

2001 Brookie and D.K. Brown Fiction Contest Sunstone Winner

ROSEMARY'S GRANDDAUGHTER

By Cass McNally

IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE, MARY'S GRANDMOTHER'S maiden name meant "a river which forms a boundary." Still means "a river which forms a boundary," even now, three years after her grandmother's death. The name still exists even if Mary's grandmother does not. Mary doesn't believe in, doesn't even make much distinction between, the existence of the name and the non-existence of her grandmother. She believes in life after death. She believes in heaven. Hell, she believes, is in our own minds, or will be when we get to the other side and discover what we might have had, had we understood the truth. The truth being that we have always existed and will always exist as children of God, just as her grandmother does now, in heaven. On the other side.

Mary's grandmother, Rosemary, lived the last fifty years of her life on the same two acres in the same county where she was born. By the time she died, the city had grown into the county and the acreage became condos and a small yard for Rosemary's modest but comfortable house. Comfort was something Rosemary understood. Comfort meant beauty most of the time. Peonies in the sun, begonias in the shade. Wedgewood china and good blue wool to knit with. But Rosemary also knew that when the need for comfort was terrible, tragic in the ordinary sense of an average woman's life, beauty could turn to torture. As when Rosemary's second son was taken suddenly, like a breath before diving, by a telescoped intestine at the age of seventeen months. The baby died in the fall, and it was many years before Rosemary could look at an ash tree without averting her eyes. Golden ashes hurt her.



CASS MCNALLY is a Ph.D. candidate in fiction in the creative writing program at the University of Utah. Her work has appeared in several literary journals, including *Quarterly West*, *Cimarron Review*, *Nimrod*, and *Grain*. She lives in Salt Lake City with her husband and four children.



THERE IS A church on the corner, one that Mary has never entered but which she has driven past probably three times a week for twenty years. It is on the way to her grandparents' old place. She passes it on her way to other places now. It has a wide lawn and big trees near the street. Locusts, she thinks. And a white hawthorne. She turns right at the church and then almost immediately left down into the gully, below the freeway overpass, and climbs the road up the other side, crossing at some unmarked point from the city limits into the county. At the deepest point of the gully, in the hollow of the horseshoe-shaped road under the roaring, straight arrow of the interstate, Mary can always smell the creek—the creek that carves the gully and feeds the undergrowth of willows and scrub oak, and the monstrous cottonwoods that make the overpass necessary and prudent. She considers herself allied with the creek and the trees. The smell of the creek never fails to comfort her, the smell of water touching the edge of such dry, dry earth and stones, turning dead leaves—so much rusted chaff—damp and cool and nourishing. Of course, the leaves themselves are only there because of the creek, and she only finds comfort in the smell because of the creek's proximity to where her grandmother lived, her grandmother who is no longer there.



HE HAD BEEN fussy all night. Rosemary kept him in bed with her while her husband slept in the den, slept through the last night they would have him, two rooms away. Slept through her singing to him as he lay on her chest, breathing too fast between electric-like spasms of discomfort. He would cry and draw his hard, fat knees up under himself and try, it seemed, to burrow right through her, right through her sternum and lungs and spine, with his damp, dark head. She thought it must be a tooth. A molar coming in. A big one.

He calmed down some by dawn, and when her husband dressed to do chores, he told her he would feed their other son breakfast before he left for the store. Her husband looked down at her and then at the baby curled against her like a big pup in need of weaning, and said softly, softly as a man can, so as not to wake him, "And the winner is..."

"Not mama," she whispered, almost mouthed, and smiled at the fight in the little body beside her, smiled at the stubbornness, the spirit that came complete except for any memory of where it had been before its own birth. Smiled at her tough one, her willful child of God, and then went to sleep. She woke about nine o'clock to the sound of her baby. A strange baby sound, not crying so much as murmuring, and breathing too fast. Terribly fast. In hot, death-sweet pulses of air on her cheek as she bent close. There was light in the room now, beautiful, gold light moving across the walls and ceiling with the swaying of ash branches outside. He opened his eyes without quite waking. His dark hair was curly with sweat, even in the autumn-chilly bedroom. She must check the furnace, she thought at the same moment, precisely the same moment, that she knew she would not check it, not any time very soon because there was something wrong, very seriously wrong, with her baby. She carried him into the children's room and lay him in his crib to change him. Such a big baby boy. Bouncing baby boy. Fat. Hair like hers. Long upper lip like his father's. Eyes...like she had never seen them, open but not seeing anything except some distress too big for him, even big as he was. She glanced at the diaper open around his legs, unwrapped as if from a package, his chubby ankles still crossed in her right hand, to lift his bottom, the corner of the soggy diaper in her left, ready to fold and remove it from beneath him. The clean, lovely, bleached and softened new diaper lay

open and ready to replace the old, right next to him. She looked from the wet diaper to the clean one and back again. Looked from one to the other for what seemed like eternity, eternity the way it is read and meant in the scriptures, forever and ever, amen and amen, before she could see what was there before her, what had been before her and next to her and lying on top of her for long minutes and all the hours of the night. The old diaper was wet and heavy and at its center, in its deepest creases, through six or seven of its ten cotton layers, it was red.



