

2002 Brookie & D. K. Brown Fiction Contest Sunstone Winner

# TOPLESS IN ELKO

By Lisa R. Harris

IT WAS LIKE THIS. CELESTE, HER OLD COLLEGE roommate, had determined that Diane would be perfect for her visiting teaching companion's cousin in Sacramento. So Celeste had given him Diane's cell phone number. Diane had misgivings. Once Celeste had set her up with a picky, bald zookeeper who'd stood her up. But then Jed called. And he kept calling. Every night from around ten to three, they would talk. Jed had a drawl, drove a truck, and raised buffalo near Sacramento. When asked, he said he was around six foot and broad-shouldered. He was adamantly against public schooling, Bill Clinton, and breast implants. Diane herself taught German at the state university and was halfway through a Ph.D. But she was also against Bill Clinton and breast implants. She told herself that she liked independent men. She knew she liked his phone calls. And he was Mormon, although Celeste had hinted that his past might be shady: a mission he'd been sent home from, a girlfriend he had lived with. Well, that was okay. Upright-downright-forthright returned missionaries shied away from Diane—"Intimidated," her mother always said. And so, after six weeks of phone conversations, she was going to meet him for the first time, right after she dropped Spanky off at her little sister's. Spanky knew something was up. He had taken Diane's bathrobe and one of her sandals under the bed and had refused to come out all day.

When Diane entered Missy's house, she found luggage arranged in a semi-circle inside the front door. Next to the tapestry bag sat the baby's car seat, with the baby sleeping inside, her index finger curled over her nose as she sucked her thumb. Her little sister walked into the room, the diaper bag slung over her arm. "I've decided I'm going with you," Missy said. "Steve said it would be good for me, since I've been cooped up here in the house all summer." The TV was on. Missy's husband lurked in the kitchen, making a peanut butter

and onion sandwich. "It worked out great," he said; "I've got to work a lot of overtime this week." Steve sold computers at Circuit City. Diane thought he was slick, the way salesmen sometimes are. Missy leaned down and tucked a blanket around the baby. "We should probably get started before she wakes up. I've already fed her. Why don't you start loading my stuff?"

Diane didn't move. She hadn't moved. She still stood in the doorway, holding Spanky's leash in her right hand and a bag of treats in her left. The dog looked up at her. She couldn't leave him with Steve. Steve could make Spanky pee just by looking at him wrong. She unclipped his leash, patted his head, and said, "I guess you're coming too?" The dog gave her a self-satisfied look, shook himself, and went over to mark the oak tree. Diane picked up the car seat and looked at the baby, still working her thumb. The baby was six weeks old, dressed in a pink layette gown, and had hair as fine as dandelion fluff.

Diane had planned to make this trip alone. But then her mother found out about it and was probably standing by her own front door, twenty minutes away in Sandy, checking her watch, expecting Diane to pick her up. Diane had made the mistake of telling her mother about her plans, and her mother had said she couldn't go alone. "Who will wait up for you? And what if he's a rapist? You'll need someone to pray for you," she'd said. Diane had replied that Mom could pray just as well from Sandy as from Sacramento. "You'll want me sending up specifics," Mom told her, "Like 'Bless Diane that her hairspray will hold. Bless Diane that Jed will not take her to Hooters, or any other place that the Spirit cannot follow.'" Then she had taken out her notebook and jotted down these specifics. Her mother kept a Things-to-Pester-God-About list. Diane knew that roughly 80 percent of the listed items revolved around the fact that she wasn't married yet. The other 20 percent had to do with Missy. Mom didn't worry about herself; she concentrated on her girls. She was willing to do whatever she could to prompt God to fulfill the promises in Diane's patriarchal blessing. Once Diane had overheard her talking on the phone with Aunt Esther: "This part talks about raising righteous children. Doesn't that sound like an earthly promise to you?" Since Dad had died five years ago, Mom spent even more time



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wrestling with the Lord on Diane's behalf. Yes, Mom was invested in this endeavor, and so Diane had yielded to her arguments and agreed to take her on the journey. But now she would be taking not only her mother, but also her postpartum sister, an infant, and her Corgi on a trip across the Nevada desert in August. She wanted to turn back before she started. In fact, she didn't want to go at all. But she was stuck. Hadn't Jed said to her just last night, "Get your butt down here"?

