



# Madrona Way

*Laurie Galbraith Weckstein*

Kansas sits quiet in the early morning light, her hands sticky from cutting up Sam's pineapple for breakfast. Maybe he won't mind having pineapple in his lunchbox too, she thinks, and goes back to the sticky, fragrant pineapple carcass to cut some more. As she expertly slices off the hard, white sections, leaving dripping in her hands, the yellow, juicy parts flecked with brown from the outer husk, she gazes out the window toward the back yard. It already showed every sign of being a typical autumn morning on Whidbey Island—cool, misty, and grey. Sam was her husband. He was upstairs getting ready for work.

"Oh!" she said suddenly, out loud.

"What?" said Sam as he came down the stairs into the kitchen, pulling a sweater over his head.

"I just need to fill the feeders."

"You and your birds," he teased.

"Well, you and your skeletons!"

"Speaking of bones," said Sam, "how would you like to come out to the site today?"

"I don't know . . ." Kansas trailed off. She was looking through the window again, out toward the back garden where her bird feeders were.

"C'mon, you've made friends with every bird on the island. We need you at the site today."

"Site?" Kansas said absently.

"Y-e-a . . . the place where I work and have been to every day for the past nine months."

"You know I don't want to go on any boats" she looked at him, thinking about the boat ride that was required to get to the dig.

"Honestly Kansas, when are you gonna get over this ridiculous fear? You live on an island for Chris' sakes! C'mon! We've gotten down to a new layer. Bridget found three shards from a Salish pot yesterday. Paul is busy with that skeleton we found last week . . . it looks like it might be on the edge of a burial ground. Fascinating stuff!"

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It had been eight years since they both graduated from Washington State University. Kansas was a geology student and Sam studied archeology. They were married the day after graduation. Sam's work in the field had taken them to both American coasts and a stint in Canada, working on a glacial dig. Kansas discovered that banking appealed to her sense of order and paid better than her work in the dirt, so somewhere in all the moving, Kansas had become a banker and Sam was moving up in the field of archeology. They had moved to the island in the Pacific Northwest two years ago when Sam was awarded a grant to excavate a suspected Swinomish site at Cornet Bay.

Dreadfully, on an unusually hot summer day a year ago, her life as she had always known it, ended. Her parents, flying over for a visit from Honolulu, disappeared when their plane fell out of the sky somewhere over the Pacific. There were no survivors. Some wreckage had washed up months later on a beach in Anchorage. Nothing else. The investigation ruled that the cause of the accident had been, apparently, a faulty wing that broke in half, mid-flight.

Kansas was their only child. Once the full truth had sunk in, the accident left her unmoored and adrift, with a paralyzing fear of water. Not the glittering turquoise of chlorinated crystal clear pool water. It was the dark, salty, mysterious depths of the sea that numbed her. Two months after the accident, Kansas quit her job at the bank. She couldn't focus on the numbers that once fit so well into her ordered and predictable life. Her mystified friends all watched her drifting away from them. None of them had seen or talked to her in over three months. They had tried, but Kansas always had some reason for not being able to make whatever get together was being planned.

"Well, I've got to go," she would say on the phone.

Every day, Sam came home to find her sitting alone out in the back garden with the birds.

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This morning in the kitchen, Sam continued trying to coax her away.

"Come on Kansas, you're great in the field. Bridget won't be there today and I don't have anyone to supervise the sluice."

The mist hanging outside seemed to echo an unfathomable aloneness. She slowly turned her face toward him and the hollow look in her eyes startled him.

"I can't," she said simply.

As he backed out of the driveway, Sam looked up to the big, front

window to see her there waving. Through the glass, he couldn't see how pale and sad he knew she was. He pretended for a moment that everything was normal again. Kansas had become an island herself. An island where no one could reach her. His eyes stung, thinking about her all alone. He drove fast through the madrona trees that lined the road. Their rusty colored papery thin bark peeling away in sheets. He wondered if he would ever again find the girl he had married. Her parent's deaths had washed over Kansas like acid. The woman she had been peeled off in sheets, leaving another person, like the green wood exposed through the bark. Like the heart of the madrona — exposed, vulnerable, and utterly alone.

Kansas sat back down and finished off the remnants of the pineapple. She held thoughtfully to her coffee cup, pressing the warm mug to her cheek in between sips. The warmth on her face seemed to waken something. She realized that her dad used to sit like that, with his warm coffee cup pressed to his face. The memory stabbed painfully at an open, festering wound.

She carefully put her coffee cup in the sink and went to the back door, grabbing her old Macintosh.

"It looks like it might rain" she thought.

She scooped birdseed into the metal bucket, shaped like watering can with a plain spout, from the bag in the garage. There was much twittering and wing rustling as she walked through the mist to the birdfeeders in the garden. The birds knew that her arrival usually meant food and at the very least, a quiet, soft presence that was more than acceptable. There was something different in their chirps today though—an urgency. Kansas looked instinctively over to the garden bench where she usually sat after filling the feeders. There was a small, feathered body on the ground. Both wings were outstretched from the plain little bird and it lay perfectly still on its back, delicate legs in the air. She dropped the bucket and rushed over to look. One wing was fine, but the other was broken. The little house finch was dead.

She stooped to pick it up. The soft bird in her hand, just perfect, except for its broken wing. Kansas stood in the misty clearing, perfectly still. A stillness that not even breathing was allowed to break.

The sob started inside like a long, deep wave that had been out at sea for weeks and was finally close to shore. It threatened to crush her. Breaking suddenly and violently, it came out of her mouth in a long, anguished cry. Her chest started heaving. She gulped for air as if it was her very first breath of life. Tears spilled down her cheeks, her shoulders shook in painful jerks. She held the little body close and fell to her knees. Finally, crumpling to the

ground, the foggy mist mingled with the tears on her face. The birds were quiet and still while Kansas lay on her beach, gasping for air.

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After she buried the bird in the garden, Kansas went back to the house and changed into her jeans and an old sweatshirt. She packed herself a lunch and made her way to the car. As she drove down Madrona Way, she noticed the startling new green wood—smooth, flawless, fresh—emerging from the underneath the red paper bark.

She was on her way to the Salish site. Her fear of the boat ride had left, inexplicably vanishing as she had lay in the garden, grasping the finch to her breast. She was shaken, but felt suddenly purposeful.

“Didn’t Sam say Bridget wouldn’t be there today?

I could take over her section.”

She was breathing again. It felt good.

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“Hey, isn’t that your wife?” Paul said to Sam. Sam looked up to see Kansas striding toward him. It was nearly noon and the mist had almost completely burned off. He could hear a bald eagle screeching, high in the top of one of the tall pacific conifers surrounding the bay. The sun was bright and reflected off the water in shiny winks. It lended a busy look to the charged feel in the air.

“I decided to come out today after all” Kansas said to Sam when she got to him. “I see that,” he looked at her in amazement. “How’d you do in the boat?”

“Fine. I know, it’s weird. I seem to be over it though—the water thing.”

“Wow . . .” breathed Sam. “Well, great! I’m so glad you’re here. We’re hopelessly behind. Would you mind taking over the sifters down on the beach? You know the drill. We’re looking for anything interesting. I’ll take you down there and introduce you to Katelyn and Mark.”

“That’s ok . . . I’ll introduce myself,” she said over her shoulder, making her way already, over the sandy trail leading to the beach.