Breaking Clean

JUDY BLUNT

"Breathtaking. . . . Blunt's writing is visceral, yet never without humor and a raw, fierce honesty." —*Chicago Tribune*

For Luciann —

Breaking Clean

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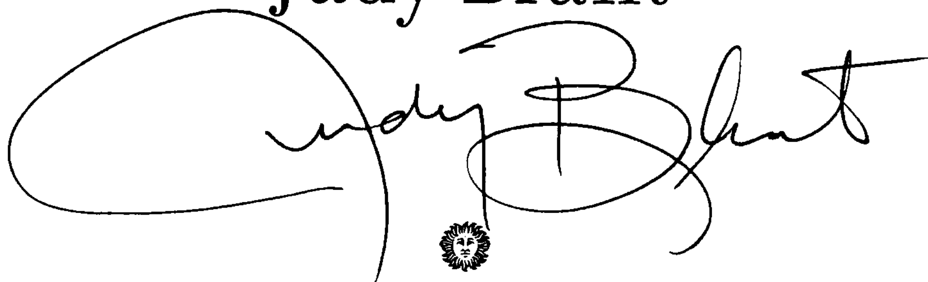
Judy Blunt



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Breaking Clean

Breaking Clean

I rarely go back to the ranch where I was born or to the neighboring land where I bore the fourth generation of a ranching family. My people live where hardpan and sagebrush flats give way to the Missouri River Breaks, a country so harsh and wild and distant that it must grow its own replacements, as it grows its own food, or it will die. Hereford cattle grow slick and mean foraging along the cutbanks for greasewood shoots and buffalo grass. Town lies an hour or more north over gumbo roads. Our town was Malta, population 2,500, county seat of Phillips County, Montana, and the largest settlement for nearly one hundred miles in any direction.

"Get tough," my father snapped as I dragged my feet at the edge of a two-acre potato field. He gave me a gunnysack and started me down the rows pulling the tough fanweed that towered over the potato plants. I was learning then the necessary lessons of weeds and seeds and blisters. My favorite story as a child was of how I fainted in the garden when I was eight. My mother had to pry my fingers from around the handle of the

hoe, she said, and she also said I was stupid not to wear a hat in the sun. But she was proud. My granddad hooted with glee when he heard about it.

"She's a hell of a little worker," he said, shaking his head. I was a hell of a little worker from that day forward, and I learned to wear a hat.

I am sometimes amazed at my own children, their outrage if they are required to do the dishes twice in one week, their tender self-absorption with minor bumps and bruises. As a mom, I've had to teach myself to croon over thorn scratches, admire bloody baby teeth and sponge the dirt from scraped shins. But in my mind, my mother's voice and that of her mother still compete for expression. "Oh for Christ's sake, you aren't hurt!" they're saying, and for a moment I struggle. For a moment I want to tell this new generation about my little brother calmly spitting out a palm full of tooth chips and wading back in to grab the biggest calf in the branding pen. I want to tell them how tough I was, falling asleep at the table with hands too sore to hold a fork, or about their grandmother, who cut off three fingers on the blades of a mower and finished the job before she came in to get help. For a moment I'm terrified I'll slip and tell them to get tough.

Like my parents and grandparents, I was born and trained to live there. I could rope and ride and jockey a John Deere as well as my brothers, but being female, I also learned to bake bread and can vegetables and reserve my opinion when the men were talking. When a bachelor neighbor began courting me when I was fifteen, my parents were proud and hopeful. Though he was twelve years older than I was, his other numbers were very promising. He and his father ran five hundred

cow-calf pairs and five hundred head of yearlings on 36,000 acres of range.

After supper one spring evening, my mother and I stood in the kitchen. She held her back stiff as her hands shot like pistons into the mound of bread dough on the counter. I stood tough beside her. On the porch, John had presented my father with a bottle of whiskey and was asking Dad's permission to marry me. I wanted her to grab my cold hand and tell me how to run. I wanted her to smooth the crumpled letter from the garbage can and read the praise of my high school principal. I wanted her to tell me what I could be.

She rounded the bread neatly and efficiently and began smoothing lard over the top, intent on her fingers as they tidied the loaves.

"He's a good man," she said finally.

