

All That Space and Sky

by [Lorie Adair](#) (June 2026)



Room (Vilhelm Hammershøi, 1897)

The days were endless after the baby was born, and Edie Stark looked at her life through layers of veils, a heaviness about her beyond the extra flesh weighing down the bones. Baby Blues, people called it, as though the condition were a sorrowful song, and all you had to do was lift the needle and change the record to cure it.

“Plain lazy,” Doug chided, taking in Edie’s unwashed hair and set of curtains abandoned on her sewing machine. “It’s a question of mind over matter.” He wondered how she’d had the discipline to excel in honors classes at Bethel High and earn a scholarship, since lapsed, at the University of Florida. One night, he jostled her awake for leaving dishes in the sink. “The baby is seven months old. Enough excuses.” Fine, Edie thought, sinking a fist in her pillow. She would show him.

Next morning, October air swept through the apartment, crisp as a McIntosh apple. Mottled leaves whirled in a New Hampshire sky, scudded with clouds. Fueled by fair weather and Doug’s unkind remarks, a sort of mania overtook Edie. She washed and dried dishes, mopped floors, and vacuumed rugs, pausing to crank the swing and settle the colicky baby. By mid-morning, his face was slack with sleep. Edie looked about the place and wondered, What next?

She craved a shower, longed to exfoliate and rub lotion on her pinkened skin, then use the serum her sister gave her at Christmas, which guaranteed sleek curls in place of the fine frizz that slipped from her elastic band. But what of Riley? What if he woke wild-eyed and frightened? The neighbors would complain again—about her inexperience, the unnerving crying jags, and the inconsolable baby.

A breeze riffled a nest of receipts Doug had left in the nook, scattering them to the floor. Edie lowered the sash and brewed coffee, determined to balance them, and lay to rest this foolish idea that she was lazy. She slit the bank statement open and began.

Edie buzzed along, noting the purchases Doug had made, mostly the coffee-to-go and fast-food variety, frivolous expenses for their tight budget. Easily eliminated if, before nursing Riley each morning, she could rise to pour a thermos of coffee and pack a healthy lunch. These actions would prove her devotion to Doug and the ability to bootstrap her way back to the girl she was before. The Treats receipt, the last in the pile, rebuked such flimsy notions.

Over the Piscataqua Bridge and across New Hampshire's state line, the bar above the Finnish Health Club served overpriced drinks and plausible deniability to customers who solicited the girls below. Locals went as a rite of passage, and navy men to blow off steam, while college boys collected anecdotes for future poker nights. "Remember the one with the huge ass? You should've paid her extra to put a bag over her head."

The guys at the diner where Edie worked knew the score. First, you slipped a fifty to the doorman, then negotiated with management for the wham bam, girlfriend experience, or a little something in between. Edie had choked back a laugh when the new waitress, a university girl, asked the cook about the club's equipment. "Are we talking free weights or Nautilus too?" The cook looked up from scraping the grill. "God, that's cute," he said.

In the nook, Edie lit a cigarette. She squinted at the receipt. What kind of equipment, indeed? Eighty dollars was quite a sum for a drywall installer with a wife and baby at home. With that kind of cash, she could have purchased a month's worth of formula to supplement and loads of diapers. Maybe bought a new bureau or toddler bed on layaway—something Riley would need before they knew it. Didn't he deserve more than hand-me-downs and thrift-shop finds? What a round, generous digit that eight was, a grand snowman with its broomstick dollar sign. Untwist the number and it became zero, exactly what she got from the exchange. More to the point, what had Doug received?

"You don't trust me," he'd accuse if she brought it up. "Think you can nose around in my business?" Even though it was a joint account. Or call her frigid, taunt he could feel the cold Atlantic beneath her skin, and that was the reason he'd crossed the bridge.

It wasn't always this way. Before the baby arrived, Edie and Doug were different people. Days off, they hiked the White Mountains, then stopped for ice cream. One June night, he spread a quilt in a meadow, where they watched meteors flash by. Doug held her tight, both shivering against the damp cotton. A perfect summer romance, that's what she planned to tell her college roommate come fall, bright and fleeting. Then her mother got involved.

"Any relation to the old general?" Regina asked over dinner. She was referring to Major General John Stark of Revolutionary War fame. "Distant," Doug said, then changed the subject. Compared to Doug's pedigree, Edie's full ride barely registered. "It's not like it's Harvard," her mother said. Wasn't she lucky a Stark was interested in her despite her unruly hair and pinched features? Why, this development even outshone her sister's stint in summer stock theater. Regina insisted she bring him round again, and this time, trotted out the good china and linen napkins.

"Botany," Edie emphasized, watching Doug pull into the driveway.

"What of it?" Regina said. "Mulch, harvest, and hunker down for winter. That's all you need to know."

