

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Barbara
Kingsolver

A Novel

Prodigal
Summer



HarperCollins e-books



Prodigal Summer

A NOVEL

Barbara Kingsolver



 HarperCollins e-books

Barbara
Kingsolver
{ *A Novel* }

Pr o d i g a l

S u m m e r

—*for Steven, Camille, and Lily,*
and for wildness, where it lives

Prothalamium

Come, all you who are not satisfied
as ruler in a lone, wallpapered room
full of mute birds, and flowers that falsely bloom,
and closets choked with dreams that long ago died!
Come, let us sweep the old streets—like a bride:
sweep out dead leaves with a relentless broom;
prepare for Spring, as though he were our groom
for whose light footstep eagerly we bide.

We'll sweep out shadows, where the rats long fed;
sweep out our shame—and in its place we'll make
a bower for love, a splendid marriage-bed
fragrant with flowers aquiver for the Spring.

And when he comes, our murdered dreams shall wake;
and when he comes, all the mute birds shall sing.

— *Aaron Kramer*

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She paused at the top of the field, inhaling the...

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[Predators](#)

solitary habits. But solitude is only a human preH er body moved with the frankness that comes from

sumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life

underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed.

If someone in this forest had been watching her—a man with a

gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees—he

would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path and how

direly she scowled at the ground ahead of her feet. He would have

judged her an angry woman on the trail of something hateful.

He would have been wrong. She was frustrated, it's true, to be

following tracks in the mud she couldn't identify. She was used to

being sure. But if she'd troubled to inspect her own mind on this

humid, sunlit morning, she would have declared herself happy. She

loved the air after a hard rain, and the way a forest of dripping leaves

fills itself with a sibilant percussion that empties your head of

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words. Her body was free to follow its own rules: a long-legged gait

too fast for companionship, unself-conscious squats in the path

where she needed to touch broken foliage, a braid of hair nearly as

thick as her forearm falling over her shoulder to sweep the ground

whenever she bent down. Her limbs rejoiced to be outdoors again,

out of her tiny cabin whose log walls had grown furry and overbearing during the long spring rains. The frown was pure concentration, nothing more. Two years alone had given her a blind

person's indifference to the look on her own face.

All morning the animal trail had led her uphill, ascending the mountain, skirting a rhododendron slick, and now climbing into an old-growth forest whose steepness had spared it from ever being logged. But even here, where a good oak-hickory canopy sheltered the ridge top, last night's rain had pounded through hard enough to obscure the tracks. She knew the animal's size from the path it had left through the glossy undergrowth of mayapples, and that was enough to speed up her heart. It could be what she'd been looking for these two years and more. This lifetime. But to know for sure she needed details, especially the faint claw mark beyond the toe pad that distinguishes canid from feline. That would be the first thing to vanish in a hard rain, so it wasn't going to appear to her now, however hard she looked. Now it would take more than tracks, and on this sweet, damp morning at the beginning of the world, that was fine with her. She could be a patient tracker. Eventually the animal would give itself away with a mound of scat

(which might have dissolved in the rain, too) or something else,

some sign particular to its species. A bear will leave claw marks on

trees and even bite the bark sometimes, though this was no bear. It

was the size of a German shepherd, but no house pet, either. The

dog that had laid this trail, if dog it was, would have to be a wild and

hungry one to be out in such a rain.

She found a spot where it had circled a chestnut stump, probably

for scent marking. She studied the stump: an old giant, raggedly rotting its way backward into the ground since its death by ax or blight.

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Toadstools dotted the humus at its base, tiny ones, brilliant orange,

with delicately ridged caps like open parasols. The downpour would

have obliterated such fragile things; these must have popped up in

the few hours since the rain stopped—after the animal was here,

then. Inspired by its ammonia. She studied the ground for a long

time, unconscious of the elegant length of her nose and chin in profile, unaware of her left hand moving near her face to disperse a

cloud of gnats and push stray hair out of her eyes. She squatted,

steadied herself by placing her fingertips in the moss at the foot of

the stump, and pressed her face to the musky old wood. Inhaled.

“Cat,” she said softly, to nobody. Not what she’d hoped for, but

a good surprise to find evidence of a territorial bobcat on this

ridge. The mix of forests and wetlands in these mountains could be

excellent core habitat for cats, but she knew they mostly kept to the

limestone river cliffs along the Virginia-Kentucky border. And yet

here one was. It explained the cries she’d heard two nights ago, icy

shrieks in the rain, like a woman’s screaming. She’d been sure it was

a bobcat but still lost sleep over it. No human could fail to be moved

by such human-sounding anguish. Remembering it now gave her a

shiver as she balanced her weight on her toes and pushed herself

back upright to her feet.

And there he stood, looking straight at her. He was dressed in

boots and camouflage and carried a pack larger than hers. His rifle

was no joke—a thirty-thirty, it looked like. Surprise must have

stormed all over her face before she thought to arrange it for human

inspection. It happened, that she ran into hunters up here.
But she

always saw them first. This one had stolen her advantage
—he'd seen

inside her.

“Eddie Bondo,” is what he'd said, touching his hat brim,
though

it took her a moment to work this out.

“What?”

“That's my name.”

“Good Lord,” she said, able to breathe out finally. “I didn't
ask

your name.”

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“You needed to know it, though.”

Cocky, she thought. Or cocked, rather. Like a rifle, ready
to go

off. “What would I need your name for? You fixing to give
me a

story I'll want to tell later?” she asked quietly. It was a
tactic learned

from her father, and the way of mountain people in general
—to be

quiet when most agitated.

“That I can't say. But I won't bite.” He grinned—
apologetically,

it seemed. He was very much younger than she. His left
hand

reached up to his shoulder, fingertips just brushing the
barrel of the

rifle strapped to his shoulder. “And I don’t shoot girls.”

“Well. Wonderful news.”

Bite, he’d said, with the northerner’s clipped *i*. An outsider, intruding on this place like kudzu vines. He was not very tall but

deeply muscular in the way that shows up through a man’s clothing,

in his wrists and neck and posture: a build so accustomed to work

that it seems tensed even when at ease. He said, “You sniff stumps,

I see.”

“I do.”

“You got a good reason for that?”

“Yep.”

“You going to tell me what it is?”

“Nope.”

Another pause. She watched his hands, but what pulled on her

was the dark green glint of his eyes. He observed her acutely, seeming to evaluate her hill-inflected vowels for the secrets behind her

“yep” and “nope.” His grin turned down on the corners instead of

up, asking a curved parenthetical question above his right-angled

chin. She could not remember a more compelling combination of

features on any man she’d ever seen.

“You’re not much of a talker,” he said. “Most girls I know, they’ll yap half the day about something they haven’t done yet and

might not get around to.”

“Well, then. I’m not most girls you know.”

She wondered if she was antagonizing him. She didn’t have a

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gun, and he did, though he’d promised not to shoot. Or bite, for

that matter. They stood without speaking. She measured the silence

by the cloud that crossed the sun, and by the two full wood-thrush

songs that rang suddenly through the leaves and hung in the air between herself and this man, her—prey? No, her trespasser. *Predator*

was a strong presumption.

“All right if I just follow you for a while?” he asked politely.

“No,” she snapped. “That wouldn’t suit me.”

Man or boy, what was he? His grin dissolved, and he seemed

suddenly wounded by her curtness, like a scolded son. She wondered about the proper tone, how to do that. She knew how to run

off a hunter who’d forgotten when deer season ended—that was

her job. But usually by this point in the conversation, it was over.

And manners had not been her long suit to begin with, even a lifetime ago when she lived in a brick house, neatly pressed between a

husband and neighbors. She pushed four fingers into her hair, the

long brown bolt of it threaded with silver, and ran them backward

from her hairline to tuck the unraveled threads back into the braid

at her nape.

“I’m tracking,” she said quietly. “Two people make more than

double the noise of one. If you’re a hunter I expect you’d know that

already.”

“I don’t see your gun.”

“I don’t believe I’m carrying one. I believe we’re on National

Forest land, inside of a game-protection area where there’s no hunting.”

“Well, then,” said Eddie Bondo. “That would explain it.”

“Yes, it would.”

He stood his ground, looking her up and down for the longest

while. Long enough for her to understand suddenly that Eddie

Bondo—man, not child—had taken off all her layers and put them

back on again in the right order. The dark-green nylon and GoreTex were regulation Forest Service, the cotton flannel was hers,

likewise the silk thermal long johns, and what a man might find of

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interest underneath all that she had no idea. No one had been there

in quite a while.

Then he was gone. Birdsong clattered in the space between trees, hollow air that seemed vast now and suddenly empty. He had

ducked headfirst into the rhododendrons, leaving behind no reason

to think he'd ever been there at all.

A hot blush was what he left her, burning on the skin of her neck.

She went to bed with Eddie Bondo all over her mind and got up

with a government-issue pistol tucked in her belt. The pistol was

something she was supposed to carry for bear, for self-defense, and

she told herself that was half right.

For two days she saw him everywhere—ahead of her on the

path at dusk; in her cabin with the moonlit window behind him. In

dreams. On the first evening she tried to distract or deceive her

mind with books, and on the second she carefully bathed with her

teakettle and cloth and the soap she normally eschewed because it

assaulted the noses of deer and other animals with the only human

smell they knew, that of hunters—the scent of a predator. Both

nights she awoke in a sweat, disturbed by the fierce, muffled sounds

of bats mating in the shadows under her porch eaves,
aggressive

copulations that seemed to be collisions of strangers.

And now, here, in the flesh in broad daylight beside this chestnut stump. For when he showed up again, it was in the same spot.

This time he carried his pack but no rifle. Her pistol was inside her

jacket, loaded, with the safety on.

Once again she'd been squatting by the stump looking for sign,

very sure this time that she was on the trail of what she wanted. No

question, these tracks were canine: the female, probably, whose den

she'd located fourteen days ago. Male or female, it had paused by

this stump to notice the bobcat's mark, which might have intrigued

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or offended or maybe meant nothing at all to it. Hard for a human

ever to know that mind.

And once again—as if her rising up from that stump had conjured Eddie Bondo, as if he had derived from the rush of blood

from her head—he stood smiling at her.

“There you are,” he said. “Not most girls I know.”

Her heart beat hard enough to dim her hearing in pulses.

“I'm the *only* one you know, looks like, if you'd be hanging

around the Zebulon National Forest. Which you seem to be.”

