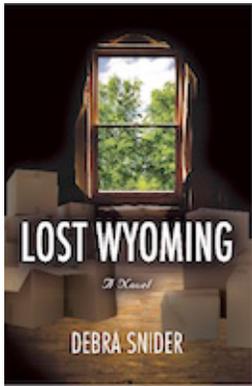


LOST WYOMING

A Novel

DEBRA SNIDER



A bright and thoughtful, yet thoroughly disillusioned heroine discovers how family shapes who we are, who we aren't, and who we have the potential to become. When a family crisis jolts Maggie Winslow out of her quarter-life malaise, she takes charge and rethinks the choices and convictions that have kept her from living the life she always envisioned. A heartbreaking, unflinchingly honest, and ultimately uplifting tale about the puzzles we must solve for ourselves.

Lost Wyoming

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ISBN: 978-1-63491-503-8

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
Snider, Debra

Lost Wyoming by Debra Snider

Fiction: Literary | Fiction: Contemporary Women | Fiction:
Family Life

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016909503

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

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Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2016

First Edition

CHAPTER 1

Disappointment plied its campaign against Maggie Winslow with vigor, determination, and a shrewd understanding of the power of persistence. Its early forays swirled around her ankles, easily shaken off or kicked away. Undeterred, it billowed upward and clung to her, like creeping ivy on a reluctant wall, dogged and relentless, a sticky miasma no less blinding or malign for being invisible. Its next incursion, Maggie feared, might swallow her whole.

Dank, discouraging disappointment. Maggie sounded the words in her head, hitting the Ds hard and taking pleasure in the resonance even as the real thing threatened to swamp her like the humidity that had coated Chicago for nearly a month. She longed for more colorful emotions—if not the glowing silver-rose of exhilaration, then the ruby-red of fury, the black-bordered bright orange of fear, the deep indigo of regret. Even the vinegary green of bitterness might at least be vivid. Disappointment was so boring, all but colorless, at most the faded, sickly tones of old Polaroids, evocative of nothing but nostalgia and loss.

Maggie felt older, and far wearier, than she thought a twenty-eight-year-old person ought to feel. She seemed to be stuck in a sort of quarter-life limbo, trapped between a past that teetered uneasily behind her, its pleasures discolored by disenchantment, and a future that loomed ahead, in every direction a crouching gray mass poised to pounce on and devour the last skimpy shreds of hope she had left.

Was she supposed to be able to believe, still, that something wonderful was on the horizon?

She sighed and stopped tapping her fingers on the frayed arm of the wing chair in which she sat waiting for Steve.

He was incapable of arriving anywhere on time, and she was incapable of arriving ten minutes late and saving herself the frustration of waiting.

The wing chair had once been the perfect combination of comfort and support. Maggie had spent countless hours lounging in it, talking to friends, sipping tall, nonfat, no-foam lattes, occasionally eating a scone or a chocolate bar. Now the chair felt deflated. Maggie shifted her position, looking for a still-plump spot, and noticed pulpy stuffing oozing from between the tired, stretched threads of the upholstery's seams. The stuffing was a disgustingly organic yellowy beige, as if the chair, while still alive, were very, very ill.

Was anything ever all it was cracked up to be? Chairs deflated. Thrills dimmed. Work excitedly sought and found paled into drudgery. Food of such surpassing deliciousness that each mouthful was a sensation dulled with familiarity into mere fuel. A love once capable of imbuing everything with beauty and buoyancy withered and became powerless to deliver even compatibility, let alone joy.

Maggie pulled her laptop out of her soft, battered black leather messenger bag and set it on the low table between her chair and its companion, likewise a sad reminder of previous perfection. She opened the computer and waited while it booted up. When it finished its mysterious coming-alive operation, she joined the wireless network the coffee shop boasted of on every sign, and went to the dictionary she'd bookmarked.

Disillusionment: "To be freed or deprived of illusion or belief."

Exactly. The idea that life was full of delights just waiting to burst into flower had turned out to be nothing but an illusion of the inexperienced, a hopeful belief, wishful thinking.

Why, Maggie wondered, did people even have the capacity to anticipate delight, and the desire to experience it,

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when things so consistently fell short of actually being delightful? Life was always failing to deliver on its promises. Did it know what it was doing, leaving so much to be desired?

The coffee shop's door clattered shut. The closing mechanism had been broken for weeks, and the door imitated a shaken box of jagged metal chunks every time someone entered or left without babying it back into a closed position.

Steve wasn't the person who had come in, but through the window, Maggie saw him about halfway across the plaza that separated the coffee shop's building from its twin. Like the other people walking in the plaza, Steve appeared to be moving through a wavy, slightly out-of-focus version of normal air. Unlike them, he looked crisp. He walked smoothly, confidently, bouncing a bit on his insteps with each stride. His hair was neither flat nor frizzy; he had the glossy, floppy kind that behaved properly even in summer's humidity. He carried nothing.

Maggie watched him, feeling as she had for three weeks as if she'd inadvertently let something slip away with him.

