MAILE MELOY BOTH WAYS IS THE ONLY WAY I WANTIT



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When kids weren't supposed to get polio anymore. In Logan, they still did, and he had it before he was two. He recovered, but his right hip never fit in the socket, and his mother always thought he would die young.

When he was fourteen, he started riding spoiled and unbroke horses, to prove to her that he was invincible. They bucked and kicked and piled up on him, again and again. He developed a theory that horses didn't kick or shy because they were wild; they kicked and shied because for millions of years they'd had the instinct to move fast or be lion meat.

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"You mean because they're wild," his father had said when Chet advanced this theory.

He couldn't explain, but he thought his father was wrong. He thought there was a difference, and that what people meant when they called a thing "wild" was not what he saw in the green horses at all.

He was small and wiry, but his hip made it hard for him to scramble out from under the horses, and he broke his right kneecap, his right foot, and his left femur before he was eighteen. His father drove him to Great Falls, where the doctors put a steel rod in his good leg from hip to knee. From then on, he walked as though he were turning to himself to ask a question.

His size came from his mother, who was three-quarters Cheyenne; his father was Irish and bullheaded. They had vague dreams of improvement for their sons, but no ideas about how to achieve them. His older brother joined the army. Watching him board an eastbound train, handsome and straight-limbed in his uniform, Chet wondered why God or fate had so favored his brother. Why had the cards been so unevenly dealt?

He left home at twenty and moved up north to the highline. He got a job outside Havre feeding cows through the winter, while the rancher's family lived in town and the kids were in school. Whenever the roads were clear, he rode to the nearest neighbors' for a game of pinochle, but mostly he was snowed in and alone. He had plenty of food, and good TV reception. He had some girlie magazines that he got to know better than he'd ever known an actual person. He spent his twenty-first birthday wearing long johns under two flannel shirts and his winter coat, warming up soup on the stove. He got afraid of himself that winter; he sensed something dangerous that would break free if he kept so much alone.

In the spring, he got a job in Billings, in an office with friendly secretaries and coffee breaks spent talking about rodeos and sports. They liked him there, and offered to send him to the main office in Chicago. He went home to his rented room and walked around on his stiff hip, and guessed he'd be stove up in a wheelchair in three years if he kept sitting around an office. He quit the job and bucked bales all summer, for hardly any money, and the pain went out of his hip, unless he stepped wrong.

That winter, he took another feeding job, outside Glendive, on the North Dakota border. He thought if he went east instead of north, there might not be so much snow. He lived in an insulated room built into the barn, with a TV, a couch, a hot plate, and an icebox, and he fed the cows with a team and sled. He bought some new magazines, in which the girls were strangers to him, and he watched *Starsky and Hutch* and the local news. At night, he could hear the horses moving in their stalls. But he'd been wrong about the snow; by October it had already started. He made it through Christmas, with packages and letters from his mother, but in

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January he got afraid of himself again. The fear was not particular. It began as a buzzing feeling around his spine, a restlessness without a specific aim.

The rancher had left him a truck, with a headbolt heater on an extension cord, and he warmed it up one night and drove the snowy road into town. The café was open, but he wasn't hungry. The gas pumps stood in an island of bluish light, but the truck's tank was full. He knew no pinochle players here, to help him pass the time. He turned off the main street to loop through town, and he drove by the school. A light was on at a side door and people were leaving their cars in the lot and going inside. He slowed, parked on the street, and watched them. He ran a hand around the steering wheel and tugged at a loose thread on its worn leather grip. Finally he got out of the truck, turned his collar up against the cold, and followed the people inside.

One classroom had its lights on, and the people he had followed were sitting in the too-small desks, saying hello as if they all knew each other. Construction-paper signs and pictures covered the walls, and the cursive alphabet ran along the top of the chalkboard. Most of the people were about his parents' age, though their faces were softer, and they dressed as though they lived in town, in thin shoes and clean bright jackets. He went to the back of the room and took a seat. He left his coat on, a big old sheepskin-lined denim, and he checked his boots to see what he might have dragged in, but they were clean from walking through snow.

"We should have gotten a high school room," one of the men said.

