

Media Kit
How to Be a Man
by Tamara Linse

This media kit includes the following:

- a press release
- information about the book
- author bio and contact info
- Q&A with the author
- letter to the reader
- excerpt

Attached with this package are high-resolution photos of the book cover and author.

Press Release

Contact: Tamara Linse
Cell Phone: 307.761.6865
Email: tamara@tamaralinse.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Local Author Announces Wyoming Story Collection

This week, local author Tamara Linse announced the release of her short story collection titled *How to Be a Man*.

“This collection has been 15 years in the making,” Linse says. “The genre of the Western hangs heavy over Wyoming, and these stories are about the legacy of that ideal.”

Set in Wyoming, *How to Be a Man* contains stories of tough-minded girls and boys and self-reliant women and men who struggle to break out of their lonely lives and the emotional havoc of their families to build a life despite the odds. The collection is similar to the works of Maile Meloy, Tom McGuane, and Annie Proulx.

In the title story, a ranch girl in a family of boys tries to find a sense of self-worth by rejecting her gender. Will she be able to find love if she cannot accept who she is? The protagonist in “Men Are Like Plants” has a similar dilemma—although she’s sassy, she’s so afraid of intimacy she hides behind her love of plants. The bartender in “A Dangerous Shine” is comfortable at the bar—“like sitting on a gargantuan comfy couch with all your cousins”—but when a man she likes is brutally attacked, her sense of safety is shattered. Other characters include a young sister and brother left alone to fill their empty bellies, a young man who shoots his cranked out father, an engineer who struggles with his job, a girl estranged from her own body, and more hard-scrabble characters who are doing their best despite the odds.

The collection is available in paperback and ebook through Amazon, Smashwords, and other online retailers.

About Tamara Linse. Tamara Linse—writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl—broke her collarbone when she was three, her leg when she was four, a horse when she was twelve, and her heart ever since. Raised on a ranch in northern Wyoming, she earned her master’s in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an *Arts & Letters* and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a

freelancer. Find her online at www.tamaralinse.com and tamara-linse.blogspot.com.

#

If you'd like more information or to schedule an interview, contact Tamara Linse at 307.761.6865 or via email at tamara@tamaralinse.com.

Book Information

Genre

literary short story collection

Keywords

literary fiction, short story collection, contemporary American West, women's fiction, book club fiction, coming of age, rural, Wyoming

Logline

In the American West, self-reliant women and men struggle to break out of their lonely lives and the emotional havoc of their families to build a life despite the odds. In the tradition of Maile Meloy, Tom McGuane, and Annie Proulx.

ISBN

Print

ISBN: 0991386701

ISBN-13: 978-0-9913867-0-3

Epub

ISBN: 099138671X

ISBN-13: 978-0-9913867-1-0

Ebook ASIN

B00HKSLFSQ

Page Count

238

Publisher

Willow Words

www.willowwords.com

Publication Date

December 31, 2013

Synopsis

“Never acknowledge the fact that you’re a girl, and take pride when your guy friends say, ‘You’re one of the guys.’ Tell yourself, ‘I am one of the guys,’ even though, in the back of your mind, a little voice says, ‘But you’ve got girl parts.’” – Birdie, in “How to Be a Man”

A girl whose self-worth revolves around masculinity, a bartender who loses her sense of safety, a woman who compares men to plants, and a boy who shoots his cranked-out father. These are

a few of the hard-scrabble characters in Tamara Linse's debut short story collection, *How to Be a Man*. Set in contemporary Wyoming—the myth of the West taking its toll—these stories reveal the lives of tough-minded girls and boys, self-reliant women and men, struggling to break out of their lonely lives and the emotional havoc of their families to make a connection, to build a life despite the odds. *How to Be a Man* falls within the traditions of Maile Meloy, Tom McGuane, and Annie Proulx.

The author Tamara Linse—writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl—broke her collarbone when she was three, her leg when she was four, a horse when she was twelve, and her heart ever since. Raised on a ranch in northern Wyoming, she earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an Arts & Letters and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at tamaralinse.com and tamara-linse.blogspot.com.

Author Bio

Contact

tamara@tamaralinse.com

307.761.6865

4312 Kerry Lynne Lane

Laramie, WY 82070

www.tamaralinse.com

Agent

Rachel Stout

Dystel & Goderich Literary Management

rstout@dystel.com

One Union Square West, Suite 904

New York, NY 10003

Phone: 212.627.9100

Fax: 212.627.9313

www.dystel.com

Links

www.tamaralinse.com

tamara-linse.blogspot.com

[@tamaralinse](https://twitter.com/tamaralinse)

fb.com/tlinse

Highlights

- Born in 1969 and grew up on the Tillett Ranch north of Lovell, Wyoming.
- Graduated from Lovell High School in 1987.
- Earned a bachelor's (with honors, 2000) and master's (2002) in English from the University of Wyoming. Thesis on 1852–54 Overland Trail diaries, which received an Outstanding Thesis Award. Taught freshman composition and science and technical writing.
- Waitressed in high school and bartended and waitressed to put herself college.
- Worked for 16 years as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm (TRC Mariah Associates Inc.), as well as a freelance journalist, editor, and writer.
- Currently works as an editor for a foundation (the University of Wyoming Foundation) for 5 years.
- Married with 7-year-old twins (a boy and a girl).
- A semifinalist for the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize, a finalist for the *Glimmer Train* Short-Story Award for New Writers and the *Arts & Letters* Fiction Prize, and an honorable mention for the Neltje Blanches Award, among others.
- Published stories in the *South Dakota Review*, *New West*, *Talking River*, the *Georgetown Review*, and others.