She thought they might sleep together on a business trip, but it hadn't happened. After a day of meetings, they went out with a group of people for dinner. Dinner turned into a tequila shot competition at a rowdy bar. Too many shots later, Maggie and Steve stumbled giddily back to their hotel.

He joked about what a lightweight she was, holding her arm and insisting on walking her to the door of her room. She opened the door and turned to say, *Stay?* Instead, she looked into his smiling face and heard herself say, *Thanks. G'night.*

Apparently unsurprised, he squeezed her arm gently before he let go of it and loped off down the hall. Maggie backed into her room and closed the door, not bothering to double-lock it or use the chain. For much longer than seemed reasonable, given how woozy she was, she lay awake, dressed,

on the still-made bed and wondered whether he would have stayed if she'd asked and why she hadn't.

They worked at the same company, but in different departments. They met when they were assigned to the same project. Maggie originally noticed Steve because he was nice-looking and then because he was unusually competent. Enthusiastic, too. She'd enjoyed working with him.

A month or so after their first project together, he'd emailed to suggest a late afternoon coffee to catch up. She thought that might be a euphemism for a date, but it proved to be just what he'd suggested. Since then, they'd met for coffee or lunch once or twice a month. It was a heartening office friendship, exactly the kind she enjoyed with a few female colleagues.

But not really. There was also a flirty male-female dynamic that hadn't dimmed over time—probably, Maggie thought, because they'd never acted on it. She often imagined sex with Steve. The abstraction of imagination kept their relationship frothy and titillating. Maggie wasn't inclined to trade that for the moderately squalid and likely disappointing reality of an office romance.

Still, from the moment she'd learned they would be out of town together, she'd thought about whether the move would be made. Unsure how she might react, she'd nevertheless been waiting for him to make it. She was as annoyed with him for not making it as she was with herself.

Steve remembered to indulge the door's broken springs before he walked over to their usual spot. Maggie smiled in response to his familiar cheerful grin.

"Hey, Mag," he said. "Been waiting long? Need a refill?"

"Just about, but I'm not in the mood for another. Too hot."

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“Not even something iced?”

“No, thanks. I’m good.”

“Okay. Be right back.”

Maggie closed her laptop and put it away. She glanced at the new messages on her phone—nothing that couldn’t wait.

Steve was his normal self, just as he’d been at breakfast after the night they didn’t spend together and ever since. She was mildly annoyed with him about that, too. She’d thought she might say something direct about the whole thing, but she hadn’t. She still thought she might.

He set a large iced coffee in an already sweating plastic cup on the low table and flopped into the companion chair. “So,” he said, pushing a dampish-looking lock of dark blond hair off his forehead. “Remember that asshole Larry I was telling you about? Wait until you hear this.”

As she listened and commiserated, Maggie relaxed and fell into the flow of the conversation. Her chair lost its power to make her uncomfortable. She drank what was left of her coffee and didn’t mind that it was lukewarm. The irritation she’d felt most of the day eased, and she warmed to the challenge of helping Steve figure out how to negotiate the roadblocks Larry was busily erecting.

Steve rolled up his shirtsleeves, exposing the sparkling golden hair on his arms. A part of Maggie’s mind pictured those arms, with their silky blond fleece, around her body. The picture was only a fragment. Her reveries about Steve never included faces or the more graphic mechanics; they were always images only of the tactile, sensual aspects of two bodies together.

Was there any way the reality could even begin to approach the dreamy pleasure of the imagining?

Maggie blinked and leaned toward Steve to refocus her attention. She wondered again if she were going to say

something direct, but when Steve said, "Okay, enough about Larry. What's up with you?" she didn't.

"I had another bad meeting with Jamie this morning," she said instead. "She was incredibly stubborn and difficult, even for her."

"She's an idiot." Steve sounded dismissive, but he too sat forward and his face looked expectant. The lock of hair again fell into his face and he again pushed it back.

Maggie pulled her eyes away from his sturdy hand. "I don't know about that. She's moving up pretty effectively. And she's great at getting in my way."

"She has to. You're the competition, and you're good, so you're a problem for her."

"Maybe." Steve's immediate jump to her defense reminded Maggie of her father. As far as Hank Winslow was concerned, anyone who thought his daughters were anything but enchanting and infallible was suffering from a severe inability to see straight. His sister Sally liked to tell the story of a time he said something about his girls that prompted her to retort, *Your problem, Hank, is that you think your kids are better than everyone else's. Well, they are*, Hank had replied in the same tone of certainty and mild surprise he would have used had Aunt Sally accused him of believing strawberries were red.

Maggie wished she hadn't missed the moment with Steve on the business trip. It would be nice if their relationship had already moved itself to the next level.

"Something wrong?" Steve asked when she didn't add anything to her *Maybe*.

"No. Sorry." She smiled. "I've had enough of Jamie and her problems for one day."

"Works for me. I've been tired of work all day today."

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"Me, too! Longer than just today, actually." Maggie contemplated his handsome, kind face. "Is this what you thought work would be like?"