MARY HAD A lover, but only once. A friend of her husband's. She had broken off the relationship because she knew that her lover was about to. Because she could hear the change in the way he pronounced the two syllables of her name, making them distinct from each other and perfectly balanced by his inflections—Ma-ry—instead of landing with gentle emphasis on the first and sliding so quietly to the next that they sounded like one—M-a-a-a-ry. Months later, she went with her husband to the movies where they ran into her lover and his wife and another couple. They chatted in the foyer as they bought popcorn, the women with the women and the men with the men. Mary excused herself to go to the ladies' room. Once inside the stall, she hung her purse on the hook provided and sat fully clothed on the lidless toilet seat and wept, as violently,

and silently, as she could. When she was quite certain that the feature had started, she left the stall, repaired her face as well as she could with what she had, and walked into the darkened theatre. She had just found her husband, his silhouette waving at her in short chops against the opening credits, when the sound suddenly ballooned and twisted like something dying, and the house lights abruptly went up. She saw in a glance that her lover was seated exactly two rows behind and one seat to the left of where she would be. She sat down quickly, discovering almost immediately that when she turned to look at her husband, she could see her lover out of the corner of her eye. By looking up, as if

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she were interested in the theatre's old moldings, she could actually tell whether her lover's face was directed toward her. Finding that it was, she looked at her husband, and asked with her most animated, most provocative tone and expression. "Did you miss me?"

Looking surprised and pleased, her husband said, "Well, sure. A little worried, though. You sick or something?"

"I'm fine," she said, waiting as she had through all the weeks of her affair for what she knew would not come. Another question. A follow-up, something that would explode the flat land between them like a mine. Something insinuating, dark, angry. Something true.

Instead, her husband picked up her hand and laced his fingers between hers. He covered both of their hands with his other one. She looked from their hands lying against her husband's leg, over her left shoulder, directly into the unsmiling eyes of her startled lover. She did not smile, and she did not look away as the house lights came down.



SHORTLY AFTER THEY bought the property, after the house and fencing had gone up but before the barns, Rosemary's husband agreed to board three horses for a friend. They grazed in the belly-high, irrigated grass, and every other day, her husband fed them grain from a tin pail. Rosemary didn't care for horses, but they were pretty to look at and a passion with her husband and teenaged son. Both of them were more than willing to drive an extra ten miles to the store and the high school in the city every day. Horses were the reason they had bought the property in the first place, and as soon as they could afford the barns, they would have horses of their own to breed and train and sell as a sideline. She might have objected if there had been any point, but there was not.

One late-summer morning, Rosemary remembered the wild plum tree that grew at the far end of the property, just this side of the fence from the adjoining dairy farm. She imagined that with all that manure and water, the plums, though wild, must be good ones, and just ripe. She left the house in her belted, poplin, everyday dress and grabbed a tin pail off the back porch to pick some, taking the newly graveled lane around the pasture and just-planted cherry orchard. The surveyor had been out the day before, and the stakes for the new barns were planted as neatly as the cherry trees inside a cleared space where the lane looped back upon itself. The stakes, painted red on the tops, stuck out of the granite-hard ground like patient settlers in old portraits, waiting for who-knew-what, surrounded by the hardest, straggliest, ugliest weeds that the old desert this new "farm" really was could produce. Waiting for who-knew-what. Rosemary stood, bucket in hand, the very image of the farm wife her own mother had been, that

Rosemary had never wanted to be, and thought about the sweet plums waiting for her.