She loaded the car. It wasn't worth it to have it out with Missy and tell her to stay home. Right now Missy had only two reactions: crying or screaming. She whistled for Spanky; he scuttled toward her, and she lifted him into the car. At least she wouldn't fall asleep driving.

"Over three million people have never seen Winnemucca," Mom read the billboard aloud. They were between Wendover and Wells on I-80 in Mom's Pontiac Bonneville. They'd left Diane's Saturn at Mom's because it didn't have enough room for all their luggage and the stroller. Diane drove. Mom rode in the front with Spanky at her feet. The rear-facing car seat sat square in the middle of the back seat with Missy beside it on the right.

"I think we're out of cell phone range right now," Mom said. "What if we have an accident? In this heat? With the baby? We can't call anyone." No one spoke. "No houses either," she continued. "I guess we'd leave Miss and the baby in the car. I'm the most expendable, so I'd start walking. Maybe Diane could flag down a trucker. Could you, Diane?"

"What?"

"Flag down a trucker?"

"I could take my shirt off. I understand that's how it's done."

"Where'd you learn that? Not all truckers are scary. Bishop Baker was a trucker."

"Mom. We're not going to break down."

"But if we did, I think it's nice to have a plan."

"Great plan, Mom," said Missy from the back seat. "You're asthmatic. We aren't sending you walking. You'd keel over. Then what would we do?"

"I can walk. I walk on the treadmill everyday."

"That's under ideal conditions."

"I'm a farm woman."

"And that is relevant because . . ." said Diane, and Missy said, "A farm woman? You live on five acres with two arthritic horses and a half-tamed skunk."

"I'm a farm woman. I killed chickens. Toughness was bred into me."

"If I see any chickens, I'll let you know," said Diane.

Missy tapped Diane's shoulder. "Whenever we doubt her abilities, she relies on the farm woman defense."

"Still, I think you should be glad I have a plan," said Mom. "Look. A \$10-All-You-Can-Eat buffet at John Ascuaga's Nugget in Reno," she read off another billboard.

Diane's cell phone beeped; they were back in calling range.

"I think we'd better stop in Elko," said Missy as Elko exits zoomed past. "I need to feed the baby."

"Why can't you just feed her in the car?" asked Diane.

Missy and Mom exchanged horrified looks. "You can't take a baby out of a car seat when the vehicle is in motion," Missy recited. "And," she added, "what do you want me to do? Hang over the car seat?"

"Okay. Where do you want to go?"

"Well," said Mom, "There probably won't be a nursing lounge anywhere that I can think of."

"How about we go through a drive-through, get some lunch, and find a park or something?" Spanky would appreciate the park.

Diane parked under a tree. Mom spread a blanket on the ground while Missy took the baby out. The baby's hair was curled with sweat ringlets. She yawned and burrowed against Missy. Spanky leaped down and rolled. They sat down on the blanket. There were a few people across the baseball diamond, toward the playground. Missy hoisted up her top and began to unhook her bra. Diane looked away. It was disconcerting to have her little sister bare her breast as they sat down to eat. Missy looked too busy to notice. She nursed the baby while Mom held a chicken sandwich to Missy's mouth so she could take bites. "Fanks," she said. Mom fed her a fry.

No one had mentioned Jed. Diane wasn't going to. She'd let them ask. If they would ask. Diane knew what she didn't want to tell them. She wouldn't tell them that sometimes Jed talked about how he'd like to hold her and touch her, and she wouldn't tell them how he admired Suzanne Somers. But she could tell them other things. They'd talked about financial solvency, Ford vs. Chevy, belt buckles, the elections, zoning laws, Charleton Heston and the NRA, and Spanky. She'd kept track of their conversations in her planner; then she'd made a grid on the computer, noting how often each subject was brought up. It made her feel like she knew him better if she knew what he talked about.

Spanky had attached himself to a group of Mexican children. One of the kids picked him up. Diane whistled from the blanket. Spanky wiggled until the boy put him down. He perked his ears toward Diane. She whistled again. The dog looked at the boy. Then he looked back toward the blanket with the women. He moved toward the blanket. Spanky the faithful, thought Diane. She rewarded him with Chicken McNuggets.