Short Bio

Tamara Linse—writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl—broke her collarbone when she was three, her leg when she was four, a horse when she was twelve, and her heart ever since. Raised on a ranch in northern Wyoming, she earned her master's in English from the University of Wyoming, where she taught writing. Her work appears in the *Georgetown Review*, *South Dakota Review*, and *Talking River*, among others, and she was a finalist for an Arts & Letters and *Glimmer Train* contests, as well as the Black Lawrence Press Hudson Prize for a book of short stories. She works as an editor for a foundation and a freelancer. Find her online at tamaralinse.com and tamara-linse.blogspot.com.

Long Bio

Tamara Linse grew up on a ranch in northern Wyoming with her farmer/rancher rock-hound ex-GI father, her artistic musician mother from small-town middle America, and her four sisters and two brothers. She jokes that she was raised in the 1880s because they did things old-style—she learned how to bake bread, break horses, irrigate, change tires, and be alone, skills she's been thankful for ever since. The ranch was a partnership between her father and her uncle, and in the 80s and 90s the two families had a Hatfields and McCoys-style feud.

She worked her way through the University of Wyoming as a bartender, waitress, and editor. At UW, she was officially in almost every college on campus until she settled on English and after 15 years earned her bachelor's and master's in English. While there, she taught writing, including a course called Literature and the Land, where students read Wordsworth and Donner Party diaries during the week and hiked in the mountains on weekends. She also worked as a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm.

She still lives in Laramie, Wyoming, with her husband Steve and their twin son and daughter. She writes fiction around her job as an editor for a foundation. She is also a photographer, and when she can she posts a photo a day for a Project 365. Please stop by Tamara's website, www.tamaralinse.com, and her blog, Writer, Cogitator, Recovering Ranch Girl, at tamara-linse.blogspot.com. You can find an extended bio there with lots of juicy details. Also friend her on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/tamaralinse) and follow her on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/tamaralinse), and if you see her in person, please say hi.

Other Details

An even more-detailed bio is also available at http://www.tamaralinse.com/bio_bio.html.

Q&A

How do you pronounce your name?

tuh-MARE-uh LIN-zee. Don't worry—hardly anyone gets it right the first time.

What does “writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl” mean?

The real reason I tagged myself “writer, cogitator, recovering ranch girl” was that I needed a tagline for my blog, something that helped me to stand out. “Writer” was obvious. I love old-timey words, and I had been finishing up a historical novel at the time, and so “cogitator” popped into my mind. I have friends who are “recovering alcoholics” (and “recovering Catholics”) and I thought that that fit me well—the idea that my childhood was something I needed to recover from. As Maile Meloy wrote in her story “Ranch Girl,” you can't have much worse luck than being born a girl on a ranch.

Why is it bad luck to be born a girl on a ranch?

Western culture is a very male culture. A lot of women I know, myself included, saw that phenomenon growing up and the only way they could see to have self-worth is to be a man, hence the title of the collection. A lot of women in the West wear men's clothing and drink beer and hunt and watch football and generally be as masculine as they can be. They shun everything feminine, and they have no women friends—heaven forbid. They think of themselves as this third thing, this third gender. Not a woman definitely, and they can't be men, so they think of themselves as genderless almost. It's very destructive to the psyche.

Who did you read as a child?

I loved all things British—Pooh and *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Secret Garden*. I also loved Joan Aiken and Frank L. Baum. I was glad to go from grade school to middle school because I'd exhausted the library. In middle school, I discovered the [Newberry Award](#) books. Later, I read a lot of westerns and loved them, particularly Louis L'Amour. He doesn't stand the test of time well, though. I went through a scifi/specific phase as a teenager and still have a fondness for it. I haven't read much romance or mystery, and I'm not quite sure why.

Who are your favorite writers?

My favorite writers. Well, it often feels like the writer of the last book I read because I fall in love almost every time. But I'll take a run at it.

- My all-time favorites are Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf.
- For novels, Douglas Adams, Julian Barnes, Michael Cunningham, E. L. Doctorow, William Faulkner, Charles Frasier, James Galvin, Kent Haruf, John Irving, Stephen King, Barbara Kingsolver, Cormac McCarthy, Ann Patchett, Jodi Picoult, Terry

Pratchett, Anne Rice, J. K. Rowling, Anita Shreve, and Alexander McCall Smith.

