

## SALVATION KNOLL

Lady would never forgive Edie if Grandma spilled into the dirty upholstery and drifted out the cracked windows along with the continuous bellows of Camel Lights. The way Grandma shifted back and forth in the backseat as Edie sped along the US-6 made Lady on edge. She was grateful when the yellow light on the dashboard glowed outside of Helper, forcing them to stop for gas. As soon as Edie disappeared inside for some beer and smokes, Lady looked disapprovingly into the cluttered backseat until her eyes settled on the ornate box of ashes that contained her grandmother's ashes.

She cleared a spot for herself in the seat behind her and grabbed Grandma, placed her softly in her lap, and softly brushed her hand against the grain of the wood. She cleared a spot off in the middle seat and buckled her in tightly. She placed their sleeping bags on either side of Grandma, and picked up the loose clothes that were scattered about the floor. Lady looked toward the store to make sure Edie was still inside before sifting through her laundry. She picked up a leopard print bra and held it up so the sun would shine through the fine, sheer fabric, and laughed. She placed it up against her own undeveloped chest and shimmied her shoulders, "Look, Mom, I'm a star".

She laughed at her sultry tone, speaking like that felt unnatural to her, more like a purr than a voice. She could easily picture Edie purring at a camera like Elizabeth Taylor or Jacqueline Bissett, flaunting this frivolous bra. Lady looked down at her own body and immediately felt foolish in her skin. She wrapped the thin bra around the box and fastened the clasp. She looked at down at the ashes, and smiled, "You two had the frame for this, not me. I'm too boxy."

She reached further under the driver's seat and could feel textured fabric wrapped around something solid. She grabbed it and yanked it toward her, but the fabric had latched on to the metal frame on the bottom of the seat, Lady could hear it rip as bright red sequins poured over the clutter. She unraveled the ruined sequin dress and pulled out a bottle of half-drunk Jim Beam.

She looked back toward the store, where she could see Edie being distracted by a group of young men peacocking for her attention. Lady scoffed and twisted the cap off the bottle of the bourbon whiskey and took a long pull. She lazily wrapped the bottle back up in the red dress and shoved it back under Edie's seat. She put the final touches on Grandma's nest, leaving the bra fastened around the top of the box. Once reassured Grandma wasn't going anywhere, Lady crawled out the backseat and rolled down her window, watching Edie walk away from the group of men, their eyes latched on to her cutoff jeans and cowboy boots.

"I gotcha a Coca-Cola, Lady Bird," Edie said as she approached with a pleased smile, she handed the glass bottle to her daughter.

"Please stop calling me that," Lady said sharply as she grabbed the soda. She nodded her head toward the group of boys debating the two of them together, and watched as disenchantment and disappointment washed over their faces, "What did they want? An autograph?"

"Geez, they were just saying hello," Edie said as she crawled back in the car. She looked in the rearview mirror, at the nest that cradled her mother, the bra her boyfriend got her back in Reno, and the glimmering red sparkles that littered the backseat, "If you only waited, you coulda had a whiskey coke."

“I know you don’t have much practice, but that isn’t great parenting, Edie,” Lady’s words came too easily to her, that she barely realized their sharpness, “You think those boys realize I’m your daughter, or think I’m just a very portly little sister?”

“I wish you wouldn’t talk about yourself like that. You know that not everybody is as mean as you think they are. They were just being nice.”

“Well, *you know* that most people don’t have strangers be that nice to them all the time. You just got that sort of star quality,” Lady looked down at the overflowing ashtray and popped the soda bottle open with the edge of Edie’s lighter. “C’mon, it is still about eight hours from Price to the Grand Canyon. We gotta long drive ahead of us.”

Edie lit up a cigarette, started the engine, and looked over at her daughter. She tilted her aviator glasses down on the bridge of her nose so her bright blue eyes popped out from above them, “Best we put on some good tunes then.”