More people showed up at the park. People had even started to park close to their car, presumably because it was in the shade. Missy was trying to switch the baby to the other side. She had both breasts out.

"Geez, you might as well be naked, Miss," Diane said. The baby fussed and squirmed.

Missy said, "This isn't as easy as it looks. It'd be easier if I could just take my shirt off."

"Well, at least put one of them back in. They're staring at me."

"So don't look. I've got my hands full right now."

Mom laughed. Missy and Diane looked at her.

"What?" Diane asked.

"I was just remembering," said Mom. "When I was little, I was with Grandma someplace and there was a lady breast-feeding her baby. And I didn't know what she was doing. Grandma told me, 'the lady is feeding the baby. Those are the baby's dinners.' So for the longest time, I thought breasts were 'dinners.'"

"Missy called them 'buzzers,'" Diane remembered.

"Yeah," said Missy. "I don't think that's a Grandma-approved word. Are they having a barbecue or something?" More and more people were arriving. A scraggly guy parked his Harley and walked by Diane's half-naked sister, took one look, then looked away. Spanky had assumed fighting position. His hackles were up.

"That's right, buddy," said Diane. "Just keep walking." He must have heard her. He turned back, lifted up his shirt, and squeezed his nipple at them. Only Diane and Spanky saw.

"Somehow, I don't think Grandma would approve of this either," said Missy.

"Breastfeeding?" said Mom. "She breastfed her kids, and so did I. She was a nurse."

"And a farm woman," Diane added.

"No, it's not that," said Missy. "Somehow I don't think she'd approve of me being topless in Elko City Park. I might as well charge admission."

"It's not like you're a showgirl or something," said Diane.

"Yeah. I'd be a showgirl with stretch marks," said Missy.

Between Elko and Battle Mountain, Mom got hot. "Can we turn the air conditioning up?" she asked from the back seat. "It's maxed, Mom," said Diane. Mom and Missy had switched places. Mom had declared that she would rather watch her granddaughter than the Nevada landscape. The road was punctuated by terse signs: "Warning: Do Not Pick Up Hitchhikers. Federal Prison Area."

Still no one had said anything about Jed. Diane knew why. They all did. They were afraid. There had been others. Others she had talked about, analyzed, and laughed at with her mother and sister. Stories that had become part of the family folklore. She had taken Lars, the Finnish exchange student, to Mom's place when Missy was still in high school. She'd taken him riding, and he'd fallen off Al the arthritic palomino.

Mom had set her up with Darrell, a widower with four kids. Diane had wondered how she had arrived in the forty-something-with-children ballpark. Just add water and stir: instant family! He came to family home evening once but didn't know how to play *Monopoly* and kept taking other people's hotels. Mom urged her to give him more chances, but Diane had told her, "I just don't feel it."

And most recently, Nathan had decided he was gay. Diane couldn't call any of them her boyfriends. More like a colorful parade of failed attempts. And every failure led her farther away from what her mom and sister wanted for her and, when she admitted it, what she wanted for herself: a husband, a

family, a messy house, someone waiting for her besides Spanky. Diane would be satisfied if she never had to go on a blind date again.

"Well, I'm at least going to take off my pantyhose," Mom declared.

"Why you wear pantyhose at all is a mystery to me," said Diane. "Especially under pants. To church, yes. Under a skirt, yes. But pants?" She shook her head.

"Yeah," said Missy. "I can't manage the clothes I've got on now."

"Panty lines," said Mom.

"But you don't even wear panties. You wear garments," said Diane.

"Well, I've got to take off these hose."

"You want me to pull over?"

"And risk a prison hitchhiker ambushing us?"

"Um, Mom, I don't see any people at all," said Missy. Diane looked. The desert was empty. Her mother must be imagining ragged prisoners lurking behind the sagebrush. "I think we can risk it," she said.

"No! It would wake up the baby," said Mom. "Besides, I think I can take them off here in the car." She started maneuvering.

Diane and Missy exchanged a glance. Missy looked back at Mom. "Twenty bucks says you can't do it without taking off your pants."