In the seventh grade, my daughter caught up with the culture shock and completed her transition from horse to bicycle, from boot-cut Levi's to acid-washed jeans. She delighted me with her discoveries. Knowing little of slumber parties, roller skates or packs of giggling girls, sometimes I was more her peer than her parent. She wrote, too, long sentimental stories about lost puppies that found homes and loving two-parent families with adventurous daughters. Her characters were usually right back where they started, rescued and happy, by the end of the story. She'd begun watching television.

"Do you hate Daddy?" she asked once, from the depths of a divorced child's sadness.

"Your daddy," I replied, "is a good man."

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In the manner of good ranchmen, my father and John squatted on their haunches on the porch facing each other. The whiskey bottle rested on the floor between them. John's good white shirt was buttoned painfully around his neck. Dad had pushed his Stetson back, and a white band of skin glowed above his dark face, smooth and strangely delicate. When I moved to the doorway, their conversation was shifting from weather and cattle to marriage. As Dad tilted back heavily on one heel to drink from the neck of the bottle, John looked down and began to plot our life with one finger in the dust on the floor.

"I been meaning to stop by . . . ," John said to the toe of his boot. He looked up to catch Dad's eye. Dad nodded and looked away.

"You figured a spot yet?" He spoke deliberately, weighing each word. Like all the big ranches out there, John's place had been pieced together from old homesteads and small farms turned back to grass.

"Morgan place has good buildings," John replied, holding Dad's gaze for a moment. He shifted the bottle to his lips and passed it back to Dad.

"Fair grass on the north end, but the meadows need work," Dad challenged. John shifted slightly to the left, glancing to the west through the screen door. The setting sun was balanced on the blue tips of the pines in the distance. He worked at the stiffness of his collar, leaving gray smudges of dust along his throat. Settling back, he spoke with a touch of defiance.

"If a person worked it right . . ." Then his eyes found his boots again. He held his head rigid, waiting.

Dad smoothed one hand along his jaw as if in deep

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thought, and the two men squatted silently for several minutes. Then Dad drew a long breath and blew it out.

"Old Morgan used to get three cuttings in a rain year," he said at last. John's head rose and he met my father's steady look.

"A person might make a go of it," John agreed softly. Dad's shoulders lifted slightly and dropped in mock defeat. He placed a hand on each knee and pushed himself up, John rising beside him, and they shook hands, grinning. Twisting suddenly, Dad reached down and grabbed the whiskey. He held it high in a toast, then leaned forward and tapped John's chest with the neck of the bottle.

"And you, you cocky sonofabitch! Don't you try planting anything too early, understand?" They were still laughing when they entered the kitchen.

I talk to my father twice a year now, on Christmas and Father's Day. We talk about the yearling weights and the rain, or the lack of rain. When I moved away from our community, my parents lost a daughter, but they will have John forever, as a neighbor, a friend. He is closer to them in spirit than I am in blood, and shares their bewilderment and anger at my rejection of their way of life. As the ultimate betrayal, I have taken John's sons, interrupting the perfect rites of passage. The move was hardest on the boys, for here they were only boys. At the ranch they were men-in-training, and they mourned this loss of prestige.

"I used to drive tractor for my dad," the elder son once told his friends, and they scoffed. "You're only eleven years old," they laughed, and he was frustrated to bitter tears. He would go back to the ranch, that one. He would have to. But he returned there an outsider, as his father knew he would. He

did not stay. The first son of the clan to cross the county line and survive found it easier to leave a second time, when he had to. Had he chosen to spend his life there, he would have had memories of symphonies and tennis shoes and basketball. When he marries and has children, he will raise them knowing that, at least sometimes, cowboys do cry.

I stuck with the bargain sealed on my parents' porch for more than twelve years, although my faith in martyrdom as a way of life dwindled. I collected children and nervous tics the way some of the women collected dress patterns and ceramic owls. It was hard to shine when all the good things had already been done. Dorothy crocheted tissue covers and made lampshades from Styrofoam egg cartons. Pearle looped thick, horrible rugs from rags and denim scraps. Helen gardened a half acre of land and raised two hundred turkeys in her spare time. And everyone attended the monthly meetings of the Near and Far Club to answer roll call with her favorite new recipe.

These were the successful ranchwomen who moved from barn to kitchen to field with patient, tireless steps. For nearly ten years, I kept up with the cycles of crops and seasons and moons, and I did it all well. I excelled. But in the end, I couldn't sleep. I quit eating. It wasn't enough.

