

GIVER OF LIFE

There is no baby. Like the inside of a drum when the echo fades, her womb is hollow, has been hollow from the start. It's hard to wrap her head around it. Raylie watches out the car window as they hurry past bucolic fields with leaning fences, stands of ponderosa pine, a sky hunkered down beneath graphite clouds that seem to follow them, waiting for the right moment to drop their load. She should have been prepared after the disappointments of the past. You think you're getting all you can out of life. Then something happens and you realize you've been shortchanging yourself, living in a foreshortened world that obscures real happiness in some mocking way. Only now does she realize she has settled, has been plowing through her days with more resolve than relish. She also knows, despite whatever is to come, there will be no going back to that half-life.

"I'm scared, Stu."

He reaches over to touch her knee without taking his eyes from the road. "I'm scared, too." His tone sounds weighted. The lidded sky stalks him, too.

Raylie pronounces the syllables one at a time: "Ec-top-ic. Is that how Dr. Lindy said it? Funny. I never heard the word before today. It's surreal, isn't it, how quickly life can change."

Stu nods in bewilderment. "I couldn't believe she wouldn't do the surgery. It makes no sense."

"She explained all that."

They called the doctor that morning, mostly for reassurance after Raylie got up feeling lightheaded. Dr. Lindy listened to her symptoms and told them to meet her at the hospital. That,

in itself, had been concerning, but they determined not to panic. Then came the blood tests and the ultrasound, the palpating of Raylie's abdomen, the concerned looks.

After everything, Dr. Lindy rolled a stool in front of Raylie and sat down, her face inches from Raylie's. "It's called an ectopic pregnancy," she said. She explained how in a normal pregnancy the embryo comes down the fallopian tube to lodge in the uterus. In their case it never made it. It attached to the tube and started growing there. Eventually it grew so large, the tube burst. "That's the cause of your bloated feeling. Your abdomen is slowly filling with blood from the rupture."

Raylie tried to take it in. "And the baby?"

"There is no baby. I'm so sorry. Right now we have to worry about you. You need surgery."

Raylie glanced at Stu. He looked equally stunned. "So, when ...?"

Dr. Lindy took a breath and pointed to a notice tacked to the back of the door.

"Unfortunately, according to current state law, an ectopic pregnancy is still considered a pregnancy despite having zero chance of survival. It's crazy. I can't legally do surgery at this point." She pulled the notice from the door and handed it to the attending nurse. "Sandy, would you please make a copy of the regulation for Raylie and Stu?"

When Sandy left the room, Dr. Lindy turned back. She grabbed Raylie's hands. "This is what you're going to do. You and Stu are going to get in your car and drive to Salt Lake City. It's the nearest hospital where they can legally perform the operation. It's about a three-hour drive."

Raylie looked at Stu, alarmed. "What? Right now?"

"Yes, right now."

Stu put his arm around Raylie. "We need to pack a few things. Can we go home first?"

The doctor's intensity was ferocious in the sterile room. "No. Get in your car and go. Just go." She glanced back at the door and stood, scribbling something on a slip of paper she handed to Stu. "Here's the address. I'll call ahead that you're coming. Stu, you need to leave now. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

They have been driving for an hour when they pass their first road sign for the Utah border. One-hundred-sixty miles to go. It might as well be the moon. Raylie nibbles on the Hostess cupcake Stu bought when they stopped for gas. She closes her eyes and leans back in her seat. Has it only been two weeks?

She had felt silly that first morning rooting under the bathroom sink on the off chance. She remembered nudging the rubber plunger and a tower of toilet paper rolls to the side. Behind the talcum powder, the half-empty bottle of rubbing alcohol, the archaic musk-scented Aqua Velva, the glass jar of Q-tips, and a half dozen bottles of unopened hand sanitizer, she found it. The kit. Still sealed in its cardboard box, it had survived, battered but intact. Turning it over in her hand, she looked for a use-by date; it was medical, after all.

She had smiled at the absurdity of it all. What were the odds? More likely she was entering menopause than the other thing. She couldn't even think the word. Leaned up against the wall on the chilly floor, she waited out the processing time, the silence closing around her like a tule fog. Stu was her first thought. He'd left early for work, in a snit because they were out of coffee. She could imagine his snort if he knew what she was doing. They quit hoping back when gas was a dollar-fifty a gallon.

