

# Body Language

Short Stories

MARYLEE MACDONALD



## Praise for *BODY LANGUAGE*

In Marylee MacDonald's stirring story collection *Body Language*, an older woman recalls her spelunking youth, saying, "we humans were designed . . . to connect with one another not just with words, but with the intimacy of touch." These stories touch us readers, too, as MacDonald draws us to her unforgettable characters, like Sister Salina, a nun with a cleaning compulsion who is forced to return to her family home, to the angry adoptive daughter whose begrudging duty to her dying mother opens her to transformative truths, to Neva Roth, an American composer briefly in Vienna who is unexpectedly and sadly awakened to desire. MacDonald's immersive language makes us inhabit the bodies of her vividly drawn characters through sensations: the chill of a dark, empty church at night; the softness of an old woman's skin; or the taste of chocolate on the lips of an endlessly hungry woman. These are sensations that reveal what runs beneath the physical—the soul's yearnings to connect. MacDonald's profound insight and compassion are triumphs of this indelible collection of stories.

Lynn Sloan, author of *This Far Isn't Far Enough* and *Principles of Navigation*

Wry, heartwarming, and richly dramatic, these stories reach across decades, from troubled young adulthood to precarious old age, and reaffirm what remains human and vulnerable in all of us.

Tara Ison, author of *Child Out of Alcatraz* and *Reeling Through Life*

MacDonald reads the room in each story and sees not just the postures and worn shoes of their inhabitants, but also their inner

states. Throughout this collection, she builds many such rooms for her readers to survey, populated by people whose body language speaks volumes. The fictional worlds are fully fleshed-out, and the stories' wide-ranging premises and subtle endings yield a sense of wonder...A well-wrought collection that finds moments of transcendence in the personal quests of its characters.

*Kirkus Reviews*

MacDonald's savvy understanding of human relationships, and her vibrantly poetic prose, make for riveting stories you can't put down and must pause at length between, imagining what came before and what comes next.

Richard Lemm, author of *Shape of Things to Come* and *Burning House*

...unforgettable portraits of people crossing out of hopeless suspension into vulnerable hope and tender communion.

Kevin McIlvoy, author of *Little Peg* and *The Fifth Station*

...a literary, psychologically engrossing series of portraits of individuals who, in different ways, stand at the crossroads of change...

Diane Donovan, for *Midwest Book Review*

These stories paint a picture of the human condition of wanting to love and be loved on many levels—self, romantic, platonic, and familial.

Gabriella Tutino, for *US Review of Books*

Some characters come into our lives and are forgotten after the turn of the last page. The characters in Marylee MacDonald's short story collection, *Body Language*, aren't just coming over for dinner. Her characters become instant grandmothers, sisters, troubled cousins, and departed loved ones. The stories are vastly different on some levels, but reflect the same kind of message. We are human, we all feel love, fear, sadness, bitterness and no one can escape these, no matter how hard we try not to step into that bear trap of pathos. It is my fervent belief that anyone who reads this book may possibly be healed of some sort of trauma. I know that it helped me deal with some of my own familial problems. Any book that can release even a molecule of emotion that sadly has nowhere to go but within is a book that needs to be read and passed on by word of mouth. If you read this book, and I hope that you do, please share it with others.

Erin Nicole Cochran, for *Readers' Favorites*



# **Body Language**

by

**Marylee MacDonald**

**Twelve unforgettable portraits of heartbreak  
and desire**

## Preface

THE STORIES IN this book are about people who follow their instincts. Their bodies, rather than their conscious minds, direct what they do.

A few years back, I became interested in the neuroscience of human behavior and discovered that many of our actions, if not most, originate in the amygdala, the primitive brain that is the site of our “flight or fight” response. Our five senses collect data from our surroundings, and that data is instantly transformed into electrical signals. The signals travel up the spinal cord to the amygdala, the hunter-gatherer’s primitive brain.

The amygdala is hard-wired to the cortex, the part of the brain that makes instant judgments. Is that stranger friend or foe? Is that relative the same uncaring bastard we’ve always thought he or she was, or can we let down our guard and finally resolve the childhood hurts that shaped who we’ve become?

Without the intervention of conscious thought, our bodies make instantaneous decisions about whether we’re safe or in danger. Furthermore, there’s often a time lag between our actions and words. We’ve raised our fists or run for cover before we have time to think, *Gosh, I’d better book it*. That’s why we wake up in the middle of the night, pondering the “could have saids” and “should have saids.” There’s a delay between the instant our bodies *feel* an emotion and the moment we find the perfect words to *name* our feelings.

Attraction works much the same way. When we’re attracted to someone, the hormones dopamine and norepinephrine pump into the bloodstream. The hormonal cocktail makes us feel positively giddy. Even relatively innocent contact, such as hugging, increases the “love” hormone: oxytocin. That is, perhaps, why Walt Whitman, in his poem “The Body Electric,” says he is content to swim in the sea of touch.

The following passage from the story, “Tito’s Descent,” sums up the theme of the collection.

“I had never been as aware of my body as I was at that moment. The warmth of another human being, the sideways pressure of his hip, the squeeze of his fingers against my arm, the ripple of sensation from my forehead to my feet, made me feel as if we humans were designed, on a primitive level, to connect with one another not just with words, but with the intimacy of touch; that touch was essential for our well-being and the reason we have bodies, not just souls.”

Our bodies speak to us every day.

Let us listen.

Marylee MacDonald  
Santa Rosa, California  
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I have perceiv'd that to be with those I like is enough,  
To stop in company with the rest at evening is enough,  
To be surrounded by beautiful, curious, breathing, laughing flesh is  
enough,  
To pass among them or touch any one, or rest my arm ever so lightly  
round his or her neck for a moment, what is this then?  
I do not ask any more delight, I swim in it as in a sea.

From "The Body Electric"  
by WALT WHITMAN



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## A Body of Water

THE FIRST TIME I saw Sally, she was leaping from the top rail of a corral fence and into the saddle of one of her daddy's prized stallions, Satan.

At thirteen I was tall for my age (I'd try out for the freshman basketball team in the fall but would make junior varsity instead). Even so, the magnificent horse stood hands above me. Sally's guts and grace stopped me in my tracks. Seeing her all-American good looks, my knees began to cave.

Sally's dad owned Muir Trail Ranch up near Florence Lake, a deal he'd worked out with the Forest Service and that gave him the right to run trail rides. He had taken me on as a part-time ranch hand, and by the summer after senior year, I was a full-fledged groom.

I thought the summer would give me a chance to spend more time with Sally, edge aside the guy she'd been going with. But one hot day in August, when I had just turned eighteen, Sally married him, and so it was me who stood in polished boots and a dress-white shirt, shooing away a misery of mosquitoes with my Stetson and awaiting the new bride's arrival back at the ranch. Without making eye contact, I held the reins while Sally, in a wedding dress and cowboy boots, dismounted. She headed off to supervise the barbecue and greet her guests. While brushing down Satan in his stall, I let it go. Cracking the knuckles of my freaky long fingers, I let it all go. That seals it, I thought. She made her choice. The next day I enlisted in the Navy.

When I got back my dad helped me buy a ranch near Sumner Hill, but a ranch in the foothills didn't sit right. I bought another higher up, edging my way back to the place I'd been happiest in my life. Once or twice a year my wife let me off the leash, and I packed up my fishing pole and headed up State Route 168. When that first

sweet smell of Ponderosa pine came through the open windows, my heart began to pound.

Twenty years had gone by since Sally's wedding, six years since my own, and in the ensuing years, I had forced myself into some kind of normal life. If I saw Sally at all, it was when she was tying horses to the hitching post and waiting for the day's trail riders to finish their steak and eggs. Occasionally, we would bump into each other at the hot springs out behind the ranch. Once, we happened to be sitting in the steaming water when the sky opened up in a typical Sierra thunderstorm: brief and unannounced. The privacy afforded by the pebbles of rain socking against the canvas lean-to above our heads was an open invite to laugh and tell stories about kids we'd gone to high school with or guys like me who'd worked summers riding trail or washing dishes. Being friends with Sally wasn't quite like being friends with another guy, but out of respect for her husband, I pretended it was and never made my move.

Anyway, early last spring before my last son was born, who should I see driving up to my front door but Sally. She parked her yellow pick-up by the stoop and walked up, snugging her tan riding pants around her hips. Over the winter, she'd put on a few pounds, but summer always slimmed her down.