He frowned, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"It all seems so lame sometimes. Day after day, we crunch numbers and go to meetings and put proposals together and deal with people like Jamie, and, really, what's the point? Do we ever accomplish anything that actually matters?" Maggie slouched in the chair and propped her feet on the low table. "It all just seems like a lot of more or less pointless activity."

"As opposed to?"

"Something exciting or fulfilling. Inspiring even. I guess I didn't think work would be sort of stupid like this. Did you?"

"Eh, it's work. I think it's pretty interesting." Steve drank the last of his iced coffee and crunched the few remaining pebbles of ice. "And we get paid pretty well."

"Yeah, but I didn't think money would be the best thing about working. Maybe my expectations were too high, but I expected something different. Something meaningful. And a lot more stimulating."

"This really isn't bad for work. You're doing something you're good at, you're getting paid a lot, people think you're doing a great job." He grinned. "You even get to work with a great guy like me. What else do you want?"

"Good point." Maggie matched his grin. "Why long for stimulating work when one out of every fifty colleagues is wonderful?"

Steve laughed. "It is what it is, Mag," he said. "Your expectations probably were too high."

"Probably." She shrugged. "I'm just feeling disillusioned."

"Got any plans for the weekend that will cheer you up?"

“Actually, yes. My niece’s birthday party is this weekend.” Maggie’s face lit up at the thought of her little niece. “She’s turning four and the party should be a riot. How about you?”

“Going out on the boat.” He rolled his bright blue eyes. “That is, if the weather cooperates.”

“Isn’t it supposed to rain?”

“Scattered thunderstorms. With any luck, they’ll scatter somewhere other than the North Shore.”

Steve owned a boat with three other guys. He complained about it almost as much as he claimed to enjoy it. Taking it out was complicated by the weather, their work schedules, and their inability to get a slip anywhere near where any of them lived. One guy’s father was hooked into the grandiosely named Yacht Club in Wilmette, so the boat was moored there, but that added at least an hour of commuting time to every boating trip.

Maggie’s sister lived in Evanston, not far from Wilmette, and that’s where the birthday party was on Saturday. Maggie did not take the obvious opportunity to suggest she and Steve get together up there over the weekend.

Her continuing hesitation made her think of her best friend Danielle, who was expert at moving speedily with men from eye contact to physical contact. Danielle always said it was a no-brainer, but Maggie had never mastered the ability to shift interactions from the social or collegial to the sexual.

She’d never had to. With Dave, the transition happened of its own accord; with Jake, no transition was necessary. With everyone else, she was typically left with imagination in place of reality. She wasn’t sure if she over-thought or just wasn’t sufficiently interested.

Whatever the reason for her hesitation, Maggie once again said goodbye to Steve without having done anything to

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change the nature of their relationship. He headed east, and she joined the northbound stream of evening commuters heading toward buses and trains.

The wind had picked up, but instead of cooling things off, it pushed the air down the street like a blow-dryer spewing bus exhaust. It's like a canyon, Maggie thought, a canyon of cracked concrete cutting through the steel and marble rectangles of skyscrapers, some hideous, some as majestic in their way as the craggy, granite triangularity of mountains.

No fresh blue-white water flowed through this urban gorge, but it was far from dry. It had none of the arid purity of the gorgeous high-desert canyons she and Dave once marveled over in Nevada. This canyon seemed to have been carved by water that had evaporated incompetently. So much of it still weighed down the air that it was a marvel the soaked result didn't fall to the ground like rain.

Summer in Chicago. It was so much worse than winter. Winter was manageable. You could always make yourself warmer. But summer left you with no options.

Maggie's whole life felt as sodden as the air, and every bit as stalled and inescapable. She had somehow transformed from an able driver of her life into a reluctant passenger in it. But how? It was impossible to trace the path from who she'd been to who she was now; the dots simply wouldn't connect.

She'd originally come to Chicago for a job and a boyfriend. She'd long since quit the job and left the boyfriend. Her current job wasn't much better than the one it replaced, and no one had replaced the boyfriend. Danielle was in New York; Lisa and Keri were her only real friends in Chicago. Maggie spent most of her free time with a bunch of acquaintances who were nearly as annoying as they were entertaining. Nothing had thrilled her in ages.

What on earth was she going to do if everything were still this lackluster when she was almost forty instead of almost thirty?

Her supposedly air-conditioned bus home from work was packed with tired, crumpled commuters. The royal-blue molded seats with their black insets looked so dark and hot that she wasn't too sorry they were all taken. The aisle was also crowded, but she managed to wedge herself into a benign-looking little group. The metal pole she grasped offered one second of coolness before turning unpleasantly sticky under her palm.

Even people's briefcases, purses, and shopping bags looked sweaty and hot. In deference to the purported air conditioning, the windows on the bus were tightly shut. Maggie had a wild moment of picturing the enervated passengers rising as one and using their limp belongings to punch through the glass of the windows. Her lips curved into a smile as the bus lurched forward.