Over coffee and dessert, she asked whether Doug's mother had joined the Daughters of the American Revolution.

"That I don't know," he mumbled. Thankfully, his mom lived in Manchester, far enough that it was unlikely Regina would hunt her down. Doug hadn't lied. A Stark several times removed *had* been involved in his conception. "A bastard," he said.

"Never," Edie hushed. "You belong." The look on his face months later when Edie delivered the news! "Our baby?" he asked. "Of course, our baby," Edie cooed, "Who else's?" Doug tipped his head to her lap. "He'll know his father." "Yes," Edie said. She smoothed his curls and added, "If it's a boy." He said it was. That he was the kind to father boys. During the pregnancy, he caressed her thighs, needing to make love, but worried about hurting the baby. "Nonsense," Edie said. She opened to him and he glided along tenderly, tentative in this new territory.

But now his appetite was voracious, and it varied. Sometimes he wanted a bath, for Edie to kneel before him and knead his skin with baby oil. For the hands-behind-your-back-and up-against-the-wall nights, she gained a gymnast's flexibility. He poked and squeezed, she flicked her tongue, teasing along, hoping to get it over with quick, unable to match the feverish pitch of his imagination.

She crushed the cigarette, twisting long after the ember was out.

At sunset, Doug shambled toward the fridge, pausing to palm the baby in his high chair and graze Edie's cheek. Mushrooms wafted after him, sharp notes from the drywall mud he used.

"Typical," he said to her question about his day. He opened a beer and asked about her day, perfunctorily. He twirled the bottle cap. "Good for you," he said, after she finished. "That's progress."

Edie pasted on a smile. She mashed the baby's banana and banked the spoon to his eager mouth, singing, "Zoom goes the airplane," in the butter-bright voice reserved for him. He swallowed what he could and pushed out the rest, sputtering and squealing for more.

"That's one hungry piglet," Doug said.

"He likes his treats well enough," Edie said. She scooped the mess from Riley's cheeks.

Doug grinned. "That he does."

"What about you?" she asked, managing a breezy tone. "Did you get your treats on today?"

"If you count this." Doug opened a bag of chips from the 7-Eleven. "I know—this little piggie's gonna spoil his dinner."

Edie looked up from the baby's bowl. "Actually, I meant Treats across the river."

Doug rubbed his greasy fingers on his flannel shirt. "Yeah—what about it?"

Edie frowned. Mud from his boots had flaked onto her clean floor. "Details? She plucked the receipt from her pocket. "It's a lot of money."

He tilted back the beer, then said, "Sounds more like a demand than a request."

A bear. That's how he appeared to Edie, his hair shaggy at the collar, legs bulky in his Carhartt pants. "Humor me." She ignored the fussing baby.

A cunning glint stole into Doug's eyes. "I took Benny and the boys out for Happy Hour," he said. "Not," he added, "that I need your permission."

"How do you figure?" Edie asked.

Doug crossed his arms over his barrel chest. He worked full-time, which gave him the right to spend as he wished.

The gall, Edie thought. In one fell swoop, he dismissed the nine-hour shifts she worked, the housework, the milk she supplied for the baby (pumping in the diner's broom closet), the lengths she went to when he fussed—and never a groan or

nudge for help because the last thing she needed was a sleep-deprived husband plunging off a ladder.

"Anyway," Doug said, "it was my turn."

"To treat," Edie said. She pried Riley's fingers from the bowl and nicked the banana before he yowled.

"That's right." He said it in that full-throated way that cued Edie his patience was running thin. But she persisted, even as the hungry baby whimpered for more.

"Of all the places, why'd you have to go there?"

"Why does it matter?"

Because it was her money too, and besides, why go out of his way to cross the bridge for a drink when there were plenty of bars this side of the state line? "I'm not stupid," she said.

Doug smirked. "You mean the massages?"

"Please," Edie spat. She read the papers. The girls' licenses were a joke. And how convenient the town council president was also the club's attorney, who laundered the profits in local real estate. "The whole region stinks of whores," she finished. The room had grown warm, her sweater too tight under the arms. Riley banged his fists on the metal tray.

"I don't know what you're driving at, Edes," Doug said. He flicked stray crumbs from his shirt. "Honestly, you sound a little unhinged."

Edie worked the spoon like a pestle, mashing the fruit to compote. Unhinged, hormonal, acting like a crazy bitch—Doug had a way of doing that, of turning it back on her whenever she was on the mark.

"I'll finish feeding the baby," he said. "Take a walk, why don't you? Get some air."

She'd rather go out with a friend on a whim like he could, raid her closet for something slinky, swing into some swanky bar and order piña colodas tarted up with pink umbrellas. She swung round to her life now, fighting the urge to scream for the crying baby, for all of it, for this rattling of her nerves to stop. But that would only prove Doug right about her moods and give him further license to skirt the truth. She opted for shtick instead, bugging her eyes for the baby, tapping her toes like a vaudeville pro. His breath hitched beneath a watery smile.