"Hey, there." I greeted her with an open door. "What brings you down this way?"

"Well, I don't know exactly why I came, John." She undid her ponytail, then spitting on her fingers, cinched it up again. The worry lines on her forehead matched the squint lines around her eyes. We were both getting older.

"Come on in and meet the kids," I said, taking her elbow.

"I won't take but a minute," she said.

"You're not interrupting anything."

Seven months pregnant, short and stocky, Margie waddled out of the kitchen. With her curly brown hair and apron tied up under her breasts, she looked a little unnerved by Sally turning up like this. Margie wiped her hand, front and back, as she'd been flouring chicken, then offered a handshake. Over the years Margie had heard me mention Sally, mostly in connection with my summers as a

young, single ranch hand. However, actually seeing Sally, with her square jaw and athletic build, her 5' 11" frame, and her horse-riders' bowlegs, well, that was a whole different deal.

"You want to meet my kids?" I asked.

"I'll go see what they're up to," Margie said, not taking her eyes off Sally.

"I can go out back if that's where they are," Sally said.

"No, I'll get them." Margie slid open the patio door and slammed it shut.

The hallway where we stood was a regular rogue's gallery of family pictures.

Sally leaned in for a better look. "Cute kids."

"Let me show you around the Ponderosa," I said and apologized for the dirt on my hands. "I was putting in some walnuts."

"Can't stay long. Just wanted to know if you'd like to go fishing up by Colby Meadow."

"It's early."

"I think we could get up that far."

"Horses or foot?"

"It'll have to be on foot. I don't want to take the animals up there. Water's too high."

"I guess I could do that."

Out back, through the closed door, I could hear Margie doing the two-tone call. "Jaaa-son! Raaan-dy! You boys get in here right now, and don't make me come find you." She would be back any minute.

"When you want to do this?" I said, lowering my voice.

"A week from today."

"How about in two weeks."

"No, a week," she said. "Has to be."

"I guess that can be arranged."

Sally seemed anxious to leave, and I walked her to the truck. Margie brought the kids around to the driveway. Jason was going on six and Randy five. Sally looked at me. She probably hadn't bothered to figure out the math, and I had never told her I'd had to get married. Either that or she just figured my kids weren't real, like the

characters in a movie everyone else is talking about but you haven't yet seen. She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped Randy's nose. She asked him what he'd been doing, and when he pulled out a blue belly lizard, she took it and stroked its chin. Randy's eyes got wide. His mom never let him bring lizards in the house. In fact, if anything, Margie was a little at odds with the natural world. She'd grown up in Sacramento.

Sally handed back the lizard and told the boys she hoped I would bring them up to the ranch sometime. She shook hands with Margie again, Margie gave me a look, and then of all things, Sally took my hand, letting her own go limp.

I wanted to know what the heck this handshake business was all about and why she avoided looking me in the eye, but before I could get the words out, she spun around and strode resolutely toward her truck. She sprang up on the running board, threw an arm across the seat, and, gunning the engine, backed one-handed out to the road.

Puzzled, I watched from the porch and felt my stomach turning the way it does when I'm coming down with the flu. I was not quite sure if I should go to bed or stand my ground and hope it passed.

Margie slid past me. "You going to stand out here all night?"

"Is dinner ready?"

"Soon as you set the table," she said, "and I don't mean set *at* the table."

ALL WEEK I worked like the devil to get the walnuts in and adjust the irrigation. When Margie heard me going through my tackle box, she came out to the garage. Splay-footed, she stood massaging her stomach. We had sort of joked about "accidents," how they happened, why we'd been careless, how I should have pulled out and let her put more jelly in her diaphragm.

"What if the baby comes early?" she asked.

"That's why I'm going now," I said, bending over my pack so she didn't see my face, which would have told her I was lying. "In another month I wouldn't risk it."

“Get it out of your system, then.” She slammed the door, her signal that she’d be stewing about it for some while.

It had taken a day or two of deep thinking to figure out what Sally was up to. I have not been entirely faithful to my wife, and from the tone of Sally’s voice — and even more from her limp hand; so unlike her usual crush-your-fingers-to-prove-a-point grip — I guessed that she wanted me to sleep with her, but I didn’t know why. There are certain conditions where I would not sleep with a woman, one of them being if she was mad at her man, and I was just convenient revenge. Her man or her father, in Sally’s case, because her father was the domineering type. And the other case was where some gal wanted to get me tangled into the web of her life. I already made that mistake once with Margie. Turned out she wasn’t a bad wife, as wives go.

But as I was driving up to Florence Lake, singing and whistling my way around the curves, it struck me that in spite of my financial security and the enjoyment I took in my kids, this truly happy feeling came over me less often than when I was young.

I parked my truck down the road from the boat dock, shut up the cab, and threw the keys under the left front wheel, since one year I’d lost the keys in a stream and had to hitch a ride home to get the spare. Besides, when you’re going into the back country, it’s freeing to leave all but what you absolutely need behind.

The outboard that carried people from the dock over to Sally’s father’s ranch was out on the lake, and I thought about waiting till it came back. That would cut three miles off however long I had to hike today. Then it occurred to me that maybe Sally didn’t want my presence to be public knowledge. I could walk the three miles in less than an hour, and so I did.

I was all the way around the lake and heading up the granite ridge toward the ranch when I saw Sally heading toward me. She was concentrating on the trail, looking down at the rocks and taking the slope in giant strides. She had on a sheepskin coat with her thumbs tucked in the pockets. Her long brown hair was clipped at the back of the neck, and her eyes shown as blue-green as the lake. When she

smiled, it wasn't seductive, but rather open, frank, and warm. Just the same, I felt a jump in my groin.

"Hey, Sally!" I shouted.

"Shh!" She put her finger to her lips. "Do you need a hand with your gear?"

I climbed to where she was waiting on a boulder. "What's the deal?"

"Come on. Let's go up this ridge and cut over to Blayne Meadow. I left my pack there. Did you bring flies? I didn't have time to tie any."

"I've got buzz hackles."

"They think I'm just going up by myself. My husband wanted to come, but I'm trying to think a little, and I can't when he's around."

"But you can with me? Why didn't you go alone? You're not about to get lost."

"I wanted company. Come on. We've got four days to talk." She pushed me ahead. Like me, Sally must have made her excuses. I wondered what she'd brought to eat. Cornbread, I hoped. That went well with fish. But if she just grabbed food from the storeroom, we'd be cooking freeze-dried turkey tetrazzini. The smell of frying bacon drifted over from the ranch and made my mouth water.

"That there bacon smells good," I said. "I haven't had bacon in forever."

"Cholesterol?" Sally said.

"Yep. Getting old."

Sally smiled and grabbed her pack from a tree. "You've still got a little life in you, I reckon."

"Hope so, I said. "Be a shame to check out early."

We went up the trail, stepping around mule deer pellets, and walked in silence until lunch, when we stretched out on the ground, resting our heads on our packs. Most women talked your ear off. Sally was the exception. Offering her a handful of trail mix, I must have been watching her out of the corner of my eye.

"Stop staring," she said. "I'm not that fascinating." She scrambled to her feet and walked over to the river, dipping her Sierra cup.

I retied my boots. If she wanted to be like that, I wouldn't look at her again ever, and she could see how she liked being ignored. She drank her fill, then refilled the cup and brought me my first taste of sweet, pure — almost thick — mountain water. My jaw unclenched. Look out, John, I thought. This woman is a peck of trouble.

“Want a hand up?” she asked.

“I was just enjoying the sound of the river,” I said, “but I guess you want to go.”

“I do,” she said.

THE TRAIL GREW slick. An open bog smelled like a dead marmot. Skunk cabbage. Further on, snow flowers, like stalks of red asparagus, poked through the duff of fallen pine needles. It was early yet for Indian paintbrush and penstemon; but, plenty of lupine, a good sign because it meant we probably wouldn't get snowed on.

By the time we found a campsite, the sun had dropped behind the trees. “Let's stop here,” I said.

She pulled out a topo map and spread it on a log. “Before it gets too dark, we should talk about our final destination.”

I bent over the map. Her hair brushed my cheek. The creamy vanilla scent of frozen custard. She'd been smelling like that since high school, and I almost licked her neck.

Seemingly unaware of my rapid breathing, she put her finger on a small lake. “Let's go here!”