The traffic was terrible, and the bus spent as much time idling as it did moving. The air seemed equally still, so still that Maggie wondered if there were actually enough for all the people crammed into the bus to breathe. With the exception of a woman gabbing in a too-loud voice to her bored-looking friend, people were quiet, as if they, too, suspected oxygen might be at a premium.

Maggie didn't live far from the Loop, and the crowd never unclogged much before her stop. She stood, too wedged in to pull out her vibrating phone, for twice the usual twenty minutes before it was finally time to get off the bus and walk the last three blocks to her apartment.

Heat baked into the concrete by its day under the sun invaded the soles of her shoes and made them squishy. She squinted up at the sky. The high, thin clouds scattered across it

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did not look like they had the energy or the commitment to get together and produce a cooling rainstorm.

The low thrum of the air conditioner greeted her as she unlocked the door to her apartment. She couldn't remember the last time it had clicked off. Once inside, she noticed that the faucet in the kitchen was still dripping perkily, adding its repetitive percussion to the whine of the air conditioning.

The air inside felt humid, too, but it was cooler. Maggie cracked open one of the blinds in the living room and perched on a chair in the resulting slivers of sunlight to check the new messages on her cell phone.

"Hi, it's Beck. Could you come over a little before noon on Saturday? The party isn't until one, but Emily would love to see you alone for a while and I could use your help before the other kids get here. Let me know, okay? Thanks!"

"Yeah, uh, this is Bill at the management company. Sorry, but the plumber got tied up again today. He'll be there tomorrow to fix that faucet."

"Maggie, it's Lisa. Ellen flaked again, so let's go to the sushi place after all. Can you meet Keri and me there at seven-thirty? No need to call if that works. Otherwise, give me a call on my cell. See you later!"

All three messages irritated Maggie.

She usually slept until she felt like getting up on Saturday mornings, then went to the gym and swam or took a yoga class. There was no way that was going to work if she had to be in Evanston before noon.

And what was Ellen's problem? She was always making plans and then canceling. It was getting really annoying, especially when they'd picked the restaurant to accommodate her. Ellen didn't like fish. Maggie could respect, if not agree with, squeamishness about sushi, but how could someone seriously make a blanket statement like that about fish? There

were only about a million kinds. It was like saying you didn't like liquids.

But the thought of eating sushi for dinner cheered Maggie, as did the prospect of walking to the restaurant instead of dealing once again with public transportation or, worse, giving up the great parking spot into which she'd tucked her car the previous weekend.

She took a quick shower to cool off, then dressed in a casual long wrap skirt, tank top and flip-flops. The skirt was multi-colored and she usually wore black with it, but when she reached for a black tank, her hand chose a red one instead.

It was a good choice, she thought, looking at herself in the mirror. Lively. Maggie usually liked the way she looked. She smiled instinctively, then watched the smile in the mirror turn ironic as she became aware of it.

A glance at her phone told her she didn't have to leave for another ten minutes, so she called Becky and promised to be in Evanston at 11:45 on Saturday. Her sister sounded very grateful; she said rather breathlessly that she was extra-busy at work and way less prepared for the birthday party than she needed to be. Maggie doubted there was a single detail left unhandled, but it was reassuring to hear Becky sounding something other than flawless and perfectly in control for a change.

Relaxed and refreshed, Maggie put her phone, wallet, and keys in the cute little red wristlet her mother had sent for her last birthday. It seemed ridiculous to take a sweater, but the sushi place was always freezing, so she grabbed a thin cardigan and went out to meet her friends.

CHAPTER 2

In classic Chicago style, Saturday's weather was not as predicted. The day dawned clear and breezy.

Maggie's trip up Lake Shore Drive to Evanston could have been featured in a promotional video for tourists. The traffic was minimal, and it moved swiftly and competently. Bikes zoomed along the bike path, in and among walkers and joggers dressed in a variety of bright, shiny colors. Beyond them, dainty sailboats dotted Lake Michigan's gently rolling turquoise water.

Maggie wondered if one of the boats was Steve's. The thought flitted away as quickly as it came. She'd driven to Becky's so many times that her little car all but drove itself, and her mind was pleasantly empty. She hadn't bothered to plug in her phone or insert a CD, but she hummed along with the unusually good songs on the radio.

Balloons festooned the graceful front porch of Becky's brick and lannen stone house. Maggie grinned when she saw the mixed bouquets of white, cream, peach, and rose. The balloons for Emily's birthday party matched the house perfectly. The stylish perfection of Becky's world always made Maggie hyper-aware that much of the furniture in her own apartment was in serious need of replacement, her unmatched collection of dishes could easily be characterized as more ramshackle than charming, and far too many of the clothes in her closet were undeniably past their prime.

Even as she admired yet another example of her sister's elegance, Maggie remembered what their mother had said the first time she saw Becky's expensive, large, and painstakingly decorated house. *It's all rather obvious, isn't it*, Nell had murmured, and while Maggie had resented the ugliness of the

comment on Becky's behalf, she also knew exactly what Nell meant.