"Girls. It's wrong to gamble."

"It's not like we're playing the slots," said Diane.

Twenty minutes later, the girls were out twenty bucks and Mom had tied the pantyhose to the antenna, where they streamed triumphantly in the wind.

Diane didn't want to stop again until Winnemucca. It'd be better if the baby would sleep all the way to Reno. Spanky was asleep. But the baby decided not to sleep. She cried as soon as they passed the big B.M. on the hill at Battle Mountain.

"She might be messy," Mom suggested.

"I don't think so. I'd smell it," Missy answered. Missy claimed she could smell poop at thirty paces.

Mom checked. "Nice and clean!" she said to the baby. But the baby would not be comforted by mere notice of her cleanliness. She started to howl.

"She wants out," said Missy.

"I could turn on a C.D.," Diane suggested.

"No. There's only one thing to do," said Missy from the front seat. "Mom, can we switch places?"

Mom said yes. After Missy settled into the back seat, she hunched low over the car seat, humming. The baby wailed. Missy started singing, "*Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.*" The baby found her thumb. "*And they're always glad you came,*" Missy continued. "*You want to be where you can see, your troubles are all the same. You want to go where everybody knows your name.*" The baby sighed, and Missy kept singing.

Diane looked back at her in the rearview mirror, "The



JEANETTE ATWOOD

theme song from *Cheers*?”

“So what?” said Missy.

“You sing your baby to sleep with the theme song from *Cheers*?”

“It’s her favorite song.”

“Hasn’t *Cheers* been off the air for about ten years?” asked Mom.

“It’s on Nick at Nite. It reminds me of being home with you,” said Missy.

“As long as her first word isn’t ‘Norm!’” said Diane.

“So I have TV friends. They’re better than real friends. I can’t put real friends on mute. Norm and Cliff I can mute,” said Missy. “Besides, they’re the only men who hang out at my house.” Diane, who frequently hung out at Missy’s knew this all too well. Steve, when he was there, loved to say, “Diane, you’re not going to find any men to marry in our basement.”

“I could sing some other theme songs,” said Missy.

“How about lullabies? Are lullabies dead?” asked Diane.

But Missy had already started, “*Come’n listen to my story ‘bout a man named Jed. Dada dada barely kept his family fed.*”

“Hilarious,” said Diane.

But Missy changed channels again: “*Buffalo gals won’t you come out tonight? Come out tonight? Come out tonight?*” she belted, then asked, “Hey, Mom. You’re a farm woman. What do you do with buffalo? Pets? Zoos? Meat?”

“Can somebody turn her off?” asked Diane. Mom didn’t answer; she stared straight ahead. “I bet Spanky is excited to meet the buffalo man and his herd,” muttered Missy. Spanky yawned.

In Reno, they stopped at a Taco Bell. “We’ll have to scarf our chalupas,” said Diane. “We can’t leave Spanky in the car for long.”

“Mom! They have slot machines!” said Missy.

“Those are poker machines, dear,” explained Mom. She was holding the baby. “Go check the bathroom and see if they’ve got a nursing area.”

Diane ordered two encharitos, a Mexican pizza, a gordita, a chalupa, and three drinks. Missy took the baby to the restroom. Diane waited for the order then carried it over to a window booth so she could see Spanky. Mom slid in beside her. “Do you have any plans once we get to Sacramento?” she asked.

Diane paused. She could see the tips of Spanky’s ears over the dashboard. This is stupid, she thought. Jed, Jed, Jed, Jed, Jed, Jed, Jed. I could have said his name seven times by now. She had wanted them to ask about him, had wanted to talk about him, right up until Missy had sung lullabies. It was hard, though. She knew that Mom thought of her as the family tragedy. “I guess,” she said. “Jed said that if I got in early enough, he’d like to get together.”

“Oh,” said Mom. “Any idea what you’ll do?”

Run off to Vegas. Have a drive-through wedding. Become a showgirl, she thought. She knew that Mom was inviting her to talk. But her mom liked novels. Essays. Lyric poems. Diane liked to converse in bullet points. She’d like to tell her mother:

- I’m thirty-five. Jed is forty. We’re adults.
- I’m thirty-five, and Jed is the first serious relationship I’ve ever had.
- I’m thirty-five, and the first serious relationship I’ve ever had is with some guy I’ve never even seen.
- I’m thirty-five, and my nineteen year-old sister got married and had a baby before I did.