- For short stories, Sherman Alexie, T. C. Boyle, Raymond Carver, Charles D'Ambrosio, Anthony Doerr, Aryn Kyle, Dennis Lehane, Maile Meloy, Alice Munro, Antonia Nelson, Tim O'Brien, Benjamin Percy, Donald Ray Pollock, Annie Proulx, Karen Russell, Jim Shepard, and Tobias Wolff.
- For nonfiction, Steve Almond, Judy Blunt, Augusten Burroughs, John D'Agata, James Herriot, and Mary Roach.
- There are a number of writers that I really want to like and I have their books but I haven't gotten around to reading them.

See what I mean? And this isn't all of them.

What's the earliest memory you have of writing a story? When did you first call yourself a writer?

I've always written. The first story I wrote a beginning, middle, and end to was called "The Silver Locket" and was the story of a girl who goes back in time to become her own great grandmother. It was inspired by a friend named Cami who was into a British YA mystery writer named Joan Aiken. Together we read everything of hers. Cami wrote a story that ended with a head rolling in a gutter. Prior to that, I had read all the time, but I hadn't realized that a person could actually BE a writer. When I called myself a writer is a totally different story. I think I was 30. I wrote all of my life, but no one I knew was a writer, and I thought of writers as someone who published a novel, and so when I began to imagine I might just be published is when I tentatively played around with the idea of calling myself one.

Why do you write?

That's a complicated question. Because it's my passion. Because as a child I felt I had no voice. Because I love to read, and writing is like reading only better. Because I have to stay sane—just ask my husband. Because I'm fascinated by people, and writing and reading is the closest you can get to another person's consciousness. But a deeper reason is that writing is all about desire. All people everywhere live in a constant state of desire. It is truly a human condition. Whether it's something as small as a snack or something materialistic or something as large as a mate for life, people want. People need. One reason that we are such good consumers and why advertising works so well is because we by our very nature have this endless hole within us that needs to be filled. Every religion is built on this. So, this is my deeper answer to why I write: Because I'm human. Because I desire. It's a way to take the world into myself and to make it part of me. It's a way to place myself into the world. It's a way to connect with the world and with other people and to imagine for one small moment that we are not alone and that we have the capacity to be full and content and meaningful.

Where do you get your ideas?

That's the wrong question. It should be: How do you recognize an idea when you see one?

Ideas are all around you. Everything and anything can spark a story. Say, someone told you to write about walls. [Thomas King](#), who's Native American, was given 24 hours' notice to write about walls, and he came up with a humdinger. (Sorry—I don't remember the name of it!) It's about a man wanting his walls painted white but the history of walls bleeds through, and then finally, when he has them torn out and new walls put in, the stark white walls makes him look brown. Virginia Woolf wrote a story about a blob on her bedroom wall, which turns out to be a snail or a slug, I think, but it's a great story. I'm sure there are more stories about walls. It's about what you put into the idea, what lights you up and interests you, and it can be as specific as something that happened to you as a child or as general as wanting to write about the color green. I also find that when my head is in my writing—in other words, I'm not blocked and avoiding—ideas come so fast and thick I can't keep up. Everything sparks an idea for a story. Then it's a problem of way too many ideas and feeling guilty about lost opportunity.

What is your writing process? What is your least favorite part? Your most favorite part?

I avoid. I feel awful. I inevitably read things and feel inspired, but still I avoid. Then I make myself sit at the computer and start. It's hard, really really hard. But then something magical happens. The real world goes away and the world I'm creating becomes more real than the real world. It's like the real world is in black and white, and the world I'm creating is in technicolor. Sure, sometimes it still comes slowly and painfully, but sometimes it comes like lightening from my brain. And then I'm in love. When I finish a story, revised and all, I'm in love with it. I can't see its flaws. I want to take it to dinner and then make out with it in the back seat. Then, like all affairs, after a while I start to see the story's strengths and weaknesses. Then I either revise some more or I write a new story or both. My least favorite part is the avoiding stage, and my most favorite part is when the writing is going well and the world I'm writing is more real than the real world.

Are the stories based on your life?

Of course. I always find it fascinating that the first question a fiction writer gets is how close the writing is to her and his life, and the first question a nonfiction writer gets is pointing out all her and his mistakes—or lies. Human nature, I suppose. We need labels to know how to understand something. About the stories—of course the stories are based on my life. I can only write what I know or I imagine. However, they're probably not based on my life in the way you might think. I'm going for the truth of the situation, of the feelings, what seems the most honest and clear and human, rather than the color of the sofa. And that's the thing I've always loved about fiction—it can be more true than nonfiction. I remember as a teenager devouring novels because they expressed the complexities of life so much better and more fully than “factual” writing. That way, I found out I was not alone, that I was part of the human race.

Is Birdie in “How to Be a Man” transgendered?

No. (Not that there's anything wrong with that.) See my answer to the question about the

bad luck of being born a girl on a ranch. Western culture is very patriarchal, and sometimes the only way a girl can see to give herself worth is to try to be a man. She doesn't feel inside that she was born in the wrong gender—she just longs to be someone who others value and therefore be able to value herself.

Your stories can be pretty dark. Why don't you write stories with happy endings?