He was hatless this time, black-haired and just a little shaggy like

a crow in the misty rain. His hair had the thick, glossy texture she

envied slightly, for it was perfectly straight and easy and never would

tangle. He spread his hands. “Look, ranger lady. No gun. Behold a

decent man abiding by the law.”

“So I see.”

“More than I can say for you,” he added. “Sniffing stumps.”

“No, I couldn’t lay any claim on being decent. Or a man.”

His grin grew a shade darker. “That I can see.”

I have a gun. He can’t hurt me, but she knew as she thought these

words that some other tables had turned. He’d come back. She had

willed him back to this spot. And she would wait him out this time.

He didn’t speak for a minute or more. Then gave in. “I’m sorry,” he

said.

“For what?”

“For pestering you. But I’m determined to follow you up this

trail today, for just a little while. If you don’t mind.”

“What is it you’re so determined to find out?”

“What a nice girl like you is sniffing for in this big old woods.

It's been keeping me up nights."

He'd thought of her, then. At night.

"I'm not Little Red Riding Hood, if that's what's worrying you. I'm twice as old as you are." *Twiced as old*, she'd said, a longextinguished hillbilly habit tunneling into her unpracticed talk.

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"I doubt that sincerely," he said.

She waited for more, and he offered this: "I'll keep a little distance, if you like."

What she didn't like was the idea of his being behind her. "My

preference would be for you to walk on ahead, and please take care

not to step on the trail of this animal I'm tracking. If you can see to

keep off of it." She pointed to the three-day-old cat tracks, not the

fresher trail in the leaf mold on the down side of the trail.

"Yes ma'am, I believe I can do that." He bowed slightly, turned,

and walked ahead, his feet keeping an expert's distance from the

tracks and hardly turning the leaf mold, either. He was good. She

let him almost disappear into the foliage ahead, then she took up

the trail of the two males walking side by side, cat and man. She

wanted to watch him walk, to watch his body without his knowing it.

It was late afternoon, already something close to dark on the north side of the mountain, where rhododendrons huddled in the cleft of every hollow. In their dense shade the ground was bare and slick. A month from now the rhododendrons would be covered with their big spheres of pink blossoms like bridesmaids' bouquets, almost too show-off fancy for a wildwood flower on this lonely mountain. But for now their buds still slept. Now it was only the damp earth that blossomed in fits and throes: trout lilies, spring beauties, all the understory wildflowers that had to hurry through a whole life cycle between May's first warmth—while sunlight still reached through the bare limbs—and the shaded darkness of a June forest floor. Way down around the foot of this mountain in the valley farmland, springtime would already be winding down by the first week of May, but the tide of wildflowers that swept up the mountainsides had only just arrived up here at four thousand feet. On this path the hopeful flower heads were so thick they got crushed underfoot. In a few more weeks the trees would finish leafing out here, the canopy would close, and this bloom

would pass

on. Spring would move higher up to awaken the bears and finally

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go out like a flame, absorbed into the dark spruce forest on the scalp

of Zebulon Mountain. But here and now, spring heaved in its randy

moment. Everywhere you looked, something was fighting for time,

for light, the kiss of pollen, a connection of sperm and egg and another chance.

He paused twice on the trail ahead of her, once beside a flame

azalea so covered with flowers it resembled a burning bush, and

once for no reason she could see. But he never turned around. He

must be listening for her step, she thought. At least that, or maybe

not. It really didn't matter.

They reached the point where the old bobcat trail went straight

up the slope, and she let him go. She waited until he was out of

sight, and then turned downhill instead, stepping sideways down

the steep slope until her feet found familiar purchase on one of the

Forest Service trails. She maintained miles of these trails, a hundred

or more over the course of months, but this one never got overgrown because it ran between her cabin and an overlook she loved.

The fresher tracks had diverged from the bobcat trail and here they

were again, leading exactly where she thought they'd go: downhill,

in the direction of her recent discovery. Today she would bypass

that trail. She'd already forced herself to stay away for two weeks—

fourteen long days, counted like seasons or years. This was the

eighth of May, the day she'd meant to allow herself to go back

there, sneaking up on her secret to convince herself it was real. But

now, no; of course not now. She would let Eddie Bondo catch up

to her somewhere else, if he was looking.

She'd dropped down from the ridge into a limestone-banked hollow where maidenhair ferns cascaded from outcroppings of stone.

The weeping limestone was streaked dark with wet-weather

springs, which were bursting out everywhere now from a mountain

too long beset with an excess of rains. She was near the head of

the creek, coming into the oldest hemlock grove on the whole of

this range. Patches of pale, dry needles, perfectly circular, lay like

Christmas-tree skirts beneath the huge conifers. She paused there

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with her feet in the dry duff, listened. “*Nyaa nyaa nyaa,*” spat the

chickadees, her familiars. Then, a crackle. He’d doubled back, was

tracking her now. She waited until he emerged at the edge of the

dark grove.

“Lose the bobcat?” she asked him.

“No, lost you. For a while.”

“Not for long, I see.”

He was wearing his hat again, with the brim pulled low. She

found it harder to read his eyes. “You weren’t after that cat today,”

he accused. “That trail’s a few days old.”

“That’s right.”

“I’d like to know what it is you’re tracking.”

“You’re a man that can’t hold his horses, aren’t you?”

He smiled. Tantalizing. “What’s your game, lady?”

“Coyotes.”

His eyes widened, for only a second and a half. She could swear

his pupils dilated. She bit her lower lip, having meant to give away

nothing. She’d forgotten how to talk with people, it seemed—how

to sidestep a question and hide what was necessary.

“And bobcats, and bear, and fox,” she piled on quickly, to bury

the coyotes. “Everything that’s here. But especially the carnivores.”

She shifted, waiting, feeling her toes inside her boots. Wasn’t he

supposed to say something after she finished? When he didn’t, she

suggested, “I guess you were looking for deer the other day?”

He gave a small shrug. Deer season was many months over and

gone. He wasn’t going to be trapped by a lady wildlife ranger with

a badge. “Why the carnivores, especially?” he asked.

“No reason.”

“I see. You’re just partial. There’s birdwatchers, and butterfly

collectors, and there’s gals like you that like to watch meat eaters.”

He might have known this one thing could draw her talk to the

surface: an outsider’s condescension. “They’re the top of the food

chain, that’s the reason,” she said coldly. “If they’re good, then their

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prey is good, and *its* food is good. If not, then something’s missing

from the chain.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Keeping tabs on the predators tells you what you need to

know about the herbivores, like deer, and the vegetation, the detritovores, the insect populations, small predators like shrews and

voles. All of it.”

He studied her with a confusion she recognized. She was well

accustomed to watching Yankee brains grind their gears, attempting to reconcile a hillbilly accent with signs of a serious education.

He asked, finally, “And what you need to know about the shrews

and voles would be what, exactly?”

“Voles matter more than you think. Beetles, worms. I guess to

hunters these woods seem like a zoo, but who feeds the animals and

cleans up the cage, do you think? Without worms and termites you’d

be up to your hat brim in dead tree branches looking for a clear shot.”

He took off his hat, daunted by her sudden willingness to speak

up. “I *worship* worms and termites.”

She stared at him. “Are you trying to make me mad? Because I

don’t talk to people all that often. I’ve kind of forgotten how to read

the signs.”

“Right there I was being what you call a pain in the ass.” He

folded his cloth hunter's hat in half and stuck it through a loop in

his pack. "And before that I was being nosy. I apologize."

She shrugged. "It's no big secret, you can ask. It's my job; the

government pays me to do this, if you can believe it. It doesn't pay

much, but I'm not complaining."

"To do what, run off troublemakers like me?"

She smiled. "Yeah, a fair share of that. And trail maintenance,

and in August if it gets bad dry they make me sit in a fire tower, but

mostly I'm here watching the woods. That's the main thing I do."

He glanced up into the hemlock. "Keeping an eye on paradise.

Tough life."

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"Yep. Somebody's got to do it."

He nailed her then, aimed his smile straight into her. All his previous grins had just been warming up for this one. "You must have

some kind of a brain, lady. To get yourself hired in this place of

business."

"Well. Brain, I don't know. It takes a certain kind of person.

You've got to appreciate the company."

"You don't get a lot a visitors?"

“Not human ones. I did have a bear in my cabin back in February.”

“He stay with you the whole month?”

She laughed, and the sound of it surprised her. How long since

she'd laughed aloud? “No. Long enough to raid my kitchen,

though. We had an early false thaw and I think he woke up real

hungry. Fortunately I was out at the time.”

“So that's it, just you and the bears? What do you live on, nuts

and berries?”

“The Forest Service sends up a guy with a jeepload of canned

food and kerosene once a month. Mainly to see if I'm still alive and

on the job, I think. If I was dead, see, they could stop putting my

checks in the bank.”

“I get it. One of those once-a-month-boyfriend deals.”

She grimaced. “Lord, no. They send up some kid. Half the time

when he comes I'm not at the cabin, I'll be out someplace. I lose

track and forget when to expect him, so he just leaves the stuff in

the cabin. I think he's a little scared of me, truth to tell.”

“I don't think you're a bit scary,” said Eddie Bondo.

“Truth to tell.”

She held his eye for as long as she could stand it. Under the sandpaper grain of a two-day beard he had a jaw she knew the feel of against her skin, just from looking at it. Thinking about that gave her an unexpected ache. When they resumed walking the trail, she kept him five or six steps ahead of her. He was quiet, not somebody who had to fill up a space between two people with talk, which was

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good. She could hear the birds. After a while she stopped to listen

and was surprised when he did, too, instantly, that well attuned to

her step behind his. He turned toward her with his head down and

stood still, listening as she was.

“What?” he asked after a bit.

“Nothing. Just a bird.”

“Which one?”

She waited, then nodded at the sound of a high, buzzing trill.

“That one there. Magnolia warbler. That’s really something.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, see, because they’ve not been nesting up on this ridge

since the thirties, when these mountains got all logged out.
Now

the big woods are growing back and they're starting to
breed up

here again."

"How do you know it's breeding?"

"Well, I couldn't prove it. They put their nests way up
where

you'd have to be God to find them. But it's just the male
that sings,

and he does it to drum up business, so he's probably got
some."

"Amazing," said Eddie Bondo.

"Oh, it's not. Every single thing you hear in the woods
right

now is just nothing but that. Males drumming up
business."

"I mean that you could tell all that from a little buzz I
could just

barely hear."

"It's not that hard." She blushed and was glad he'd turned
and

was walking ahead of her again so he didn't see. How long
since

she'd blushed? she wondered. Years, probably. And now
twice, in

these two visitations. Blushing, laughing, were those
things that occurred only between people? Forms of
communication?