A lady—a girl—stood at the teacher's desk at the front of the room, taking papers from a briefcase. She had curly light-colored hair and wore a gray wool skirt and a blue sweater, and glasses with wire rims. She was thin, and looked tired and nervous. Everyone grew quiet and waited for her to speak.

"I've never done this before," she said. "I'm not sure how to start. Do you want to introduce yourselves?"

"We all know each other," a gray-haired woman said.

"Well, she doesn't," another woman protested.

"You could tell me what you know about school law," the young teacher said.

The adults in the small desks looked at each other. "I don't think we know anything," someone said.

"That's why we're here."

The girl looked helpless for a second and then turned to the chalkboard. Her bottom was a smooth curve in the wool skirt. She wrote "Adult Ed 302" and her name, Beth Travis, and the chalk squeaked on the h and the r. The men and women in the desks flinched.

"If you hold it straight up," an older woman said, demonstrating with a pencil, "with your thumb along the side, it won't do that."

Beth Travis blushed, and changed her grip, and began to talk about state and federal law as it applied to the public school system. Chet found a pencil in his desk and held it

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like the woman had said to hold the chalk. He wondered why no one had ever showed him that in his school days.

The class took notes, and he sat in the back and listened. Beth Travis was a lawyer, it seemed. Chet's father told jokes about lawyers, but the lawyers were never girls. The class was full of teachers, who asked things he'd never thought of, about students' rights and parents' rights. He'd never imagined a student had any rights. His mother had grown up in the mission school in St. Xavier, where the Indian kids were beaten for not speaking English, or for no reason. He'd been luckier. An English teacher had once struck him on the head with a dictionary, and a math teacher had splintered a yard-stick on his desk. But in general they had been no trouble.

Once, Beth Travis seemed about to ask him something, but one of the teachers raised a hand, and he was saved.

At nine o'clock the class was over, and the teachers thanked Miss Travis and said she'd done well. They talked to each other about going someplace for a beer. He felt he should stay and explain himself, so he stayed in his desk. His hip was starting to stiffen from sitting so long.

Miss Travis packed up her briefcase and put on her puffy red coat, which made her look like a balloon. "Are you staying?" she asked.

"No, ma'am." He levered himself out from behind the desk.

"Are you registered for the class?"

"No, ma'am. I just saw people coming in."

"Are you interested in school law?"

He thought about how to answer that. "I wasn't before tonight."

She looked at her watch, which was thin and gold-colored. "Is there somewhere to get food?" she asked. "I have to drive back to Missoula."

The interstate ran straight across Montana, from the edge of North Dakota, where they were, west through Billings and Bozeman and past Logan, where he had grown up, over the mountains to Missoula, near the Idaho border. "That's an awful long drive," he said.

She shook her head, not in disagreement but in amazement. "I took this job before I finished law school," she said. "I wanted any job, I was so afraid of my loans coming due. I didn't know where Glendive was. It looks like Belgrade, the word does I mean, which is closer to Missoula—I must have gotten them confused. Then I got a real job, and they're letting me do this because they think it's funny. But it took me nine and a half hours to get here. And now I have to drive nine and a half hours back, and I have to work in the morning. I've never done anything so stupid in my life."

"I can show you where the café is," he said.

She looked like she was wondering whether to fear him, and then she nodded. "Okay," she said.

In the parking lot, he was self-conscious about his gait, but she didn't seem to notice. She got into a yellow Datsun and followed his truck to the café on the main drag. He

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guessed she could have found it herself, but he wanted more time with her. He went in and sat opposite her in a booth. She ordered coffee and a turkey sandwich and a brownie sundae, and asked the waitress to bring it all at once. He didn't want anything. The waitress left, and Beth Travis took off her glasses and set them on the table. She rubbed her eyes until they were red.

"Did you grow up here?" she asked. "Do you know those teachers?"

"No, ma'am."

She put her glasses back on. "I'm only twenty-five," she said. "Don't call me that."

He didn't say anything. She was three years older than he was. Her hair in the overhead light was the color of honey. She wasn't wearing any rings.

"Did you tell me how you ended up in that class?" she asked.

"I just saw people going in."

She studied him and seemed to wonder again if she should be afraid. But the room was bright, and he tried to look harmless. He was harmless, he was pretty sure. Being with someone helped—he didn't feel so wound up and restless.