That’s what she’d like to say. In fact, she’d like to have it printed up and just hand it to her mother. There, she’d say.

You've been briefed. But she knew her mother would ask questions, would probe for details: How serious? Did he go on a mission? You're sure he's a heterosexual? Is he worthy to take you to the temple? And Diane didn't want to answer that. They'd discussed marriage. But Diane couldn't picture a wedding where she was the bride. All she could picture was Missy's wedding, Missy kneeling across from Steve, the computer guy.

"Maybe a movie," she said. Her mother picked up the chalupa and started eating. Missy came out of the bathroom fifteen minutes later. The baby's head lolled on Missy's shoulder. She was warm, drowsy, and totally unaware that she was at a Taco Bell in Reno, Nevada.

Everyone got back in the car. Everyone slept over Donner Pass except Diane. When she pulled into Sacramento, only she and Spanky were awake.

THEY LEFT SACRAMENTO three days later. Diane drove again. Missy slept. She'd gotten mastitis. They'd found a doctor, and he had put her on antibiotics. Mom sat in the back seat with the baby. Spanky's head rested on Missy's lap. Diane drove fast. She darted in front of a semi. Mom gasped from the back seat. "Okay, Mom?" Diane asked. "I'm fine," Mom answered. "After all, if we'd hit that truck, it would have crunched my side. And I'm prepared to go; I'd be with your dad. I've already made up my mind that if we get in a wreck, I'll shield the baby with my body."

"I'll slow down," said Diane.

"God thanks you. And so do the innocents in this car."

They got off at Fernley. There was a truck stop there, with a low casino, a convenience store, and diesel pumps. Diane woke Missy up. "You need to eat, and then you need to feed the baby." Missy stretched and began to move. Diane clipped Spanky's leash on.

"You can't take him into the casino!" said Mom as she unbuckled the baby.

"Do you really think anyone is going to notice? Besides, I'm not leaving him in this hot car. He's my little honeymoon man," said Diane. She lifted him out. The heated asphalt burned his paws. He danced toward the door. "If anyone asks, I'll pretend I'm blind," said Mom.

Missy followed Mom into the nearest entrance, the entrance to the casino. Cigarette smoke choked them. "I don't want to take my baby in here!" said Missy.

"Did you see anywhere else?" said Mom, handing the baby to Missy who draped a blanket over her.

"See that door? I think it's the door to the restaurant," said Diane. It was. They sat down in a booth and looked around. Spanky ducked under the table. The restaurant was decorated with vinyl carnations and wagon wheels. Fernley must be a tough town. The people looked hard and used. The woman in the booth next to them had faded red hair and saggy jowls. She wore turquoise sweat pants and scuffed high-heels.

After they ate, Diane went with Missy to take care of the baby. The restroom was clean and had a changing table and a

nursing station. When they went back to find Mom and Spanky, they found them talking to the saggy jowls lady. "This is Arlene," said Mom. "Her husband works for Amazon.com. Their big warehouse is here in Fernley." Arlene smiled at the girls. "I was talking to your mom about that baby. We don't see too many babies out here. Especially so young." Missy shifted the baby forward so that Arlene could look at her face. "Darling little cuss," she crooned. Spanky was shining her ankles like a cat, but she ignored him. Then she leaned down and kissed the baby reverently, like someone kissing a priest's ring in the movies. She left red smooch marks on the baby's forehead. Then she walked away. Diane already had a wipe ready when Missy reached into the diaper bag.

"That was random," said Missy, scrubbing the lipstick off. "Mom, you always make friends with the weirdest people."

But Mom shivered a little. "Before you came out, she was telling me that she had a daughter who had married but that she had refused to have children. She had show poodles instead. This Arlene told me that her arms just ached to hold a child. That's really what she said, that her arms just ached."

"Why didn't the daughter want to have kids?" asked Missy.

"Too messy and too much work, I guess," said Mom.

"Who'd want a poodle?" Diane asked Spanky.

Mom slept in the back after Fernley. "I could drive," said Missy.