"So you do watch birds," he accused. "Not just the
predators."

"You think that little guy's not a predator? Consider the
world

from a caterpillar's point of view."

"I'll try to do that."

"But no, he's not the top of the food chain. Not the big bad wolf."

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"I thought the big bad wolf was your game, ranger lady."

"Now *there'd* be a real boring game, in this day and age."

"I guess so. Who shot the last wolf out of these parts,
Daniel

Boone?"

"Probably. The last gray wolf, that's right, just around then."

"There's another kind?"

"Yep. The gray everybody knows about, the storybook wolf.

But there used to be another one here. A little one called the red

wolf. They shot all those even before they got rid of the big guys."

"A little wolf? I never heard of that."

"You wouldn't. It's gone from the planet, is why."

"Extinct?"

She hesitated. "Well. Depends on how you call it. There's one

place way back in a Louisiana swamp where people claim to see one

now and again. But the ones they've caught out of there are all interbred with coyotes."

They kept their voices low. She spoke quietly to his back, happy

to keep him ahead of her on the trail. He was a surprisingly silent

walker, which she appreciated. And surprisingly fast. In her lifetime

she'd met very few men who could keep up with her natural gait.

Like you're always leaving the scene of a crime, that was how her husband had put it. *Can't you just stroll like other women do?* But no, she

couldn't, and it was one more thing he could use against her in the

end. "Feminine" was a test like some witch trial she was preordained to fail.

"But you did say you've seen coyotes up here," Eddie Bondo

charged softly.

Coyotes: small golden ghosts of the vanished red wolf, returning. She wished for a look at his face. "Did I say that?"

"Almost but not quite."

"I said I look for them," she said. The skill of equivocation seemed to be coming to her now. Talking too much, saying not

enough. "If they *were* here, I'd be real curious to see how they af14

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fects the other populations up here. Because they're something

new."

"New to you, maybe. Not to me. I've seen more of them than

a dog has ticks."

“Really?” From the back of his shoulders she couldn’t tell how

he felt about that, or whether it was even true. “New to this place,

is what I meant. They weren’t even here back in Daniel Boone’s

day, or in Indian times.”

“No?”

“Nope. There’s no real record of their ever living here. And

then they just up and decided to extend their range into southern

Appalachia a few years ago. Nobody knows why.”

“But I’ll bet a smart lady like you could make an educated guess.”

Could, she thought. *Won’t*. She suspected he already knew much

of what she was telling him. Which was nothing; she was keeping

her real secret to herself.

“It’s not just here, either,” she added, hating the gabby sound of

herself evading the issue. *Not most girls you know, but just watch*

me now. “Coyotes have turned up in every one of the continental United States in the last few years. In New York City, even.

Somebody got a picture of one running between two taxicabs.”

“What was it doing, trying to catch the subway?”

“Trying to catch a rat, more likely.”

She would be quiet now, she decided, and she felt the familiar
satisfaction of that choice, its small internal tug like the strings
pulled tight on a cloth purse. She'd keep her secret in the bag, keep
her eyes on the trail, try to listen. Try, also, to keep her eyes away
from the glossy animal movement of his dark hair and the shape of
the muscles in the seat of his jeans. But the man was just one long
muscle, anywhere you looked on him.
She set her eyes into the trees, where a fresh hatch of lacewings
seemed to be filling up the air between branches. Probably they'd

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molted out after the rain. They were everywhere suddenly, dancing
on sunbeams in the upper story, trembling with the brief, grave
duty of their adulthood: to live for a day on sunlight and coitus.
Emerged from their slow, patient lives as carnivorous larvae, they
had split down their backs and shed the husks of those predatory
leaf-crawling shapes, left them lying in the mud with empty legs
askew while their new, winged silhouettes rose up like carnal fairies

to the urgent search for mates, egg laying, and eternal life.

The trail ended abruptly at the overlook. It never failed to take her

breath away: a cliff face where the forest simply opened and the

mountain dropped away at your feet, down hundreds of feet of

limestone wall that would be a tough scramble even for a squirrel.

The first time she'd come this way she was running, not just her

usual fast walk but *jogging* along—what on earth was she thinking?

And had nearly gone right over. Moving too fast was how she'd

spent her first months in this job, it seemed, as if she and her long,

unfeminine stride really *were* trying to leave the scene of a crime.

That was two summers ago, and since that day her mind had returned a thousand times to the awful instant when she'd had to pull

up hard, skinning her leg and face in the fall and yanking a sapling

sourwood nearly out of the ground. So easily her life could have

ended right here, without a blink or a witness. She replayed it too

often, terrified by the frailty of that link like a weak trailer hitch

connecting the front end of her life to all the rest. To *this*. Here

was one more day she almost hadn't gotten, the feel of this blessed

sun on her face and another look at this view of God's green earth

laid out below them like a long green ruffled rug, the stitched-together fields and pastures of Zebulon Valley.

"That your hometown?" he asked.

She nodded, surprised he'd guessed it. They hadn't spoken for

an hour or more as they'd climbed through the lacewinged afternoon toward this place, this view she now studied. There was the

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silver thread of Egg Creek; and there, where it came together like a

thumb and four fingers with Bitter, Goose, Walker, and Black, was

the town of Egg Fork, a loose arrangement of tiny squares that

looked from this distance like a box of mints tossed on the ground.

Her heart contained other perspectives on it, though: Oda Black's

store, where Eskimo Pies lay under brittle blankets of frost in the

cooler box; Little Brothers' Hardware with its jar of free lollipops

on the dusty counter—a whole childhood in the palm of one valley. Right now she could see a livestock truck crawling slowly up

Highway 6, halfway between Nannie Rawley's orchard and the

farm that used to be hers and her dad's. The house wasn't visible

from here, in any light, however she squinted.

"It's not *your* hometown, that's for sure," she said.

"How do you know?"

She laughed. "The way you talk, for one. And for two, there's

not any Bondos in Zebulon County."

"You know every single soul in the county?"

"Every soul," she replied, "and his dog."

A red-tailed hawk rose high on an air current, calling out shrill,

sequential rasps of raptor joy. She scanned the sky for another one.

Usually when they spoke like that, they were mating. Once she'd

seen a pair of them coupling on the wing, grappling and clutching

each other and tumbling curve-winged through the air in hundredfoot death dives that made her gasp, though always they uncoupled

and sailed outward and up again just before they were bashed to

death in senseless passion.

"What's the name of that place?"

She shrugged. "Just the valley. Zebulon Valley, after this mountain." He would laugh at Egg Fork if she declared its name, so she

didn't.

"You never felt like leaving?" he asked.

"Do you see me down there?"

He put a hand above his eyes like a storybook Indian and pretended to search the valley. “No.”

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“Well, then.”

“I mean leaving this country. These mountains.”

“I did leave. And came back. Not all that long ago.”

“Like the mag-no-lia warblers.”

“Like them.”

He nodded. “Boy, I can see why.”

Why she’d left, or why she’d come back—which could he see?

She wondered how this place would seem to his outsider’s eye. She

knew what it *sounded* like; she’d learned in the presence of city

people never to name her hometown out loud. But how did it look,

was it possible that it wasn’t beautiful? At the bottom of things, it

was only a long row of little farms squeezed between this mountain

range and the next one over, old Clinch Peak with his forests rumped up darkly along his long, crooked spine. Between that ridge

top and this one, nothing but a wall of thin blue air and a single

hawk.

“Sheep farms down there,” Eddie Bondo noted.

“Some, yeah. Tobacco. Some dairy cattle.”

She kept to her own thoughts then, touching them like
smooth

stones deep in a pocket as she squinted across at Clinch,
the lay of

his land and the density of his forests. Last spring a dairy
farmer had

found a coyote den over there in the woods above his
pasture. A

mother, a father, and six nursing pups, according to local
gossip all

dead now, thanks to the farmer's marksmanship. She didn't
believe

it. She knew how Zebulon men liked to talk, and she knew
a coyote family to be a nearly immortal creation. "Mother and
father"

was a farmer's appraisal of something beyond his ken; a
coyote family was mostly females, sisters led by an alpha
female, all bent on one

member's reproduction.

Fourteen days ago, when she found the den over here on
her

own mountain, she'd felt like standing up here and
crowing. It was

the same pack, it had to be. The same family starting over.
They'd

chosen a cavern under the root mass of a huge fallen oak
near Bitter

Creek, halfway down the mountain. She'd found the den
by acci**18**

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dent one morning when she was only out looking for some
sign

of spring, headed downmountain with a sandwich stuck in her
pocket. She'd hiked about two miles down the hollow before she
found Virginia bluebells blooming along the creek, and was sitting
among them, eating her sandwich one-handed while watching a
towhee through her binoculars, when she saw movement in the
cavern. The surprise was unbelievable, after two years of searching.
She'd spent the rest of the day lying on a bed of wintergreen and
holding her breath like a crush-stricken schoolgirl, waiting for a
glimpse. She got to see one female enter the den, a golden flank
moving into darkness, and she heard or sensed two others hanging
around. She didn't dare go close enough to see the pups. Disturb
these astute ladies and they'd be gone again. But the one she saw
had a nursing mother's heavy teats. The others would be her sisters,
helping to feed the young. The less those Zebulon Valley farmers
knew about this family, the better.
Eddie Bondo clobbered her thoughts. The nylon of his sleeve
was touching hers, whispering secrets. She was called back hard into

her body, where the muscles of her face felt suddenly large
and

dumb as she stared at the valley but tried to find his profile
in her

peripheral vision. Did he know that the touch of his sleeve
was so

wildly distracting to her that it might as well have been his
naked

skin on hers? How had she come to this, a body that had
lost all

memory of human touch—was that what she'd wanted?
The divorce hadn't been her choice, unless it was true what he
said, that

her skills and preference for the outdoors were choices a
man had

to leave. An older husband facing his own age badly and
suddenly

critical of a wife past forty, that was nothing she could
have helped.

But this assignment way up on Zebulon, where she'd lived
in perfect isolation for twenty-five months—yes. That was her
doing. Her

proof, in case anyone was watching, that she'd never
needed the

marriage to begin with.

“Sweet,” he said.

And she wondered, what? She glanced at his face.

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He glanced back. “Did you ever see a prettier sight than
that

right there?”

“Never,” she agreed. Her home ground.

Eddie Bondo’s fingertips curled under the tips of hers, and he

was holding her hand, just like that. Touching her as if it were the

only possible response to this beauty lying at their feet. A pulse of

electricity ran up the insides of her thighs like lightning ripping up

two trees at once, leaving her to smolder or maybe burst into

flames.