"Did I make a fool of myself?" she asked.

"No."

"Are you going to come back?"

"When's it next?"

"Thursday," she said. "Every Tuesday and Thursday for nine weeks. Oh, God." She put her hands over her eyes again. "What have I done?"

He tried to think how he could help her. He had to stay with the cows, and driving to pick her up in Missoula didn't make any sense. It was so far away, and they'd just have to drive back again.

"I'm not signed up," he finally said.

She shrugged. "They're not going to check."

Her food came, and she started on the sandwich.

"I don't even know school law," she said. "I'll have to learn enough to teach every time." She wiped a spot of mustard from her chin. "Where do you work?"

"Out on the Hayden ranch, feeding cattle. It's just a winter job."

"Do you want the other half of this sandwich?"

He shook his head, and she pushed the plate aside and took a bite of the melting sundae.

"I'd show you if you could stay longer," he said.

"Show me what?"

"The ranch," he said. "The cows."

"I have to get back," she said. "I have to work in the morning."

"Sure," he said.

She checked her watch. "Jesus, it's quarter to ten." She took a few quick bites of sundae and finished her coffee. "I have to go."

He watched as the low lights of the Datsun disappeared out of town, then he drove home in the other direction. Thursday was not very far from Tuesday, and it was almost Wednesday now. He was suddenly starving, when sitting across from her he hadn't been hungry. He wished he'd taken the other half of the sandwich, but he had been too shy.

THURSDAY NIGHT, he was at the school before anyone else, and he waited in the truck, watching. One of the teachers showed up with a key, unlocked the side door, and turned on the light. When more people had arrived, Chet went to his seat in the back of the classroom. Beth Travis came in looking tired, took off her coat, and pulled a sheaf of paper from her briefcase. She was wearing a green sweater with a turtleneck collar, jeans, and black snow boots. She walked around with the handouts and nodded to him. She looked good in jeans. "KEY SUPREME COURT DECISIONS AFFECTING SCHOOL LAW," the handout said across the top.

The class started, and hands went up to ask questions. He sat in the back and watched, and tried to imagine his old teachers here, but he couldn't. A man not much older than Chet asked about salary increases, and Beth Travis said she wasn't a labor organizer, but he should talk to the union. The older women in the class laughed and teased the man about rabble-rousing. At nine o'clock the class left for beers, and he was alone again with Beth Travis.

"I have to lock up," she said.

He had assumed, for forty-eight hours, that he would go to dinner with her, but now he didn't know how to make that happen. He had never asked any girl anywhere. There had been girls in high school who had felt sorry for him, but he had been too shy or too proud to take advantage of it. He stood there for an awkward moment.

"Are you going to the café?" he finally asked.

"For about five minutes," she said.

In the cafe, she asked the waitress for the fastest thing on the menu. The waitress brought her a bowl of soup with bread, coffee to go, and the check.

When the waitress left, she said, "I don't even know your name."

"Chet Moran."

She nodded, as if that were the right answer. "Do you know anyone in town who could teach this class?"

"I don't know anyone at all."

"Can I ask what happened to your leg?"

He was surprised by the question, but he thought she could ask him just about anything. He told her the simplest version: the polio, the horses, the broken bones.

"And you still ride?"

He said that if he didn't ride, he'd end up in a wheelchair or a loony bin or both.

She nodded, as if that were the right answer, too, and looked out the window at the dark street. "I was so afraid I'd finish law school and be selling shoes," she said. "I'm

sorry to keep talking about it. All I can think about is that drive."

THAT WEEKEND was the longest one he'd had. He fed the cows and cleaned the tack for the team. He curried the horses until they gleamed and stamped, watching him, suspicious of what he intended.

Inside, he sat on the couch, flipped through the channels, and finally turned the TV off. He wondered how he might court a girl who was older, and a lawyer, a girl who lived clear across the state and couldn't think about anything but that distance. He felt a strange sensation in his chest, but it wasn't the restlessness he had felt before.

On Tuesday, he saddled one of the horses and rode it into town, leaving the truck. There was a chinook wind, and the night was warm, for January, and the sky clear. The plains spread out dark and flat in every direction, except where the lights glowed from town. He watched the stars as he rode.