“Sure.” She knew the good places to camp. “We going to cook on propane?” I said.

“Nope. I have a fire permit.”

This early in the season, the ground was saturated, and even if a spark hit the duff, pine needles wouldn't burn. By the time I came back with downed wood, Sally had made a cook-fire from twigs. A pot of coffee balanced on a rock. While she boiled water, I rolled out our sleeping bags and put them a foot apart.

“Is that okay with you?” I asked. “Or you want the fire between us?”

“What, like cowboys in movies?” She was squatting over the fire, pouring out a silver pack of dehydrated spaghetti. “No, John, I’ll bed down next to you.” She gave me a thumbs up.

After we’d eaten and washed dishes, we sat across from one another on logs. I sang Garth Brooks’ songs. She liked my voice, even when it got choked up from thinking of the three summers at the ranch, back when we were kids, and how she’d never given me the time of day. ‘Course, she was a year older and that made all the difference at that age. I put on another pot of coffee. Caffeine might keep me awake, but it didn’t matter. I was too keyed up to sleep.

I kept waiting for Sally to tell me why she’d invited me on this trip, but all she talked about was the tourists at the ranch. A lot of the old regulars, people who’d watched her grow up, were getting on in years, and now their kids and grandkids were coming up.

“What do you think about when you’re alone, John?” She had her arms wrapped around her knees and held a coffee cup tight in one hand.

I tried to see her face. I could usually tell more about what she was thinking by how she looked, in spite of the way she tried not to let her feelings come out that way either.

“I guess I’m not alone that much,” I said.

“I’m always alone.” She stretched her feet out to the fire and tapped the toes of her boots. Then she yawned.

A signal. That part of the talk was over. In the flickering light I caught her looking at me quickly, maybe to see if I would take the bait. People with a mind to fool around always make out that their spouse is the Devil incarnate.

“I have to apologize about this body.” I stood, patted my belly, and kicked dirt on the fire. “I’m a little out of shape.”

She looked me up and down. “Could have fooled me.”

I laughed.

“Leave a few coals for morning,” she said. “It’s easier to start.”

I stopped kicking. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Sally walk over to our sleeping bags, strip down to her underwear, and crawl into her blue cocoon. Didn’t look like she had in mind what I thought she did.

“Damn,” I said, digging through my pack. “I forgot my long johns.”

“Just sleep in your birthday suit.”

“I don’t favor waking up at night and having to stand buck naked while I take a leak.”

“You’re right,” she said. “Another hour, and it’ll drop below freezing.”

I kept on my flannel shirt and folded my jeans for a pillow. When my bag was zipped, I put my hand on her shoulder. “You still awake?”

“I’m looking at the stars,” she said.

They made us learn our stars in the Navy. I guess they thought if we were ever stranded on a desert island, we could get home. Above, where the treetops almost joined, I could see Orion.

“Do you know the constellations?” I said.

“My father made me learn them.”

“Your father kind of overprepared you for life.”

“What kind of thing is that to say?”

“I don’t know. It was more a feeling than anything. How you had to be the best at tracking. The best female barrel racer. What you didn’t get any encouragement for was just being yourself. Did you ever even wear makeup?”

I waited, but she didn’t say anything back. She just lay there with her hands folded under her head.

“Good night, Sally,” I said after a while.

“Good night, John,” she answered.

“We sound like the Waltons.”

“I always wanted a big family,” she said. “That’s coming from me, by the way. Not my dad.”

THE NEXT DAY I got up early, started the fire, and made coffee. Sally hardly touched her breakfast. She didn’t like to hike on a full stomach. After a couple hours walking, a stop for lunch, and another hour on the trail, we bushwhacked to the lake. Since it was a pretty easy day, we got out her pole and I dug out my flies. While we waited

for the fish to rise, I showed her how I tied a buzz hackle, and she showed me a woolly worm that she thought worked pretty well in spring runoff. About the time we cast our flies, the wind died down. We ate the fish and boiled up some RiceARoni, but between the mosquitoes and Cutter's spray stinging our eyes, we had a miserable dinner and climbed into our bags, holding them closed at the top and nearly suffocating.

I woke before sunup and got breakfast over quick so we could skedaddle before getting attacked. Since all the lower lakes were sure to have mosquitoes if this one did, we decided to head up to Evolution Valley. The only problem with the plan was that no one had been up there yet, and the snow had been heavy.

WE RETRACED OUR steps back to the place where we'd camped the night before. Just beyond that campsite, after we had crossed a slick, striped granite saddle, we ran into our first patches of snow. Switchbacking steadily uphill, my boots left pink sinkholes. Then we walked for what felt like a long, long ways before I noticed that the lodgepoles, junipers, and aspen grew closer together and that the ground had leveled out. Fallen wood and crusted snow made it hard to see the trail. Sally led, going by the diagonal slash marks on the trees.

Back in high school a Forest Service crew had taken me along as mule wrangler when they went to blaze the trail. Twenty odd years ago the ax marks had left gashes on the trunks and sap oozing like tears. I hadn't been up this way since. The bark had regrown, filling in like scar tissue around a wound, but seeing those slashes made me miss that mule. My shoulders ached from the weight of my pack, and I stopped to adjust the straps.

When I caught up to Sally she was standing at the edge of a vast tangle of branches. Trees lay on their sides, their tops pointing downhill. An avalanche.

"This is going to be a bear," she said.

"Do you want to head back?" I asked.

"No, we can make it." She began picking her way. The tree trunks were black and slimy. The bark came off like dead skin.

Branches caught at my jeans. The slash marks lay buried in the decomposing brush, and it was impossible to see the trail on the other side. We'd just have to hope it didn't veer off one way or another.

Sally heaved her pack over a five-foot trunk, hoisted herself up, and slid down the other side. "Is this fun for you?"

"Hell, no," I said.

"It is for me."

"Why?"

"Because I'm doing it with someone I really like." Midway over another slimy log, she gave me an earnest smile.

"Well, apart from that..."

"There is no 'apart from that'. Who you're with makes all the difference."

When I was younger I might have thought that. Now, it felt like life and who you were with was more a matter of endurance. Marriage was a hole you fell into, but couldn't escape, no matter how hard your fingers clawed at the crumbling bank.

Almost to the other side of the avalanche, she spotted where the trail resumed: a slash mark on a standing pine. After the switchbacks and seven hundred feet of elevation gain that came next — a long, hard, and exhausting slog — I knew we would be home free; but I feared that with all the snow we had walked through and all the snow still on the peaks, the water in Evolution Creek was going to be too damn cold to cross safely.

The trail ended at the water's edge. I walked up and down the bank, looking for the ford. Evolution Creek fed the south fork of the San Joaquin, and its roar hurt my ears. Actually, "creek" was the wrong word this time of year. "River" was more accurate.

"Did you bring a rope?" I shouted.

Sally shrugged off her pack and pulled loops of climbing rope from the sleeping bag compartment. "A hundred foot."

I said, "I'll go across first and come back for our packs."

"If I've got a rope," she said, "I think I can make it over without your help."

“The water’s too deep. You’ll be off balance. Listen to me for a change.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll do it your way.”

Sally tied the rope to a tree.

I stripped down to the tighty-whities, stowed my clothes, and put my boots back on. With the water rushing so fast, all I’d need was to cut my foot on a rock.

She looked me up and down, the corner of her mouth curling.

I put a hand on my chest. “What?”

“You idiot.” She shook her head. “Do you really want to go first?”

“You’re not that good a swimmer.”

“Try not to get hypothermia.”

“Agreed.”

As I stepped into the creek, the first shock of cold made my nuts shrink up. I looked back. She stood sober-faced on the bank, playing out the coils of rope. The current felt like a gale-force wind. I would have been scared to go downriver on a raft; but walking and being careful where I planted my boots, I made it across and tied off the rope. The tension in the line made it easier for me to carry our packs. With the rope under my arm, I felt steadier. Even so, when I stumbled out after my third trip, my chest ached with the effort it took to breathe.

Across the river, Sally stripped down to her sports bra and underpants. She untied the rope, looped it like a lariat, and stepped into the stream.

I cupped my hands. “Tie it back! Tie it back!”

Maybe she couldn’t hear. The slack rope dropped in the water, and the current carried it downstream. To keep the tension, I coiled fast. Halfway over, Sally stepped in a depression, and the water made a collar around her neck. I pulled up the slack and hauled her to shore.