“Eddie Bondo,” she tried out loud, carefully looking away from

him, out at the sky-blue nothing ahead. “I don’t know you from

Adam. But you could stay one night in my cabin if you didn’t want

to sleep in the woods.”

He didn’t turn loose of her fingers after that.

Together they took the trail back into the woods with this new

thing between them, their clasped hands, alive with nerve endings

like some fresh animal born with its own volition, pulling them forward. She felt as if all her senses had been doubled as she watched

this other person, and watched what he saw. He ducked under low

branches and held them with his free hand so they wouldn’t snap

back in her face. They were moving close together, suddenly seeing

for the first time today the miracle that two months of rain
and two

days of spring heat could perform on a forest floor. It had
burst out

in mushrooms: yellow, red, brown, pink, deadly white,
minuscule,

enormous, delicate, and garish, they painted the ground
and ran up

the sides of trees with their sudden, gilled flesh. Their
bulbous

heads pushed up through the leaf mold, announcing the
eroticism

of a fecund woods at the height of spring, the beginning of
the

world. She knelt down in the leaf mold to show him
adder's

tongue, tiny yellow lilies with bashful back-curved petals
and leaves

mottled like a copperhead's back. He reached down beside
her

knees to touch another flower she'd overlooked and nearly
crushed.

"Look at this," he said.

"Oh, *look* at that," she echoed almost in a whisper. "A
lady's

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slipper." The little pink orchid was growing here where she
knew it

ought to be, where the soil was sweetened by pines. She
moved

aside to spare it and saw more like it, dozens of delicately
wrinkled

oval pouches held erect on stems, all the way up the ridge.
She

pressed her lips together, inclined to avert her eyes from so
many

pink scrota.

“Who named it *that*?” he asked, and laughed—they both
did—

at whoever had been the first to pretend this flower looked
like

a lady’s slipper and not a man’s testicles. But they both
touched

the orchid’s veined flesh, gingerly, surprised by its cool
vegetable

texture.

“The bee must go in here,” she said, touching the opening
below the crown of narrow petals where the pollinator would
enter

the pouch. He leaned close to look, barely brushing her
forehead

with the dark corona of his hair. She was surprised by his
interest in

the flower, and by her own acute physical response to his
body held

so offhandedly close to hers. She could smell the washed-
wool scent

of his damp hair and the skin above his collar. This dry
ache she felt

was deeper than hunger—more like thirst. Her heart beat
hard and

she wondered, had she offered him a dry place to sleep,
was that

what he thought? Was that really all she had meant? She
was not

sure she could bear all the hours of an evening and a night
spent

close to him in her tiny cabin, wanting, not touching.
Could not

survive being discarded again as she had been by her
husband at the

end, with his looking through her in the bedroom for his
glasses or

his keys, even when she was naked, her body a mere
obstruction,

like a stranger in a theater blocking his view of the movie.
She was

too old, about to make a fool of herself, surely. This Eddie
Bondo

up close was a boy, ferociously beautiful and not
completely out of

his twenties.

He sat back and looked at her, thinking. Surprised her
again

with what he said. “There’s something up north like this,
grows in

the peat bogs.”

She felt unsettled by each new presence of him, the
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tions of his voice, the look of his fingers as they touched
this flower,

his knowledge of peat bogs she had never seen. She
couldn’t take

her eyes from the close white crescents of his nails at the
tips of his

fingers, the fine lines in his weathered hands. She had to
force herself to speak.

“Lady’s slippers up there? Where, in Canada?”

“It’s not this same flower, but it traps bugs. The bee smells something sweet and goes inside and then he’s trapped in there unless he can find the one door out. So he’ll spread the pollen over the

place where the flower wants it. Just like this, look here.”

She bent to see, aware of her own breathing as she touched the

small, raised knob where this orchid would force its pollinator to

drag his abdomen before allowing him to flee for his life. She felt a

sympathetic ache in the ridge of her pubic bone.

How could she want this stranger? How was it reasonable to do

anything now but stand up and walk away from him? But when he

bent his face sideways toward hers she couldn’t stop herself from

laying a hand on his jaw, and that was enough. The pressure of his

face against hers moved her slowly backward until they lay together

on the ground, finally yielding to earthly gravity. Crushing orchids

under their bodies, she thought vaguely, but then she forgot them

for it seemed she could feel every layer of cloth and flesh and bone

between his body and her thumping heart, the individual follicles of

his skin against her face, even the ridges and cracks in his lips when

they touched her. She closed her eyes against the
overwhelming

sensations, but that only made them more intense, in the
same way

closed eyes make dizziness more acute. She opened her
eyes then, to

make this real and possible, that they were kissing and
lying down

in the cold leaves, falling together like a pair of hawks, not
plummeting through thin air but rolling gradually downhill
over adder's

tongues and poisonous *Amanitas*. At the bottom of the hill
they

came to rest, his body above hers. He looked down into her
eyes as

if there were something behind them, deep in the ground,
and he

pulled brown beech leaves from her hair.

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“What about that. Look at you.”

“I can't.” She laughed. “Not for years. I don't have a
mirror in

my cabin.”

He pulled her to her feet and they walked for several
minutes in

stunned silence.

“The head of the jeep road's here,” she pointed out when
they

came to it. “My cabin's just up ahead, but that road runs
straight

downhill to the little town down there. If that's what you were

looking for, the way out."

He stood looking downhill, briefly, then turned her shoulders

gently to face him and took her braid in his hand. "I was thinking

I'd found what I was looking for."

Her eyes moved to the side, to unbelief, and back. But she let

herself smile when his hands moved to her chest and began to part

the layers of clothing that all seemed to open from that one place

above her heart. He peeled back her nylon jacket, slipped it off her

shoulders down to her bent elbows.

"Finding's not the same as looking," she said, but there was the

scent of his hair again and his collar as he laid his mouth against her

jawbone. That wool intoxication made her think once again of

thirst, if she could name it something, but a thirst of eons that no

one living could keep from reaching to slake, once water was at

hand. She worked her elbows free of her jacket and let it drop into

the mud, raised her hands to the zipper of his parka, and rolled the

nylon back from him like a shed skin. Helping this new thing

emerge, whatever it was going to be. They moved awkwardly the

last hundred yards toward her cabin, refusing to come apart, trailing

their packs and half their nylon layers.

She let go of him then and sat down on the planks at the unsheltered edge of her porch to pull off her boots.

“This where you live?”

“Yep,” she said, wondering what else needed to be said. “Me

and the bears.”

He sat next to her and brought his finger to her lips. No more

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talking about this, he seemed to be saying—but they had never

talked about *this*, she was still not sure it was real. He guided her

shoulders to the floor and lay next to her, stroking her face, unbuttoning her undershirt and touching her under her clothes, moving

down, finding her, until it was only his mouth on hers that stopped

her from crying out. She arched her back and slid her weapon gently out and away across the floorboards. This was all much too fast,

her pelvis arched itself up again and she did cry out then, just a

woman’s small moan, and she had to pull away to keep from losing

herself to him completely. She opened her eyes and caught sight of

her pistol at the edge of the porch, aiming mutely down the valley

with its safety on. The last shed appendage of her fear.

Carefully she took both his hands off of her, raised them above

his shoulders, and rolled over him and pinned him like a wrestler.

Straddling his thighs this way, looking down on his face, she felt

stunned to her core by this human presence so close to her. He

smiled, that odd parenthetic grin she already knew to look for. *It's*

that simple, then, she thought. *It's that possible*. She bent down to him,

tasting the salt skin of his chest with the sensitive tip of her tongue,

and then exploring the tight drum of his abdomen. He shuddered

at the touch of her warm breath on his skin, giving her to know

that she could take and own Eddie Bondo. It was the body's decision, a body with no more choice of its natural history than an orchid has, or the bee it needs, and so they would both get lost here,

she would let him in, anywhere he wanted to go. In the last full

hour of daylight, while lacewings sought solace for their brief lives

in the forest's bright upper air, and the husk of her empty nylon

parka lay tangled with his in the mud, their two soft-skinned bodies completed their introductions on the floor of

her porch. A

breeze shook rain out of new leaves onto their hair, but in their

pursuit of eternity they never noticed the chill.

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It seemed to take forever, afterward in the thickening twilight, to

recover her resting heartbeat. He lay looking past her into the darkened woods, apparently untroubled by his own heart. Thrushes

were singing, it was that late. A wind kicked up, shaking more raindrops out of the trees to ring like buckshot on the cabin's tin roof

and scald the naked parts of their bodies with cold. She studied a

drop of water that hung from his earlobe, caught in the narrowest

possible sliver of a gold ring that penetrated his left ear. Could he

possibly be as beautiful as he seemed to her? Or was he just any

man, a bone thrown to her starvation?

With his left hand he worked out some of the tangles his handiwork had put into her hair. But he was still looking away; the

hand moved by itself, without his attention. She wondered if he

worked with animals or something.

Coming back from someplace he'd been, he moved his eyes to

her face. "Hey, pretty girl. Do you have a name?"

“Deanna.”

He waited. “Deanna and that’s all?”

“Deanna and I’m not sure of the rest.”

“Now that’s different: the girl with no last name just yet.”

“I’ve got one, but it’s my husband’s— *was* my husband’s. Or it *is*,

but *he* was.” She sat up and shivered, watching him stand to pull his

jeans on. “You wouldn’t know, but it leaves you in a quandary. That

name is nothing to me now, but it’s still yet stuck all over my life, on

my driver’s license and everything.”

“ ‘Still yet,’ ” he mocked, smiling at her, considering her words.

“That’s the male animal for you. Scent marking.”

She had a good laugh at that. “That’s it. Put his territorial mark

on everything I owned, and then walked away.”

Amazingly, Eddie Bondo walked to the end of her porch and

peed over the edge. She didn’t realize it until she heard the small,

sudden spatter hitting the leaves of the mayapples and Christmas

fern. “Oh, good Lord,” she said.

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He turned to look at her over his shoulder, surprised. “What?”

Sorry.” His arc declined and dribbled out, and he tucked himself

away.

She said quietly, “You’re still in my territory.”

Deanna had been chaste through her teens, too shy for the rituals

of altered appearance that boys seemed to require and, lacking a

mother, too far outside the game to learn. When she went away to

college she found herself taken in and mentored by much older

men—professors, mainly—until she married one. Her farm-bred

worldliness, her height, her seriousness— *something*—had caused her

to skip a generation ahead. She’d never before known what men in

their late twenties had to offer. Eddie Bondo knew what he was doing and had the energy to pursue the practice of making perfect.

