

Legacy

1997 - Jensen, UT

I drive slowly, my tires crunching over and sliding through a migrating swarm of Mormon crickets gathered on the asphalt to collect the last of summer's warmth. I can see them moving, like a wave, in the narrow beam of headlights in front of me. I've just taken the left off U.S. Highway 40 at the L&M Country Store and pulled onto UT-149 which leads to Dinosaur National Monument, the heart of the Uintah Basin. The memories of my childhood and adolescence are collected here in deep canyons and red sandstone bowls, so I have a peace-offering to ensure they stay safe when I leave this place for good in a couple of days.

It's exactly six miles from the main highway to the ranger station that marks the entrance to the park. Not a lot of time to pull myself together, so I squint into my rearview and pull off the road once the L&M is little more than a dot. I put the car in park, unbuckle my seatbelt and reach into my jeans pocket for a zippo. Plucking the Lucky Strike from behind my left ear, I clench it between my teeth while I light it. Tobacco and paper crackle loudly when I close my eyes and inhale. I enjoy the rush of smoke that slides down my throat and settles—until it occurs to me that my mum will kill me if she finds out I've been smoking in her car. I slide across the front seat, crank the passenger window down as fast as I can then open both front doors to let the smoke escape. I pour myself out onto the asphalt with the smoke, walk to the back of the car, lean against the hood to finish my cigarette, and gaze out over the basin toward the towering canyons of the monument, where I know my secrets are waiting. It's a struggle to keep my tears at bay, and even though I've graduated from bubble-gum cigarettes to the real sort, I still feel like I'm five years old, coming out here for the first time on my kindergarten field trip, absolutely certain that I'll see the ghost of Josie Bassett. *Just breathe, Bree.*



1985

The Discovery Elementary kindergarten bus rolled toward the parking lot in front of Josie’s cabin, a dozen tiny noses scrunched up against glass inside, where they created a thick veil of moisture over the windows. The world outside was blurry, like we were looking through a snow-globe from the inside out. I peeled my nose off the window, wiped the veil away with the thread-bare sleeve of my Tears for Fears sweater, and tried to get my first glimpse of the place. My breath caught; the cabin was small and squat, with slightly crooked walls, like a giant had stepped on it. It was made of wood, but not the flat, shiny kind like our shed at home. This thing looked like it was built out of life-sized Lincoln Logs. While the other kids bounced up and down on jungle-green seats, I held my breath and slipped past Miss Massey and the bus driver. No one noticed me until I walked through the cabin’s front door – at which point I heard a muffled voice screech “Bree-AANNN-AH, YOU GET BACK HERE THIS INSTANT!” My feet stopped dead in their tracks. For a second, I was sure Miss Massey was an evil witch who would freeze me in place, and the next bus full of kids that rolled up was going to have a good laugh at the snotcicles hanging off my chin.

Though she’d been my teacher for nearly a year at that point, Miss Massey still hadn’t managed to say my name right. *Bree-in*. Really not that difficult. That’s what I was thinking when the irritation unfroze my feet just enough to ignore her screeches behind me and step inside the doorway of the cabin. I found myself encased in darkness, the only light in the massive center room sliced through the cracks of a shuttered window in beams that seemed to be reaching for the hard-packed dirt floor. It smelled musty too, like my poppa’s cooler after a summer wood-cutting trip. I remember thinking it weird that the place didn’t have any furniture, but it was still hell of an improvement over the orange and brown shag carpet that covered my living

room back home. I made my way carefully toward the middle of the room, where the entire center wall was comprised of a stone fireplace, framed on either side by two doorways that led off into separate rooms of the house, and a narrow shelf just above the fireplace opening that was lined with a row of shiny cans. I got just close enough to notice that they had the same labels as the stuff my mum always drank when Miss Massey grabbed my arm from behind and yanked me back toward the front door. Outside, I huddled in the cold with the rest of the noses while the old park ranger rattled off legends about Josie that all of us kids had known for ages. When we finally made it back inside, I noticed some of the cans were missing from the shelf above the fireplace. And just like that, any doubt I'd had in my mind that Josie's ghost was hanging around, vanished.