When the time had elapsed, she stood to read the result. Her hands shook at the sight of distinct parallel lines. Two lines. One for her. One for someone else. Could this be accurate? She

was forty years old, for God's sake. She looked at herself in the mirror. Straight hair cropped short. Skin like sandpaper. She rubbed her cheek. It felt like sandpaper. When was the last time she applied makeup or wore a dress, even? Could this be the face of someone soon to have a child?

They had tried for years. When it didn't happen, they listened to advice. Looking back, she winced at the silly things they did, thinking they might help. She read articles in *Women's Day* and monitored her temperature to determine ovulation. They ate loads of vegetables and quit the glass of wine with dinner. At someone's suggestion, Stu even abandoned his whitey-tighties. Let everything breathe, the friend said. In time they considered alternatives, but everything was so damned expensive. There'd been no money for hormone treatments, in vitro or surrogacy, nothing over for heroic measures of any kind. They concluded they were not meant to have children. Raylie had been devastated.

And now the result she had yearned for all those years. Breathe, she told herself. The house felt claustrophobic suddenly, as if it couldn't handle her big emotions. She walked through the living room and opened the front door. The air was cool, like the sun had yet to hit its stride. Shockingly, her corner of the world looked much like the day before. The pale sky washed out the purple morning glory above the door. Of their own volition, cheatgrass and balsamroot had sprouted in the empty lot on the corner, elbowing each other for space. The neighbor across the street was inflating a giant rabbit holding a basket of Easter eggs. At Christmas, it'd been a Snoopy nativity scene, at Fourth of July, a ten-foot Uncle Sam waving an American flag. It's your same world, she thought. Somehow, it wasn't.

It would be evening before she could tell Stu. She'd learned long ago not to interrupt him at school. Besides, this conversation needed to be face to face. In the meantime, she'd keep busy.

It was her day off from the food bank. She'd continue with her original plans—return books to the library, work her latest crossword puzzle, change the sheets on the bed. First, she'd buy a bouquet of flowers at Home Spot. A little celebration all to herself. Dressing quickly, she drove to Salmon Creek's one superstore. She knew cut flowers were kept near the cashier, so she headed in that direction. Walking through the garden section, she passed a sunless alcove filled with work equipment, a mishmash of coiled hoses, industrial-sized brooms, dirty rakes and shovels. A dozen or so plants had been tossed to the side. Sick plants culled from the herd. They looked so sad. Original tags had been slashed through with red marker and repriced at next to nothing. She reached to touch the leaf of an English ivy. The poor thing lost its grip and fluttered to the damp concrete floor. On impulse she grabbed a cart and swept up the entire ad hoc group. All of them, all those abandoned children.

Halfway home, the plants tucked in the trunk, she started doubting the pregnancy test. It had been an ancient relic, after all. Could it have been wrong? She stopped at a Rite Aid and bought a test from this century. Wouldn't hurt to doublecheck. The kit came with three opportunities. That should do it.

Before taking the tests, she had carried her plant largesse into the living room, an armload at a time. The six-inch pots fit nicely along the top of the built-in cabinet that ran the width of the room. The shelving system was what had sold them on the house. An exuberance of luxury, she thought at the time. All that space for books and her snow globes, Stu's turntable and vinyl record collection. She gave each foundling a sip of water from a large plastic measuring cup. A sip only, having read somewhere that people dying of thirst should drink slowly at first so as not to overpower their systems.

“It’s up to you.” She said the words aloud, looking at each of them in turn--the English ivy, the spider plant, the peace lily, weeping fig, the lucky bamboo, the succulents and cacti. “No hurry. Take as long as you need, but you *will* grow to be warriors. You hear me?”

It felt right. Raylie was suddenly a giver of life.

Next to her, Stu honks at the car in front of them. The driver throws his hands in the air and honks back. Several cars ahead a truck farmer with bales of hay stacked high in his cargo bed leads the string of vehicles like some parade Grand Marshal. Raylie can tell Stu is about to blow. He keeps veering out of the lane to see if he can pass.

“Take it easy,” she says. “Everyone is as stuck as we are.”

“People have no common sense.”

“You’re making me anxious, Stu. Dr. Lindy said we have time.”