They didn’t get any sleep between dusk and dawn.

It was first light before she recovered the calm or belated contrition to wonder what she might have lost here—other than, momentarily, her mind. She knew that most men her age and most

other animals had done this. The collision of strangers. Or not

strangers, exactly, for they’d had their peculiar courtship: the display,

the withdrawal, the dance of a three-day obsession. But the sight of

him now asleep in her bed made her feel both euphoric and deeply

unsettled. Her own nakedness startled her, even; she normally slept

in several layers. Awake in the early light with the wood thrushes,

feeling the texture of the cool sheet against her skin, she felt as

jarred and disjunct as a butterfly molted extravagantly from a dun-colored larva and with no clue now where to fly.

From the look of his pack she guessed he was a homeless sort,

out for the long tramp, and she wondered miserably if she'd coupled herself with someone notorious. By late morning, though,

she'd gathered otherwise. He rose calm and unhurried and began

carefully removing items from his pack and stacking them in organized piles on the floor as he searched out clean clothes and a razor.

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A criminal wouldn't take the time to shave, she decided. His pack

appeared to be a respectable little home: medicine cabinet, pantry,

kitchen. He had a lot of food in there, even a small coffeepot. He

found a place to prop his small shaving mirror at an angle on one

of the logs in the wall while he scraped the planes of his face one

square inch at a time. She tried not to watch. Afterward he moved

around her cabin with the confidence of an invited guest, whistling,

going quiet only when he studied the titles of her books.

Theory

of Population Genetics and Evolutionary Ecology: that kind of thing

seemed to set him back a notch, if only briefly.

His presence filled her tiny cabin so, she felt distracted trying to

cook breakfast. Slamming cupboards, looking for things in the

wrong places, she wasn't used to company here. She had only a single ladderback chair, plus the old bedraggled armchair out on the

porch with holes in its arms from which phoebes pulled white

shreds of stuffing to line their nests. That was all. She pulled the ladderback chair away from the table, set its tall back against the logs of

the opposite wall, and asked him to sit, just to get a little space

around her as she stood at the propane stove scrambling powdered

eggs and boiling water for the grits. Off to his right stood her ironframed cot with its wildly disheveled mattress, the night table piled

with her books and field journals, and the kerosene lantern they'd

nearly knocked over last night in some mad haste to burn themselves down.

At some point they'd also let the fire in the wood stove go out,

and the morning was cold. It would be July before mornings broke

warm, up here at this elevation. When she brought over two plates

of eggs, he stood to give her the chair, and she huddled there with

her knees tucked into her flannel gown, shivering, watching him

through the steam above her coffee cup. He moved to the window

and stood looking out while he ate. He was five foot six, maybe.

Not only younger but half a head shorter than she.

"No offense," she observed, "but guys of your height usually

get away from me as fast as humanly possible."

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"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. They kindly like to *glare* at me from the far side of the

room. It's like being tall is this insult I arranged for them personally."

He paused his fork to look at her. "No offense, Miss Deanna,

but you've been consorting with too many worms and voles." She

laughed, and he angled a grin at her, a trout fisherman casting his

fly. “You’re what we western boys call a long drink of water.”

He seemed to mean it. Her long thighs and feet and forearms—

all her dimensions, in fact—seemed to be things he couldn’t get

enough of. That was amazing. That, she appreciated. It was his

youth that made her edgy. She suppressed the urge to ask if his

mother knew where he was. The most she allowed herself was the

question of his origins. “Wyoming” was his answer. A sheep rancher,

son of three generations of sheep ranchers. She did not ask what

might bring a Wyoming sheep rancher to the southern Appalachians

at this time of year. She had a bad feeling she knew.

So she looked past his lure, through the window to the woods

outside and the bright golden Io moth hanging torpid on the window screen. The creature had finished its night of moth foraging or

moth love and now, moved by the first warmth of morning, would

look for a place to fold its wings and wait out the useless daylight

hours. She watched it crawl slowly up the screen on furry yellow

legs. It suddenly twitched, opening its wings to reveal the dark eyes

on its underwings meant to startle predators, and then it
flew off to

some safer hideout. Deanna felt the same impulse to bolt—
to flee

this risky mate gleaned from her forest.

A sheep rancher. She knew the hatred of western ranchers
toward coyotes; it was famous, maybe the fiercest human-
animal

vendetta there was. It was bad enough even here on the
tamer

side of the Mississippi. The farmers she'd grown up
among would

sooner kill a coyote than learn to pronounce its name. It
was a dread

built into humans via centuries of fairy tales: give man the
run of a

place, and he will clear it of wolves and bears. Europeans
had killed

theirs centuries ago in all but the wildest mountains, and
maybe

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even those holdouts were just legend by now. Since the
third grade,

when Deanna Wolfe learned to recite the Pledge and to
look up

“wolf” in the *World Book Encyclopedia*, she'd loved
America because

it was still young enough that its people hadn't wiped out
all its

large predators. But they were working on that, for all they
were

worth.

“You had a rifle,” she said. “The other day. A thirty-thirty,
it

looked like. Where is it now?”

“I stashed it,” he said, simple as that. He was clean-shaven,
barechested, and cheerful, ready to eat up powdered eggs and
whatever

else she offered. His gun was hiding somewhere nearby
while his

beautiful, high-arched feet moved around her cabin floor
with pure

naked grace. It occurred to Deanna that she was in deep.

What might bring a Wyoming sheep rancher to the
southern

Appalachians at this time of year was the Mountain
Empire Bounty

Hunt, organized for the first time this year. It’d been held
recently,

she knew, around the first day of May—the time of
birthing and

nursing, a suitable hunting season for nothing in this world
unless

the goal was willful extermination. It had drawn hunters
from

everywhere for the celebrated purpose of killing coyotes.

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[{2}](#).

[Moth Love](#)

furtively—the only way a farmer’s wife may read, it
Lusa was alone, curled in an armchair and reading
turns out—when the power of a fragrance stopped
all her thoughts. In the eleventh hour of the ninth day of
May, for
one single indelible instant that would change everything,
she was
lifted out of her life.

She closed her eyes, turning her face to the open window
and
breathing deeply. Honeysuckle. Lusa shut the book on her
index
finger. Charles Darwin on moths, that was what she’d been
lost in:

a description of a virgin *Saturnia carpini* whose scent
males flocked
to till they covered her cage, with several dozen even
crawling

down Mr. Darwin’s chimney to find her. Piles of Lusa’s
books on
the floor were shoved halfway out of sight behind this old
overstuffed chair, the only spot in the house she had claimed
as her own.

When she first moved in she’d dragged this chair, a strange
thing

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upholstered in antique green brocade, across the big
bedroom to the

tall, south-facing window, for the light. Now she leaned
forward in

her seat and moved her head a little to see out through the
dusty

screen. Far away at the opposite edge of the hayfield her eye caught

on Cole's white T-shirt and then made out the rest of him there, the

forward-arching line of his body. He was leaning out from the tractor seat, breaking off a branch of honeysuckle that had climbed into

the cedary fencerow high enough to overhang the edge of the field.

Maybe that plume of honeysuckle was just in his way. Or maybe he

was breaking it off to bring back to Lusa. She liked to have a fresh

spray in a jar above the kitchen sink. Survival here would be possible if only she could fill the air with scent and dispatch the stern female ghosts in that kitchen with the sweetness of an unabashed,

blooming weed.

Cole was nearly a quarter of a mile away across the bottom field, tilling the ground where they'd soon set tobacco. It seemed

unbelievable that his disturbance of the branch could release a burst

of scent that would reach her here at the house, but the breeze was

gentle and coming from exactly the right direction. People in

Appalachia insisted that the mountains breathed, and it was true:

the steep hollow behind the farmhouse took up one long, slow inhalation every morning and let it back down through their open

windows and across the fields throughout evening—just one full,

deep breath each day. When Lusa first visited Cole here she'd listened to talk of mountains breathing with a tolerant smile. She had

some respect for the poetry of country people's language, if not for

the veracity of their perceptions: mountains breathe, and a snake

won't die till the sun goes down, even if you chop off its head. If a

snapping turtle gets hold of you, he won't let go till it thunders. But

when she married Cole and moved her life into this house, the inhalations of Zebulon Mountain touched her face all morning, and

finally she understood. She learned to tell time with her skin, as

morning turned to afternoon and the mountain's breath began to

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bear gently on the back of her neck. By early evening it was insistent as a lover's sigh, sweetened by the damp woods, cooling her

nape and shoulders whenever she paused her work in the kitchen to

lift her sweat-damp curls off her neck. She had come to think of

Zebulon as another man in her life, larger and steadier than any

other companion she had known.

But now there was her husband across the field, breaking
off the
honeysuckle branch to bring back to her. She was sure of
it, for he'd
tucked it between his thigh and the padded seat of the
Kubota. Its
cloud of white flowers trembled as he bounced across the
plowed
field, steering the tractor with both hands. His work on the
lower
side was nearly done. When he returned to the house for
his latemorning coffee and "dinner," as she was learning to
call the midday
meal, she would put the honeysuckle branch in water.
Maybe they
could talk then; maybe she would put soup and bread on
the table
and eat her bitter words from earlier this morning. They
argued
nearly every day, but today had already been one of their
worst.
This morning at breakfast she'd nearly made up her mind
to leave.
This morning, he had wanted her to. They had used all the
worst
words they knew. She closed her eyes now and inhaled.
She could
have just let him laugh, instead, at her fondness for this
weedy vine
that farmers hated to see in their fencerows.
This week's gardening column in the paper was devoted to
the

elimination of honeysuckle. That had been the jumping-off point

for their argument:

“Be vigilant! The project will require repeated applications of

a stout chemical defoliant,” she’d read aloud in her version of a stupid, exaggerated mountain burr that she knew would annoy Cole.

But how could she help herself? It was the county Extension agent

who wrote this awful column called “Gardening in Eden,” whose

main concern, week after week, was with murdering things. It

stirred up her impatience with these people who seemed determined to exterminate every living thing in sight.

Grubbing out

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wild roses, shooting blue jays out of cherry trees, knocking phoebe

nests out of the porch eaves to keep the fledglings from messing on

the stairs: these were the pastimes of Zebulon County, reliable as

the rituals of spring cleaning.

And he had said, “If you’re making fun of Zebulon County,

you’re making fun of me, Lusa.”