1994

Around fall of my freshman year in high school, mum figured out that I'd been erasing and redrawing the thin black line she used to trace in felt tip pen on her liquor bottles to keep track of the amount of booze left (so that I couldn't drink it). Cover blown, it was time to move on to safer methods of obtaining alcohol for the crew. And while we managed to score a bottle of Boone's Farm for very special occasions, the method of acquisition for such a luxury wasn't worth the trouble (you could only take the gas attendant from the Last Chance out back and lift your shirt up so many times before the novelty wore off). Out of options, I headed for familiar territory. I was sure, though she'd been dead for over three decades, that Josie would provide a solution to this very pressing problem. By this time, I knew those shiny cans from my kindergarten field trip weren't actually soda; they were tributes to Josie's legacy of bootlegging during Utah's alcohol prohibition. Aside from supplying her infamous beau (Butch Cassidy) and his Hole in the Wall Gang with fresh horses and (allegedly) stolen beef, Josie cooked up batches

of apricot brandy and chokecherry wine and hauled it down to the Green River to sell thirsty Utahans some liquid courage. Turns out Utahans like their whiskey just as much these days as they did in Josie's. So, for as long as anyone can remember, they've been leaving alcoholic tokens of appreciation in and around her homestead as small thanks for her "service" to the community. It didn't occur to me until our show-and-tell sessions behind the Last Chance were no longer an option that Josie wouldn't mind if my friends and I consumed a little bit of all that appreciation.



1997

When I called my poppa from Cedar City to tell him I had joined the Army and ask if he'd mind if I came home to see him and mum before I left for basic training in a few weeks, the first thing out of his mouth after a long stretch of silence was "bullshit, Bree." I *was* only seventeen, so I understood his disbelief, but while I had made the call fully prepared to defend my new choice of career, I was at a loss for how to convince him that I had, in fact, joined the military. The call ended with a curt "of course I'll meet you for breakfast or something, honey, but you'd better bring your contract with you." I took away from that conversation that he was angry, like Jack-Torrance-relapsing-angry, so I didn't bother telling him that I didn't have the rent to stay in Cedar City or the gas money to drive home and show him my contract.

I don't remember much of the month that followed. I had originally planned on heading back to Vernal (my hometown) to stay with family and visit friends before Basic Training, but the conversation with my poppa made it perfectly clear that my presence under his roof wouldn't be welcomed. I vaguely remember packing up the few things I'd collected the months I'd lived in Cedar City — two small cardboard boxes full of books, a duffle bag of clothes, and a tennis racquet bag full of my poppa's dreams — and begged a ride to Vernal from a friend who was

headed in that direction for his summer break. In a last-ditch effort to find a place to stay, I called my high school Sadie Hawkins date, who (to my great surprise), told me I could crash in his little sister's room, which is where I spent the next few weeks.

Three days before my flight out of Vernal, my poppa met me at J.B.'s Restaurant for breakfast. We sat there for a while, made small talk, until the mounting awkwardness prompted me to slide my Army contract across the table and excuse myself to the ladies' room so he'd have time to mull it over. When I got back, I noticed the redness of his eyes and the whites of his knuckles, which were clenched into fists and resting on the cool laminate surface of the table, where they framed my service contract. I slid into the booth, risked another quick glance at him then looked back down at the table to wait for whatever he might have to say to me now that he knew I was telling the truth.

"The Army, Bree? Really? Do you actually think you're cut out for the *Army*?" He emphasized Army, made it sound like Everest. "You're throwing away a tennis scholarship and the rest of your life to go play *G.I. Joe*?" He shook his head, looked away from me, let the silence stretch out in the absence of my response. I didn't have to respond. He'd seen my signature on the bottom of the contract. *What's done is done*. I imagined the mantra he'd been chanting at me my whole life was haunting him in spades in that moment. "Well, I'll tell your mom. No promises, but if she's up for it we'll meet you for breakfast and take you to the airport in a couple days. And if she's not, I'll be there. You got plans for tomorrow?"

"I do." I almost whispered it, already wondering how I'd get him to agree to let me borrow the car for a trip out to Josie's cabin.



