

All the Places to Love by Patricia MacLachlan

On the day I was born my grandmother wrapped me in a blanket made from the wool of her sheep. She held me up in the open window so that what I heard first was the wind. What I saw first were all the places to love: the valley, the river falling down over rocks, the hilltop where the blueberries grew.

My grandfather was painting the barn, and when he saw me he cried. He carved my name—*ELI*—on a rafter beside his name, and Grandmother's name, and the names of my papa and mama.

Mama carried me on her shoulders before I could walk, through the meadows and hay fields. The cows watched us and the sheep scattered; the dogs ran ahead, looking back with sly smiles. When the grass was high only their tails showed.

When I was older, Papa and I plowed the fields. *Where else is soil so sweet?*, he said. Once Papa and I lay down in the field, holding hands, and the birds surrounded us: Raucous black grackles, redwings, crows in the dirt that swaggered like pirates. When we left, Papa put a handful of dirt in his pocket. I did too.

My grandmother loved the river best of all the places to love. *That sound, like a whisper*, she said; gathering in pools where trout flashed like jewels in the sunlight. Grandmother sailed little bark boats down river to me with messages. *I Love You Eli*, one said. We jumped from rock to rock to rock, across the river to where the woods began, where bunchberry grew under the pine-needle path and trillium bloomed. Under the beech tree was a soft, rounded bed where a deer had slept. The bed was warm when I touched it.

When spring rains came and the meadow turned to marsh, Cattails stood like guards, and killdeers called. Ducks nested by marsh marigolds, and the old turtle—his shell all worn—no matter how slow, still surprised me.

Sometimes we climbed to the place Mama loved best, with our blueberry buckets and a chair for my grandmother: to the blueberry barren where no trees grew—the sky an arm's length away; where marsh hawks skimmed over the land, and bears came to eat fruit, and wild turkeys left footprints for us to find, like messages. *Where else*, said my mama, *can I see the sun rise on one side and the sun set on the other?*

My grandfather's barn is sweet-smelling and dark and cool: leather harnesses hang like paintings against old wood; and hay dust floats like gold in the air. Grandfather once lived in the city, and once he lived by the sea; but the barn is the place he loves most. *Where else*, he says, *can the soft sound of cows chewing make all the difference in the world?*

Today we wait, him sitting on a wooden-slat chair and me on the hay, until, much later, my grandmother holds up a small bundle in the open window, wrapped in a blanket made from the wool of her sheep, and my grandfather cries.

Together we carve the name *SYLVIE* in the rafter beside the names of Grandfather and Grandmother, and my mama and papa, and me.

My sister was born. Someday I might live in the city. Someday I might live by the sea. But soon I will carry Sylvie on my shoulder through the fields; I will send her message down river in small boats; and I will watch her at the top of the hill, trying to touch the sky. I will show her my favorite place, the marsh, where ducklings follow their mother like tiny tumbles of leaves. All the places to love are here, I'll tell her, no matter where you may live. *Where else*, I will say, *does an old turtle crossing the path make all the difference in the world?*