The house was beautiful, but studied, as if Becky chose things not because she loved them, but to demonstrate that she understood—and could afford—what a certain elite ilk of people found impressive. Her Scandinavian rugs were the ones *The New York Times* raved about in its Style section. Copper pots hung over and reflected the most *au courant* shiny granite countertops in the kitchen. Gorgeous appliances, the right brand names tastefully visible, glowed in, on, and under gleaming dark wood cabinets. In the master bedroom, a pleated, ruched snow-white duvet floated light as air atop a huge platform bed, its sides swathed in rich taupe suede.

Throughout the house, an eclectic mélange of furniture, art, and *objets*, modern and antique, Eastern and Western, all perfectly suited to one another and visually exquisite, lived in picture-perfect harmony. Striking faucets, drawer pulls, light fixtures—every room was stunning, down to the smallest detail.

It was a house in which you felt you ought to keep your shoes on, and that those shoes ought to be expensive and new. Nell's house, the one Becky and Maggie grew up in, was also meticulously decorated, but Nell's taste was more personal and subtle. She had created not a magazine-ready showcase, but a home.

Not that Becky perceived the difference or would have cared about it if she had. Nell's snotty comment would have riled her if she'd heard it, but she would have chalked it up to sour grapes and experienced not a second's doubt about the perfection of her own surroundings.

Becky did not appear to be acquainted with doubt. It seemed to Maggie that her sister couldn't imagine—literally could not and did not consider—that anyone, given the choice, would not choose exactly as she had in every respect. Maggie

admired her certainty. She wished she had the same immunity to doubt and disappointment, the same imperious, blithe determination, the same great luck. Life obliged Becky. She demanded a lot, and she got it. She was fun, too—quick-witted and wry. It was impossible not to envy her. Most people did, and her sister was no exception.

Maggie parked behind Paul's car in the driveway. The irregular dark-peach paving stones curved from the street around to the back of the house, but she was still surprised to see the gleaming Jaguar out of the garage instead of tucked neatly in it, out of sight.

Becky appeared on the back porch just as Maggie got out of her car. Like Maggie, she was wearing shorts, a T-shirt, and strappy sandals, and she still somehow managed to look ready for a photo-shoot. The clothes and shoes bore no tacky labels or obvious logos, but something about them nevertheless communicated good taste, luxurious fabrics, and high prices.

At first glance, the sisters didn't look alike. Becky's glossy, slightly wavy hair was golden brown and cut into a chic, piece-y style that suited her as perfectly as if it had been created exclusively to do just that. Maggie's chocolate-brown hair was similar in texture and shine, but it was longer and bundled into a loose high ponytail, her customary weekend do. Where Becky's face was rounded, Maggie's was angular. Becky's mobile features, along with her posture and gestures, reflected her high-energy dynamism even when she was standing still; Maggie's expressions and movements were calmer, languidly indicative of her less forward nature.

But both women had flared eyebrows and lush lips, lively brown eyes, and wide smiles that showed straight white teeth. Their Midwestern-accented alto voices were identical, and they shared too many facial and verbal expressions to

count. No one spent more than ten minutes in their company without realizing they were sisters.

"Hi, Mag," Becky called. "Thanks so much for coming early!"

"No problem. I'm excited to see you guys!" She gestured toward her car. "Is it okay if I park here or is Paul going out?"

"It's fine. I don't know why he didn't put his car in the garage." She laughed. "Possibly planning to make a quick getaway once the monsters arrive."

Maggie walked up the few stairs to the porch and hugged her sister. "The balloons in front look great."

"Thanks! There are about a thousand more inside." Becky ushered Maggie into the sunny, cool kitchen. "I think I got a little carried away. Including with these damn goodie bags."

She waved at the kitchen table, which was covered with brightly colored small toys, bags of individually wrapped candy, sheets of stickers, and a bunch of other stuff Maggie couldn't identify at a glance. Four or five shiny little paper bags stood upright, already full; a stack of empty bags lay on the burnished dark wood, waiting.

"Want me to finish them?" Maggie asked.

"No, I'll do it. Let me get you some lemonade, then will you hang with Em?"

"I'd love to. No lemonade, though. Maybe later."

"Are you sure?" Already halfway to the fridge, Becky turned and strode to the table. "Paul's getting the family room set up, and Emily keeps running back and forth between us, trying to 'help.' As you can imagine, that's just slowing us down." She smiled. "It would be great if you'd keep her occupied."

"Sure, happy to."

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Maggie strolled through the dining and living rooms, enjoying the clean, sunlit surfaces, and into the family room, where Emily was bouncing around, apparently reviewing her father's party preparations.

"Maggie!" the little girl squealed. She ran over and hugged Maggie's legs.

"Hi, birthday girl!" Maggie picked her up and gave her a kiss. The skin on the child's cheek was soft and hot. Her cheek itself was sturdy and infant-plump even though Emily was spindly. Maggie kissed it again. "Where's your daddy?"

