

**FIELD NOTES FOR
THE EARTHBOUND**

A NOVEL IN STORIES

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For Karen

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The Earthbound

Joel and Jeremy talked about Kathryn Mueller and the fact that she could fly. When the subject was anything else, anything but Kathryn, they worked like normal boys—ramming points at one another and huffing to conclusions. But Kathryn Mueller talks had gaps. And in the silence between words, each conjured a personal vision of flight. Joel’s was purple. He’d see Kathryn up close, slicing through the air with cool gelatin darkness pressing into her face, the night curling out away from her shoeless feet. Jeremy’s was faraway red. He saw Kathryn from a distance, like a dot arcing over the flatness of Northwestern Ohio and careening toward the Indiana horizon.

Kathryn was the orphaned niece of Bill and Sally Mueller. She had perfect hair for flying, no glasses, and the only green eyes in Blakeslee. She wasn’t overly thick, but she didn’t have the kind of body you’d associate with flying—plenty of bulk in the shoulders and plenty of circumference otherwise. Anyone familiar with Kathryn Mueller lore could dismiss it with a glance. And no one ever saw her fly—at least they didn’t know it if they did. People didn’t say, “Look! Up there! Isn’t that the Mueller girl?”

Not seriously anyway. But Kathryn talked about flying the way others might describe a day at work—going up and surveying the fields, checking on people’s affairs, detecting wind direction and telling anyone who might listen. Once, outside of Thiel’s restaurant, after a quick dinner of meatloaf and sweet corn, she told two younger girls that clouds are like swimming pools, which made them laugh and walk away. And Kathryn gave reports: “Wilma Huddleston sits for hours beside her dog’s grave.” “Jackie Grundon fiddles himself behind his barn. He leans against the side and points it out toward the field.” “Trent Leroy and Janet Brookins meet in the woods just after sunrise. They use a big tree stump.” And so on like that. She didn’t speak with an air of scandal. Her announcements were public notices—notes for the earthbound. But they had social impact. They put people into action. The Huddlestons got a puppy basset hound. Mothers grabbed their children’s arms when Jackie Grundon came around. Bill Brookins divorced his wife and shot the windows out of Trent Leroy’s house.

At the Nazarene Church, Kathryn made for hard work. Denying the claims of some secularist freak or godless Catholic would have been easy enough, but Kathryn was a member of the congregation. Every second or third Sunday, she’d enter the square brick building with her aunt and uncle. She’d parade down the aisle with an aloof sternness that adolescent girls were supposed to lack. Because her parents had died in a fire when she was only five, her abnormal confidence was attributed to shock or lack of guidance or both. After all, Bill and Sally Mueller were good Christians and decent farmers, but they were accidental parents, not the brisk certain types to guide a girl through the manifold opportunities of childhood. They lacked force. Also, Sally Mueller drove too fast. Her powder blue Chevy bulleted

down back roads where only a few, but enough, farmers heard the RPMs howling over the delicate cornfield silence. It was no wonder Kathryn had loose ideas.

Joel and Jeremy were also Nazarenes so they got periodic eye-fuls of Kathryn. They watched her stroll in, make her way to a pew, fidget with her unponytailed hair, and then casually head out the double doors to her aunt and uncle's car. She didn't tuck her chin into her neck like the other girls, nor did she acknowledge the tight-lipped whispers.

On a Sunday in April, when the adults were huddled in a prayer meeting and the kids were milling around in the post-church fresh air, Joel and Jeremy stoked up the courage to ask Kathryn point blank, "When do you normally fly?"

"I normally walk," she said.

"Do you fly at a regular time?" Jeremy asked.

"Do you walk at a regular time?" she asked back.

The boys didn't have the prowess to defend their questions—and neither had an affinity for talking to girls. They waited for Kathryn to walk away or call them something mean. She didn't. Instead, she settled into her spine, looked at one face and then the other with a warm smirk.

"So, what, you just fly whenever you want?" Joel asked.

"Whenever the feeling hits me."

"Do you feel like it now?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"It's only when I'm alone. Usually at night but sometimes in the morning."

They were just about to ask how—to get into the mechanics of it. Joel had the question ready. He was breathing in and forming the first letter when Bill and Sally Mueller emerged from the

church. Kathryn said, “Gotta go,” spun clockwise in the loose gravel, her dress swirling away from whatever legs were beneath it.