At the school, he tethered the horse to the bike rack, out of sight of the side door and the lot where the teachers would park. He took the fat plastic bag of oats from his jacket pocket and held it open. The horse sniffed at it, then worked the oats out of the bag with his lips.

"That's all I got," he said, shoving the empty plastic bag back in his pocket.

The horse lifted its head to sniff at the strange town smells.

"Don't get yourself stolen," Chet said.

When half the teachers had arrived, he went in and took his seat. Everyone sat in the same seat as they had the week before. They talked about the chinook and whether it would melt the snow. Finally Beth Travis came in, with her puffy coat and her briefcase. He was even happier to see her than he had expected, and she was wearing jeans again, which was good. He'd been afraid she might wear the narrow wool skirt. She looked harassed and unhappy to be there. The teachers chattered on.

When the class was over and the teachers had cleared out, he asked, "Can I give you a ride to the café?"

"Oh—" she said, and she looked away.

"Not in the truck," he said quickly, and he wondered why a truck might seem more dangerous to a woman. He guessed because it was like a room. "Come outside," he said.

She waited in the parking lot while he untied the horse and mounted up. He rode it around from the bike rack—aware that he could seem like a fool, but elated with the feeling of sitting a horse as well as anyone did—to where Beth Travis stood hugging her briefcase.

"Oh, my God," she said.

"Don't think about it," he said. "Give me your briefcase. Now give me your hand. Left foot in the stirrup. Now swing the other leg over." She did it, awkwardly, and he pulled her up behind him. He held her briefcase against the pommel, and she held tightly to his jacket, her legs against his. He

couldn't think of anything except how warm she was, pressed against the base of his spine. He rode the back way, through the dark streets, before cutting out toward the main drag and stopping short of it, behind the café. He helped her down, swung to the ground after her, gave her the briefcase, and tied the horse. She looked at him and laughed, and he realized he hadn't seen her laugh before. Her eyebrows went up and her eyes got wide, instead of crinkling up like most people's did. She looked amazed.

In the café, the waitress slid a burger and fries in front of Beth Travis and said, "The cook wants to know if that's your horse out back."

Chet said it was.

"Can he give it some water?"

He said he'd appreciate it.

"Truck break down?" the waitress asked.

He said no, his truck was all right, and the waitress went away.

Beth Travis turned the long end of the oval plate in his direction, and took up the burger. "Have some fries," she said. "How come you never eat anything?"

He wanted to say that he wasn't hungry when he was around her, but he feared the look on her face if he said it, the way she would shy away.

"Why were you afraid of selling shoes?" he asked.

"Have you ever sold shoes? It's hell."

"I mean, why were you afraid you couldn't get anything else?"

She looked at the burger as if the answer was in there. Her eyes were almost the same color as her hair, and ringed with pale lashes. He wondered if she thought of him as an Indian boy, with his mother's dark hair. "I don't know," she said. "Yes, I do know. Because my mother works in a school cafeteria, and my sister works in a hospital laundry, and selling shoes is the nicest job a girl from my family is supposed to get."

"What about your father?"

"I don't know him."

"That's a sad story."

"No, it's not," she said. "It's a happy story. I'm a lawyer, see, with a wonderful job driving to fucking Glendive every fifteen minutes until I lose my mind." She put down the burger and pressed the backs of her hands into her eyes. Her fingers were greasy and one had ketchup on it. She took her hands away from her face and looked at her watch. "It's ten o'clock," she said. "I won't get home before seven-thirty in the morning. There are deer on the road, and there's black ice outside of Three Forks along the river. If I make it past there, I get to take a shower and go to work at eight, and do all the crap no one else wants to do. Then learn more school law tomorrow night, then leave work the next day before lunch and drive back here with my eyes twitching. It's better than a hospital laundry, maybe, but it's not a whole fucking lot better."

"I'm from near Three Forks," he said.

"So you know the ice."

He nodded.

She dipped her napkin in her water glass and washed off her fingers, then finished her coffee. "It was nice of you, to bring the horse," she said. "Will you take me back to my car?"