My mom asks me that all the time, as do a couple of my sisters. I fear I was born with a broken funny bone. I find things funny, but they're usually English geek kinds-of-things—Monty Python, Terry Pratchett. The things that most people find funny, I usually find incredibly sad or incredibly angry. One of the reasons why, I think, is because the basis of a lot of humor is stereotyping, reducing someone to one dimension, and my goal in writing is to find the complexity of life, to express lived reality. That's why I'm drawn to the genre of literary. (Not at all to insinuate that the other genres are anything less!) I don't think of my endings as dark—what I often try for is closure without resolution, which is the way life is. There's always a tension when I write between the messiness and meaninglessness of life and the creation of a satisfying piece of art.

How to Be a Man is self-published. Why did you choose that route?

I have to admit that I crave the legitimization that comes from traditional publishing, and that's why I resisted self-publishing for so long. It took me 11 years and almost 200 queries to get an agent. (Read more about [my journey to get an agent here](#).) I've written and rewritten two novels that have gone out to publishers. Though I've gotten some very nice notes from editors, neither was picked up. Some might call me a slow study ~ I call myself pig-headed, and that's a good thing. I don't know if you've been reading much about this, but the squeeze that is being put on traditional publishing by disintermediation has brought about the rise of a new type of author: the hybrid author. (The great Chuck Wendig [has been talking a lot about this](#).) There's no longer just two tracks ~ traditional publishing and self-publishing. The tracks are becoming melded and diversified, and much more of the power is back in the hands of the author. Also much more of the responsibility for getting a book out and connecting with readers. That's where the hybrid author comes in. She or he is someone who, with the help of her agent, chooses the best route for the work at hand and then has to make it so. This is wonderful and terrifying ~ for everyone involved. Also, traditional publishers now consider the success of a self-published title in their decision to take book on. In other words, they will take on a book that's doing well under self-publishing (and I suspect that this will become the norm, rather than the exception). I'm also made for it. It's like all my various backgrounds come together in this one endeavor. Of course the writing part ~ I've been writing and improving my craft my whole life. But then also editing ~ I've been an editor in all different capacities. I've also been an artist and taken art classes for years, not to mention jobs as a document designer. I took classes in electrical engineering and computers for a number of years, and all that experience goes into making a website and working with digital publishing. And I'm in marketing and have done freelance marketing for years, which prepares me to be a promo-sapiens. And I love social media and tend to be a bit of an early adopter. Not to mention I'm a bit obsessive.

What are you reading?

Boy, you ask difficult questions. The thing is, I could honestly say that I'm reading hundreds of books at one time. That's because I tend to "taste" books before I read them from beginning to end. I'll buy a new book and then read it for a half hour or hour before bed. Then I'll put the book aside and not pick it up again for years. Lately, I've been reading the books of my fellow Wyoming writers who are also great friends. Nina McConigley is out with a fabulous book of short stories called [*Cowboys and East Indians*](#). Pembroke Sinclair is out with a YA horror novel called [*The Appeal of Evil*](#). You should check them out.

Do you have an MFA?

No—my master's is in literary studies and my thesis was on 1852-1854 pioneer diaries. I've taken a lot of workshops, however, in the classroom and online and at writers conferences. I highly recommend them. Be it an MFA or a local writers group, any time you can get others to look at your work and give you solid feedback is helpful. Solid feedback does not mean only "oh, you are so wonderful"—but you do need some of this for your ego or you won't have the strength to go on. Neither does it mean brutal comments like "This isn't working" with no further explanation or direction. It means detailed criticism of one reader's reaction to what's working and what's not working—the more detailed and specific and articulate, the better. Still more important, volunteer to read your writer friends' work. You'll learn more from commenting on theirs than you will reading comments on your own. I am thinking about getting a low residency MFA, however, as I'm always trying to improve my writing.

Do you have any advice for aspiring writers?

Read a lot. Write a lot. Write in the style of what you like to read. The best writing often comes from what obsesses you and makes you uncomfortable. Be brave. Persevere. Make a lot of writer friends.

What's next for you?

I have a novel coming out in July called [*Deep Down Things*](#). It's set in contemporary Colorado and it's about a young woman, Maggie, who falls in love with an idealistic young writer named Jackdaw. They get pregnant but he blames her, but because he's idealistic he marries her. They have a child with a severe birth defect, and Maggie tries to save her son and her marriage. In January of next year, [*Earth's Imagined Corners*](#), a historical novel set in 1885 Iowa and Kansas City, will come out. It's about Sara Moore, whose father tries to force her to marry his younger partner. Instead, she elopes to Kansas City with a kind man she just met who has a troubled past. *Earth's Imagined Corners* is the first book in a trilogy. I'm also working on a young adult series called the Wyoming Chronicles. Stay tuned!

Letter to the Reader

The stories in *How to Be a Man* were written over the course of the last fifteen years. Some came hot and fast and did not need much fiddling (“Men Are Like Plants,” “Oranges”) and some were the result of years of revision (“Nose to the Fence,” “Mouse”). The oldest story in the collection is “Snowshoeing,” and its flaws make me uncomfortable, but I love the striving to capture something inexplicable that motivated it. The youngest story is “Dammed,” and it’s a good example of my writing process now—I tend to revise extensively as I go and write a lot in my mind before I put it down on the page. Once I get started, it only takes me a session or two to get it all down.