“*This* I need to be told?” she’d snapped. As if, sitting in this

kitchen where she felt the disapproving presence of his dead mother,

she could forget where he'd grown up. Cole was the youngest of six

children, with five sisters who'd traveled no farther than the bottom of the hollow, where Dad Widener had deeded each daughter

an acre on which to build a house when she married, meanwhile

saving back the remainder of the sixty-acre farm for his only

son, Cole. The family cemetery was up behind the orchard. The

Wideners' destiny was to occupy this same plot of land for their

lives and eternity, evidently. To them the word *town* meant Egg

Fork, a nearby hamlet of a few thousand souls, nine churches, and

a Kroger's. Whereas Lusa was a dire outsider from the other side of

the mountains, from *Lexington*—a place in the preposterous distance. And now she was marooned behind five sisters-in-law who

flanked her gravel right-of-way to the mailbox.

Silently then, after snapping at him, she'd watched Cole eat his

breakfast for a while before slapping down the offending newspaper

and getting up to face her work, stepping out the kitchen door to

retrieve yesterday's milk from the cool back porch. She was still in

her slippers and seersucker nightshirt at that point; they hadn't been

out of bed for an hour yet, and the fog was still lifting
above the

creek. An Io moth rested on the screen, her second-favorite
moth,

whose surprising underwings were the same pinkish gold
as her

hair. (Her favorite would always be *Actias luna*, ethereal
green ghost

of the upper forests.) “Worn out from your big night of
love,” she

scolded, “that’s what you get”—but of course he’d had no
choice.

All the giant silkworm family, the Ios and lunas she
admired, did

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their eating as caterpillars and as adult moths had no
mouths. What

mute, romantic extravagance, Lusa thought: a starving
creature racing with death to scour the night for his mate.

She picked up the milk and handled it carefully, noting that
it

was nicely set, ready to separate. There wasn’t but a
gallon. They

kept only one milk cow for the homemade butter and
cream Cole

liked, and milked her only in the evenings now. Lusa had
shocked

everyone with her proposal of eliminating the inconvenient
four

A.M. milking by putting up the cow with her calf in the
barn

overnight. She could even pasture mother and calf together and skip

milking altogether if she needed to drive to Lexington for a weekend (did it take a scientist to think of this?). On days when Lusa

wanted to milk, they simply pushed the calf into a pasture separate

from his mother so her udder would be full by evening. Cole's sisters

disapproved of this easy arrangement, but Lusa felt smug. If they'd

spent their girlhoods as slaves to the twice-daily milkings, that was

not Lusa's problem. She had her own ways of doing a thing. She'd

neatly mastered the domestic side of farming in less than a year, and

Cole loved her cooking more than he'd loved his mother's. Now, as

she stood at the sink dipping the skimmer and watching the cream

flow smoothly over the rim in a stream so thin it was nearly green,

she had an inspiration: fat bouquets of savoy spinach stood ready for

picking in her backdoor garden. Sautéed in butter with sliced mushrooms, a bay leaf, and this cream, they'd make for a fragrant, sensuous soup Cole would love. She could have it ready by noon when he

came in for his dinner. She would concentrate on soup, then, and try

to let this argument go by.

But Cole wouldn't do it. "Why don't *you* write the garden column for the newspaper, Lusa?" he'd goaded her from the breakfast

table. "Think of all you could teach us sorry-ass bumpkins."

"Cole, I have to concentrate on what I'm doing here. Do we

have to fight?"

"No, dear. I'm just *sorry*," he said, not sorry at all, "that I'm not

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from someplace fancy where people keep their dogs in the house

and their gardens in window boxes."

"Will you ever let it go? Lexington's not *fancy*. People there just

have more to read and write about than killing the honeysuckle in

their hedgerows."

"They needn't to bother. They don't have hedgerows. Every

city yard I ever saw ended in the flat killing mulch of a sidewalk."

In many species of moths, Darwin had observed, the males prefer to

inhabit more open territory, while the females cling under cover. She and

Cole were a biological cliché, was that it? A male and female following their separate natures? She glanced up from her waterfall of

cream, wondering how to gentle down this thing between them.

“A city person is only part of who I am,” she said quietly.
The
lines they drew in argument were always wrong; he put her
in a
camp she hadn’t chosen. How could he understand that
she’d spent
her whole sunburnt, freckled childhood trapped on lawn
but longing for pasture? Spent it catching butterflies and
moths, looking
them up in her color-keyed book and touching all the
pictures,
coveting those that hid in wilder places?
He cracked his knuckles and locked his hands behind his
head.
“Lusa, honey, you can take the girl out of the city, but you
can’t
take the city out of the girl.”
“Shit,” she said aloud, giving in to pure irritation. Did he
actually think he was clever? She’d mishandled the skimmer
and dropped
it too low, right at the end, giving up most of the cream
she’d just
skimmed. Now it would take another half day to separate
again. She
tossed the skimmer into the sink. “For this I spent twenty
years of
my life in school.” She turned to face him. “I’m *sorry* my
education
didn’t prepare me to live here where the two classes of
animals are
food and target practice.”
“You forgot ‘bait,’ ” he drawled.
“It’s not funny, Cole. I’m so alone here. You have no idea.”

He picked up the paper and folded it back to the beef prices. So

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that would be that. Her loneliness was her own problem, and she

knew it. The only people she ever talked to, besides Cole, were all

in Lexington. When he suggested that she make friends *here*, she

could picture only the doe-eyed, aggressively coiffed women she

saw in Kroger's, and then she'd run to the phone to snipe about

small-town life with Arlie and Hal, her former lab mates. But lately

their support had run out on Lusa, to the tune of embarrassing

phone bills: *What's the problem, exactly? You're not happy, so walk away,*

you've got feet. Get back here while you can still recover your grant money.

She set herself to the task of sterilizing the milk utensils, trying

to forget Arlie and Hal. Her former and present lives were so different that she couldn't even hold one in her mind as she lived the

other. It embarrassed her to try. Instead she soothed herself with an

ancient litany: *Actias luna, Hyalophora cecropia, Automeris io, luna, cecropia, Io*, the giant saturniid moths, silken creatures that bore the

names of gods into Zebulon's deep hollows and mountain slopes.

Most people never knew what wings beat at their darkened windows while they slept.

It was just one more thing she couldn't talk about—her education, which far outstripped her husband's. Cole's standard joke: "I

loved education so much, I repeated every grade I could." And Lusa

had never, ever believed his self-deprecation. From the day they'd

first met at the University of Kentucky she'd recognized him as a

scholar of his own kind. Cole was there for a workshop on integrated pest management. A group of farmers in this county had

raised the tuition and sent him to Lexington knowing Cole would

ignore the claptrap and bring back to them anything worth knowing. Their confidence was justified. He'd not been automatically

impressed with Lusa's status as a postdoctoral assistant, but had

pressed her with questions when he saw how well she knew the

gelechid moths, denizens of a grain crop in storage. His eyes, the

blue of a rainless summer sky, had begun to follow her in a way that

either alarmed or flattered her, she couldn't say which. She'd showed

him her lab and her father's larger one in the same building, where

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he studied the pheromones of codling moths, notorious
pests of

apple trees. The laboratory moths lived scrutinized lives in
glass

boxes where scientists learned to fool the males into
mating with

scent-baited traps so their virgin brides might vainly cover
the

world's apples with empty, harmless eggs.

Later on (but not much), Lusa and Cole had slept together
in

her apartment on Euclid Street. Cole made love like a
farmer,

which is not to say he was coarse. On the contrary, he had
a fine intelligence for the physical that drove him toward her
earthy scents,

seeking out with his furred mouth her soft, damp places,
turning

her like fresh earth toward the glory of new growth. Her
body,

which she'd always considered too short and hourglass-
curved to be

taken seriously, became something new in the embrace of
a man

who judged breeding animals with his hands. He gave her
to know

what she'd never before understood: she was voluptuous.

She told him about the scent cues animals use to find and
identify their mates. Pheromones. That delighted him. "So it's
all about

sex. All you people in that laboratory, all the livelong day. And getting paid for it.”

“Guilty,” she confessed. “I study moth love.”

He was interested in moth love. More interested still when she explained to him that even humans seem to rely on certain

pheromonal cues, though most have little inclination to know the

details. Cole would, she thought. Cole, the man who buried his

face in every fold of her skin to inhale her scent. He could only love

sex more if he had antennae the shape of feathers, like a moth, for

combing the air around her, and elaborately branched coremata he

could evert from his abdomen for the purpose of calling back to her

with his own scent.

He’d asked, “When you fall in love with somebody for no apparent reason you can think of, then, is that what’s going on? The

pheromones?”

“Maybe,” she’d answered. “Probably.”

He’d rolled onto his back then and locked his fingers behind his

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head, providing her with an opportunity to study him from close

range. He was astonishingly large. His shoulders, his hands, the

plane of his broad, flat stomach and chest—all of him made her feel

tiny and delicate. Here was a happy giant, naked in her bed.

“Tell me this, then,” he said. “How come a woman will do everything humanly possible to cover up what she really smells like?”

“I have no idea.” Lusa had wondered this before, of course.

Even shaving armpits defeats the purpose. The whole point of pubic hair is to increase the surface area for scent molecules, and she

told him so.

“Damn if this isn’t another thing entirely, sleeping with a lady

scientist,” he’d declared, smiling at her with a face she’d already begun to think about missing. Damn if *he* wasn’t another thing entirely. And soon he would be gone, the happy, earnest enormity of

him, his closely trimmed beard that marked lines on his jaw and up

the center of his chin to his wonderful mouth. His beard made her

think of the nectar guides on the throats of flowers that show bees

the path to the sweet place where nectar resides.

Her Euclid apartment had seemed to suit him so well that he

delayed his departure for two days after the seminar’s end. They

hardly left her bed, in fact, and she had to call her lab to claim sudden illness. She was on the verge of asking him—not

out of guile,

but just for curiosity—whether he habitually slept with women

he'd just met, when he proposed marriage. Lusa was speechless. For

the next year he courted her with an intensity that caused her to

ovulate during his visits. She began taking real care, lest a pregnancy

too close to their wedding provide his relatives with the goods on

Lusa they seemed to want. Her mother's language had an expression

for people like Cole's sisters: "Born with ten fingers so they can

count to nine."

Cole had finished his breakfast now and glanced up at Lusa as

he lit a cigarette. He seemed startled to find her staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

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"I was just remembering how much we used to like each other."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. Herb will be up later this morning to

borrow the pressure sprayer. Don't be surprised to see him digging

in the storeroom."