Outside, he swung her up onto the horse again, and she put her arms around his waist. She seemed to fit to his body like a puzzle piece. He rode slowly back to the school parking lot, not wanting to let her go. Next to the yellow Datsun, he held her hand tight while she climbed down, and then he dismounted, too. She tugged her puffy coat where it had ridden up from sliding off the horse, and they stood looking at each other.

"Thank you," she said.

He nodded. He wanted to kiss her but couldn't see any clear path to that happening. He wished he had practiced, with the high school girls or the friendly secretaries, just to be ready for this moment.

She started to say something, but in his nervousness he cut her off. "See you Thursday," he said.

She paused before nodding, and he took this for encouragement. He caught up her hand again and kissed it, because he had wanted to do that, and it was soft and cold. Then he leaned over and kissed her cheek, because he had wanted to do that, too. She didn't move, not an inch, and he was about to kiss her for real when she seemed to snap out of a trance, and stepped away from him. She took her hand back. "I have

to go," she said, and she went around to the driver's side of the Datsun.

He held the horse while she drove out of the parking lot, and he kicked at the snow. The horse sidestepped away. He felt like jumping up and down, in excitement and anxiety and anguish. He had run her off. He shouldn't have kissed her. He should have kissed her more. He should have let her say what she wanted to say. He mounted up and rode home.

THURSDAY NIGHT he drove the truck in, no cowboy antics; he was on a serious mission. He was going to answer her questions honestly, such as the one about why he didn't eat. He was going to let her say the things she intended to say. He didn't wait for the crowd to arrive before going into the classroom; he went in early and took his seat in the back. The class filled up, and then a tall man in a gray suit with a bowling-ball gut came in and stood behind the teacher's desk.

"Miss Travis," he said, "found the drive from Missoula too arduous, so I will take over the class for the rest of the term. I practice law here in town. As some of you know, and the rest of you would find out soon enough, I'm recently divorced and have some time on my hands. That's why I'm here."

While the man talked on, Chet got up from his seat and

made his way up the aisle to the door. Outside he stood breathing the cold air into his lungs. He let the lights of town swim in his eyes until he blinked them clear again and climbed into the rancher's truck. He gave it enough gas so the engine wouldn't quit, and it coughed and steadied itself and ran.

He knew Beth Travis lived in Missoula, six hundred miles west, over the mountains, but he didn't know where. He didn't know where she worked, or if she was listed in the phone book. He didn't know if it was he who had scared her off or the drive. He didn't know if the truck would make it all that way, or what the rancher would do when he found out he'd gone.

But he put the truck in gear and pulled out of town in the direction he had three times watched the yellow Datsun go. The road was flat and straight and seemed to roll underneath the truck, dark and silent, through a dark and silent expanse of snow-covered land. He stopped outside of Miles City, and again outside of Billings, to hobble around on his stiffened-up leg until he could drive again. Near Big Timber, the plains ended and the mountains began, black shapes rising up against the stars. He stopped in Bozeman for coffee and gas, and drove the white line on the empty road past Three Forks and Logan, to stay out of the ice that spread from the shoulder in black sheets. Somewhere off to his right in the dark, his parents were sleeping.

It was still dark when he reached Missoula, and he stopped

at a gas station and looked up "Travis" in the phone book. There was a "Travis, B." with a phone number, but no address. He wrote down the number, but didn't call it. He asked the kid at the cash register where the law offices were in town, and the kid shrugged and said, "Maybe downtown."

"Where's that?"

The kid stared at him. "It's downtown," he said, and he pointed off to his left.

Downtown, Chet found himself in dawn light among shops and old brick buildings and one-way streets. He parked and got out to stretch his hip. The mountains were so close they made him feel claustrophobic. When he found a carved wooden sign saying "Attorneys at Law," he asked the secretary who came to open the office if she knew a lawyer named Beth Travis.

The secretary looked at his twisted leg, his boots, and his coat and shook her head.

In the next law office, the secretary was friendlier. She called the law school and asked where Beth Travis had gone to work, then cupped her hand over the receiver. "She took a teaching job in Glendive."

"She has another job, too. Here."

The secretary relayed this information on the phone, then wrote something down on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Down by the old railroad depot," she said, pointing toward the window with her pencil.

He pulled up at the address on the piece of paper at eight-thirty, just as Beth Travis's yellow Datsun pulled into the same parking lot. He got out of the truck, feeling jittery. She was rummaging in her briefcase and didn't see him right away. Then she looked up. She looked at the truck behind him, then back at him again.