She had been excited to tell Stu the news that first day. When he came in from work, he’d dropped a bag of Dunkin’ Donuts instant coffee on the kitchen counter and headed to their bedroom without a word. She waited in the living room, like usual, where he joined her a few minutes later, beer in hand, changed into sweatpants and his favorite t-shirt, the one with the red bullseye on the front. Neither said a word. Raylie, seated on the couch, pretended to work her crossword puzzle as he settled in his recliner and turned on the news. With a jolt she realized words had become obsolete in their relationship. Had they said all there was to say? When they talked, the sentences were mostly grunts and shrugs conveying necessary information. The communication slide happened so slowly as to be undetected until now. Without an umbilical cord holding them together, they’d drifted apart.

He didn't seem to notice her studying him as he watched the news. There were the beginnings of jowls and his hairline was in full retreat, like some defeated army. He enjoyed his beer, which accounted for the slight pot belly. Somewhere along the line, he entered middle age without making a fuss. He looked content enough, slouched there in his man chair with his remote control in hand, his beverage. Did he ever want more? She couldn't remember. Maybe she never asked. Well, she'd wanted more. Her heart thumped as she gathered the courage to speak. She put her hand over her still-flat stomach, but the words stuck in her throat.

Stu was the one to fill the void, as if he sensed her desire for conversation. "Someone at the shelter give you their dead plants?" He didn't bother to look in her direction.

"They're not dead and today was my day off, if you recall. I bought them at Home Spot." She knew she sounded churlish, but damn.

Glancing at the row of foliage buoyed her spirit. Despite their precarious health, the plants looked cared for in their deliberate spacing.

He took a long swallow of beer. "You paid money for those?"

"They were on sale for almost nothing. Give 'em time"

He shrugged. "What's for dinner? The guys'll be here in an hour."

She'd forgotten it was his poker night. "The last of the stew. Can you turn off the television? Let's talk a minute."

With a glance that failed to suppress exasperation, he turned down the sound but left the picture on. Terry Bradshaw was eating Doritos. "Well?"

"Tell me about your day," was all she could muster.

Stu frowned at her question, like she should know the answer. "What's there to tell? Someone left a drawing of a penis on my desk when they handed in their test on the Civil War."

She pulled a throw pillow to her chest for ballast. “Speaking of tests, I took a test this morning.” The words came out in small puffs.

“I know the kid that drew it. Little shit.” Stu drained his beer and set the can on a biography of Harriet Tubman, making a ring.

“It turned out positive.”

Her words somehow penetrated his focus on all things Stu as he started to the kitchen for beer number two. He turned back.

“What’s that? What turned out positive?”

“The test, Stu. I’m trying to tell you.”

He sat back down and looked at her for real this time.

“What are you talking about? Test for what? Are you sick?”

“No, I’m not sick.”

“Well, what is it then?” A quickening in his tone. “The sports’ll be on after the commercial.”

“Brace yourself.” The words came out in a spurt: “We’re going to have a baby. I took a test. Several tests, actually.”

There, she said it. The words tasted funny.

He sat there for a long moment before responding. She had his attention now. Staring at her, he opened and closed his eyes several times. He rubbed his neck, stretched it back and forth as if gathering momentum to leap a chasm. He shook the empty beer can. “You sure? Is that possible?”

It was almost comical, the way he stared at her. She wished she’d put on lipstick before he came home.

“I’m sure.”

His face lost its color as the news sank in, then turned the waxy red of a boiled lobster. He reached to touch her but stopped. “How do you feel?”

“I feel fine. Shocked, but I’ve had a few hours to get used to the idea.”

“Shocked is putting it mildly. I mean, after all these years?”

The buzzer on the oven sounded. Raylie stood to get the stew.

Stu’s eyes locked on her. “Well, what do you want to do about it?”

“What?” she said. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? We’re a little old for changing diapers, don’t you think?”

Even now, two weeks later and after all that has happened, Raylie feels the pain of those words. Stu may as well have slapped her. She remembered reeling back as if he had. Here they had this second chance, a miracle if ever there was one, and he doesn’t see it that way. Why? Because they might have to postpone their summer trip following the route of the Underground Railroad? That was Stu’s idea, but she’d gone along with it. The Civil War was the one passion he had retained from childhood after his parents took him to visit Gettysburg. Sharing that passion was his favorite part of teaching history--or had been. In the last years he seemed to have soured on his chosen career. She knew he was sick of cocky seventh graders who thought they ruled the world. Maybe that accounted for his reaction to her news. “I don’t teach,” he often complained. “I babysit.” Raylie thought she had felt everything of disappointment, but that had gone deep.

