

# Her Dream of Ending

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## I.

The girl within the sleeping woman dreams her dream of ending. To her comes the cowgirl with no kids: she's riding high atop her turquoise horse, steady by its braided mane. Silver pistols holstered.

The girl in the woman in the dream she's dreaming is in bright boots, crouched behind a shack-sized rock.

The girl, the cowgirl, the horse, the cactus-punctured plain. Hooves coughing up a company of dust.

The sleeping woman has been through this desert plain: New Mexico, she murmurs. The girl has not, will never. The cowgirl owns this plain. This plain owns her back.

The sleeping woman rolls across the mattress to hug her other shoulder, a reaction to the extra space. Where he's been she hasn't known. She doesn't even dream it.

## II.

The girl leaps from behind her rock, shouting, Me!—and the cowgirl, riding, spurs the steed—one welling eye as red as flame, the other just as blue, both licking, spluttering, the sleeping woman knows the blue—her stove downstairs, hissing gas, the stove she used to light each night, now less. The microwave: green zeroes.

The girl within the sleeping woman doesn't know this stove. But she knows the horse's hurt to have a rider and feels a pang, missing the mother her and the sleeping woman share: Father is away, he's fighting. Eat; entertain the belly to ignore the heart.

Hooves spray red dirt as the horse crushes through creosote, smashing waxy leaves, halting inches from the girl who's making happy fists, jumping up and down as if on bedsprings, the mother gone momentarily, from memory. The pistols shimmer in the heat. Both barrels corked.

Dust passes through them like an order, ignored. The girl thinks:  
If only, if only I could only be with her. A flash—the cowgirl splits  
her photo-smile to speak through it: You smell smoke?

The sleeping woman shakes her head, chin rubbing her shoulder,  
sheets twisted, smelling merely sweat and painted walls. She says  
to the space: New room, old condo.

It's what she's been saying to her sister. Her sister's been  
saying, Say something else, will you? Something so I know you're  
okay?

Next summer, she says.

You're giving him a year.

Next summer.

You hate the summer. You hate the heat.

I never hate the heat.

The girl sniffs so hard her face crumples. She wants to smell the  
smoke.

Sweat shines down the horse's cheeks. Both eyes flash and sizzle.

Leaning closer, the cowgirl repeats: Smoke?

Creosote, corrects the sleeping woman, looking to the trampled  
bush. Its wooly seed-pods powdered.

III.

Her sister says, You've always been a little girl.

I wish I was.

That's what I mean.

IV.

But the girl can't smell, she can only frown, wanting badly to be  
with her, half-aware of how she used to smell when she existed.  
Now her smelling funnels through the sleeping woman if the  
sleeping woman is awake and struck by sneaky, loaded stimuli; if so,  
then, the girl is the only one who smells, wholly present and re-  
existing however many moments into one return, riding joy and  
jumping—peanuts, cigarettes, a man's wet boots—and should the  
hopeful waking sleeping woman try to meet the girl inside her

smelling through her, turning over, reaching out—it's all evaporation.

This is the meaning, the sleeping woman knows. By now she can only reclaim *how*, can never hope to *as*—but she's hungry for new endings, even in this old remembered plain.

The girl has dropped her happy fists. Her face tightens, readies itself for the kind of crying that rolls like rain across the desert: rare and hard, wrong. The cowgirl tilts her hat, deepening the shadow. She draws her pistols and spins them by the trigger-guards, a pair of silver wheels—goodbye Father, goodbye Greg—and locks them steady, pointed to the sky. All would-be clouds ground up, pulverized by space, blue sheets.

Can't you creosote, pleads the sleeping woman, her mouth pressed to mattress, remembering by dream the smell of creosote, the rain, Greg, their desert-years, their adobe home, their day-hikes and cactus-gardens and the high desert miles made between them and everyone they used to know.

The smell of creosote, what rises after rain.

The roots leak poison, said Greg every time it rained, every time it smelled astounding, a smell that's nowhere else. The desert blooming, then burning back to hardness.

This is it. The girl wipes her stubborn nose. Trembling, she shuffles boots and says, I only want to be with you.

She says, I smell it.

The cowgirl pulls the triggers. The corks explode—the horse-eyes flare, glutting gas—a swarm of grackles bleep, doves warble—smoke columns into two great stacks, curling, folding open blackly. A dirty wind blows, bending cacti and buffing the horse's turquoise coat. Both stacks smudge together and loom as one. The cowgirl, pistols turned to dirt, reaches with gloved hands for the girl and the girl is too terrified to be ecstatic, too ecstatic to weep—she grips the cowgirl's fringe; both are in the saddle as the smoky curtains close—open—lift.

V.

The sleeping woman now alone. Not a presence on the plain, but in it.

Now knowing: when she wakes they will have gone and she'll smell paint. When she returns to work, microwave, her sister's voice, sheets, and extra space? Still they will have gone, smoked away for good.

This plain, she says. What she's been through by car. What she's left behind. What she might mean when she says, Next summer.