Author’s often get the question, “Where do you get your ideas?” I’ve never had a problem getting ideas, and I mourn the loss of the multitude of ideas that have come and gone, unfulfilled. I think there are lots of ideas out there—it’s just a matter of recognizing them for what they are, and when I’m writing—not blocked—the ideas come thick and fast. I may start with a voice, which happened with “Men Are Like Plants.” I was lying in bed trying to go to sleep, and her voice came to me so strongly I risked my husband’s displeasure—he hates it when I stay up late—and got up to write it down. I wrote most of that story in one sitting. What prompted “Revelations” was a contest a couple of years ago that had to include the year 2010. It got me thinking about the end of the world and Revelations, and so I wondered what a modern-day devil might be like. “Snowshoeing” started with the idea of conveying that feeling of separateness that sometimes comes upon a couple, that realization that you can’t always take your partner for granted. “Oranges” arose in one sitting on a plane coming back from a writer’s conference, the result of guilt over abandoning my kids for a week. “A Dangerous Shine” is based on a real incident that took place at the Buckhorn where I bartended. And on it goes.

Putting together a collection is tough. The idea of revising so many stories at one time and the nakedness that will result from other people seeing them all together is enough to stop the hardiest souls in their tracks. And what order do you put them in? Do you treat them like a mix tape—starting with an attention grabber, turning it up, taking it back, orchestrating peaks and valleys? Or do you arrange them on merit only, putting the best ones first? My protagonists are of different ages—should they be organized by age? I ended up putting what I think of as my best stories first and last, but then also taking into account the mood of the story. I tried to start with some positive stories and then place some of the darkest stories toward the end. I also tried to group them tonally, thematically, and by protagonist, so “Mouse” and “Oranges” are together because they’re about young girls dealing with their parents. “The Body Animal,” “Revelations,” and “Dammed” are together because they’re about the body and violence and alienation. “Wanting” is last because it’s a strong story but it also is historical, while all the others are contemporary.

I’ve always loved when authors tell the story of the story, and so I thought I’d choose a few and talk about how they came into being. “How to Be a Man” was written in response to “How to Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl, or Halfie” by Junot Diaz. I had long resisted writing a second-person story because it seemed so cliché—the young writer thinking herself so edgy,

taking such an avant garde point of view. Then I read a couple of kick-ass second-person stories, and it began to work on me: Why couldn't I write one? Then I heard Edwidge Danticat read Diaz's story and I was hooked. The story wrote itself fairly quickly until I got to the ending—well, the first ending where she becomes a whiskery-chinned old batty. I stopped there. But I didn't like that ending. I didn't want her life to end that way. I wanted her to have a chance at happiness. Then I thought, why can't I have two endings. I'm the god in this little world. I can do whatever I want. So I added the second ending. "Wanting" is another story I wrote in response to a story. Growing up in the West, I had strong Hemingway tendencies—clipped sentences, withheld emotion, huge psychic distance—and so to try to remedy that, I decided to take a great story that was a little more lush to imitate it in sentence construction, paragraphing, even down to where the dialog rests. The story I chose was Karl Iagnemma's "Children of Hunger." So I tried to maintain the feel of his story and mimicked it as closely as I could in my own story. It was a very helpful exercise, I think, and I really like the results. "Mouse" began as a writer's exercise at a conference workshop presided over by Steve Almond. He had good advice about the mouse-killing scene: "A little blood and gore goes a long way." I later expanded the scene into the story.

I will always write short stories. They are harder than novels, in a way, because they require the precision of a diamond cutter. They have to be so much more concise, clear, compact, and well-written than a novel. In a novel, you can get away with pages of loose extraneous stuff, while a short story must have no fat. And I love reading short stories. I think we're in a renaissance of good short-story writing, and for that I'm very thankful.

Excerpt

(a complete story)

How to Be a Man

Never acknowledge the fact that you're a girl, and take pride when your guy friends say, "You're one of the guys." Tell yourself, "I am one of the guys," even though, in the back of your mind, a little voice says, "But you've got girl parts."

You are born on a ranch in central Colorado or southern Wyoming or northern Montana and grow up surrounded by cowboys. Or maybe not a ranch, maybe a farm, and you have five older brothers. Your first memory is of sitting on the back of Big Cheese, an old sorrel gelding with a sway back and—you find out later when you regularly ride bareback—a backbone like a ridge line. Later, you won't know if this first memory is real or comes from one of the only photos of you as a baby. You study that photo a lot. It must be spring or late fall because you're wearing a quilted yellow jacket with a blue-lined hood and your brother's hands reach from the side of the frame and support you in the saddle. You look half asleep with your head tilted to the side against your shoulder, a little sack of potatoes.