"You're on drugs, remember?" said Diane.

"So is the rest of Nevada," said Missy. Diane ignored her. Missy hated to drive, and Diane knew it. They rode in silence for a while.

"Where'd you go that first night?" asked Missy.

"Does it matter?" said Diane.

"I guess not now, except you were gone until four a.m."

"Actually, I got in around six."

"All I know is Mom woke up at four talking about murderers and rapists. I told her that you were okay because I had just had a dream about you and you seemed okay in the dream."

"I'm sure that was very comforting to her."

"She let me go back to sleep."

"She was up when I got home. She'd made a list of all the hospitals and morgues in the Sacramento area and was getting ready to start calling."

They passed a billboard picturing a herd of cattle. "Winnemucca Rush Hour," read Missy aloud. Then she said, "So did he tell you over the phone that he looked like John Ritter?"

"Who?"

"John Ritter. You know, the guy from *Three's Company*."

"Oh yeah. *Come and knock on our door, . . .*" Diane sang.

"*We'll be waiting for you, . . .*" Missy joined in.

"No. He didn't tell me that. He thinks he looks like Chuck Norris."

"He's wrong."

They hit road construction after Winnemucca. Twenty miles of orange drums and one-lane traffic. The baby disliked road construction. She screamed from the fourth mile on. "She's messy," said Missy "I can smell it."

"Well, I can't pull over." The baby's screams grew shrill and frantic. Spanky started yelping. "You may have to," said Mom.

"I can't," said Diane. "It's not safe."

"Emergency pull-out ahead," read Mom. The emergency pull-out was a widened shoulder. Diane checked her mirrors and pulled over. Missy changed the baby and threw the dirty diaper into the desert. "Here's what I think of you, Nevada!" Diane expected her mother to lecture Missy about littering. But she didn't. Instead she said, "You've got some on your shirt."

"I've got some on my hands too," said Missy. "But it's okay. It wipes off. I'm not afraid of poop." Diane laughed. "No, really. I'm not. Steve lives in fear of touching poop, but it isn't that big of a deal." Missy settled the baby back into her car seat, and buckled up. Diane got back on the road.

"I had this dream about poop," said Missy.

"Can you just stop saying that word?" asked Mom.

"POOP!" yelled Missy. "Poopity poop poop poop!"

"What about your dream?" asked Diane.

"Well, I dreamed that I was traveling with Madonna on tour. I think I was her backup singer."

"Anyway—" prompted Diane.

"So anyway, I was with Madonna, and she got really sick and ended up pooping on stage."

"Charming," said Mom. She looked up for billboards to read. But there weren't any close enough.

"So I left my microphone and ran to Madonna's side, and I said, 'I'll help you, Madonna. I'm not afraid of poop.' And then I took her leather pants backstage and cleaned them."

"I'm sure Madonna was very appreciative."

"I don't remember. I woke up before I took her pants back to her."

"Hot Slots in Jackpot," read Mom.

Diane watched Missy in the rearview mirror. She was shading her eyes with her hand. "My life is poop," she whispered to the baby.

It was twilight when they stopped in Elko. Instead of the city park, they opted for a parking lot outside of Albertson's. Diane let Spanky out. Mom had gone into the store. Missy had given up. She'd taken her shirt off to feed the baby. "I don't care," she said, "There are probably hundreds of topless women in this town right now. I might as well be one of them." Her long straight hair, hair like a stripper's, hung down in a sheet over her face. Diane considered taking her shirt off too, as a show of support. Instead, she decided to tell Missy about one of her dates with Jed.



"We spent most of the day on the reservoir in his old boat. Then I was hungry, but he wasn't. He didn't want to stop anywhere. I tried to get him to go to an In-N-Out Burger because they have drive-throughs and because they don't have any in Utah. But he didn't want to. So finally he agreed to stop somewhere, but he didn't want to find In-N-Out. So he stopped at this convenience slash grocery store called the Rainbow Mart."

"Classy," said Missy, wincing as the baby bit her.