Soaked, spent, shivering, she threw herself on the meadow grass. “My husband would have let me drown.”

Furious at her recklessness, I turned her on her back and pinioned her arms. “Why in hell did you untie the rope? Didn’t you

hear me?”

“I was afraid someone might follow us.”

“Who?”

“My husband.”

“Jesus, girl!” I collapsed on her and cried. It was the first time I had cried since Marge showed me that first and unwanted pink test strip, and I could feel Sally’s arms around me, rubbing my back.

“It’s okay, John. We made it.”

“Yeah, but...”

“We’re safe. Nobody can get to us here.”

Even with my body half frozen, I was utterly relieved to have made it across the river. Sally tried to smooth out the goose bumps with her fingers. After a while, I stopped shaking, but I could still feel her fingers going up and down my spine and into the small of my back. Down my legs even. It was as if she was seeing me for the first time, but with her hands.

I moved off her and hunkered on all fours. She lay there, arms flung and legs spread and laughing like a crazy person. I was just about to tell her to stop it, for God’s sake, when I noticed a brown pencil-like line heading south from her navel. The same line Margie had. Sally’s stomach was flat. No stretch marks on her hips. None visible on her breasts. Through her bra, her tits looked like acorn caps, bumpy and brown.

She turned her head. “Long enough rest?”

I pointed to the brown line. “When did you lose the baby?”

She swallowed. “It was more than one.”

“What, twins?”

“No, more than one time.”

“Fixing to try again?”

She reached out for my hand, smiled, and nodded.

“What makes you think this time’ll be different?”

“It will. I just know it.” She rubbed my fingers against her face.

Her skin felt warm.

Scrambling to her feet, she took jeans and a shirt from her pack. “Let’s go on up to the lake.”

I changed into dry clothes. My boots immediately soaked my socks. Cold stiffened my fingers, and I fumbled to untie the half hitch on the rope.

“Leave it for when we come back.” Sally said.

I did and hoisted on my pack. My teeth chattered.

We had hiked eight miles with Evolution Creek on our left. Now, it was on our right. The forest had thinned and the land flattened. Beyond an inundated meadow lay Evolution Lake, four miles long and ringed by granite peaks.

I found a camp spot on a little peninsula. The ground felt dry and that meant the campsite would have good morning sun. There was a fire ring and level ground for our sleeping bags. I built a fire, tore open a packet of beef stroganoff, put water on to boil, and warmed my hands. While Sally hung our food bag, I checked the sleeping bags to see if they would zip together. My toes burned with cold, and I wanted to borrow some of her body heat.

“Hey,” she called, pointing to the lake. “Don’t miss the *Alpenglo*.” She was already on her way, striding toward a granite boulder out on the tip of the peninsula.

I put the bags down.

Knit hats over our ears, we sat like two birds on a wire and stared at the still water of Evolution Lake; its shimmering surface filled me with peace. Off some ways, in a half-ring, stood four big, snow-covered peaks—Mounts Huxley, Spencer, Darwin, and Mendel. To my knowledge, not one of those great men had talked about love, as if the survival of the human race depended only on the practical stuff—who would bring home the woolly mammoth and who would cook it—but, my life had shown me that all that “survival of the species” stuff is driven by our bodies’ needs, who we yearn for and who we cannot do without.

“I’m going to check on the fire,” I said.

“Don’t be too long,” she said.

“I won’t.”

The fire had dried my socks, and I pulled them over my hands. When I returned, I sat next to her, an arm around her shoulder.

“What’s this?” She wiggled the sock’s toe. “A wool condom?”

I laughed. "You're lucky to be alive. You know that?"

She cuddled against me. "I know." Then, after a pause, "Glad, too."

"You had something to tell me."

She didn't move, but I felt her stiffen. A fish jumped right in front of us. The ripples settled.

"There were five altogether," she said.

"Five babies?"

"Yes," she said.

"How far along were you?"

"Heard a heartbeat on the last one."

I exhaled and it came out like a whistle. She was thirty-nine.

"You sure you want to try again?" I said.

"I don't want to be having a baby just to have a baby," she said.

"I want to be a mother, to raise a child and watch it grow. The problem is, my husband won't touch me."

"What a fool."

Although, to give her husband the benefit of the doubt, maybe he couldn't stand to see her suffer.

I took off my sock and laced my fingers through hers. She squeezed back. I wanted her for more than one night. I wanted her in a motel room where we could sleep with the covers off and wake up to coffee and hot showers. I wanted her for as long as it would take us to make a baby, and for more nights after that. And, if that happened, I wanted to keep her off horses, at least until she came to term, even though asking her to leave the mountains would be like asking her to peel off her skin.

I took her chin and turned her face toward mine. Her lips felt cold and dry. As the sun went down, all the blues, greens, and browns of the sky changed into the red glow of battered, cutthroat trout on their mating run upstream.

How confusing it was to be human. How surprising. This moment was one I had waited for my entire life.

## Hunger

SO DECADENTLY RICH, the taste and texture of hot chocolate. The heavy white porcelain mug, the froth of bubbles and fresh nutmeg, but most of all the spoonable residue at the bottom. Just beyond the mahogany doors of the United Airlines Executive Club was the best hot chocolate in the whole wide world. Olympia Stavropoulis, pulling her bag of pharmaceutical supplies, showed her Priority Pass at the counter. A nervous craving, not hunger exactly, but a feeling similar to hunger, overcame her before international flights.

Inside the lounge, Olympia, gold hoop earrings jangling against the collar of her flowing cape, brushed past the business travelers relaxing on leather couches. She had expected more of a reaction — a cocked head; eyes taking her measure — because she was careful about how she presented herself and wanted to come off as a woman of substance. The purple cape was a statement not just of grandeur but of practicality, for it was often true that in coach, the blankets did not quite cover her body, and the soft wool kept her from freezing beneath the whistling nozzles that blew cold air. But, never mind. A job was a job, for her as much as for anyone else, and she braced herself to endure the indignities of the flight: crowded bins, snoring seatmates, and most of all, tiny portions of food. She considered grabbing a few of the pastry-wrapped Vienna sausages put out as snacks, but decided against it. Just get the chocolate, she told herself, then on to the gate.

At the bar, she parked one buttock on a stool. The bar was manned by a trim blond, his face half-hidden by dangling wine glasses. High intensity lights shaped like upside down waffle cones lit her diamond ring.

“I’d like some hot chocolate, please,” she said.

“No can do,” the bartender said. “The machine is broken.”

“But you don’t need a machine to make chocolate,” Olympia said. “All you need is a pan and some hot milk.”

“We make our *cocoa* with an espresso machine.”

“You grind the beans from scratch?”

“From scratch.”

“I walked all the way down here to get chocolate, and now you don’t have it? You guys have the best chocolate in the world, right here in this bar, and now I know why. You grind the beans. Imagine that!”

“Sorry to disappoint,” the bartender said, wiping lipstick from a glass. “Can I get you something else? A chardonnay, perhaps?”

“Let me think.” Was there something else she craved? Not really. She had counted on chocolate to help her sleep. At bedtime her grandmother, a wiry-haired widow who spoke not a word of English, had always given her a warm cup of Nestle’s Quik. The bedtime ritual had become a habit. A warm drink relaxed the body and calmed the mind.

“How about a decaf? Cream and sugar,” she said.

“Coming right up.” A moment later the bartender placed the mug of coffee on the counter and handed her packets of creamer.

“Could I have real cream?” she asked. “I don’t want to scald my tongue.”

“Sure,” he said, turning to take a carton of half-and-half from a small refrigerator.

Pouring the cream, she hoped the residual amount of caffeine in the coffee wouldn’t keep her awake. She was off to eastern Europe for another round of show-and-tell, peddling out-of-date drugs to government clinics. She hated the beaten down look of the beleaguered doctors, their haggard, hollow eyes. Cows, she thought. Sheep. Hunger for the drugs was the only detectable glow in their anxious eyes.

“I live in Chicago,” she said, “and once a year I take a vacation for two weeks. I go on cruises. The last time I went up the Inland Passage. Do you know it? It was spectacular, all those glaciers crashing into the sea! And I go back to Greece every five or six years to see my parents’ relatives, who are all dying off now. They live on

olive farms overlooking the sea, but the streets are all stone, and I usually twist my ankle and end up being carried around the town in a straight-backed chair. Like one of the Madonna statues they carry around on feast days.” She laughed. “It’s really pretty hilarious.”