She grabbed a cassette from her middle console and handed it to Lady, who preferred her mother’s musical taste more than her conversation. She placed the cassette in the deck and looked at the album art, “This must be the new Talking Heads album.”

“Little Creatures— their best work yet.”

Edie turned up the volume and sped out of the parking lot. Lady looked at the cassette insert and the indefinite drawing of a man holding the world on his shoulders, and muttered to herself under the blaring music, “I get what you mean, David.”

They drove through the early afternoon, in the heat of the desert sun, flipping the cassette back and forth. Lady remained silent, lost in thought as her eyes scanned the changing landscape. It occurred to Edie that it could have been the perfect opportunity to have a conversation with her daughter, yet she was too afraid of the silence between the words, all the unspoken things that

should have been said before. She knew she waited far too long, so she convinced herself it could wait just a few more hours. So, she just kept singing and smoking, to drown out all the thinking. All those intrusive thoughts Edie had about the sixteen years of quiet between them.

## Ω

Lady arrived in the world silently, despite that the small room became crowded with people Edie had never seen. She didn't know what was wrong when they took her baby from her. But she could tell they felt something was wrong, she could tell by the way they all turned to look at her at once, and by the way her mother gripped her arm with one hand and covered her mouth with the other that they all knew something she didn't. And yet, in that brief moment of deafening silence, Edie felt relieved.

The room burst into sudden noise like an explosion, like the hammer of a gun had struck down, and guilt overpowered Edie as if she had actually pulled the trigger. The baby let out a horrible wail and the strangers rejoiced. A nurse that Edie had never seen before handed her the baby, insisting that she was a miracle, but Edie did not reach out.

She could still feel her life force pouring out of her, the wetness of the bed, and the cold sweat that matted hair down to her colorless face and clung her hospital gown to her skin. She looked up at the round face of the nurse, and shook her head, "I— I— I don't know what to do."

"Just hold your baby," the nurse said softly, but Edie could see the disappointment in her eyes. She shook her head again and pushed herself into the stack of pillows behind her, hoping to

sink so far into the hospital bed that she would go through it, and be able to escape this moment and this guilt.

“Give me my granddaughter, ma’am,” Edie’s mother spoke firmly as she took the baby from the nurse. She looked around the room and smiled reassuringly, “Let my daughter rest now please, all of you, shoo shoo.”

The strangers left the room, and Edie felt some relief once it was just the three of them. She watched as the baby settled in her mother’s arms, studying the loving look that they shared. Edie sat up straight and placed a pillow on her lap, jealous of this moment between them, “I’m ready now, Mom.”

Her mother placed her infant on the pillow and Edie softly wrapped her arm under her small body. The baby stirred and opened her dark brown eyes, and Edie could see a glimpse of the man who did this to her. The man who forced this baby in her when she was only fourteen, She stared into those man’s eyes unable to escape him, and that guilt that was birthed in a singular moment of silence, “A miracle, huh?”

For a while, people would tell Edie that it was normal to feel sad after you have a baby. But when days became weeks, even people from the church stopped visiting. Then weeks became months and people stopped telling Edie she was normal at all anymore. By the time she dropped out of school, she felt that her friends had already forgotten about her, let alone all the boys that used to chase after her. She became determined to fit back into her old clothes, but it didn’t change much. The few people she did see would still tell her how nice she looked, but she knew it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t how they used to look at her. She remembered how people would tell her she was so beautiful that she could be a famous actress. She remembered how the

church would always ask her to perform hymns on the piano, and how it felt when people looked at her in awe. After the baby, she could only see pity and disgust.

One of her mother's friends told Edie that she heard if she smiled enough that eventually she would feel happy. So, Edie smiled through the brightest moments of Lady's infancy, and yet they were still shrouded in darkness and silence. She would smile while she went through all the right motions of loving her daughter and being an attentive mother. She smiled as she imitated everything her Mom did, mirroring her gentle tone, the way she would sway Lady to sleep on her left hip. She would even smile when the guilt crept into all aspects of her life, and yet it never made her happy. By Lady's first birthday, she was gone.