"Oh, yeah. Only the finest. And he tells me to go in and pick out what I want. And I'm thinking, stuff for sandwiches maybe? A picnic, maybe? But he says, 'Well, it's just about closing time, and they have Chinese food here. If we're lucky, they'll be getting ready to throw it away, and we might just luck into some free kung-pao.' And he was serious. So I follow him all over this stupid store, while he waits to see if the teenager at the Chinese food counter is ready to trash today's leftovers. And then I thought, this is what my life will be like forever with this man. Me trotting after him. Him scavenging."

Missy's shoulders were shaking, her head bowed. Diane could see that she was crying. "I'm so sorry, Diane," she said. "So sorry." She paused, and then added, "We held a family fast for you."

"Mom's idea, right?"

"Yes, but I wanted it to work, too. I guess it didn't help."

"I don't know. Maybe it did. I'm okay now with being a nun without the uniform."

"Is that really how you see yourself?"

"No. Well maybe. Can nuns have dogs?" Diane laughed, ruffling Spanky's ears. He had been prowling the parking lot, checking for spilled groceries. He had returned with half a melted ice cream cone and was crunching it at Diane's feet.

"You're a well-traveled nun. You've been everywhere. This is my first trip anywhere. I've never been to Elko before, let alone California."

Mom came out, carrying several bags. "I got the wipes. And then the bakery lady asked me if I wanted the rest of the day's doughnuts. She'd just throw them out otherwise, she said."

Both girls started laughing loud and hard. "What did I say?" Mom asked. Spanky started barking, then howling. The baby, who had fallen asleep while she nursed, woke up and cried. Diane took her from Missy and held her even as her own shoulders shook.

After Elko, they only had 111 miles of Nevada left. Diane had the radio on to keep her awake. Country music. Sammy Kershaw was singing, "*She is the queen of my double-wide trailer with the polyester curtains and the redwood deck.*"

"Everything he had looked used," said Missy. Diane hadn't known she was awake.

"Huh?" she said.

"His truck, if you can call a Toyota a truck. His house. His clothes. His face. His buffalo were even shaggy."

"Buffalo are supposed to be shaggy."

"Yes, but his face. Do you deny his face?"

"No. But I think that's a pretty shallow thing to say."

"Well, I'd rather be shallow than fat. But maybe I'm both. I need to drop some weight."

"You will. Geez, Miss. It's only been six weeks. I told you it was a mistake to try on your normal pants so soon."

Missy stared at the road. "I don't know why I expected that they'd fit. Did I tell you about what happened right after I had the baby?" She didn't wait for an answer. "When she finally popped out, I reached out to Steve for a hug or a kiss, but he was snapping pictures of the baby. And I felt so alone. Lonely even, with just me in my body."

"Did he ever come and kiss you?"

"He must have, but I don't remember it. Anyway, after they took the baby down to the nursery, the nurse took me into the shower. They get you up right after, you know."

"Why?"

"Not sure. So I get in the shower, and I look down at myself, expecting to see my old body, and instead I see my belly. It hung down like a deflated balloon. I could jiggle it. And they have these little seats in the shower, so I sit down and bawl and bawl. Then the door opens, and I'm thinking it's the nurse. But it's not. It's Steve, and he calls my name, but I don't answer. So he sticks his head in and sees me crying. He doesn't even hesitate. He steps into the shower with me and holds me. He's fully dressed, wearing his suede shoes, and he steps in the shower and holds me. Doesn't even turn the water off. When we came out, him wet and me naked, the nurse thought he was delusional from sleep deprivation and found him a cot." Missy smiled. Then she said, "I know that you think Steve is a weasel, but he's not all weasel. He loves me, the me behind the belly." Missy kept staring out the window, "But Jed. That's not who I want for you. He'd be too afraid he'd ruin his good lizard boots."

"You're right. Even though they looked like they'd gone a few miles."

"If everything he had looked used—what would you look like after spending five or ten years with him?"

"Yes," Diane said. "I know." She paused. "He wasn't who he was supposed to be."

Missy said, "I don't think he knew who he was. He wasn't who he said he was or even who he thought he was. He acted like you were lucky to be with him, like he was your last chance. When he met you and said, 'Well, you're a tall girl, aren't you. Taller'n I expected. But I'll try you on for size,' I hated him. Mom told me not to tell you that. Mom said it was okay for you to pretend, that it was okay for you to go out with him, and hold his hand, even though we knew he was wrong. But I hated him. And I do." Diane was surprised by the coldness of Missy's voice.