On her way back to the house, the pail full and heavy, her hands sticky and her arm and feet aching, she left the lane, walking straight through the unbuilt barns and across the rows of cherry saplings. When she came to the pasture fence, she still had half its length to go and decided, since the horses were down at the far end, well away from the house, that she would cut across. She looked carefully up and down the length of the property to make sure she would not be observed doing anything so unladylike as climbing a five-rail fence in her dress. Then balancing the bucket on the top rail with one hand and no little effort, she got herself and her plums safely to the other side without having to jump even the last rail. Jumping would have been too unladylike even to do unobserved. She picked up the bucket and started across the pasture, noticing almost at once that the three horses, two grays and a sorrel, were watching her in a way that she could only think of as interested. They began to walk her way. With the bucket of plums banging in heavy rhythm against her skirt and leg, she walked a little faster toward the house. The horses, it seemed, began to walk faster, too. She looked over her shoulder, trying to remember whether she had ever heard of an unprovoked attack by horses. She could not remember any such story but it occurred to her in a bright flash behind the eyes that there were a great many stories she had never heard, never would hear, of things that were terrible or wonderful and true. Probably thousands of them, maybe even millions. She began to trot, hoisting the pail ahead of her and looking over her shoulder. She saw that the horses were trotting now. She held the plums in both arms and broke into a run, thinking that if she could get to the fence she could toss the bucket over onto her short soft lawn without doing too much damage. The plums might scatter, but their landing place would be soft and clean, and she had picked them mostly for jam anyway. They would still be good, sweet and dark red, and still warm from the sun. But Rosemary heard the horses behind her, heard them running, the cadence of a true gallop, and knew that she was lost, her plums were lost. She ran faster, as fast as she could, knowing what she had to do, suddenly knowing what the horses were after, and just as suddenly knowing, remembering, as if she had forgotten and had to be told again and again, that her baby was in the ground, the granite-hard ground of the old desert it really was, and she tossed the perfectly good, wild plums, bucket and all, over her shoulder, taking the fence with one leap and a scramble over the top rail.

She landed on the other side, falling hard onto her knees and then her sticky hands. Blades of her soft, clean lawn stuck to her palms as she raised them to her face, as she covered her face, and cried out loud for what seemed like a very long time.



OH MY LOVE, my love, is a river through trees in a desert of bright sage and red clay. My love is a refuge I cannot dream, not even dream, because it is too real and close and will be the end of everything I know. My love is the sound of water on old, old rocks, unmoved but worn away by motion. My love is nothing left in me but the fear of nothing being left.



A MAP TO GO BACK

MARY HAS THREE children, a boy and two girls, a moderately fulfilling half-time position as a high school art teacher, a well-ordered home, and a good husband. A kind man. In the heat of high summer, with her children at home and her days overrun, Mary feels free rather than oppressed. She paints early in the mornings—blanched landscapes, dry riverbeds, portraits of her children—from snapshots. She listens to the radio and feels exhilarated rather than anxious at the news of shrinking reservoirs and slowing creeks. Feels reassured that beneath all the acre feet of land and water, beneath the measurements of need, the earth has a memory stronger than sprinklers or garden hoses, ditches or wells. It does not know its own limitations. Underneath the smell of a creek, deeper than comfort, the earth is wild and alive.

Mary has had terribly vivid, disturbingly real, erotic dreams since before she'd ever even been with a man. They have always been about men she knows, not movie stars or sports figures, and since her marriage, not usually her husband, but sometimes. In the past, whenever she dreamed about another man, she would wake feeling vaguely guilty but comforted by the fact that her dreams were not within her power to control and that the pleasure she took from them was free in a way that other, more conscious pleasures never could be.

But Mary cannot dream about her one, real lover. She believes that when she broke her marriage vows, she broke something real, as real as skin or a bottle of milk. Still, every night, when she says her prayers, she asks that she will be sent a dream of him, that since she has had the strength to put an end to this terrible physical betrayal, that at least she be sent this succor, this stand-in for immediate joy, for the real body of the stranger she loves. She does not pray for more than a dream of the act itself—she does not dare—but what she most hopes for is that, in the dream, her lover will say her name the way he did before he decided to leave her, the way he made her two syllables one. Even as she prays, she knows the dream itself is too much to ask. Every night, she knows.

Not every night, but almost every other, her husband slides a hand along her hip or cups a breast and whispers, "I miss you," and she asks herself, instead of him, if a man can miss what he's never really had. She knows a woman can.

Begin by traveling to the white pebble drive
ellipsed on two sides by stone.

You must walk to get there.

Look at the white, once newly sided house
and the grandfather, his face vague
now, in the window above the sink.

You're only a child of various ages.
See him looking down as he dries,
not noticing, yet, you coming to his door.

Who would have known this
would be the last time you'd see him?
Turn away. Run in the yard

where you played hide and seek
behind ancient trees he planted.
Spin a circle until you fall.

Catch your breath. Go inside.
Find the slightly stained spot
on his refrigerator. Feel his hand

on your shoulder. Again,
say hi, then open the door. Grab a pop
and some ice-cubes that don't quite taste right

and put it all into the antique glass
with chipped edges he frugally filed down
for safety. You can smile now

about how you thought it was time
that smoothed those edges.

—SCOTT GALLAWAY