"I drove over," he said.

"I thought I was in the wrong place," she said. She let the briefcase hang at her side. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see you."

She nodded, slowly. He stood as straight as he could. She lived in another world from him. You could fly to Hawaii or France in less time than it took to do that drive. Her world had lawyers, downtowns, and mountains in it. His world had horses that woke hungry, and cows waiting in the snow, and it was going to be ten hours before he could get back to get them fed.

"I was sorry you stopped teaching the class," he said. "I looked forward to it, those nights."

"It wasn't because—" she said. "I meant to tell you on Tuesday. I'd already asked for a replacement, because of the drive. They found one yesterday."

"Okay," he said. "That drive is pretty bad."

"You see?"

A man in a dark suit got out of a silver car and looked over at them, sizing Chet up. Beth Travis waved and smiled. The man nodded, looked at Chet again, and went into the building; the door closed. Chet suddenly wished that she *had* quit teaching the class because of him, that he'd had any effect on her at all. He shifted his weight. She pushed her hair back and he thought he could step forward and touch her hand, touch the back of her neck where the hair grew darker. Instead he shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. She seemed to scan the parking lot before looking at him again.

"I don't mean any harm," he said.

"Okay."

"I have to go feed now," he said. "I just knew that if I didn't start driving, I wasn't going to see you again, and I didn't want that. That's all."

She nodded. He stood there waiting, thinking she might say something, meet him halfway. He wanted to hear her voice again. He wanted to touch her, any part of her, just her arms maybe, just her waist. She stood out of reach, waiting for him to go.

Finally he climbed up into the truck and started the engine. She was still watching him from the parking lot as he drove away, and he got on the freeway and left town. For the first half hour he gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white, and glared at the road as the truck swallowed it up. Then he was too tired to be angry, and his eyes started to close and jerk open. He nearly drove off the road. In Butte he bought a cup of black coffee, and drank it standing next to the truck. He wished he hadn't seen her right away, in the parking lot. He wished he'd had a minute

to prepare. He crushed the paper coffee cup and threw it away.

As he drove past Logan, he thought about stopping, but he didn't need to. He knew what his parents would say. His mother would worry about his health, driving all night, her sickly son, risking his life. "You don't even know this white girl," she'd say. His father would say, "Jesus, Chet, you left the horses without water all day?"

Back at the Hayden place, he fed and watered the horses, and they seemed all right. None of them had kicked through their stalls. He rigged them up in the harness, and loaded the sled with hay, and they dragged it out of the barn. He cut the orange twine on each bale with a knife and pitched the hay off the sled for the cows. The horses trudged uncomplainingly, and he thought about the skittery two-year-olds who'd kicked him everywhere there was to kick, when he was fourteen. The ache in his stomach felt like that. But he hadn't been treated unfairly by Beth Travis; he didn't know what he had expected. If she had asked him to stay, he would have had to leave anyway. It was the finality of the conversation, and the protective look the man in the dark suit had given her, that left him feeling sore and bruised.

In the barn, he talked to the horses, and kept close to their hind legs when he moved behind them. They were sensible horses, immune to surprise, but he had left them without water all day. He gave them each another coffee canful of grain, which slid yellow over itself into their buckets. He walked back outside, into the dark, and looked out over the flat stretch of land beyond the fences. The moon was up, and the fields were shadowy blue, dotted with cows. His hip was stiff and sore. He had to pee, and he walked away from the barn and watched the small steaming crater form in the snow. He wondered if maybe he had planted a seed, with Beth Travis, by demonstrating his seriousness to her. She wouldn't come back—it was impossible to imagine her doing that drive again, for any reason. But she knew where he was. She was a lawyer. She could find him if she wanted.

But she wouldn't. That was the thing that made him ache. He buttoned his jeans and shifted his hip. He had wanted practice, with girls, and now he had gotten it, but he wished it had felt more like practice. It was getting colder, and he would have to go inside soon. He fished her phone number out of his pocket and studied it a while in the moonlight, until he knew it by heart, and wouldn't forget it. Then he did what he knew he should do, and rolled it into a ball, and threw it away.