"He went somewhere. Maggie, you know what?"

"What, sweetie?"

"I'm four!"

"I know you are. That's so cool! Are you excited about your party?"

Emily nodded vigorously. "We have a circus cake with animals and toys and ack, ack...ack-ro-bats all over the top!" Her eyes got very wide, and she said seriously, confidentially, as if she were disclosing top-secret information, "It's a very special cake."

"I can't wait to see it," Maggie said, smiling. It was so easy to hear Becky in Em's words. "So what will we be doing at this party?"

Before Emily could answer, Paul reappeared, a bouquet of balloons in each hand. He, too, kissed his daughter's cheek, then Maggie's. "How're you doing, Mag?" he said.

"Hi, Paul! The place looks great."

"Nothing but the best for my girl. Right, Em?"

"Daddy, how many minutes til the party?" Emily squirmed in Maggie's arms, an unmistakable physical communication of her desire to be put down that Maggie obliged.

Paul glanced at his Rolex. "Sixty-seven."

"Is that enough time to play with Maggie in my room?"

"It sure is." Paul smiled at Maggie. "I feel like a cuckoo clock. I've been telling her how many minutes until the party every five minutes for the last two hours."

Maggie laughed. "We'll let you get back to work. Come on, Em."

Emily chattered and led the way upstairs to her toddler's paradise of a bedroom. The furniture was as stylish as the furniture everywhere else in the house, but it was age-appropriate and that, along with a colorful scatter of toys and books, lent the room a cheery lived-in feeling.

"Look!" Emily said, pointing to a miniature easel. It was obviously new: the large pad of perforated paper affixed to its pristine wood was crisp and flat. "It's from Grandpa and My Nell for my birthday."

Maggie exclaimed over the easel, tickled by Emily's enthusiasm and, as always, by her name for Nell. Paul's father was dead, so Hank was just "Grandpa" to Em, but she had two grandmothers. She'd evidently heard the words "Grandma Nell" as "my Nell," and it was what she'd called Nell from the moment she could talk. Nell's daughters suspected Nell liked the name as much because it omitted "grandma" as because it was adorable.

Emily decided to draw Maggie a picture on the top sheet of the easel's pad. "You can color with the crayons I'm not using," she said magnanimously, handing her aunt a coloring book.

Maggie grinned, but thanked her with due solemnity, and gave her a quick thank-you hug. When Emily turned to the easel, Maggie chose one of the few pages in the coloring book with no scribbling on it and pulled a sharp, unused-looking deep-green crayon out of the box. She began to color in her

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picture, absently but with precision, and thought about the first time she held her niece.

Becky and Paul still lived in their condo in the city when Emily was born. The condo wasn't quite as perfect as their house; it bore a few signs of the graduate-school life they were only a couple years beyond. A scarred butcher-block table, purchased at a used furniture store and not yet replaced, dominated the kitchen. Rickety bookshelves wobbled up the wall in the den, inexpertly made by Paul during a brief carpentry phase before he realized he was better at building capital than woodwork. Even with its remnants of imperfection, though, the condo was still the most elegant place Maggie ever went, other than Dave's parents' house, and it had tended to make her wonder if she'd ever feel like a real adult.

How sad to be wondering the same thing four years later. Maggie glanced up at Emily, who was choosing new colors to add to her picture. The little girl did this with extreme deliberation, glancing back and forth between the easel and the box of crayons several times before she selected a turquoise and a bright yellow.

Maggie had noticed very little other than the baby that day in the condo. It was surreal and surprisingly moving to hold her sister's infant in her arms, and Emily herself fascinated Maggie. For someone so tiny, she seemed remarkably complete and self-contained. She slept during most of the visit, even as she was passed from person to person, and she nestled, utterly trusting, into each successive pair of arms. When she awoke, she regarded the faces around her with tranquil, pensive eyes, as if she were observing and considering committing to memory an odd but promising series of tableaux.

Maggie had been sitting next to Dave on a plush loveseat, his arm around her and hers cuddling her new niece. Dave was already tired and thin, but things between them

hadn't yet unraveled. In his warm, relaxed embrace, in the delicate heft of the burrowing newborn, Maggie had felt infused with the certainty and sheer promise of the future.

Strange, she thought, coloring her picture, to be able to recall that feeling so clearly when actual certainty and promise seemed not only so far away as to be entirely out of reach, but also both inexplicable and unrealistic.

She stopped coloring and looked up. Emily's wiry, bristling-with-vitality body and her constant growth and maturation still seemed to prove the positive potential of the future, but separately, in a way that didn't include Maggie. Was it Dave who had imbued her with that sensation of safety and confidence, or if not Dave *per se*, then just the happy fact of being in love? Or was the sensation something innate that she had become unable to access or, worse, lost altogether?