Your dad is a kind man, a hard worker, who gives you respect when no one else will. When you're four, if he asks, "Birdie, do you think the price of hogs is going up?" ponder this a while. Take into account how Rosie has just farrowed seven piglets and how you're bottle-raising the runt and how you've heard your brothers complaining about pig shit on the boots they wear to town. Think about how much Jewel—that's what you've decided to name the pig—means to you and say, "Yes, Daddy, pigs are worth a lot." He'll nod his head, but he won't smile like other people when they think what you say was cute or precocious.

Your mother is a mouse of a woman who takes long walks in the gray sagebrushed hills beyond the fields or lays in the cool back bedroom reading the Bible. When your brothers ask "Where's Mom?" you won't know. You don't think it odd when at five you learn how to boil water in the big speckled enamelware pot and to shake in three boxes of macaroni, to watch as it turn from off-yellow plasticity to soft white noodles, to hold both handles with a towel and carefully pour it into the colander in the sink while avoiding the steam, to measure the butter and the milk—one of your brothers shows you how much—and then to mix in the powdered cheese. You learn to dig a dollop of bacon grease from the Kerr jar in the fridge into the hot cast iron skillet, wait for it to melt, and then lay in half-frozen steaks, the wonderful smell of the fat and the popping of ice crystals filling the kitchen. When your brothers come in from doing their chores, they talk and laugh instead of opening the cupboards and slamming them shut. And your dad doesn't clench his jaw while washing his hands with Dawn dishwashing liquid at the kitchen sink and then toss big hunks of Wonder Bread into bowls filled with milk.

When you wear hand-me-downs from your brothers, be proud. Covet the red plaid shirt of your next older brother, and when you get it—a hot late summer afternoon when he tosses three shirts on your bed—wear it until the holes in the elbows decapitated the cuffs. If you go to town with your dad for parts, be proud of your shitty boots and muddy jeans and torn-up shirts. It

shows that you know an honest day's work. Work is more important than fancy things, and you are not one of those ninnies who wear girlie dresses and couldn't change a tire if their lives depended on it.

Be prepared: when you go to school, you won't know quite where you fit. All the other kids will seem to know something that you don't, something they whisper to each other behind their hands. They won't ever whisper it to you. But they won't make fun of you either because—you'll get this right away and take pride in it—you are tough and also you have five older brothers and the Gunderson family sticks together. Be proud of the fact that, in seventh grade social studies, you sit elbows-on-the-table next to a boy about your size, and he says with a note of admiration, "Look at them guns. You got arms bigger than me." It's winter, and you've been throwing hay bales every morning to feed the livestock.

Your friends will be boys. You understand boys. When you say something, they take it at face value. If they don't understand, hit them, and they'll understand that. For a couple of months—until your dad finds out about it—your second oldest brother will give you a dime every time you get into a fist fight. The look on your brother's face as he hands you those dimes will make your insides puff to bursting. Use the dimes to buy lemons at the corner grocery during lunch time. Slice them up with your buck knife and hand them out to see which of the boys can bite into it without making a face.

Leave the girls alone, and they will leave you alone. When you have to be together, like in gym class, they'll ignore you, which will be fine with you. Always take the locker by the door so you can jet in and out as fast as you can. You'll be mortified that they'll see your body, how gross and deformed it is. Be proud of the muscles, but the buds of breast and the peaking pubic hair will be beyond embarrassing. Still, you'll be fascinated with their bodies, not in a sexual way, but in that they seem to be so comfortable with them, even—to your disgust—proud. They'll compare boobs in the mirror, holding their arms up against their ribs so that their breasts push forward. One girl, Bobbie Joe Blanchard, won't stand at the mirror though because she'll get breasts early, big round ones. She'll quickly go from a slip of a girl who never says anything to the most popular because the boys pay attention, and the attention of the boys is worth much more than any giggling camaraderie of the girls. You'll agree with this, but you'll also be mystified as to the boys' motivations. Ask your best friend Jimmy Mockler, "What's up with that?" He'll just shrug and smile, sheepishly but with pride too.

In middle school, don't be surprised if the guys who used to be your friends forget about you. They'll still be nice, but they'll spend their time playing rough games of basketball and daring each other to talk to this girl or that. You won't be good at basketball—you're tough, but you don't have the height or the competitiveness. Plus, they don't really want you to play—you can tell. Think about this a lot, how to regain their respect. Go so far as to ask the coach about trying out for football. He'll look at you like you're a two-headed calf and say, "Darlin', girls don't play football." You'll want to scream, "I'm not a girl!" but you won't. Instead, never tell anyone, especially the boys, and hope to God that the coach never mentions it in gym class, which he teaches. He won't. He'll agree with you that it's embarrassing.

One day at lunch time, Jimmy Mockler will tell a story to the other guys about Bobbie Joe Blanchard and how he's asked her to meet him under the bleachers in the gym during fifth period study hall. There is no gym during fifth period. He and Bobbie Joe are going to get passes to go to the bathroom and sneak in when no one's looking. "I bet she lets me kiss her!"

he says and laughs and the other boys laugh. Then he says, “Maybe she’ll even give me a hand job.” He’ll glance at you and this look of horror will come over his face. They’ll all look at you. Right then you’ll know you’ve lost them. At home that night, cry in your room without making a sound in case your brothers walk by.