Stu jolts her from her reverie. “You doing okay?” Big plops of rain hit the windshield like mini hand grenades.

“I feel drained, Stu. I just want to lean back and close my eyes for a few minutes.”

“You need to stay awake. Dr. Lindy told me to keep you awake. Raylie?”

She felt herself drifting off.

He had left a note before leaving for work the morning after the blowup: “Sorry about last night. The news came out of left field. Let’s talk later.”

Raylie found it in the kitchen next to the newspaper, turned, as usual, to the crossword puzzle. Even that little acknowledgement of her existence had given her hope he might come around.

She’d wandered into the living room and dropped the crossword on the coffee table. Out the front window a mother and daughter passed by on the street, hand in hand. The girl, no more than six, wore a fuzzy cap with pink rabbit ears against the breeze. That could be Raylie someday, walking her child to school. What kind of mother she would be?

Motherhood had always been her ambition, her calling, if there was such a thing. Maybe it came from having a mother who was seldom there, who, even when she was there, had little left to give after long days working in an office filled with needy men, a work wife to pseudo husbands who asked for every ounce of her energy without having to reciprocate. A person has only so much to give, Raylie learned, and her mother gave at work. There had never been a father in the picture; that subject had been forbidden for as long as she could remember. It all made her want to be the parent she didn’t have.

She examined her new plant menagerie. Their survival had somehow linked in her mind to the baby growing inside her. One for all and all for one. They looked listless in the morning light. Was she an idiot to think she could bring them back to life? She decided to give them

names as inspiration. “I will call you Lady Macduff,” she said to the English ivy. Couldn’t do better than Shakespeare. She’d name all her flora progeny. The rubber plant could be Horatio, she decided, strong and stalwart Horatio. And the delicate string of pearls, now reduced to a single strand, would be Clio. Clio, for Vermeer’s “Girl with Pearl Earring.” The name had been an answer in a crossword puzzle and Raylie thought it sweet. As she got to know the rest, names would come. They had all the time in the world.

“Lady Macduff, Horatio, Clio,” she said, “you’re not going to guess. I’m going to have a baby.” The words reverberated around the room. They had heft. Screw Stu.

Work at the food bank that day had been a blur. Several volunteers failed to show, forcing Raylie to oversee the distribution line along with everything else. She watched people choose one of each offering, not taking more than their share. One boy followed his parents as they put vegetables into a plastic bag. He looked like he’d rather be anywhere but there. She guessed he was about the age of Stu’s students. When his mother pointed to fresh pineapple, the boy shrugged, his face resolutely indifferent. The mother pursed her lips and moved on. Raylie felt for the mother. She felt for the boy. She felt for Stu who faced similar rejection every day. No wonder he was so negative. Still, she knew this baby could change everything for both of them if he gave it a chance.

Back home, she had thrown a frozen lasagna in the oven. Sitting at the kitchen table she looked up gestation details on her computer. The last time she and Stu had relations had been St. Patrick’s Day. A few green beers had been part of the equation. That would make her about five weeks along. According to her research, at five weeks the embryo was about the size of a grain of rice. Growth at this point included the formation of the brain and spinal cord, and the beginning of heart development. Already, a heart.

Stu had walked in while she was doing the Internet search. He carried a bunch of sweet peas wrapped in a wet paper towel. “A peace offering,” he said.

Raylie closed the laptop and took the flowers. At the sink she put them in an old mason jar and filled it with water. She breathed in their fragrance. “I was going to buy flowers today but I got sidetracked. Where did you find sweet peas?”

“A kid on the corner. It was either these or lemonade.”

Raylie set the flowers on the table and sat back down. “I stopped by the health clinic. It’s official.”

Stu took the chair across from her. He rubbed his temples in little circles. “George Clarkson at school just found out his daughter is pregnant. He’s going to be a grandfather. A grandfather, Raylie.” He looked at her in astonishment. “He’s three years younger than me. I’ll be ready for retirement when this child, our child, turns twenty-one. Have you thought of that?”

She had been ready for the question. “I have thought of it. It’s not unusual these days to be an older parent. Our age can be a positive part of that--life experience and all.” She tried to keep the eagerness from her voice.

Stu had barely paused to breathe. “And what about the Underground Railroad? You were excited about that, weren’t you, following Harriet Tubman’s route up through Maryland and into Delaware?”