She glared. This was typical Cole, to answer an appeal to his

emotional core by appearing not to have one. “I don’t want
Herb

in our storeroom,” she replied flatly. “So. I guess I’ll have
to go

down to the barn and dig it out myself.”

“What for? Herb knows what a pressure sprayer looks like.
Hell,

he’s the one talked me into buying it, and now he uses it
more

than I do.”

“And on his way to finding it he’ll be handling my
collecting

funnels and insect nets, storing up tales for Mary Edna to
whisper

to Hannie-Mavis by way of Lois and Emaline. No thank
you.”

Cole leaned back in his chair, smiling. “The three most
efficient

means of communication: telegraph, telephone, tell a
Widener

woman.”

“I used to think that was funny. Before their favorite
subject

was me.”

“They don’t mean any harm.”

“Do you really believe that?” She shook her head, turning
her

back on him. They *did* mean her harm. They had from the
beginning. Since she’d become mistress of their family home
last June,

they’d had little to say to her and everything to say *about*
her. Before Lusa herself ever set foot in the Kroger’s or the
hardware store,

she was already known as a Lexington girl who got down on

all fours to name the insects in the parlor rather than squashing

them.

“My sisters have more to do than to sit around hating you,”

Cole insisted.

“Your sisters haven’t learned my name yet.”

“Lusa, come on.”

“You ask them. I’ll give you ten dollars if one of them gets it

right—the whole thing, Lusa Maluf Landowski. They make a show

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of not being able to remember it. You think I’m kidding? Lois evidently told Oda Black my maiden name was Zucchini.”

“Now, that can’t be.”

“Oda was clucking that she could see why I’d rushed you to the

altar to be rid of *that*. ” She watched his face, trying to see if he even

understood this humiliation. Lusa had kept her own name when

they married, but it hadn’t mattered: everyone called her Mrs.

Widener, as if there were no Lusa at all.

“Well, in spite of despising you with all her heart,” he said patiently, “Lois invited us down for a big supper Memorial Day. She

wants us all to go out to the cemetery in the afternoon to decorate

Mommy's and Dad's graves."

Lusa cocked her head, curious. "When did she call?"

"Last night."

"The whole family's invited? How can Lois do that? Her kitchen's the size of a phone booth."

"It was much bigger before the ruffles and plastic ducks prevailed."

Lusa had to smile.

He gestured. "*Here's* the kitchen. Why don't you ever invite

everybody up here?"

Lusa stared at him, slack-jawed.

"Well, what?"

She shook her head. "How can you possibly be so dumb? How

can you sit there in the middle of this hurricane of hateful women

and act like it's a nice, sunny day out?"

"*What?*"

She marched to the corner cabinet in the dining room and returned with a particular china plate, which she held up like a flash

card. "This means nothing to you?"

"It's your wedding china."

Her wedding china, true—it had been her family's, a pattern

from England with delicately tinted botanical paintings of flowers

and their pollinators. But did they have to scorn everything
she

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loved? “You don’t recall what happened at the dinner I had
here last

July, a month after we married? The birthday party for you
that I

spent about two weeks cooking, without help, in my first
failed attempt to impress your family?”

“No.”

“Let me help you out. Picture your eldest sister. Picture her
sitting in that chair, blue hair and all, forgive me, wearing a
face that

would curdle milk. Picture me serving her dinner on this
plate,

right here.”

He laughed. “I recall Mary Edna took a bite of potatoes
and saw

a black widow or something underneath and screamed.”

“It was the wing of a sphinx moth. A *painting* of a sphinx
moth.

I would not have china with black widows on it. And she
didn’t

scream, she laid down her fork and crossed her hands like
a corpse

and has refused my invitations ever since. Even
Thanksgiving, Cole,

for God’s sake. In your family home, where you and your
sisters

have eaten every Thanksgiving dinner of your lives, prior
to the

mortal offense committed by your wife against Her Majesty Mary

Edna.”

“Let the rest of them come without Mary Edna, then. She’s always made too much of herself for being the oldest.”

“They won’t come without Mary Edna.”

He shrugged. “Well, then, maybe they’re just country folks that

don’t understand plates with bugs and fancy Latin words printed on

them. Maybe they’re scared they’ll use the wrong fork.”

“*Damn* you, Cole. *Damn* your whole family, if all you can do is

ridicule me.” She grew hot in the face and felt like smashing the

plate for effect, but the gesture would be all wrong. The plate

seemed more valuable than the marriage.

“Oh, Lord,” he clucked. “They warned me about marrying a

redhead.”

“*Shuchach!*” she muttered, sinking her teeth into the harsh Arabic

consonants as she stomped into the dining room to put the plate

away. Lusa was embarrassed by her tears, shamed that the spurned

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invitations still stung. Too many times in this past year she had hung

up the phone and walked around in circles on the braided rug in the

parlor, a grown, married woman with a degree in entomology, sobbing like a child. How could she care so much what they thought

of her? Any girl who pursued the study of insects had learned to ignore public opinion. But what she couldn't bear, then or now, was

the implied belief that she was a curiosity, a nonsense of a woman.

Lusa feared in retrospect that she'd judged her own father the same

way, pitied him for being such a bitter, unworldly man, for devoting himself to agriculture in disinfected laboratories smelling of

ether. Both her parents had come from farming lineages, but they

had no more acquaintance with actual farm work than could be

gleaned on a Sunday drive through the racehorse pastures east of

Fayette County.

Lusa had wanted to be different. She'd craved to shock people

with her love of crawling things and her sweat. She could still feel

the childhood desire in her body, a girl bending close to breathe on

the mirror when hard play on summer days dampened her strawberry hair into dark-brown tendrils against her face. As a woman,

she'd jumped at an unexpected chance: to be a farmer's partner.

She'd never expected the strange, effete legacy that followed her

here to Zebulon, where her new relatives considered her old ones

to be a family of fools who kept insect pests alive in glass boxes, on

purpose.

She returned to the kitchen without looking at him. If he could

act like this wasn't tearing him apart, she could do the same.

"Check," she said. "Do not serve anything to a Widener on bug

plates. I'll remember that. And check, open the door to Herb the

great and glorious varmint killer when he comes to rifle through

my storeroom for the pressure sprayer." Herb and Mary Edna were

a perfect marriage, in Lusa's opinion: the one was exactly as superior and tactless as the other.

"What in the world does that mean?" Cole asked.

"Do you know what Hannie-Mavis told me yesterday? She said

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one time Herb found a den of coyotes up in the woods above his

fence line, a mother and a litter of nursing babies. She said he put a

bullet in every one of their heads, right in their den."

Cole gave her a blank look.

“Is that true?” she demanded. “Did you know about it?”

“Why bring up the subject?”

“When was it? Recently?”

“No-oh. It was way last spring, I think. Around the time
your

mother got sick. Before the wedding, anyway. That’s why
you didn’t

know about it.”

“Oh, back that long ago. So it doesn’t matter now.”

He sighed. “Lusa, they were meat-eating animals setting
up

camp on a dairy farm. What do you think Herb’s going to
do, give

his profits away to the wolves?”

“Not wolves, coyotes.”

“Same thing.”

“*Not* the same thing. Did it occur to anybody to be
interested in

the idea of coyotes being here, two thousand miles or
something

from the Grand Canyon?”

“I expect he was interested in what they eat. Such as a
newborn

calf.”

“If that’s even what they were—coyotes—which I doubt,
knowing Herb’s eyesight. I also doubt if he shot them, to tell
you the

truth. I bet he missed. I *hope* he missed.”

“Herb Goins with a rifle is a frightening proposition, I will
not

argue with that. But if you care to know my end of it,
Lusa, I hope

he got them.”

“You and everybody else in the county. I know. If Herb
didn’t

get them, somebody else will.” She wished she were
dressed. She

felt vulnerable and unconvincing in her nightshirt. She
went back

out to the porch, letting the screen door slam behind her.
She set

the milk back into the cooler to reseparate and noticed that
the Io

moth was still hanging on the porch screen. She reached up
and

gently slapped the screen where it clung. “Better fly on out
of

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here,” she said. “No insect is safe around here.” She
watched the

moth flare open, showing its watermelon-colored
underwings with

their startling pair of black pupils. An owl’s eyes, she
thought, a perfect likeness. Pity the little bird that opens its
mouth for a bite of

moth and gets stared in the face by *that*. Jolly old life, full
of surprises.

She returned to the kitchen with a jar of last summer’s
tomatoes

in each hand; instead of the soup she would make *imam*
bayildi, her

mother's stuffed-vegetable recipe, which Lusa herself much preferred to anything milky. Cole wasn't crazy about *imam bayildi*. He

was even skeptical of spaghetti, which he called an "Eye-talian"

dish. But it was his fault she'd lost the cream, so fine, then, let him

eat foreign food. *I've stooped to this*, she thought. *The former National*

Science Foundation scholar with the most coveted postgraduate fellowship in

her department now wields her influence on the world through acts of venge-

ful cooking.

His whole big exasperating person was still there at the table,

smoking cigarettes. Arcs of pale ash stretched like starry nebulae

across the dark tabletop between his left hand and the ugly tin ashtray balanced halfway off the table. The whole scene looked like

something she'd like to wad up and throw away. It wasn't like Cole

to be this slow getting out to his cattle and his tractor. It was a full

hour past dawn now; the sun was well up. Was he that determined

to vex her?

"What does Herb want with our pressure sprayer, anyway?" she

asked.

"I don't know. No, I do know. He said they're exterminating at

the church. They've got some kind of bees moved into the walls,

Mary Edna said."

"Oh, that's perfect. Exterminating God's creatures down at the

church. It's a good thing God didn't leave Herb and Mary Edna in

charge of Noah's ark. They'd fumigate it first, and then they'd

sink it."

He refused to laugh. "Lusa, honey, where you come from

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{ Prodigal Summer }

maybe they think it'd be nice to have a church full of bees. People

get sentimental in a place where nature's already been dead for fifty

years, so they can all get to mourning it like some relative they

never knew. But out here he's alive and kicking and still on his

bender."

"My husband, the poet. Nature is an uncle with a drinking problem."

He shook his head. "That's how it is. You have to persuade it

two steps back every day or it will move in and take you over." Cole

could fend off her condescension with astonishing ease. He had his

own I-can-put-up-with-this tone of voice that made Lusa want to

scream her red head off.

“Take over what?” she said, trembling to hold back a rage.

“You’re nature, I’m nature. We shit, we piss, we have babies, we

make messes. The world will not end if you let the honeysuckle

have the side of your barn.”