Realize at this point that you have two choices: either you have to win back the boys or you have to throw in with the girls. But you don’t understand the girls at all. You wouldn’t know the first thing about it. How do you talk to girls, anyway? Don’t lose heart. Maybe there is a way to make it through to the boys. If pretty girls are what gets their attention, maybe you’ll have to learn to look like a girl, even if you aren’t really one. You can learn. Didn’t you teach yourself how to make peach pies from scratch? How to braid horsehair into hat bands? How to pick the lock on the second oldest brother’s bottom drawer, only to be disgusted with the magazines you found there? You can do this.

Imagine the looks on the boys’ faces. The admiration filling their eyes. Respect, even. And the jealousy in the girls’ eyes. Jimmy will walk up to you and put his arm around you and say, “Where you been?” There’ll be no more awkward silences, no more conversations that switch when you walk up. It’ll be the same as before, once they notice you. All you have to do is get their attention.

Raid your mom’s closet for a dress. Smuggle it into your room. It’s the one you’ve seen her wear to church—knee-length, sky blue with a white scalloped collar. You are her height now, and it’ll fit you. To your surprise, you’ll even fill it out in the bust. Surreptitiously steal a copy of a girls’ magazine from the library and study it—the way the girls’ hair is curled, the way their lips shine, how clean their hands are. Decide to try it the following Monday. Sunday night, take a long bath and try to soak off all the dirt and scrub the elephant hide off your feet. The leg bruises from working in the barn won’t come off, but sacrifice your toothbrush to scrub your fingernails. Tie up your wet hair in rags like you’ve seen your mother do on Saturday nights before Sunday church services. The next morning, get ready in your room so no one will see you. Climb into the dress. You will feel naked and drafty around the legs. This is normal. Brush out your hair. Instead of nice wavy curls, it will stuck out all over the place. Wet it down just a little, which will help, but it will still look like an alfalfa windrow. You don’t have any lip gloss, so use bag balm, the sticky yellow substance you put on cow teats when they chap. This won’t really be new because when your lips crack from sun or wind burn, that’s what you use. It will feel different though.

Look at yourself in the mirror. You won’t recognize yourself. It will be a weird double consciousness—this person in the mirror is you, you’ll know it, but you’ll have to glance down anyway just to match the image in the mirror with the one attached to your body. Beware. It will creep you out. It looks like a girl in the mirror, but it can’t be because you aren’t one of them.

Whatever happens, keep telling yourself: it’ll be worth it if it works.

Don’t go downstairs until just before your brothers are ready to drive to school. When you come down, your brothers will stop talking. The brother just older than you will laugh, but then your dad will whistle and say, “My, don’t you look pretty today.” This will make you feel a little better and stop the boys’ wolf whistles, though they’ll keep glancing sideways at you in the car. If the brother just older than you whispers, “Look who’s a ger-rel,” the oldest one will tap him upside the head to shut him up.

Make your oldest brother drop you off two blocks from school and hide behind a tree until you're sure school has started. You won't want anyone to see you ahead of time. In fact, you'll be having second thoughts about the whole project. Be brave. You'll think of Jimmy Mockler and the embarrassed way he looks at you, maybe even avoids you when you come down the hall, and that'll help. Creep in a side door, scoot to your locker, get your books, and go to homeroom. If you feel like you might let loose in your pants as you peek into the classroom through the wire-latticed window, wait—this will pass. Mrs. Garcia will probably have everyone working in groups, and desks will be pushed together in four messy circles. The guys in the back will be in one group, including Jimmy. Rest your hand on the door knob for a long time, take a deep breath, and then push through the door.

The noise of everyone talking at once will hit you as the door opens. That and the smell of the fish tank and Mrs. Garcia's sickeningly sweet perfume. Stutter-breathe and make a beeline toward the boy's circle. Talking will begin to peter out as you enter the room, and you'll make it halfway along the wall toward the back before there's dead silence. Everyone will be looking at you, but keep your eyes on the boys' circle. The looks on the boys' faces will be wonderful. All their eyes fastened on you, looking admiringly, small smiles in the corners of their mouths. They will be looking at you, noticing you. Jimmy, particularly, will have a wide-eyed slack-jawed grin on his face.

Celebrate. You've done it. You've regained their attention. You are once more an honorary boy, respected and included.

But then it'll be like a slow-motion horror movie. From behind you, Mrs. Garcia will say, "Why, Birdie Gunderson, I almost didn't recognize you." Watch these words register on the boys' faces. Some of them will give a little shrug and turn back toward the others, but it's Jimmy's reaction that will bruise you to the core. You'll see the time delay of the words entering his ears and then his brain and then the look on his face fix as his brain processes the words and then his eyes widen as he finally understands. Then, it'll be as if someone grabs the center of his face and twists. The look will be so awful your body will wander to a stop, and you'll stand, unbelieving, still caught in the adrenalin of the moment before. You're going to cry, so flip around and push back out through the door and run down the hall and out the big double doors by the principal's office. Run until you can't breathe and then walk, taking in big hiccupping breaths of air, all the way to the high school. Make your oldest brother take you home.