“You must rack up the frequent flier miles.”

“Too many to count.”

“What do you do?” he asked.

“I sell drugs to third world countries. I’ve had the Asian market until recently, but China’s been making more and more cheap drugs —knockoffs, like they do with computer programs or CDs. They have little sweatshops where they crank out insulin and antibiotics and old standbys like Valium and Prozac. It seems the whole world is on anti-depressants. ’Course nobody knows the quality of the drugs. The Chinese say they’re the same. They don’t really test them or anything. A bunch of people got sick in Denmark last year. Turned out they’d mixed in some barrels of drugs from China with product from the Czech Republic, and it made a supremely toxic cocktail. Do you believe that?”

The bartender looked down in the sink. Olympia saw that the suds had gone flat and the water turned gray. So much for hygiene.

“I’m home for a day every couple of weeks. When I was young my mother said I should guard my independence.”

“Meaning what?” the bartender said.

“Meaning earn my own money. Don’t get pushed into marriage. Now she’s singing a different tune. Why don’t you ever date? Where are my grandchildren? My mother says it would be cheaper for me to rent a hotel. She’s probably right. I’ve been doing this for three years now. I can’t keep a houseplant alive. Isn’t that pathetic?”

The bartender pulled the plug. The sink emptied, and Olympia heard a slurp from the drain.

The bartender picked up a hand towel. “Lady, you’ve been on the road too long.”

OLYMPIA HAD TO admit she was quite fagged out from traveling. The hotels of eastern Europe offered the desultory service of formerly state-run enterprises — smoke-saturated rooms and green

cornflakes in the breakfast buffet. No air conditioning. Of course, the company could have put her up at a Hilton, but the Hiltons were near the tourist sites, and she wasn't going there to be a tourist.

At the gate she handed over her ticket and an upgrade certificate. She had flown so many miles by now, she kept three or four in her purse, but they were nearly always useless because the first-class seats filled early on overseas flights. Besides the ability to stretch out and lie flat, an amenity that might have allowed her to sleep on the plane, a first-class meal was better than most food in the restaurants of Budapest, where the meat, gristly and overcooked, swam in goulash.

"You're in luck, Miss Stavropoulis," the gate attendant said. "Your upgrade has been approved."

"It has?" she gasped. This was her lucky day. But then she'd earned it. As the bartender said, she'd been on the road too long. Once upon a time, back when she was in her twenties and struggling to finish an MBA, she had imagined a man in her life. Maybe children. These she had traded for acquaintances, money, and what could pass for respect. If she occasionally had doubts about whether selling drugs was a meaningful way to live a life, well, no point in second-guessing.

The flight began to board. Now she gave herself permission to be pampered, just as she had given herself permission to buy her own diamond ring. She settled comfortably into her window seat, and the flight attendant offered sparkling champagne. She suddenly no longer missed the foregone hot cocoa.

At the last minute before takeoff, a woman, likely in her late seventies, arms loaded with packages, made a great bustle getting on board. She insisted the flight attendant fit her packages in the overhead bin and hang up her fur coat (a mink, if Olympia was any judge). The woman tottered on her spike heels, her thin ankles bowed. After sitting down briefly, the woman suddenly stood and began to rummage around in the luggage bin. *Oh, great. A fussbudget*, Olympia thought. The stewardess asked the woman to take her seat — the flight was about to take off — but the woman said there was a mirror in her carry-on, and she wanted to freshen her

face. Unable to hide her annoyance, the flight attendant took down the carry-on and waited while the woman located the mirror. Once she found it, she sat down. It was ridiculous to worry about how you looked on a plane. In the airport, okay. But on an overnight flight? Why had the woman insisted on getting her mirror?

The woman's seat faced the front of the aircraft and Olympia's the rear. A glass panel divided the two seats. Olympia decided to leave the panel down. She was curious.

Loose strands of white-blond hair had escaped the net of the woman's chignon, and she dampened her fingers, setting them right. Like a robber wearing a nylon stocking, the woman's features were smooth but flattened. Makeup caked in the creases around her mouth. The woman outlined her lips with a lip brush, making the contour wider than the lips themselves. A perimeter of fine lines around her mouth suggested that she'd spent all seventy plus years smoking.

The woman grimaced and tucked her lip brush in her purse. "I hate to put on my face in public." She had a voice like twanging string, and Olympia was glad she did not go on. If she had, Olympia would have raised the divider, which would have sent a less than subtle message, but too bad. It was a long flight. She felt an aversion for the visible loneliness of nonstop talkers. Or was it narcissism? There was something not quite right about this woman, and Olympia began to speculate about her possible lives, always so much more interesting than the actual life the woman probably did lead. Besides hot chocolate, which Olympia had not managed to get, coming up with theories about the psychology of her fellow travelers was the one thing she enjoyed about her job. That, and the money, of course.

The seat belt sign came on.

The woman pulled her seat belt tight across the wrinkles in her skirt. The woman's hips were only half as wide as the seat. She looked like one of those rich, spindly old ladies you read about who start writing checks to strangers, a woman with many acquaintances, but no true friends. But who was Olympia to talk?

The woman leaned into the aisle and, waving a heavily veined and bejeweled hand, called forward. "Miss, bring me a whiskey sour."

Olympia watched cartoon people on her individual screen go through the safety drill: no smoking in the lavs; keep computers and cell phones off until ten thousand feet; put oxygen masks on children before putting on your own. Blah, blah, blah.

The woman rested her hand on the divider, addressing first Olympia and then the flight attendant, who had returned with a napkin and drink.

“I’ve had a frightful ordeal,” the woman said across the divider. “I am just shaking from the stress of getting on this flight.”

This will be a difficult customer, Olympia thought, and she was curious to see how the stewardess managed.

“Bad traffic getting to the airport?” The stewardess spoke placatingly, as she would to an unaccompanied minor. She herself was in her mid-twenties, a petite brunette in just enough make up.

“Not traffic at all.” The old woman turned to Olympia. “I bought my ticket at the last minute. Can you believe they charged me \$8,225?”

Olympia choked on her champagne. “I hope that’s round trip.”

“No, it’s one way.”

“Why didn’t you travel coach?”

The woman pursed her lips and frowned. “One can’t really fly in coach, can one?”

“One could if one had to,” Olympia muttered.

Olympia always flew coach because her trips often had to be arranged at the last minute. Surplus drugs had a tendency to pop up on the market unannounced, and she had to scurry over to Europe and try to sell them, or they would have gone to the landfill.

“EXCUSE ME,” THE flight attendant said. “Would you like a hot towel?”

Olympia opened her eyes and took a washcloth from the tongs. Damp heat seeped into her pores. The good thing about this flight was that she had no paperwork. All that could wait until Hungary. Meanwhile, whatever food was being warmed in the galley smelled awfully good.

“Would you prefer salmon or sirloin?” the flight attendant said, her pencil poised to take a note.

“Salmon, please,” Olympia said.

“That’s the last salmon,” the stewardess said, her eyes bright. She turned to the other woman. “Will sirloin be fine?”

“I don’t eat beef,” the woman said.

“But you eat fish.”

“Yes. I need the calcium.”

The stewardess walked backwards a few paces and addressed the entire cabin. “We have a pescatarian onboard. Would anyone be willing to change the salmon entrée for beef?”

Olympia heard mumbles that sounded like “What the hell’s a pescatarian?” but otherwise no response.

The stewardess returned with a wicker basket to collect the towels.

“I paid over \$8,000 for my ticket,” the woman said. “You should have all selections available.”

“Let me just check again.” The flight attendant went back to the galley.

Olympia heard her clanking about and discussing the matter with the other attendants.

Olympia wasn’t about to give up her salmon voluntarily. This was a treat she deserved. She wasn’t fond of beef, even in the best of times, and it was never cooked right on an airplane. Too well done and stringy.

“I just recounted the dinners.” The flight attendant’s voice came over the loudspeaker. She had picked up the galley phone. “It seems we’re one dinner short. Please ring your call button if you’d be willing to volunteer for a coach meal.”

Papers rattled. Throats cleared. No one volunteered.

A moment later the stewardess stood by their seats. She looked from Olympia to the woman. “Since you were last on board, I wonder if you would help us out by taking a coach dinner.”