She was only sixteen when she met a man with connections in the movie industry, and it wasn't long after her move to California, that Edie found out men could be a different kind of forceful. Between bruised eyes, he would flaunt her to the few connections he did have, which convinced Edie just enough to stay. At eighteen, she made it onto the big screen, all small roles: chorus girls, bridesmaids, waitresses. It was not enough to make a living in the hustle and bustle of the big city. It was not enough to free her from his violence. After one pretty bad beating, she left him, too; even considered making the trip back to Utah to be with her mother and daughter. Yet she was determined to make a name for herself. By the time she was 20, she was working on the Vegas strip as a showgirl, where she eventually learned to claim her power over men. She was able to exert her agency which she equated to a resemblance of happiness. She finally felt some truth behind her smile.

Once she was situated with a steady income, Edie was good at making short visits to Salt Lake. Lady would run up to her and throw her little arms around her neck and cover her with kisses. They would sit at the piano, singing together, Lady would tell her about church and

school. Her mother would make all her favorite food, and the three of them would all sleep together in her mother's bed, curled up in one another as if there were never any distance between them.

These visits were enough for Edie to convince herself that she was okay to go back to Nevada and build her life, but eventually, she aged out of being a new fresh face on the Vegas strip. She had a good rapport with the casino, and they set her up with a job in Reno as a blackjack dealer, they even bought her a manufactured home. She was twenty-seven when she landed a steady singing gig and became somewhat of a local celebrity. After so many failures, Edie felt like it was a success. She was the first to admit she loved the attention, the delicate dresses up against her skin, and not sharing the stage with dozen other girls. She was feeling whole and confident, enough to even convince herself that one day she would have Lady could come and live with her, but that day would never come.

Sometimes Edie wondered if she subconsciously made it impossible for Lady to be in her life full-time. There always seemed like one more thing, one more issue, one more new boyfriend, that made it so the timing never seemed to line up. Before she knew it, her daughter had become a young woman, strong and thoughtful like her beloved Grandma, a girl Edie knew would go on to achieve great things and didn't care what people thought about her. A girl whom Edie felt was better off without her, no matter how much she told herself otherwise.

After almost every dinner, Lady would do the dishes and brew a pot of decaf coffee before joining her grandmother in the backyard to watch as the Wasatch Front turned pink in the setting sun. This routine between them was reassuring for Lady, who loved things to be orderly and planned out. It was a strange night because Lady's mind was elsewhere; mulling over the big test that she had the next day. With little thought she hurriedly finished the dishes, rarely taking her eyes off the textbook she had open above the sink. The coffee pot beeped right as the peak of Mount Olympus began to change color. She poured herself and her grandmother a cup and headed outside. Spilling a little coffee as she opened the sliding glass door, making a mental note to clean it up before bed.

"Here you go," Lady said as she placed the coffee in front of her grandmother, "I'm going to go grab my homework."

"Thanks, Lady Bird," her grandmother said softly, her blue eyes twinkling at Lady. She put her own cup down and rushed inside to grab her book. When she returned, they sat in comfortable silence, until the sun had vanished, and the pink faded from the soft edges of the clouds.

With a satisfied sigh and an empty cup, her Grandma patted her on her head, "Reading in this light will hurt your eyes, why don't you come inside, and we will turn on the news."

"I'll come in just a second, I'm almost done," Lady said slightly frustrated, never looking up from her book.

"Alright, Birdie, don't take too long," Grandma said as she kissed the back of Lady's head, and turned to go back inside.

Lady heard the same sound of the sliding glass door opening and shutting that she had heard a thousand times before, then the undeniable sound of the shattering of a ceramic cup on



tile, the harsh screech of a chair being dragged across the floor, and the crashing of her grandmother's body falling backward through the glass door. It was only just one brief moment, that Lady could always hear in her head despite how often she tried to drown out the noise; a small spill of coffee that began to drown out any peace of mind.