Accept your fate. You'll never regain that special place with the boys, and you become a second-hand friend. Every once in a while your brothers will say, "Remember the time Birdie tried to be a girl?" and they'll laugh. Laugh with them. You know how ridiculous it was.

High school will be a long lonely blur, but take it like a man. Never go on a date, never kiss a boy. Instead, watch football and memorize the stats and, if anyone tries to strike up a conversation, bring up the Dallas Cowboys. Take your one stab at getting outside your life—after high school, go to community college for a semester, but when your mom dies of some unnamable female ailment, your dad will need you on the farm. You'll tell yourself that you can always go back and get that degree, but you won't. Fill your days with the routine of agriculture. The animals won't care if you're a boy or a girl—they just need to be fed and watered. Same with your dad and brothers. Don't think about being a man. Or being a woman. You are an efficient cog in the machinery of the farm.

“Sis, you’re the best,” they’ll all say. “Birdie is as faithful as a hound dog.”

You are, you know? You’re a good cook, you know a lot about football, and you work hard. It doesn’t matter that you don’t have any friends, men or women. It doesn’t matter that you don’t get out much and you’ll never be kissed, much less married. When you have needs, take care of them yourself. Don’t think about becoming a skinny whiskery-chinned old batty with too many dogs. You’re happy. Or at least you’re not sad. You’re comfortable. You have a full life taking care of your dad and your brothers. You do. You really do.

Or, maybe this isn’t the way it goes.

Maybe, when you’re in your early thirties, your fourth oldest brother will bring home an old college buddy for two weeks one summer. Conrad Patel. You’ll resent the hell out of it, this change in routine. This guy will make you uncomfortable. At first you’ll think he’s gay because he’s thin and has a loose-limbed way of walking. This will make you wonder about your brother. Then you’ll understand by the way they talk about women that they’re just comfortable with each other. They understand each other. It’ll remind you of how it used to be with you and Jimmy Mockler—you’ll be sad at first and then angry. Go out of your way to avoid this Conrad Patel. You might even do little things to make yourself feel better, like flushing the downstairs toilet when he’s in the upstairs shower. Every time you get the chance.

A lot of your energy during the summer goes into growing the garden, and after your dad and the boys leave for the fields, spend your mornings watering and weeding. In the evening after the supper dishes are done, walk through the garden and inspect things—pollinate the tomatoes, check for potato bugs, and shut the hothouse boxes. You will love this time of cool breeze and setting sun. But it will annoy the hell out of you when Conrad Patel breaks away from the card game or the sitcom TV to follow you out the back door and down the porch steps. He won’t seem to understand the very strong hints you drop. Start sneaking out the front door, but don’t be surprised if you find him already there in the garden.

“But you don’t grow coriander?” Conrad Patel will say. “You don’t grow fennel? Not even tarragon?” He will say this with wonder, as if these things are essential to life.

Say, “If you don’t like what I cook, don’t eat it,” and turn your back.

If he says, “Oh no—your cooking is a marvel. So very different from my mother’s,” you won’t be sure how to take this, just like you’re never quite sure how to take anything he says. Say, “You’re comparing me to your mother?” It will irritate you. Really irritate you. You’ll wish you were ten again so you could sock him.

“Yes, of course,” he’ll say, once again as if this were a given.

Realize that he doesn’t understand you any more than you understand him. You won’t know what to say so don’t say anything and hope that’s the end of it.

But it won’t be. He’ll say, “You would drive across this country to eat her mashed potatoes. The key is browning the mustard seeds, with just enough chilies to make your lips burn. This makes me want to drop everything and go for a visit.” His voice will be both intense and wistful.

As you finish up in the garden, he’ll talk about cooking but then about his family. He’ll tell you about his mother and his aunts and grandmother. Also about his brothers and his dad, who has passed away. It’s not what he says so much as how he says it. Women to him are a mystery, much like they are to you, but not in a contemptuous way. He talks about them with such respect and such admiration, like they are men and men are women. To him, women are the

source of all goodness and men are the source of all evil. Women are the ones who get things done, the practical ones, and men spend their time being frivolous with money.

It will all be so foreign to you that when he stops talking it'll be as if you walked out of a movie theater. Remind yourself of where you are. And who you are. Your body and your approach to the world will have traveled to another place where what you were supposed to be doesn't seem so far from what you are. You'll want to reject it whole cloth, but there's a part of you that will want to break into tears.

Shut the last hothouse lid and turn to leave.

Conrad Patel will say, "I have said something wrong." He will step in front of you. "What I meant was that your potatoes are the same. Not the same—they don't contain mustard seeds. But the same in that they are wonderful. And your beef stew is wonderful. You are a wonderful woman."

Are you? Do those words go together?

It's dark enough that you won't be able to see his face, but if he steps closer to you, don't step away. He'll stand in front of you and you'll feel the heat of his body through the cool of the evening. You'll like this feeling. You might wonder what's coming, if he's leaning toward you ever so slightly—it will be hard to tell in the fading light. Don't let this frighten you. Don't run away. Face your fears. Be a man.