I saved for three years and bought my typewriter from the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. I typed the first line while the cardboard carton lay around it in pieces. I wrote in a cold sweat on long strips of freezer paper that emerged from the keys thick and rich with ink. At first I only wrote at night when the children and John slept, emptying myself onto the paper

until I could lie down. Then I began writing during the day, when the men were working in the fields. The children ran brown and wild and happy. The garden gave birth and died with rotting produce fat under its vines. The community buzzed. Dorothy offered to teach me how to crochet.

A prescribed distance of beige plush separated us. On a TV monitor nearby, zigzag lines distorted our images. John's face looked lean and hard. My face showed fear and exhaustion. The years were all there in black and white. Mike, our marriage counselor, stood behind the video camera adjusting the sound level. We were learning to communicate, John and I. We each held a sweaty slip of paper with a list of priority topics we had prepared for this day. Our job was to discuss them on camera. Next week we would watch our debate and learn what areas needed improvement. We talked by turns, neither allowed to interrupt the other, for three minutes on each topic.

John was indignant, bewildered by my topics. I, on the other hand, could have written his list myself. Somewhere in a dusty file drawer is a film of an emaciated, haggard woman hesitantly describing her needs and dreams to a tight-jawed man who twists his knuckles and shakes his head because he wants to interrupt her and he can't. His expression shows that he doesn't know this woman; she's something he never bargained for. When it's over, they are both shaking and glad to get away.

"John," Mike once asked, "how often do you tell your wife that you love her?"

"Oh, I've told her that before," he replied cautiously. I cut into the conversation from my corner of the ring.

"You only told me you loved me once, and that was the day we were married," I said.

"Well," John said, injured and defensive, "I never took it back, did I?"

The break, when it came, was so swift and clean that I sometimes dream I went walking in the coulee behind the ranch house and emerged on the far side of the mountains. It's different here—not easier, but different. And it's enough.

A Place of One's Own

Spring of 1954, my mother stood at the threshold of Henry Picotte's abandoned chicken house, a bouquet of hens dangling in either hand, and eyed the enormous prairie rattler coiled on the dirt floor. Killing the snake would be inconvenient, hampered as she was by a midterm pregnancy and the hysterical chickens swooping left and right around their new home, but a weapon would not have been hard to find. Stout diamond willow sticks leaned against every gatepost on the place, anywhere a man might step off a horse. Such readiness suggested an extended family of snakes with cousins and in-laws, generations of snakes, more than she wished to dwell on with her hands full of squawking chickens. Stepping back out, she hollered for my father to bring a spade. Once separated from the writhing coils, the snake's head would be buried in the soft ground outside the chicken house door, dirt tamped firm with the heel of his boot, the body flung over the weeds to the fence line as a warning to others. The wide rattles he would tuck in his hatband, perhaps for the same reason.

Margaret and Kenny bounced impatiently on the bench seat of the old truck while our parents swept a path to the shack, slashing the tall weeds with sticks to give remaining varmints the courtesy of a head start. Margaret was seven, a thin child, whose fair, delicate features stood in stark contrast to Kenny, a robust toddler about twenty months old. I was the child in her belly.

The story of my first days is embedded in stories of the land, for it was in the spring of 1954, the year of my birth, that my parents scraped together what money they had and borrowed more to make a down payment on a ranch of their own. They had married three years before, my father a rowdy young cowboy of twenty, my mother a no-nonsense divorcée of twenty-eight with a two-year-college degree and four-year-old Margaret. Dad worked those first years on his father's place and for neighboring ranchers, my mother sharing kitchen rights with a mother-in-law, then moving where the work took them, always with a common goal—a place of their own. They endured the setbacks, the added expense of a son born the day after the father's twenty-first birthday. The final delay occurred when they dealt for the land.

The retiring homesteader, Eric Anderson, had crops in the field, and they could not move in until after harvest, the end of August, first part of September. That summer, homeless and broke, they set up camp on the empty homestead of Henry Picotte, waiting out the growing season, awaiting my birth, awaiting the day the Anderson place would change hands and they could come, finally, home.

A sharp-featured little man with a lame leg and a strong French accent, Henry Picotte was one of several French Cana-

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