“I paid \$8,000 for my ticket!” Visibly flustered, the woman snapped, “I insist on a first-class meal.”

“Please,” the stewardess cajoled. “We’re happy to give you all the alcohol you want.”

“I don’t want to get drunk. I want the meal I paid for.”

The woman’s complaint could be heard throughout the cabin. Olympia turned and saw heads nodding in solidarity. The plane had leveled off, but the seat belt sign was still on. The woman unbuckled. “I want to talk to the Captain.”

“The Captain’s flying the plane,” the stewardess said, stiffening and spreading her arms to the adjoining seats.

The woman stood, and shakily, ducked beneath the flight attendant’s arm. In the galley a male flight attendant attempted to intercept her, but she slipped past and banged on the cockpit’s door.

“Open up,” she demanded. “I need to speak to the Captain.”

The steward attempted to guide her back to her seat, but she pounded his chest and clawed his face. The stewardess picked up the phone to talk to the Captain. Olympia heard snatches of conversation.

Did this woman think a dinner would fly through the air and suddenly fill the vacant spot in the warming oven?

The male steward, holding a towel to his scratch, told the woman, “Take your seat immediately, or we’ll have the police waiting for you when we land.”

“I paid for a first-class dinner.” The woman hunched over, chin dimpled, mouth trembling. “It’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair. Come along now,” the steward said, adding under his breath, “you old bitch.”

She went meekly, obedient only to a man it seemed.

Back in her seat the woman sat stiffly, a child put in detention. She finished her drink and ordered another.

Returning with a glass of merlot, the flight attendant eyed them both with a frown, her look of disapproval lingering on Olympia. No way was Olympia going to admit that her upgrade had caused the cabin to come up one meal short.

At last the stewardess brought dinner. The woman stared at her coach meal — peas and carrots, mashed potatoes, and small portion of overcooked beef. She sighed and squeezed her temples. Then she

began to cry, those big, gulping sobs Olympia remembered her school days: the playground's class warfare. Olympia had never bullied girls in lower grades, but she recognized that such people existed: thin-skinned, fragile girls with no defenses. Such girls grew up and never learned to fend for themselves.

"Oh, come on. It's not as bad as all that." Olympia reached over the divider and exchanged the woman's meal for her own. "Dry your eyes."

The woman looked at the salmon. "That's very kind." She picked up a cocktail napkin and blotted her cheeks. "Your good deed shall not go unrewarded. I'll write you a check after dinner."

"Don't be silly," Olympia said.

"Are you sure?"

"Very."

Finally, the woman conceded and unwrapped her silverware.

Olympia watched, dismayed, as the woman picked at the salmon and ratatouille and couscous so artfully arranged on the china plate. How was it possible, she wondered, for a person to hunger for a dish she had no appetite to eat?

## Tito's Descent

IF YOU LOSE a friend in his youth, the years after such a loss become a kind of afterlife, an unreality, as if you, yourself, are fixed in that time when death lies far in the future. At first, you miss them, and all the questions of whether there is a heaven immediately stand in your path. The person you love like a brother is gone, shimmering in the stream of memory, and that is the picture you carry forward, taking it out now and then and pondering how the miraculous and the tragic can coexist.

Back in April 1968 when Tito led us down into the cavern, we had no fear of death nor suspicion that what we were about to find would splash our names across the Spanish newspapers, and indeed, the newspapers of the world. With the promise of a few *pesetas*, two local boys — mascots, of sorts — agreed to guide us. The boys said that our destination, the Well of Ramu, had no bottom, that their grandmothers claimed it was haunted by evil spirits. The Well of Ramu was located atop a massive, limestone bluff. Shepherds, standing on its top and looking out toward the Atlantic, had many a time been startled by the eerie-sounding moans of disembodied suffering.

Perhaps I should explain for the benefit of those urban dwellers who will watch your documentary that this “pothole” was not the kind of pothole one finds in cities, where the asphalt washes away and a street crew must be summoned to throw in a couple of shovelfuls of macadam. This was a geological pothole, a hole in the tabletop of a bluff into which a stray sheep or goat might fall to its death.

Neither Jesús nor Aurelio believed the old wife's tales, but they thought it well to warn us. They wanted to show us a different cave. Some crawling, but big grottoes and excellent formations. Most

certainly worth the effort and “much easier for the girls,” Jesús said from beneath the first traces of a mustache.

“Don’t worry about the girls,” Tito said, championing the three of us. “We go all together, or not at all.”

Tito sprang over the stone fence that encircled the pothole and dropped to his knees. “The main thing is to determine how much rope we need.”

Then, flattening himself on the ground and with a handful of rocks, he slid his shoulders over the abyss.

Potholes were new to our caving group. In fact, I had never heard of a pothole until Tito proposed this expedition. The guides were country boys and had never rappelled down into one either. Aurelio, the older of the two, warned us not to get too close to the edge in case our weight made the ground collapse; but curiosity got the better of them, and they, too, flattened themselves around the perimeter, cocking their ears and listening to see how long it took for Tito’s stones to hit bottom.

Your cameraman asks why we spelunkers didn’t lower a lantern. A lantern only works if the floor of the cave is near the surface. Otherwise, darkness swallows the light. We could only determine the depth by feel, so when Tito couldn’t hear the stones strike bottom, he lowered a lead fishing weight, the hefty kind fishermen in Ribadesella once used to sink their nets in the ocean. I suppose they must still use them, come to think of it. As to where he’d found one, I don’t recall precisely, but Tito was very careful about bringing whatever we might need for the caves he wanted to explore, and I think he must have borrowed the weight from a cousin. By the time we were finished with our preparations, we had five climbing ropes of eighty meters each tied together.

The plan, Tito said, gathering us around, was for him to descend first, assess the situation, and then send down one of the guides.

Instead of saying “of course,” the guides looked at one another.

Aurelio, maybe fourteen, said that when the boys explored caves, they slithered along with flashlights until the batteries dimmed, at which point they backed out.

“Do you want to go down or not?” Tito said.

“I’m scared,” Jesús, about thirteen, said, “but, yes. I’ll try.”

“One of you must stay behind.”

“Can’t we both go?” Aurelio said.

“It’s better to draw straws,” Tito said. “If we get injured down there, the one up here can run for help.”

“Where should we go?” Aurelio said.

“The mayor’s house,” Tito said, nodding his head in the direction of the town across the river. “Or the Guardia Civil. And, if the one who draws the longest straw is still scared to jump into a dark hole, one of the women can show you how it’s done.”

The boys smirked at us girls.

The younger, Jesús, drew the short straw. “So, am I just supposed to wait here, or what?”

“Yes, wait,” Tito said. “Once we’re down, you’re the only way we can communicate with the outside world.”

Tito secured the rope around a boulder and attached carabiners to his climbing harness. Saluting, he slid over the lip.

Adolfo, a bull whose callused hands came from years of scything his father’s hay, stood over the coil, the rope running around his leather-vested back and through his hands. Counterbalancing Tito’s weight, he lowered our leader down.

THERE WERE TWELVE of us in the Torreblanca Speleological Society, mainly geology students at the university in Oviedo, plus Tito’s sister and one of her friends. The name “Torreblanca” came from the town where Tito grew up. I know “Speleological Society” makes it sound like we were some kind of learned group, sitting around and drinking port and discussing academic articles about rock strata, but we weren’t a “society” at all. Our youngest was fifteen and the oldest twenty-two. Eight were geology students — always out in the field, gathering rocks and carrying them back to the lab to hammer apart and examine. Tito, though still not finished with his baccalaureate, had already discovered his life’s passion. Tito was a real rockhound, completely mad for rocks.

In order to join the Torreblanca Speleological Society, as founder and self-appointed president, Tito insisted that we each buy the basics: a helmet, carbon lamp, and Levi's from the store where workmen bought their clothes. For caving, he preferred rubber waders, but he let two of us get away with hiking boots — what he wore when he went out with his mountaineering friends. His kit of chocks, carabiners, and climbing ropes filled the trunk of his car.

These days, when I think of Tito, I see him in that famous photograph: in his helmet and muddy, as we all were. Chin down, he is spooning cold beans from a can. We are all smiling and looking at him in wonder. His appetite had become a joke. Bony shoulders with a hunch that hinted at his shyness, all elbows and skinny legs, Tito was a study in angularity. A shock of hair hung over his forehead, and the camera caught him looking down into the can. If I have one regret, it is that Fernando, our unofficial Society photographer, having lined us up, did not say, "Tito, *amigo*, look at the camera." I should so have liked to see the tiny windows of light in Tito's coal-black eyes.