## Ω

*'The second left from Natural Bridges Rd. 'Salvation Knoll'—just past the historical sign*", Lady wrote in her journal as Edie pummeled down the dirt road.

Edie looked over at her daughter's lap, "Don't go telling anyone about my camping spot!"

Lady pulled the journal up against her chest to keep the cruel things she had written the night before from her mother, "I'm assuming we are lost, which is why we aren't heading to the Grand Canyon as you promised, at least when they find our bodies they will be able to identify us with this journal."

"Well, I'd probably use that as kindling before we ever actually died, so better hide that journal nice and good," Edie said with a smirk.

The dirt road was difficult to see in the light of dusk, the car violently bounced up and down on the soft earth, red rock kicking up into the tire wells. The sound of the earth hammering against metal pounded in Lady's ears. Her stomach churned as she looked out into the endless canyonland that stretched into the horizon and let out a deep groan. "You can't be serious with this road."

“Dead serious,” Lady said with a cigarette dangling out her mouth, and both hands firmly gripped on the wheel. Lady cranked the window down and tilted her head outside. She wondered if somewhere beyond the shadows that shifted in the desert below was Arizona. She willed her eyes to stay open so the wind would dry her tears of frustration. The vast panoramic of ancient valleys warped and pulsed as her eyes searched for perspective and focus. A dizzying feeling of vertigo made her well aware of the bourbon that sloshed around in her stomach.

“You okay?” Eide asked as she placed her hand on her daughter’s knee. Lady’s usual rosy color had drained from her face, and she shuddered at her mother’s touch. Edie retracted her hand and clicked her teeth, “Maybe you shouldn’t have drunk my Beam, huh? You always get car sick.”

Lady sat up straight holding the vomit at the brink of her gut, eager to prove to her mother that she wasn’t the same little girl with motion-sickness that Edie pretended to know. She slammed her hand down on the tape deck and turned down the volume, her head throbbing. They drove another mile in silence, the sound of guilt and a sliding glass door playing through their heads, with only the sound of the rock slamming against the undercarriage to distract them from their thoughts.

“We’re here,” Edie exclaimed as she pulled into a small clearing between two brambles of juniper. Edie stopped the overworked car and stepped outside, stretching her long arms into the expanse above.

Lady threw her door open and vomited. Edie looked down at her daughter, who looked more like her alcoholic father than ever before. She brushed off the image of her rapist in her head and looked around the campsite. “My god, just like I remember it.”

She started humming as she twirled around the firepit, buried in wind-torn sand and overgrown with sage. Lady stood up and looked at her mother glowing in the pink light of the setting sun. Lady could see Grandma shining through Edie, jealous that they looked so much like one another.

“So, you have been here before?”

Edie looked over and smiled, “There is something for you in the trunk, Lady Bird, you’ll know it when you see it.”

Lady slammed her door and stepped over her vomit. She opened the trunk, and on top of her suitcase was a yellow manila envelope. She unfastened the clip and looked inside to see a collection of photos of her grandmother. She looked up at Edie, “Why have I never seen these before, where were they?”

“I’ve always kept them with me. I just like seeing the way Daddy would look at Momma— weren’t they just so handsome together?”

“They really were, weren’t they?” Lady was unable to subdue the thought that she wished she looked like this part of her family, and not like this man she had never met before. She looked at each one closely, her grandmother looked so young and happy. She reached the last photo and gasped at an image of her standing in this very spot. She turned the photo around and looked at the writing, *‘My Lady Bird, Salvation Knoll, 1947.’*

“He called her Lady Bird?”

Edie smiled and nodded, “You really think I called you Lady because I didn’t want to name you?”

“Well, yeah, actually. Everyone else is named after their Grandma, and I never heard anyone call her this.”