“Maybe we can still go. I’ll only be about six months.”

“People are not going to think less of you if you don’t keep it, you know. No one needs to find out. Are you really ready for getting up at all hours of the night? And when the child enters puberty ... you have no idea. I see it every day. It’s a new world out there. Twelve-year-olds know more about sex than we did when we got married. The custodian caught two kids going at

it behind the cafeteria, right out in the open.” He seemed to hold his breath. “I’ll take you wherever we need to go, be by your side the entire time.”

She had shrugged, exhausted by the effort to make him understand. “Everything you say is true. I know that. I see it at the food bank, too, the way some kids talk to their parents.” She knew she was pushing. “Don’t you see, that just makes me want it more?”

“Even if it turns our lives upside-down?”

“This is my chance, Stu. I want my chance.”

He sighed. “And I have no say in the decision.”

Raylie felt pummeled by the enormity of life, the way it kicked you about. When had Stu turned into the tight-lipped middle-aged man at the table next to her? How had she not noticed? Over the years little moments piled up and, bam, you’re living with a whole other person. That’s how big changes happened, wasn’t it, one pebble at a time, until you’re smothered by the weight of the rubble. She missed that other Stu.

“You do have a say, Stu. You can choose to be part of this or not.”

For the next days they had circled each other, wary and watchful, each waiting for a change of heart in the other. They fell into their usual pattern of minimal conversation, only more-so. The little things that had padded their marriage--work stories, her crosswords, his latest historical biography--went unremarked. Not a word when their next-door neighbor’s new 30-foot RV encroached on their driveway. Nothing about the announcement that Walmart was opening a store on their town’s historic Main Street, forcing out several mom-and-pop businesses. When they did speak, they used careful words, nonconfrontational tones. They might as well have been strangers. He left her puzzle out as usual. There was that. One morning, though, she found a clue

had been filled in: “Birthplace of Harriet Tubman.” “Dorchester” was written in block letters. It felt like a rebuke.

Before work each day she nurtured her sad-sack plants, believing that saving them would somehow save her, researching for hours ways to bring them back from the brink. She misted their scant leaves, poked a finger into their soil to test for moisture, turned them to the light. The attention seemed to be working. Most of them were taking advantage of their second chance. It was as if, day by day, they were aging in reverse, like Brad Pitt in “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.”

Raylie had been the one to break the cold war with Stu. They were getting ready for bed. She had her back to him, turning down the comforter. “I texted my mother the news.” She said the words under her breath.

Halfway to the bathroom, Stu turned back. He kept his tone light. “Oh, yeah? What did she say?”

Raylie straightened up but stayed turned away. “She texted congratulations, along with a list of all the things that would make motherhood hard for ‘someone my age’: ‘Children are needy. Forget any social life. Are you sure you’re up for it?’” She punched a pillow and threw it back on the bed. “She’s on your side, I guess.”

“There are no sides, Raylie.”

Stu was still grappling with his emotions the following Saturday. He was at the table eating a bowl of raisin bran when Raylie walked into the kitchen, still in her pajamas. She was barefoot and hadn’t combed her hair. He watched as she sat down and put her head on her arms. When she said she felt dizzy he poured her a cup of water and placed it nearby.

“Go slow,” he said and sat back down.

He stole little glances at Raylie between bites of cereal. She had been so hurt by his initial reaction to the news. In his defense, their life had been going along pretty well, or so he thought. Maybe not the life they planned when they were young enough to believe the future was within their power to determine, but who gets that? Everyone settled sooner or later, didn't they, made the best of what they were handed? When teaching didn't turn out to be the molding of minds he envisioned, he had made do. He refocused on the long summer breaks of travel, indulging his love of American history. He had his poker nights, his subscription to “Sports Illustrated,” his occasional dish of chocolate ice cream. Was it so bad that he and Raylie had settled into a relationship that was more comfortable than intoxicating? They seldom argued. If the whoop-de-do was gone, that was to be expected after nineteen years. And now this--this emotional return to square one. He didn't know if he had the energy to face it all again.

After a few moments Raylie stood, said the dizziness had passed. She shook Stu off when he reached to steady her, pausing as if to find her balance before leaving the room. From the kitchen he could hear her talking as she tended the plants: “Lady Macduff,” she said, “my own little fledgling is about the size of a grain of rice. Can you believe that? It has a heart. A beating heart.”