WE LATER LEARNED that the Well of Ramu was actually four hundred meters deep, the length of four football fields, and because of its depth, the temperature remained a constant ten degrees Celsius, barely above freezing. The caves we had explored before this were not quite as cold and often high up, generally an opening on the face of a cliff. To reach them we had to climb, and afterwards, rappel down the rock face. To do that, we slid the rope under our behinds and then leaned back, letting the rope play out as we backed down or bounced down the vertical wall. In the case of the Well of Ramu, we had no wall with which to brace our feet and slow our descent. Our hands served as our only brakes, and when we dropped into the pothole, the rope slid through our gloveless hands.

I was supposed to show Aurelio how to manage the rope, but as I lowered myself down, I found that even twining my legs around it barely slowed my fall. By the time I reached bottom, my hands burned, and blisters were already forming. I pressed my palms

together, wishing the pain would stop, and took a step back from the rope, my waders sinking in. Mud over-topped them.

“Watch out!” I cried. “Quicksand!”

Tito had been standing nearby and grabbed my arm. “I think we’ve landed in a riverbed.”

“It’s the San Miguel,” said Aurelio, letting go of the rope and dropping freely the last three meters.

And, indeed, the sound of water echoed through the chamber, a gurgle that made me think we might step into the channel and be washed downstream. The thing I feared most in caves was being sucked by the force of a river that would be too powerful to resist or stepping out into space and dropping into a lower chamber. My armpits began to tingle and, despite the cold, sweat formed on my upper lip.

Partly to overcome this aversion to confined spaces and partly because of Tito himself, I had joined his club, and now that he had accepted me, I dared not confess that in narrow passages, where I had neither room to turn around nor squirm and where I could see only the boots of the person crawling ahead, I feared the rock would shift and crush me.

The two other girls followed next, and then studious Fernando, who had a crush on Tito’s sister, but was too shy to ask her out. Adolfo, whom Tito called “the human crane,” came next, and finally little Ruperto, the youngest member, age fifteen. A lighter snapped briefly, illuminating his profile, and a moment later, I made out the glowing tip of his cigarette. Trying to appear older, no doubt.

We had all made it down safely.

“Let’s see where we are,” Tito said. “Each of you turn a hundred and eighty degrees and take five steps.”

We did, and in the faint illumination of our carbide lamps saw that the mud, the murky grayish-brown of a tidal flat, extended beyond the reach of our beams. The cave smelled like no other cave we’d been in before, the air dank and humid, like an ice box exploding with rotting cheese and moldy bread. The river, hidden from view, sounded close by, but to reach it and possibly follow it to

where it emerged from the earth, we would have to cross the reeking gray pudding of mud.

The pothole, through which we had descended, and the rope, our only way out, stood behind us, and I was tempted to turn around and keep a hand on it. Were it not for the light falling from above, I could not have told up from down. It was discombobulating.

“Now take five more steps,” Tito said, as if we were playing “Mother, May I?”

When the group had spread out so that each person, leaving his companions, felt a chilling awareness of the cold, Tito said to stand completely still and tilt back our heads.

I did.

Looking up, I could not see the top of the cavern, only a barricade of stalactites as evenly spaced as the twisted, iron bars on a window.

“Which way, do you think?” Tito asked the guide.

“To the right,” Aurelio said, sounding assured for his age.

“To the right it is,” Tito said.

And, then, as if needing to justify himself further, the guide said, “The air is cooler in that direction, and the sound of the river louder. This way should take us to the cave I told you of.”

“And?” Tito said.

“From there we should be able to walk out.”

“But you don’t know that for certain?”

“I don’t know if the passage is open,” Aurelio said.

“Let’s take a quick look,” Tito said.

“What about us?” I asked on behalf of the female contingent.

“All for one, and one for all.” Tito waved his hand inclusively, beckoning us to follow.

His and Aurelio’s lamps bobbed toward the burbling water, its sound magnified by the echo chamber of the cave. A drop of water landed on my cheek, but when I looked up, I still could see no more than I would have seen in my grandmother’s windowless root cellar.

Walking away from the rope had plunged me in darkness. As I rocked forward, mud sucked the wader from my heel. I tested each step and waited for the ground to render itself firm. The others cried

out and cursed the sucking mud. It was impossible to move quickly, and I was breathing hard by the time I could see that rocks and boulders blocked our way. I placed my hand on one of the rocks for balance. I stopped. Had the stone dislodged from the ceiling, or had the river carried it in? Maybe Tito could tell. Meanwhile, the hiss of carbide, snaking up the tube on my back, reminded me of the hissing, slithering, eyeless albino salamanders we had seen in another cave. I hoped we wouldn't come upon any creatures like that in this airless space.

So far I hadn't felt the air movement Aurelio claimed would lead us to the other cave, and I began to think it would be better for us to stay in this large chamber where, at least, we could look back and see the shaft of light beaming down from the pothole. Tito told us to wait while they explored, and if this didn't prove to be a passageway, we could search the cavern for another.

Tito squeezed sideways through pointed, egg-shaped rocks as gigantic as those the Arabic astronomer Ibn Yunus was said to have used as gnomons. Meanwhile, Aurelio ducked into a fissure that looked as though it led to another cavern, and I thought he might find another big room, but without the river running through it. Shivering and hugging ourselves, we heard his boots splash through water and Tito cautioning Aurelio to watch his footing. When they found themselves in the same passageway, Tito called back and said they could stand upright, but not see daylight. That meant the walk out could take a long time.

At last, their lamps bobbed back in our direction.

They had been gone half an hour, and I had no confidence that we could get out this way. What if we encountered more blockages? It might be better to follow the river in the other direction. I turned toward the sound of water. Above me, I saw a flash of red. It startled me.

"What's that?" I asked.

"What's what?" Tito said.

"Red."

"Where?"

Looking up and trying to relocate the color on an overhanging rock, I moved sideways from the boulder. Because I had taken my attention momentarily from the ground, my feet slipped, and I fell, scraping my blistered hands.

“This is so screwed!” I said. “It’s black as midnight.”

Then Tito had me by the elbow. His lamp blinded me, and my heart thrummed in my ears. Unlike the others, I was an art student, and the vividness of that red could only mean one thing: paint. I squinted, looking in vain as my headlamp’s faint beam moved across the undulating rock above my head.

And then I saw it: the charcoal silhouette. A single horse’s head. The horse had ears, nostrils, and the same throat latch—that thickening on the bottom of its muzzle—as horses in the pastures of Ribadesella. What was different was its mane. The mane stood as stiff as a zebra’s.

“Look up there.” I pointed.

“It’s a horse,” Tito whispered. He put his arm around me and drew me closer. He was trembling.

I had never been as aware of my body as I was at that moment. The warmth of another human being, the sideways pressure of his hip, the squeeze of his fingers against my arm, the ripple of sensation from my forehead to my feet, made me feel as if we humans were designed, on a primitive level, to connect with one another not just with words, but with the intimacy of touch; that touch was essential for our wellbeing and the reason we have bodies, not just souls.

The others joined us, and Tito released me. Once again our leader, he directed us to form a line and tilt our heads in unison. Tito’s sister, Eloisa, squeezed between us and put her arm around me.

Hefty little Pilar, one of the most irreverent women I’ve ever met, had her arm around my hip. “What gives?”

“Cave paintings,” I said.

“Like at Altamira?”

“Well, we’re not far from there.”

Our lamps illuminated a swath of red.

“Is that blood?” Pilar asked.

“No. Ocher or iron oxide.”

Honestly, at the time, I had no idea what kind of pigment paleolithic artists might have used. I only surmised that blood would have darkened and chipped away.

The artist had applied an orange-red wash to the cave wall just below the horse’s head. In the illumination of our combined head lamps, a herd of horses jumped from the darkness. Six that we could see immediately, although with better light, the archaeologists would later document more. The herd faced the opposite direction and appeared to move across a plain of red that might have been grasslands set afire.