I exhale a last drag, put the cigarette out on the bottom of my boot, and flip the butt out into the darkness, where I imagine it landing in the middle of the swarm—just another ingredient for the highway’s Mormon Cricket soup. Climbing into the car, I buckle myself up, then pull back onto the highway. I turn the radio up as loud as it’ll go to drown out the crunching beneath my tires. Ace of Base blares while I drive the rest of the way to the park entrance. I breathe a little easier when I notice there’s no ranger on duty at the fee station. This is the first time I’ve ever brought alcohol *into* the park. Two and a half miles down Cub Creek Road, I come to a fork and veer left toward Josie’s ranch. I navigate the last mile and a half of washouts and bottomless four-wheeler ruts before pulling into the empty graveled parking lot at Josie’s cabin just as the sun peaks over the edge of the looming canyon. I mutter a thanks to the universe that I’ve made it here before the place is crawling with khaki pants and straw sun-hats. I open the glove box and take out the bottle of Boone’s Farm Strawberry Hill wine I picked up from the Last Chance this morning, before heading through the gate toward the log structure.

The cabin and surrounding ranch are shrouded in the shade of countless Cottonwood trees, planted there by Josie herself when she settled this homestead in 1913. I take a moment to peek inside the old cabin and grin when I see a few full bottles of Bud Light in the shadows of the old fireplace, and a few empty bottles on the floor in front of it. The shelf had rotted away years ago. Walking inside, I gather up the empties, enjoying the sense of teenage comradery that fills me as I head back outside to toss the evidence into the trash. I can almost picture Josie leaning against the wood-framed doorway of the house she built with her own hands, bib-overalls stained with the day’s work, Winchester rifle resting casually in the crook of one arm, and short-cropped red hair rustling in the breeze that flows down through the canyon to bring her Cottonwoods to life. I imagine her thin-lipped smile turned slightly up at one corner as she watches over young women like me, who have wandered in and out of this place for decades—

rebellious kindred spirits inspired to both mischief and greatness by the memory of her outlaw legacy. I tip an imaginary hat to her imagined ghost, turn away from the cabin, and head toward the old dirt path that leads into Hog Canyon.

The air here is permeated by the bitter smell of sagebrush. I smile, remember that when I was little girl, I thought sagebrush looked like upside-down Weeping Willows, their branches stubbornly reaching for the sky instead of wilting toward the ground. I liked them more for that. A little way up the trail, I pass the old chicken coop, now just a sunken pile of rotting wood, and wander over a narrow, bubbling creek which once served as a fresh water source for Josie's homestead. I pause when I spot the ridge marking the entrance to Hog Canyon and squint my eyes against the sun to look for the white, vase-shaped pedals of Ute lady's tresses, a threatened species of orchid known to grow near the canyon's mouth. No luck today, but I'm here on business of a different sort so I continue, keeping Josie's livestock corral and wooden fence on my left, until I spot the landmark I came here to find.

The break in the split-rail fence is hard to detect, but I've made this excursion countless times over the years, so instinct causes me to step off the path and slide between two overlapping fence posts, the gap just small enough to keep livestock out. I duck under juniper branches and find myself in a large open clearing, and even though I know what to expect, I'm still awestruck by the stunning canvas of flowers that compete for moisture with thick patches of native grass. desert globemallow, scarlet gilia, white Colorado columbine, even the distinct white berries of poison ivy—the clearing looks like a butterfly album of Utah's high desert flowers, an organic art gallery created by nature for Josie's pleasure, framed and protected on every side by the sheer Weber sandstone walls of Hog Canyon. It takes great effort to peel my eyes away from the spectacle, but I manage it eventually and make my way into a shaded corner of the clearing. Here, two old Cottonwood trees fuse together at their base, creating a deep hollow about five feet

off the ground where they deviate into twin trunks. Their thick branches reach out to spill over the fence railing several feet away and conceal the nook from prying eyes. I put the wine bottle on the ground so I can sweep branches aside with one hand while I use the other to clear out dead leaves, bits of bark and feathers. Once the hollow is clear, I grab the bottle again, reach up and gently place it inside, grin at the white Boone's Farm label (only the best for Josie), then let the branches fall back into place. I pat the fused trunk, briefly letting my fingertips trace over the rough bark—and quietly promise Josie that I'll find a way to do her legacy proud in the Army.

I wait a while, gather my composure, let my fears and trepidations sink down through my feet and into the earth, try to pull courage from the legend of this place. As I stand there, eyes closed, a sudden gust blows down through the canyon and wraps around me, pushes me against the trunk of the tree. The wind picks up. I turn around to feel it on my face, spread my arms to welcome the force of it, and return Josie's embrace.