He wished she'd shared with him about the beating heart. He walked to the sink and rinsed his cereal bowl. Out the window the street sweeper crept by, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake. There was wind. The plastic Easter bunny across the street had been blown on its back. Face up, its toothy grin looked demented, as if it enjoyed being knocked about. He wondered if Raylie planned to attend the protest demonstration in front of the proposed Walmart site. He hoped she'd stay home to rest.

That evening, eating a BLT and watching *Law and Order*, Stu eased his way into conversation. “How’s Lady Macbeth doing these days?”

Raylie was stretched out on the couch. She hadn’t touched her sandwich. She gave him a quizzical look. “You mean Lady Macduff? She’s fine. You can see for yourself. Growing every day.”

He held out the bag of chips, but Raylie waved it away. “I’m feeling bloated,” she said and rubbed her stomach.

He wanted to say something. He wanted to say he was sorry. He wanted to say he would try to be happy, try to look forward to the baby, but no words came. Instead, he grabbed the knitted throw from the back of the couch and covered her legs. It was the best he could come up with. A wan smile signaled her thanks.

“You know, Raylie, I am going to be here for you with this baby. I admit the news was not what I expected at this time of my life. But I’ve gotten used to the idea. I know it’s what you’ve always wanted, and I want it for you.”

Despite having her seatback upright, Raylie can’t seem to focus her eyes. The sensation isn’t unpleasant. It’s like sinking softly to the bottom of a swimming pool and watching all the surface activity from a depth. She feels warm and safe there under the water. Has it only been that morning since her life went to hell?

“I feel like I’m going to pass out, Stu.”

“Should I pull over? Raylie, stay with me. You need to stay with me.” He reaches toward her.

“I’m so sleepy, Stu. Just a few minutes.”

“Listen to me.” His tone is urgent, demanded something of her. “Did I ever tell you about the time I visited Gettysburg? I was about thirteen and for our summer vacation we took a tour of Civil War sites. We spent the entire day there. We watched a reenactment of the battle, with volunteers dressed as Union and Confederate soldiers. Can you picture it, Raylie, with their replica muskets and bayonets? I felt like I was seeing the real thing.”

She whispers without opening her eyes. “I feel like one of your seventh graders.”

“I’ll never forget it. At sunset we climbed the observation tower to take in the entire battlefield.”

Raylie groans softly, a low moan that goes on and on.

“Ray, are you listening to me?”

“Everything hurts.”

“We’ll be there soon. Come on. Stay with me. Anyway, what I remember about Gettysburg isn’t the battle reenactment, as amazing as that was. What I remember is the land itself. Beyond the memorials, the museum, the rustic boundary fences, there was the land. As far as I could see, the fields had reclaimed themselves. Scars from the battle had been absorbed by the earth as if giving the land a second chance to be what it was meant to be. It had healed itself. Raylie?”

When she manages a nod, Stu hurries on, a new insistence to his voice, like he can keep her awake by sheer will. “Maybe that’s what I didn’t understand when you told me about the baby. I didn’t understand that you were being given this second chance to be what you were meant to be.”

By the time they get to the hospital the dogging rain is coming down in angry sheets. Stu parks at the emergency entrance. When he can't rouse Raylie, he runs inside. Orderlies rush her in on a gurney.

"We have to do surgery right away," the doctor tells Stu. "Your wife's blood pressure is dropping. That's why she won't wake up."

They rush her down the hall, leaving Stu in the waiting room. He has never felt so alone.

The surgery goes well.

"You got here just in time," the doctor says later.

"It seems criminal that we had to come all this way. She could have died."

The doctor pauses before speaking, as if wrestling with some internal conflict. "You're not the first couple to be sent here. There are doctors from several states with laws similar to yours sending patients to places like ours in secret. Dr. Lindy did a brave thing." He pats Stu on the shoulder.

The next day, Raylie is awake but sedated. Stu tells her what the doctor said, how Dr. Lindy risked her career to send them there. "I didn't realize," he says.

Raylie reaches to hold his arm. "It's like the Underground Railroad, Stu. What we went through was kind of like that, wasn't it? History repeating itself."

"I guess it was."

She pats the bed for him to sit next to her. "I'll be glad to go home. I hope the plants are okay."

Stu laughs out loud for the first time in a long time. "Not a doubt in my mind. You taught them how to survive." •