In June of 1953, word ran through Blakeslee and on up into Edon after Betty Morris found Kathryn in her hemlock bushes. Betty had gone out to hang laundry at first sunlight—because she believed it made clothes softer—when she saw Kathryn balled up with twigs and needles in her hair. “It was a crow.” That’s what Kathryn said to Betty from inside the bush and what Betty told everyone else. And most of all, the one detail repeated no matter who passed the story on, was the bloody clot above Kathryn’s right eye where the crow’s beak apparently pierced her forehead and sent her falling.

The pious wouldn’t accept it. They reinforced their position, calling Kathryn truly sad. They reminded themselves about poor Betty Morris who’d lost her husband nearly five years prior to a sudden and massive stroke. “All that loneliness,” they said. Others caressed the details of it all and wondered about sharing the sky with birds. As for Joel and Jeremy, they accepted Betty Morris’s report like a news bulletin. They assumed Kathryn was on one of her nightly swoops and heading home at the first hint of pink when a surprised crow kissed her forehead. They imagined Kathryn and crow fluttering downward, each trying to regain composure while feathers twirled after their bodies.

“Crows’re smart,” Joel said. “You’d think he’d gotten outta the way.”

“Yeah, if he’d known what to make of her.”

“And if it was morning, he wasn’t very awake probably.”

“Can you imagine the look on his face just before they hit?”

On a muggy morning, after throwing rocks at a passing train, they decided to investigate—figuring that the crow, being smaller and more fragile than Kathryn, would have fallen to the

ground after the mid-air crash. Out at Betty Morris's, they paced in rows like they were mowing the lawn. Joel took the front, Jeremy the side next to the field. Even a stray feather would have been enough. At one point, Joel thought he found something, a clot of bird parts under a lilac bush, and he called out. Jeremy came running and they stood ready for revelation, but the clot was the tail of a squirrel or some varmint—fur instead of feathers. They went back to pacing and scanning. By noon, they lost their gumption. If the crow had fallen, it wasn't there anymore. A cat or stray dog, they decided, could have come along. Or maybe the crow survived and managed to go about his business. Maybe he got the least of it. Maybe he and Kathryn hit at an angle. Or maybe a quick brush with a human skull wasn't enough, after all, to throw a full-sized and practiced crow into a tailspin.

Back home, a couple miles east of Blakeslee, Jeremy's mother refused to discuss it. She turned the conversation on Jeremy who was probably out gallivanting all day, dreaming up these sordid affairs instead of weeding around the barn. And his father didn't say much. Not that he was ever the conversant type, but he'd gone nearly mute two years back when his older brother put a shotgun to his mouth and pushed the trigger with a stick, apparently unable to overcome the grief of his oldest boy dying in Korea. "The Communists weren't worth it," he'd said before heading into the garage.

At Joel's house, Kathryn Mueller came up only once. A Saturday afternoon thunderstorm had caged them all in the livingroom. Joel was waiting for it to blow past so he could head out into the fields. His older brother, Tom, was watching horizontal rain out the north window. His mother sat crocheting in the rocker, and his father, Dale Krug—famous for drinking, wrecking, punching, and ruining things—stood in front of the screen door with his hands spread above the threshold daring the rain

to come in. Tom said something about the Mueller girl getting blown all over the place. Joel explained that she wasn't stupid enough to be out in a storm.

"You think that girl can fly?" Dale asked.

Joel looked down at the carpet.

"Maybe. Ya never know," Tom said.

When their mother joined in, it was a family talk. "That girl has her own problems," she said.

"That doesn't mean she can't fly," Tom said.

"People don't fly, Thomas. You know better."

"Well, ya never know," Dale said out the screen door. "Ya never really know."

Later that summer, Joel and Jeremy got their second interview with Kathryn. After the last amen, they'd catapulted out of the muggy sanctuary. In the shade beneath the oak tree, they rolled up their church pants and splayed their legs across the grass. They watched Kathryn come down the front steps. She pulled the top of her dress a couple times to move air across her skin, scanned the churchyard, and walked straight toward them. When she got to the shade, Jeremy pushed his pant legs back down.

"Your dad drives the green pickup, right?" she said to Joel.

"Yep."

"Why was he sleeping out on County Road E the other night?"

"I didn't know he was."

"He was sleeping in the back, right there on the side of the road."