“Well, girl-no-name, only Daddy would call her that. I think I just wanted to break the cycle, you know... all that bad luck we got... C’mon, let me show you something else.”

“I really feel like shit, we should set up camp while we got light.”

“We can sleep when we’re dead, c’mon before the light is actually gone,” Edie retorted. She looked her daughter up and down and reached into her pocket before slamming a pack of unopened cigarettes against the open palm of her other hand. She waited for Lady to say anything, but she was still in need of convincing. Edie clicked her teeth, and spoke with a pleading tone, “We will make it to the Grand Canyon tomorrow, I just really wanted you to wake up here on your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now you’re a woman, I think there is something you gotta see, please trust me— c’mon.”

Edie turned on her heels, not waiting for a reply, and began walking. Lady sighed again and followed her down to the edge of the mesa. She certainly wasn’t ready for trust, but her curiosity was piqued, and she began feeling hopeful to hear some much-needed truth from her mother. As they walked, she considered that maybe Edie would finally acknowledge, or at least allude, that she wasn’t really her mother at all. Perhaps, she would finally see for how Lady’s loss was equal if not more than hers, because of the distance and the silence between them. Lady had already spent so much time convincing herself of this narrative that it had become her own truth, and she imagined the satisfaction she would feel hearing Edie say something, anything right again. Yet, as she looked at the sun falling nearer to the horizon line, creating a smooth gradient of oranges and reds; she also felt her grandmother, and what she would want. She knew she owed her at least that.

They reached the cliff face, and Lady’s exhausted eyes adjusting to the fading light blurred the distinction between the sky and the earth until they settled on a patch of pink.

Forgetting about her anger and her nausea, Lady spoke and finally broke the silence, “Gram loved sunsets, no matter what she would sit and watch.”

“That’s because she spent so much of her childhood in hiding, so many years of curfew and fear,” Edie explained and the words coursed through Lady like an electric current, all at once, and she felt suddenly awake. Edie continued, “That’s why she loved being outdoors so much, why she always looked at beautiful things.”

Lady considered the delicate trinkets around her home, and how frustrated she became as she packed them up after Grandma’s funeral, delicately wrapping them individually and nesting them into well-organized boxes. She opened her mouth to ask Edie about them, but Edie continued to speak, never looking over at her, “I never told you how I appreciate that you set her hospice bed up like that, to make sure she could see out her window in her final days, I bet she really appreciated it.”

Lady couldn’t help but laugh, “It drove the doctors nuts.”

“Ha! Good, I fucking hate doctors.” Edie took a long drag of her cigarette, and pointed north, “Look... over there.”

Lady followed the point of Edie’s finger to a dried river valley below and at the side of a hill between two outcroppings of red rock. There, sat a small home that Lady recognized from the photographs of her grandparents, “No shit.”

“No shit. That right there is Butler Wash, and up that road there,” Edie said as she shifted her finger, “That is where Natural Bridges is, that is where Daddy worked when he met Mom.”

These names of places were familiar to Lady, as if from a reoccurring dream that she had never thought too much about. They both stared out into the open.

“Mom ever tell you about your great grandma? Poor thing was only thirteen when she gave birth to her—fucking men.” Lady was shocked at her mother’s words as she tried to imagine what it would be like to have a mother even closer to her age than she already had. Edie looked at Lady for approval to speak so candidly, and Lady nodded at the unspoken question. Edie looked back out onto the Wash, “Well, she died a couple of days later. Before too long her asshole-of-a-husband moved in another woman, mind you, not much older than wife number one. And oh man, did she give him a bunch of sons. They were all awful to her, she was beaten, teased, forced to be their maid. Mom couldn’t wait to get out of there, but then the war started. Belgrade was bombed and seized by German forces, and somehow thirteen-year-old Grandma was able to flee, and eventually made it all the way to New York, then San Fran. Then one day she heard about a place in Nevada where a bunch of Serbs ended up, and she thought maybe she should go there, too. That maybe her own people would help her...boy was she wrong.”