"Maybe it's not so bad, then," she said.

"What?"

"Being the family tragedy."

"Well, as far as tragedies go. Now if Mom decided to ditch Relief Society, started drinking, and became a showgirl, that would be a real tragedy."

"*Dang her black heart and her purdy red neck,*" Sammy crooned over the speakers.

The remaining 101 miles of Nevada passed in silence, interrupted only by the snoring dog.

**W**HEN THEY PULLED into Missy's driveway, Steve was waiting on the porch, still wearing his red Circuit City shirt. "My girls are back!" he shouted. He jumped down the front steps and bounded to the car. He patted Spanky and started unloading the luggage from the trunk. Missy moved slowly, unbuckling the car seat and putting the handle up. Mom was still asleep.

Diane winked. "He trains them for the movies. And Vegas shows."

"What?"

"The buffalo. They're stunt buffalo."

"Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm not. Could I make stuff up this good?" Diane kissed her own fingers, reached over and pressed them against the baby's forehead. The baby's eyes opened, radiating celestial light. It surprised her. "I'll see you tomorrow night."

"Yeah, *Cheers* is on at eight. Two episodes. Back to back.



## PLANTER

Thick stalks elbow sideways  
from potting soil  
over white brick  
to the common pavement.

In this wedge of dirt  
footing the bay window,  
color is the duty watered daily  
—should we choose to notice.

To succeed the bloomless sprawl  
I take by fistfuls  
to the trash,  
friends set out pots of new accents.

I have other commitments soon.  
I have pulled: they will plant.  
I will return to blue salvia trowelled in  
to balance yellow ranunculi and prior daffodils.

I will wash again to ease my palms  
of chlorophyll still clinging.  
One wash does not clear me  
of these choices among silent lives.

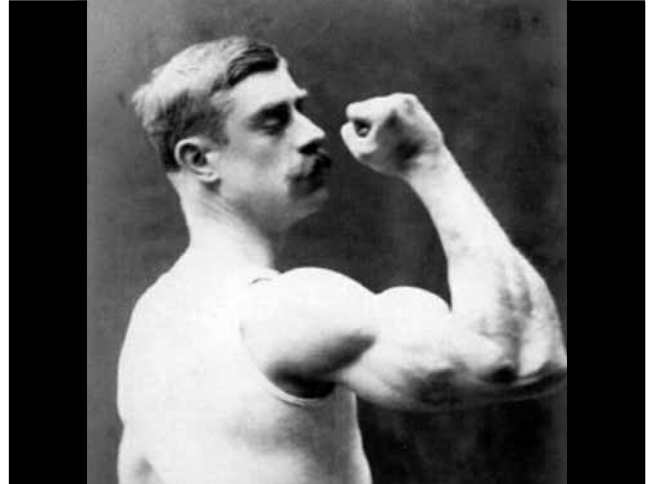
—R. S. CARLSON

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## BROOKIE & BROWN D. K.

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2004 BROOKIE & D. K. BROWN FICTION CONTEST WINNERS



## SHORT-SHORT STORY

**FEWER THAN 1500 WORDS  
MOONSTONE AWARD (\$250)**

**"ROSEVIEW FOURTH,"** by CAROL B. QUIST, Salt Lake City, Utah  
An aunt's unconventional LDS funeral reveals an adopted woman's continuing struggle for a personal and spiritual home.

## SHORT STORY

**FEWER THAN 6000 WORDS  
MOONSTONE AWARD (\$250)**

**"PARADISE PAVED,"** by KAREN ROSENBAUM, Kensington, California  
This story explores the dynamics of faith and mother-daughter relationships in three stages of a woman's life: as a young girl caring for her younger siblings, as a young mother with her own daughter, and as a grandmother caring for her aged mother.

**STARSTONE AWARD (\$150)**

**"CAT WOMAN,"** by JULIE NICHOLS, Provo, Utah  
What is the emotional and family link between a severely handicapped eighteenth-century woman and a fey, computer-savvy, twentieth-century schoolteacher?

★ 2004 ★