"You saw him?" Jeremy asked.

"With my own two eyes," Kathryn said.

"Were you out there or something"?

"That's how I saw him with my own two eyes." She kept looking down at Joel—waiting for him to comment.

He said nothing.

“Well, okay,” she said. “I was thinking the mosquitoes probably did a number on him.”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Joel said.

Bill and Sally Mueller were headed their way, so Kathryn walked off. Joel and Jeremy sat in the fumes of it. They could both imagine a story that would put Dale Krug in the bed of his pickup out on County Road E. Since he’d thrown a pickled egg jar at the muttering owner of Ned’s Bar, Dale had become a migrant drinker. He’d been showing up in different places, in different people’s stories.

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In September, the town’s welcome sign was hit and knocked off kilter. People woke up on Sunday morning to the big blue greeting “Blakeslee: A Half Mile of Smiles” drooping toward the ground. At the Nazarene church, most assumed it was an outsider, a kid from Indiana or Michigan passing through on a Saturday night with his windows down and his head full of rock-n-roll music. Pastor Booth suggested it before service and that settled it.

Like usual, Sunday dinner at Joel’s grandparents’ started at 2:00. It was Joel, his mother, and sometimes Tom. Dale never came. He’d made it clear that formal worship and any church related dinners were his wife’s, not his, form of salvation. And so Joel and Tom sat in the livingroom alone breathing the gravy aroma and waiting for their grandmother’s cue to gather in prayer. Their grandfather had gone to pull the pan from the oven and move the big potato dish onto the table. All the comfort of his grandparents’ house, or maybe the intimate scent of baked

chicken, nudged Joel to speak up—to say what he'd been holding in for over an hour. “Kathryn Mueller said Dad was the one who hit the sign.”

“When'd she say that?” Tom asked.

“Just today, standing out by the church. But don't tell.”

“Why not?”

“I just don't think anyone should know.”

“Why you talking to her anyways?”

“Jeremy and me, we sometimes talk to her.”

Tom kept the secret for about eight minutes. At the table, after prayer and just before putting a fork of potatoes in his mouth, he let it fly. “So I heard who plowed into the sign.” He didn't wait for a response and he didn't look over at Joel. “The old man did it.”

“How would you know such a thing?” his mother asked.

“The flying girl told Joel.”

“And how would she know?”

“Probably just looked down,” Tom said.

Joel concentrated on the chicken. Other than compliments on the gravy, dinner stayed quiet. A month later, Dale moved out of the house for the second time. “And this time,” he said, “I won't be back.”

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In late fall, public discussion about Kathryn Mueller climaxed when she was found face down in a field, her body pressed a good four inches into the mud. Some said she'd climbed the silo and jumped. It was a good theory, given her public musings, but her body was a full fifty yards from the silo and facing toward it, not away. Even if she could jump like a frightened white tail, it didn't add up. Others suggested earthly foul play—all kinds of

fiendish corporeal stories that zipped past Joel and Jeremy's ears. But any rendering that got Kathryn planted into the hardening mud, with no footprints around, didn't make much sense. To Joel and Jeremy, it was clear to anyone who'd admit it: Kathryn Mueller could fly. It was only a matter of why anyone who could lift off the flatland and go shooting through the darkness on her own power would stop over the middle of a field. They wondered what bird, bat, or miscalculation would halt forward movement and let gravity do its terrible work.

"Maybe a sneeze," Joel said.

"Maybe," Jeremy decided.

Dale came back, staggered around for a year, disappeared again for a few months, and returned a final time to drag his family to a listing shack on the outskirts of Edon. While Joel tried to get traction in a new town, Jeremy orbited Blakeslee alone. He started smoking and stopped attending church. Both boys went sailing into the craven world, and they both remembered, in their own quiet, nights of squinting up, almost seeing something bigger than a crow or a goose, but neither ever conjured up the real rush of flying: the flavor of all that air. They didn't imagine Kathryn Mueller keeping her mouth slightly open so the wind could slip in around her teeth and dry out the inside of her cheeks. They didn't imagine how the business of everyday life churns out a lush perfume, how the breath of every person, plant, and animal marries together, works its way upward. They didn't imagine how the sweeter tones cluster just above the trees, how everything goes tart and brittle higher up, or how the best possible mouthful comes from swooping quickly downward from sour into sweetness. They didn't imagine any of that. But they were just kids.