Emily's stance, her shoulders, even the back of her head conveyed single-minded concentration. She was adding something to the middle of her picture. Visible to Maggie were a house on the left-hand side and a tree soaring on the right. The house was a child's standard square topped by triangle, but Emily had rendered the tree with Impressionist flair. Two more or less parallel lines of brown, connected here and there by a few squiggly horizontal and diagonal bridges in the same brown, formed the trunk; bursting out and floating above the top third of the trunk was a large, fluffy halo of dashes in a wide variety of colors. Some of the colors were improbable, but the overall effect was strikingly evocative of height, sturdiness, and leaves whiffing in a mild breeze.

"Emily, your tree is beautiful!" Maggie exclaimed.

The little girl turned, her face shining with delight. "Thank you!" she said. "Now I'm drawing us. We're coming to the house for the party." She turned back to her picture.

LOST WYOMING

How simple to be a child: easily delighted, easily devastated, easily able to get over either and move on to the next thing. Did maturity inevitably dilute pleasure and salt perception with disillusionment, cynicism, and fear? Did it necessarily spark second-guessing?

Obviously, you had to grow up. You had to relinquish pure self-absorption and develop at least some self-awareness. Reflecting on the past and considering the future were essential components of an adult life. But couldn't there be a middle ground, a halfway point between pure delight and jaded negativity, between childlike immediacy and *never* living in the moment?

Surely, Maggie thought, there must be a middle ground even if she couldn't seem to place herself reliably in it. Becky and Paul seemed to have found it. They lived totally adult lives, and yet neither suffered from a disenchanting inability to enjoy or believe in anything fully.

Maggie had originally found Paul hard to read. He was attractive in a beefy, strapping sort of way, and possibly even more dynamic than Becky; together, they dominated every room. Paul had always been friendly, but he had a negligible attention span. He'd ask you a question, then start looking around or fidgeting before you'd managed to utter twenty words. Maggie had often wondered if she bored him.

He'd also seemed too driven to her. His desire to triumph was as evident during a family game of Monopoly as when he talked about work, and his conversation was so loaded with references to money and the other trappings of success that it was impossible not to suspect him of excessive ambition and, possibly, shallowness. Even his enthusiastic displays of affection for Becky had seemed designed, at least in part, to showcase the prize he obviously believed he'd won.

The big-hearted, insightful Paul whom Maggie had grown to love hadn't emerged until the month she lived with them after she left Dave. She had floated through most of that strange month in a state of suspended animation during which real life considerably put itself on hold and demanded very little of her. Without much effort, she'd evaded deep thought and spent her time working, hunting for a new apartment, and having giddy, unimportant sex with Jake.

One night, though, Paul brought home barbecued ribs for dinner. Emily, only a year or so old, was sound asleep in her crib by the time Maggie, Becky, and Paul gathered at the kitchen table to eat. It had become a Winslow family tradition to place one of the empty rib boxes on the floor near the table to serve as a receptacle for discarded bones. No one could remember exactly when this tradition began, and they all agreed it was unsavory, but not even Nell was inclined to give it up. Conversations during takeout rib dinners were always punctuated by the clunk of stripped bones hitting the box.

Becky and Paul were debating something at that particular rib dinner. Both avid debaters with strong opinions, they loved to argue with each other and they had a tendency to forget anyone else was present when they got embroiled in one of their spirited discussions. Maggie and Dave had more than once been cast into the role of audience when the four of them got together.

When Maggie, altogether instinctively, turned to share an amused glance with Dave, his seat was, of course, empty. The impact of the void ejected her from the buffering fog in which she'd spent the three weeks since she left him. For one bizarre moment, as if he'd actually materialized, she saw him lounging in his chair, smiling at her as he flipped a bone into the rib box, an endearing smudge of barbecue sauce on the side of his mouth.

LOST WYOMING

But he wasn't there, and he never would be, ever again. The permanence of his absence smacked Maggie like a physical blow. Her face and her stomach vibrated with shock and pain. She must have made a noticeable sound because Becky and Paul stopped mid-sentence and turned to stare at her, matching expressions of concern on their faces.

"Maggie?" Becky had said. "Are you all right?"

"No," Maggie heard her voice say. "I just...it's...I..." She took a deep breath and put down the rib she was holding. "It just hit me that Dave won't ever be here again."

After a brief charged silence, it was Paul who spoke. "What happened, Mag?" he asked in the gentlest voice she'd ever heard him use.

Maggie looked at him, then shook her head. "I don't think I want to talk about it."

Becky turned toward Paul with surprise when he went back to their debate. Maggie didn't see it, but when her sister nodded and, after another concerned glance in Maggie's direction, countered his most recent point, she realized he must have communicated a wordless *leave her alone* to Becky.

Late that night, sticky with anxiety and unable to sleep, Maggie threw off her covers and got out of bed. The house was dreamily quiet. No city noises disturbed the somnolent serenity; even Becky's air conditioning resisted the mechanical urge to clatter. It whispered into action periodically and breathed peacefully, soft and regular, like a giant, benign animal at rest.

The hardwood floors and thick rugs were smooth and cool under Maggie's bare feet. Propelled by the vague idea of a drink of cold water, she tiptoed down the curved staircase. On the first floor, light flowed out of the office and across the living room. Maggie headed toward it, coughing unnecessarily so her appearance in the doorway wouldn't terrify whoever was in there.

