt the color sliding off my eyes.

Sort things out—where the story went next, if I had gas enough in my car to get me there.

Back to the shop. I ran back. "Luke," I said, "I got my eyes back."

Luke and Mrs. Luke help me pack my VW full of blue can-

dles.

Mrs. Luke wears an ivory shawl of her own design. She wears Luke's watch. The bruise on her cheek is yellow now, almost gone. She touches my chin. I kiss her cheek.

Luke's proud behind his beard. "Get out there," he says.

THROUGH June I tell people the candles are Crazy Luke's. I tell them he killed a man and I—his youngest daughter—sell his candles to make bail.

In July, I tell storekeepers that I made the candles in Maine, inspired by whales and navy winters. I tell others that Mrs. Luke made them. It feels closest to real.

August breaks over Sun Valley. I am light of blue candles and on my way to my sister Crystal.

I drive to Idaho Falls, Big Piney, Rock Springs. I pretend Mrs. Luke is in the passenger seat. I ask her about the Tetons. She talks politics, tells jokes. She has a sense of humor. She rolls down the passenger window and puts her hands in the wind. We turn on the radio and sing Patsy Cline all the way to Wyoming.

The Wyoming I find is sour and low, cut with rails, lake-ish. Music turns twangy down here and cows turn sick. Roads turn gravel somewhere near the yellow line.

Crystal's neighbors keep a goat tied to their porch, and it eats trash. Her children—Jenny, Top, and Lee—play in the outyard, bouncing off fenders and picking pussy willows.

I pull up as Crystal comes out to call the children in. She is the beautiful blond in the porchlight, long limbs. The night is mothy and warm.

"Come in, Dawn," Crystal says, putting a strong arm around me. We go in to the kitchen. Yellow flutters at the walls and windows. Crystal gives each small hand a hot dog and an RC Cola. The kids watch television.

She hands me a cola, and I hand her a candle. We sit at the table.

"So tell me the story," she says, feeling the smooth of the wax with her fingers.

I talk about Crazy Luke and Helper. I tell how Mrs. Luke followed me across four states, followed me here, still is sitting out in the car.

Crystal nods. We believe in things you can't see. We believe in God and spirits. Ghosts are family policy. We put our grandparents in the ground five years ago, sold the split-level and the cows, buried their washed bodies and their faith. Now they sit in the chair in the corner of the bedroom and watch Crystal's kids sleep. Old aunts go through our dresser drawers.

The babies need bed now. We make them milk and honey. I help her swap their small socks and blankets. Top knocks his head on the nightstand. Lee wants to sleep with his truck.

"I'm glad for the help," Crystal says. Her husband works freight tonight.

We move out, sit on the stoop. The sun lets go and the air cools, comes down on us, sulfur-scented like the steel mill. I put my hands up and feel moisture in the air.

"You all safe here?" I say.

Crystal's nods, wrinkles her mouth.

"Say," she says.

"Say," I say, picking the grass out of my blisters.

"How about you and I take a walk?"

"Your kids?"

"They're sound asleep. If Top and Lee need something, Jenny can handle it."

Jenny is twelve.

We put on sneakers and walk down her street. We pass cow fields and trailer parks, tucked back in thicket nowheres.

We round the corner at the railroad tracks. Ties lay splintered, sewn up with flossy weeds. We leap tie to tie.

Gravel flies up.

We walk on, down fields that reek like byproduct and duck.

Big green oil pumps knock their heads against the ground like grasshoppers in distress. They are kept caged up, and crickets sing to them in ancient chirps of solidarity and liberation. We crush crickets under our feet.

The refinery is a small city unto itself, a temple of lights and pipes. Over it, flame hangs—like Luke's face, his red hair. Luke's eyes hold wolves to the bushes, stay murderers in their tracks.

We move around the back gates of the refinery, down to the shore. The refinery uses lake water to cool itself. It is steamy and warm.

Crystal bends over her shoes. Her clothes fall off and the water takes her in.

The lake is only about ten feet deep, but it has eaten planes and boats. Good Wyoming citizens—men with stubbly cheekbones—dredge it late each month for bodies. Deep in this lake there are factory-owned fish, three-eyed. There are amoebas and outboard motors and grasses and sea snakes. The mountains on the other side are peopled with power lines and fallen mining towns and mutant cows.

"It's just cooling water," Crystal calls. "There's no chemicals."

Standing water scares me, like the sloshing in my head. I wish I had Crystal's innocence of vision, her surety.

"It's warm," she calls.

I go in. Ankle-deep in muck, I float on my belly as soon as I can. The water ripples out around my white body, up in waves and splashes.

I try not to think about the fish, the big snakes moving along the lake bottom, feeding on all the fingers sacrificed to propeller rowboats. Jellyfish pulse like translucent hearts deep down.

We swim and float. We swim and float for hours, talking about old home and grade school. I bring up Mrs. Luke again.

"That bruise," I say.

"Do you think Luke did it?" asks Crystal.

"I don't think so."

"Maybe she just bumped into something."

It is hard to imagine Mrs. Luke of the fine lace so clumsy, hard to think of her with a body, even. Mrs. Luke like me. Mrs. Luke of the blue candles. Mrs. Luke of the low radio, the dim lights.

Crystal swims like a golden fish, full of black eggs.

I float on my back waiting for something to fall on my eyes. The witches swim around beneath me. Mrs. Luke sits above me, knitting a web of stars across the sky.

We hear pickups in the parking lot. The first shift of zip-up suits comes at five A.M. They'll pop the lights open and punch their cards. They pull the locks and pegs.

It is almost five, the sun like a secret behind the mining mountains.

We will dress, arrive home respectable, make milk and cereal for Jenny, Top, and Lee.

"You ready?" Crystal says.

I nod and move towards shore.

"Tell me another story about Mrs. Luke," Crystal says, getting dressed.

"That's all I know," I say.

"Then make one up."

I have told stories for many reasons, most of them dishonest. I have told stories to bury things and to obscure things and to avoid. Not knowing what is, I told what was not. Crystal asks me to make what is, what will be.

She's waiting. She ties on her shoes and starts back through the weeds. Her thin arms, her golden hair.

Holy of body, she makes babies. Holy of eyes, I make stories.

We both can want things into being.

This is the part where the lights go on.



SONORA

When sun pushes down on red-domed rock
of the Superstition Mountains, the wind's hot breath
steals the air from your chest
and every bead of sweat from your skin.
From the canyon floor, I see hills
robbed of rain, studded with giant saguaro,
the sentinels. They have seen us coming.
In the accordion folds of their flesh,
elf owl rests, insulated from heat.

We were lured here by the promise of pools,
but there is no path.

In the powdery soil of the wash
are star-shaped prints of roadrunner,
paws of kangaroo rat;
ocotillos and cactus barrels crowd together
in cracks. Past sheared-granite boulders,
shaded by the angles of cut stone,
are deep wells where wind swathes our faces,
makes earth shimmer like moon on a lake.

—GEORGANNE O'CONNOR