Edie laughed and stopped to take a final drag of her cigarette, before she put it out on the bottom of her cowboy boot and put the butt her in pocket. Lady looked up at her and saw she was crying and yet smiling widely. Edie looked out onto Butler Wash and scanned the desolate landscape. She breathed deeply, “Even there, no one wants to hire this young, pretty girl, with no husband, or money—at least for anything that mom was willing to do as a woman of faith and honor mind you. She was getting desperate, but not enough to do that. She ended up working at this bar and then one day this drunk fella asks her to marry him,” Edie laughed and her smile widen even further so Lady could see the back of her teeth, “This is where it gets crazy. Mom, she says, ‘I’ll marry you but only if you can beat me in poker, if I win I get something in return’. I couldn’t imagine her ever doing that, but she did. She told me she thought he was too drunk to take her seriously and if anything, maybe she could win some cash, and get something to eat. But

then this fool pulls out this piece of paper, and he says, “If you win you can have this, the driest piece of land in the Sonoran Desert”—and the two of them, they played their game. Then with a pair of red ladies, *she* won. She managed to farm this land, raised some horses and cattle, and grew something from absolutely nothing.”

Lady looked up in disbelief, “I didn’t know any of this, I feel terrible.”

“Terrible? She wouldn’t want that. I think she was just a lot like you— reserved and determined. You know...not like me. No, she was good at not forcing her problems onto others. She was happy, too. Happy living in the present, just the way it was. In fact, she didn’t take me here until Daddy died and she wanted to spread his ashes. It was then when I knew I could tell her I was pregnant, and I didn’t know what to do. It’s how I knew I could tell her what happened to me.”

Lady had never heard her mother acknowledge her rape, and she was always afraid of the day that it would happen. She assumed that would be the moment Edie would admit that Lady served as a walking reminder of her trauma, of that man who stole her future from her. Instead, Edie placed her arm around her daughter’s shoulders, and Lady sunk into her mother’s embrace and started sobbing.

“It’s my fault she is dead,” Lady wailed. Edie looked down at her in disbelief.

“You’re just being hard on yourself. Mom had a stroke, that is what the doctor’s said, and that is what the tests say that happened, she didn’t just slip and fall, Lady... You need to trust that. Poor girl.”

Edie held onto her daughter, whose body shook in her arms as she wept. She thought of her own decades of guilt, and the pain that Lady must be feeling, “It is not your fault, don’t let this eat up at you.” Edie wrapped her hands around her daughter’s face and pointed her head

towards her own, “Just look at me—I’ve been wanting to apologize to you for the longest time. For leaving you like that, and I have built my life around my guilt, and I am so sorry, my sweet baby.” Edie kissed her daughter’s forehead before cradling her head up against her chest.

Lady caught her breath and dried her face on her sleeve, and said, “Let’s leave her here.”

“It can just be some of her; we can still go to the North Rim.”

“All of her, we will leave all of her. It’s okay,” Lady said firmly and smiled, “I had a trip planned to go to the Grand Canyon on my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I plan on seeing it through.” She squeezed her hand around her mother’s arm. She let go and turned back to the car. When she arrived, she unbuckled the bra and the seat belt that situated Grandma in the backseat and returned to Edie who stood in stillness for the first time in many years.

They reached into the box, their fingers rubbing against each other as they grabbed ahold of her. They stretched their arms out into the expanse and let go. They took their time, watching as she drifted out onto the Wash and into the open sky. With their last handfuls, she was caught in a breeze, the cold air wrapped itself around Lady and Edie. Their eyes followed her as she danced in the wind, upwards into the dark sky amongst the stars that shined brightly in her beautiful wake.

“I’m glad we came here, Mom.”

“Me too, Lady Bird, me too.”