Eddie trilled, "All engines go! Captain, take flight!" and slipped the spoon into his mouth.

"Oh," she said, pressing gently on Riley's chin. "Would you look at that?"

Doug leaned forward and gazed at the baby's gums. "Isn't that something?"

The crooked blades of the baby's bottom teeth had broken through. One of the milestones. Before they knew it, Riley would be walking. Eddie smiled. The atmosphere between them lost its charge.

"That whole Treats thing is probably rumors," she allowed. "Take me there and I'll see for myself."

The chip bag fluttered to the floor, and Doug bent to pick it up. Or so Eddie thought. Instead, he was beside her, one hand flattened against the table, the other pinning her chair. The baby wailed, but she dared not move. The scent of mushrooms cloyed. Doug's face was level with hers now, and so close that, were she to brush his collar, gypsum would dust her skin. She knew not to touch him.

"I worked hard today," Doug said, "and I don't need any more of your shit." He shoved her chair, jamming it against Riley's tray. She winced but made no sound. The baby was quiet, too.

Why get married? her sister had asked two summers ago. Why chuck aside a scholarship that could open a whole new world? "This is Bethel," Edie argued. "You know the reason." But it was more than propriety that settled her on marrying Doug. A Stark was a Stark, her mother had said, and a baby in the oven, more icing on the cake.

Night had fallen, and the opaque window caught Doug's reflection. Edie watched him lumber to the fridge and rummage for another beer. Once he'd receded to the den, she turned from the bare window, warm-faced, worried that neighbors, some walkers of dogs, had seen him push her. Her ears tingled from their imagined whispers. "What I want to know is what set him off? Poke a man hard enough and he'll swipe back."

Beside her, Riley squirmed, wanting down. First, she worked the goo from the folds of his face, the sharp surprise to her ribs beginning to dull, the bruise she would find later a violet smudge too minor for ice. "I know, wet and cold," she mewed when Riley arched from the chasing rag. "Almost done." He took her finger into his mouth. She didn't mind. He did that sometimes, clamped down, gummed along her knuckles, the act soothing him. His eyes, a vivid blue, were the same as Doug's, but what of it? She was his mother; theirs an incubated love. His sucking insistence, her playful tug, this was their game—mother, son, mine.

"Oh," Edie cried. Riley had bitten her, the wedges of his new teeth grinding down. "Not nice!" She unstrapped him. Roughly, she placed him on the floor and rubbed her throbbing finger. He hadn't broken the skin or drawn blood, still, she was troubled. She had spoken to him sharply, as if he weren't a baby, as if he could understand. Silly, yet the way his eyes had locked on hers, his teeth sawing back and forth, she thought maybe he could.

Edie collected the bowl, soaped the tray, and set the stew to simmer. Steadily, the baby crawled over the threshold into the

den, toward the scritch of a match and hiss of Doug's cigarette. "Come here, Boy."

"Dinner soon," Edie called. She sat before her sewing machine, catty-corner to the desk now cleared of receipts. She unfolded lightweight cotton, careful of the pins, determined to finish this panel of drapes. Within, whoops and jeers sounded from the TV, an old western, she gathered, a long-dead star with a ten-gallon hat endlessly harassing the natives.

"Unusual," the clerk had said of Edie's choice in fabric. "Most wives go traditional." She pointed to bolts of Yankee blue, slate, and mourning dove gray. But Edie paid for bright cyan, yards enough for every window. She had watched a program about the Navajo and their captivity in New Mexico—force, the only recourse for the unimaginative man. Yet the beauty of that sky, all that light. That's what Edie had soaked in and carried into the store.

At the old Singer, she secured the presser foot to the hem and rocked her shoe gently along the pedal. The machine hummed as she fed the expanse of cloth. On the other side of the plunging needle, stitches appeared like magic. Edie sewed and thought how, even in captivity, those imprisoned women wove whatever cloth they could find, creating dazzling new patterns, and earning money to survive.

A plan begins to form, the needle gaining momentum as it falls in place. Bills skimmed from her tips each day, a double hem and basted seam, all hidden by the love seat in the den. She revs the foot pedal, imagining her escape in a '68 Mustang she will own someday. She speeds into a land of towering clouds and mesas carved by ceaseless winds. Laughing, impossible to find, Edie faces all that space and sky.

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Lorie Adair has been published in several journals, including *Mutha*, *Hippocampus*, and *Terrain*. Her novel, *Spider Woman's Loom*, was nominated for the Southwest Writers Award and the Dana Award. She is a 2025 Pushcart Prize Nominee.

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