It was Paul. He smiled quizzically, his head resting on his left hand, the pen in his right hand poised over a spiral-bound presentation book. A pool of warm light spilled from his desk lamp.

"You're up late," Maggie said softly.

"Something in these numbers is driving me crazy." Paul put down the pen. "But it's not any clearer now than it was an hour ago. Maybe if I think about something else for a while.... Join me?"

"Sure." She curled up on the upholstered sofa. It was a beautiful piece of furniture, delicate without being fussy, solid but not blocky. It would probably have looked great no matter what upholstery covered it, but the wide navy and cream stripes of the satiny fabric Becky and Paul had chosen made it exquisite. Whenever she sat on it, Maggie felt like a rich and cultured person in a movie.

"Couldn't sleep?" Paul asked.

"Uh-uh."

He swiveled his chair to face her and leaned forward, his palms on his knees. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked quietly.

Maggie wasn't sure she did, at least not to Paul. It might be a relief to pour out the painful thoughts and fears that had up until that evening lurked, incoherent, in some dark spare room in her mind, but she knew she would feel even worse if she started talking and his eyes glazed over.

"Come on, Mag. I'm a good listener," Paul coaxed. "And you'll feel better if you talk it through."

"I'm not sure I can really explain what happened," Maggie began tentatively, as if tilting a full pitcher just enough to dribble a few experimental drops. "In the end, I think we just had very different ideas of what love means, and we lost the ability to make each other happy."

LOST WYOMING

Paul's forehead creased in confusion, but his eyes stayed intent and the expression in them radiated compassion. Maggie's reticence dissolved.

Cradled in the sofa's cool, silky stripes, she let the words pour out. She talked and Paul listened, occasionally murmuring a comment or asking a question. When tears pooled in her eyes and slipped down her cheeks, he handed her Kleenex, without embarrassment or impatience, then hugged her and encouraged her to continue. She knew she wasn't especially coherent, but his eyes never left her face, and his expression never lost the sympathetic determination to understand that she'd seen glowing in his features ever since.

"You know that game where two people have to hold on to something together or it will fall?" she said at the end. "It's like Dave let go. Or didn't realize we were playing." Maggie paused, thinking of Jake, whom she had not mentioned. "Or, I don't know, maybe I was the one who let go."

Paul stretched his shoulders and neck with a small, satisfied sound, then asked, "Does it matter?"

"It might. I'd hate to think I gave up too soon. It was so great for so long. That's the thing. Even as it was all falling apart, it still sometimes felt like before. I miss that. I miss *him*."

"Of course you do. That's not surprising. You guys were together for a long time. But it doesn't necessarily mean you were wrong to leave."

"I was sure leaving was the right thing to do. I thought about it for months and it honestly seemed like the only option." Maggie looked down at her hands. "But now I can't help wondering if I made a mistake."

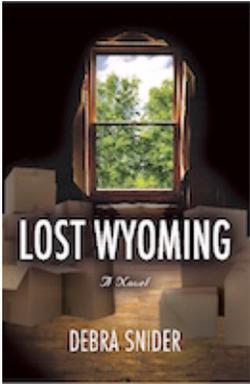
"You know, Mag, all you can do with any decision is gather information, consider all the angles as objectively as possible, and then follow your instincts." Paul's tone, while contemplative, was decisive. "If you did that, then it's done."

There's no percentage in second-guessing yourself. Or in regret."

"I suppose not," Maggie had murmured, but she doubted she would ever possess Paul's intuitive and self-assured ability to put any decision, however intelligently considered and made, entirely behind her and out of mind.

"It's done," Emily chirped, eerily echoing her father's comment from three years before. Em was talking about her picture. In it, two figures had appeared, one tall, one short, both with squiggly brown hair. They stood tantalizingly near the vivid tree and looked extraordinarily lively, as if they might turn at any moment and clamber up its trunk into its sensational leaves. Stick-figure Maggie and Emily had button eyes and guileless smiles that looked as unacquainted with doubt and regret as those of the teddy bears lounging on Emily's bed.

For a moment, Maggie wished she were her two-dimensional counterpart. But then Emily snuggled up next to her and the child's uncomplicated vitality and cuddly little body worked their usual magic. Maggie was pulled back firmly and willingly, if not altogether contentedly, into the three-dimensional present. Within seconds, even her nostalgic discontent was forgotten as she and Emily played together, wholly happy and, as always when in that blissful state, wholly and unmindfully in the moment.



A bright and thoughtful, yet thoroughly disillusioned heroine discovers how family shapes who we are, who we aren't, and who we have the potential to become. When a family crisis jolts Maggie Winslow out of her quarter-life malaise, she takes charge and rethinks the choices and convictions that have kept her from living the life she always envisioned. A heartbreaking, unflinchingly honest, and ultimately uplifting tale about the puzzles we must solve for ourselves.

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