Of these figures, the best preserved was a mare in the fullness of pregnancy. Horizontal bands of black and white circled her legs, reminding me of the leggings of mimes who perform in traveling circuses. The stripes gave the mare a comical aspect, and most remarkably, the artist had painted her body violet. Could it be that horses in prehistory were violet? In every other respect the horse was as realistic as if Goya himself had rendered the image.

Most remarkably, the artist had painted her body violet. Could it be that horses in prehistory were violet? In every other respect the horse was as realistic as if Goya himself had made the painting.

We lingered, tracing the animals with our fingers and seeing if others agreed that, yes, that was a horse. Or perhaps a deer, for as we continued to examine the figures, we saw that some had antlers.

Our watches told us that the day had advanced past one o’clock, and though we had filled our metal canisters with carbide pellets, we had a maximum of four total hours before the fuel ran out.

We walked as a group around the cavern, unable to locate any other painted surface.

THE TORREBLANCA SPELEOLOGICAL Society was not a democracy, but Tito asked our preference. Should he attempt to monkey-climb the four hundred meters of rope and prepare to pull us out, or should we follow the river, in which case, we should get going or have Jesús send down more carbide just in case. With the

river below, we would have water, and could add it to the canisters when the gas pellets fizzled out. The main thing was not to get stuck down here in the dark.

The group split evenly, six to six. We gathered around the rope and Tito called up to Jesús. Expecting to see his face looking down, I was stunned when he did not answer.

Tito turned abruptly toward Aurelio. "Did your friend run off?"

Aurelio nervously cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted.

Still no Jesús.

"Maybe he got bored," Aurelio said, shrugging his shoulders.

If the passage proved to be a dead end, we'd have to come back here and wait, but that would pose its own problem. The ground was too muddy to sit.

"We need more carbide," I said.

"I'll get some." Tito extinguished his lamp and took off his helmet. "Back in a second."

Hand over hand, he ascended the rope, twisting it between his muddy galoshes. When he made it to the first knot, he rested and looked down.

"You can do it!" we shouted in unison. His face took on a look of determination. At the second knot he rested again, this time, calling up angrily, "Jesús, you lazy lout! Come over here."

Jesús did not appear.

Halfway up the third section of rope, Tito began to slide. He tried to slow his descent at the second knot by clamping it between his insteps. That helped, but unlike when I abseiled in, with the rope acting as a swing beneath my butt, Tito had no such control and landed beside us with a thud.

Determined to try again, he prepared to remove his galoshes.

"Let me try," Aurelio said.

Our young guide did not even make it past the first section. By now, mud had made the rope too slippery to hold.

Tito put his helmet back on, and Ruperto took out his lighter and lit another cigarette.

“So, it’s to be the river,” Tito said. “Aurelio, what is your opinion? Downstream or up?”

“My instinct tells me up.”

“Mine, too,” Tito said. “Back to the passageway.”

The prospect of discovering more paintings made us avid to stay underground, but not having the use of the rope made escape a necessity. Before we tore ourselves away from these paintings and began our trek to the exit, Aurelio ducked back into the fissure he’d explored. There he found a small chamber with deer incised on rock. Not painted deer. These were petroglyphs, and finding them made him glad to have won the coin toss. Now, he could legitimately say he was the discoverer of the cave, or at least part of it.

Expecting more discoveries, we picked our way along the rock-strewn passage, our feet slipping on the slimy stones and me fearing that we would reach a dead end or an underground channel that would force one of us to submerge and try to swim against the current.

“Tito,” I called out, my voice swallowed in the dark. “What if our lamps go out?”

“I have some extra carbide,” he said, “and a dozen candles, but I suggest we not think of that and sing to keep up our spirits.”

“What shall we sing?” Maria Pia called.

“How about ‘Puppet on a String’?” Tito suggested.

Adolfo and Fernando began whistling, and the melody carried us along; however, we were concentrating so hard on where to put our feet that the lyrics simply drifted away.

**AFTER THREE KILOMETERS** underground, we caught the scent of fresh air. Just as the first sign of daylight appeared, our lamps sputtered out.

Ordinarily, when a cave is discovered, it’s a shepherd who stumbles in, usually unappreciative, which is why so few caves are recorded or mapped. But the Well of Ramu was different. No one knew it was there. We were the first.

Since then the cave has changed. Despite the three air locks, the artificial tunnel introduces outside air, and the unforgettable smell is just not the same. No one can experience it as we did fifty years ago.

It annoys me that I must pay an admission fee to bring my grandchildren, and it annoys me when people complain about the path being uneven and rocky and dimly lit. The last time I went there, a French-speaking woman was complaining to the guide, who happened to be Aurelio's son, that she'd had to walk a long way back just to see a few paintings. She had expected more for her money.

When I heard this, I felt a tremendous sense of abandonment and loss. "You have been privileged to see one of the treasures of the world," I said, "and yet you disparage it. This is not the same experience as going to the cinema."

I wanted to tell her what a miracle it was to stand before those paintings for the first time, to wonder at the artists who painted them and held them sacred. To imagine the horses that must have been running wild. And I wanted to tell her about Tito, how vibrant and alive he had been as we probed these secret grottoes. How he dove into his can of cold beans right after we had made it back to the top of the bluff and startled Jesús, taking a *siesta*. How euphoric we were as we tore off our muddy clothes and had Aurelio direct us to the mayor's house.

WOULD YOU MIND turning off the camera? Good. Now I will answer your question. Do I think Tito was a risk taker? Certainly, no more than any other young man his age, an age that predisposes the male of the species to believe he will live forever. Tito had his full share of the invincibility hormone. It surged through his veins, and it was what drew us to him.

Tito was brave. A leader. He believed in living life to the fullest, squeezing every drop of joy possible from his time on earth. And, remember, this was 1968, seven years before Franco's death. In a certain way, to live boldly was an act of political defiance.

When Tito slipped in a mountaineering accident a few days later, his sister brought us the news. The Faculty in Oviedo called for

a day of mourning. The train to Torreblanca filled with students, but we, who knew him best, drove. At the mass, his father wept like a man who'd lost a part of his very soul. And because of Señor Bustillo's intense grief, the authorities decided to name the cave in Tito's honor. No longer the Well of Ramu, today it is the Cave of Tito Bustillo.

Just this morning, I was thinking about Tito, how he stood next to me in that cave and how my body rippled with pleasure. Tito and I might have had a future. Instead, what he gave me was a single moment of ecstasy. Following his example, I have sought to live every moment as if it were my last.

## A Message from the Author

THANK YOU FOR reading this excerpt from *Body Language*. I hope you enjoyed meeting John and Sally, Olympia, and the spelunkers in the Spanish cave. If you did, I would greatly appreciate you leaving a review. Reviews are crucial for any author, and a line or two about your experience can make a huge difference. If you're part of the Goodreads' community, please follow my author page.

<https://www.goodreads.com>

I enjoy sharing my thoughts about reading, writing, and life on my blog. I write about places I visit and try to pull back the curtain on what being a writer is all about. I often have pre-release copies available for download as well. If this sounds good, then take a look at my website:

<https://www.maryleemacdonald.com>

In case you're wondering what's up next, my forthcoming book is [\*Surrender: A Memoir\*](#) about identity and adoption.

### **1961. High school sweethearts. An unplanned pregnancy.**

*Surrender* is the touching story of an adoptee's search for identity and the healing power of a mother's love.

## About the Author

BEFORE TURNING TO fiction, I worked as a carpenter and magazine editor. My nonfiction has appeared in *Sunset*, *Better Homes & Gardens*, and the *Old-House Journal*. I hold a Master's in English/Creative Writing from San Francisco State, and my short stories have won the Barry Hannah Prize, the Jeanne M. Leiby Memorial Chapbook Award, the *American Literary Review* Fiction Prize, the Ron Rash Award, and *New Delta Review's* Matt Clark Prize.

My debut novel, *Montpelier Tomorrow*, won a Gold Medal for Drama from Readers' Favorites International Book Awards, and my short story collection, *Bonds of Love & Blood*, was a *Foreword Reviews* INDIEFab Finalist.

I have five grown kids and too many grandchildren to count. Currently, I divide my time between Santa Rosa, CA and Tempe, AZ. When I'm not writing, I'm walking on a beach, strolling in a redwood forest, plucking the snails off my tomatoes, or hiking in the red rocks of Sedona. See what I'm working on now by going here:

<https://maryleemacdonald.com>.

I'd love to stay in touch. Here are my social media coordinates:

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