We have babies? I didn’t notice, his look seemed to say. But he

asked her instead, “Why tolerate a weed when you can nip it in

the bud?”

Every word they said to each other was wrong, every truth underneath it unsayable, unfindable. Their kindnesses had grown stale,

and their jokes were all old chestnuts, too worn out for use. Lusa

threw down the dish towel, feeling suffocated in clichés. “You have

a nice day out there in the big woolly jungle. I’m going to go do

your laundry. Your damn cigarettes are stinking up the kitchen.”

“While you’re cursing tobacco, you might consider it was last

year’s crop that bought your new washer and dryer.”

“*Yil’an deenuk!*” she shouted from the hallway.

“If my Ay-rab mama had taught me to swear, I wouldn’t be proud of it,” he called back.

Ay-rab mama, Polack daddy—he held this against her too, apparently, along with the rest of his family. But hadn’t she ridiculed

his accent, his background? And yet neither of them, truly,
was that

kind of person. Layers of contempt crouched camouflaged
beneath

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{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

one another until it was too much to sort out—if she and
Cole

were married a hundred years they'd still be fighting
without knowing why. She felt sick and defeated, stomping
from room to room to

collect cast-off shirts or socks they'd shed in the
downstairs rooms

(some were hers). There was nothing to say, but still they
said it, the

honeysuckle and the tobacco. In less than a year of
marriage they'd

already learned to move from one argument to the next,
just like

the creek that ran down the mountain into this hollow,
flowing out

of its banks into the ruts of their driveway, then back again
into its

creek bed at the bottom of the valley. Arguments could fill
a marriage like water, running through everything, always,
with no taste

or color but lots of noise.

Bitter Creek, that stream was named, and the hollow
running

up the back of their farm into the National Forest, people
called

Bitter Hollow. Perfect. *I am too young to feel this way*, she
thought,

trudging upstairs to collect the rest of the laundry while he headed

out to till the bottom field. How would it be in ten years? Had she

really wanted so badly all her life to live on a farm? A bird in the

hand loses its mystery in no time flat. Now she felt like a frontier

mail-order bride, hardly past her wedding and already wondering

how she could have left her city and beloved career for the narrow

place a rural county holds open for a farmer's wife.

It was only four hours later, in the eleventh hour of the ninth of

May, as the dryer clicked and droned downstairs and she sat beside

her bedroom window reading, that Lusa's life turned over on this

one simple thing: a potent rise of scent as her young husband

reached out his muscled arm for a branch of flowers. Here was what

she'd forgotten about, the full, straight truth of their attachment.

Her heart emptied of words, for once, and filled with a new species

of feeling. Even if he never reached the house, if his trip across the

field was disastrously interrupted by the kind of tractor accident

that felled farmers in this steep county, she would still have had a

burst of fragrance reaching across a distance to explain Cole's position in the simplest terms conceivable.

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{ *Prodigal Summer* }

Lusa sat still and marveled: This is how moths speak to each

other. They tell their love across the fields by scent. There is no

mouth, the wrong words are impossible, either a mate is there or

he's not, and if so the pair will find each other in the dark.

For several more minutes her hands lay motionless on her book

while she considered a language that could carry nothing but love

and simple truth.

Ten days later the marriage would reach its end. When it came, Lusa

would look back to that moment at the window and feel the chill

of its prescience.

No one would have called it a premonition, exactly; Cole's tractor did not overturn. And it wasn't tobacco that killed him, or

at least not smoking. She could have allowed him the pleasure of

two packs a day, it would have made no difference in the long run,

since there was to be no long run. Tobacco's failure was partly to

blame, though—the drop in price supports that had pressed him to

take part-time work driving grain deliveries for Southern States.

Lusa knew this outside job shamed him as a farmer, even though

there was hardly a family in the whole valley that got by solely on

farm profits. For Cole the failure was not simply one of money, but

of attachment. He hated being away from the farm for even one

night when he had to make a run over the Blue Ridge and down

into North Carolina. She had told him they could find the money

elsewhere—maybe by borrowing against next year's cattle, though

he mistrusted debt, and the new tractor had already put them in

deep. Or she could teach at the community college in Franklin.

(Would that also shame him? She wasn't sure.) She was thinking of

that, picturing herself with a class of nursing students in a biology

lab, just before the sheriff drove up to inform the next of kin.

It was very early, a damp dawn that had committed itself to nothing yet, still perfectly windless and scentless. May nineteenth,

still a nothing of a day, though the date would never again pass un

{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

noticed, after this. She was standing at the same upstairs window

watching fog drift up the edges of the fields, uphill along the

hedgerows, like the ghost of some ancient river whose tributaries

no longer heeded gravity. There was a strange quality to these

mornings when Cole was away and she woke up here alone; she

was free. As free and disembodied as a ghost. She focused her eyes

out in the middle distance of the yard, where she could see the

frenzied movement of nocturnal insects in the shadows, noctuid

moths looping crazily through the last minutes of this night's search

for a mate.

When she saw Tim Boyer's sedan with its seal on the side, she

understood. If he were just hurt, in a hospital, that was something

Tim could have stopped down below to tell. He could have given

the news to Lois or Mary Edna first. This was a different mission—

requiring notice to the wife. She knew why. Did not know the details—would never know some of them, in fact. The damage to the

body was of the kind that sisters and brothers-in-law discuss at

length but wives are never told about. But she knew enough.

Now, she thought, her body going cold, as the long white car

moved so slowly up the driveway that she could hear the individual

pops as the gravel shifted beneath the tires. *Right now, from here on*

everything changes.

But that would not be true. Her decision and all the rest of her

days would turn not on the moment when she understood that

Cole was dead, but on an earlier time at that same window when

she'd received his wordless message by scent across a field.

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[{3}](#).

[Old Chestnuts](#)

disoriented and lost to the day. It was because of the

Eight years a widower, Garnett still sometimes awoke

large empty bed, he felt; a woman was an anchor.

Lacking a wife, he had turned to his God for solace, but sometimes

a man also needed the view out his window.

Garnett sat up slowly and bent toward the light, seeing as much

with his memory as with his eyes. There was the gray fog of dawn

in this wet hollow, lifted with imperious slowness like the skirt of

an old woman stepping over a puddle. There were the barn and slatsided grain house, built by his father and grandfather in another

time. The grass-covered root cellar still bulged from the hillside, the

two windows in its fieldstone face staring out of the hill like eyes in

the head of a man. Every morning of his life, Garnett had saluted

that old man in the hillside with the ivy beard crawling out of his

chin and the forelock of fescue hanging over his brow. As a boy,

Garnett had never dreamed of being an old man himself, still look- { B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

ing at these sights and needing them as badly as a boy needs the

smooth lucky chestnut in his pocket, the talisman he rubs all day

just to make sure it's still there.

The birds were starting up their morning chorus. They were in

full form now, this far into the spring. What was it now, the nineteenth of May? Full form and feather. He listened. The prothalamion, he had named this in his mind years ago: a song raised up to

connubial union. There were meadowlarks and chats, field sparrows, indigo buntings, all with their heads raised to the dawn and

their hearts pressed into clear liquid song for their mates.
Garnett

held his face in his hands for just a moment. As a boy he had never

dreamed of an age when there was no song left, but still some heart.

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[{4}](#).

[Predators](#)

ing out her hair and listening to the opening choS he sat cross-legged on the floor of the porch, brushrus of this day. A black-and-white warbler had

started it long before dawn, breaking into her sleep with his highpitched “Sweet *sweet!*” Deanna could picture him out there, circling the trunk of a poplar, tilting his tiny little zebra-striped head

toward the first hints of light, tearing yesterday off the calendar and

opening the summer of love with his outsized voice. She’d rushed

out to the porch in her nightgown and bare feet, the hairbrush

mostly an afterthought lying on her lap. She needed to listen to this:

prodigal summer, the season of extravagant procreation. It could

wear out everything in its path with its passionate
excesses, but

nothing alive with wings or a heart or a seed curled into
itself in the

ground could resist welcoming it back when it came.

The other warblers woke up soon after the black-and-
white:

first she heard the syncopated phrase of the hooded
warbler with its

{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

upbeat ending like a good joke, then the Kentucky with his
more

solemn, rolling trill. By now a faint gray light was seeping
up the

edge of the sky, or what she could see of the sky through
the blackarmed trees. This hollow was a mean divide, with
mountains rising

steeply on both sides and the trees towering higher still.
The cabin

was no place to be if you craved long days and sunlight,
but there

was no better dawn chorus anywhere on earth. In the high
season

of courtship and mating, this music was like the earth itself
opening its mouth to sing. Its crescendo crept forward slowly
as the daylight roused one bird and then another: the black-
capped and

Carolina chickadees came next, first cousins who whistled
their

notes on separate pitches, close together, distinguishable to
any

chickadee but to very few humans, especially among this
choir of

other voices. Deanna smiled to hear the first veery, whose
song

sounded like a thumb run down the tines of a comb. It had
been

the first birdcall to capture her fascination in childhood—
not the

calls of the meadowlarks and sparrows that sang outside
her windows on the farm every morning, but the song of the
veery, a high-elevation migrant that she encountered only up
here, on fishing

expeditions with her dad. Maybe she'd just never really
listened before those trips, which yielded few trout and less
conversation but

so much silent waiting in the woods. "Now, 'at's a comb
bird," her

dad had improvised, smiling, when she asked, and she'd
dutifully

pictured the bird as a comb-shaped creature, bright pink.
She was

disappointed, years later, when she discovered its brown,
ordinary

birdness in the Peterson field guide.

The dawn chorus was a whistling roar by now, the sound
of a

thousand males calling out love to a thousand silent
females ready to

choose and make the world new. It was nothing but heady
cacophony unless you paid attention to the individual entries: a
rosebreasted grosbeak with his sweet, complicated little
sonnet; a vireo

with his repetitious bursts of eighth notes and triplets. And
then

came the wood thrush, with his tone poem of a birdsong.
The

wood thrush defined these woods for Deanna, providing
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{ *Prodigal Summer* }

ground music for her thoughts and naming her place in the
forest.

The dawn chorus would subside in another hour, but the
wood

thrush would persist for a long time into the morning, then
pick up

again in early evening or even at midday if it was cloudy.
Nannie

had asked her once in a letter how she could live up here
alone with

all the quiet, and that was Deanna's answer: when human
conversation stopped, the world was anything but *quiet*. She
lived with wood

thrushes for company.

Deanna smiled a little to think of Nannie down there in the
valley. Nannie lived for neighborly chat, staking out her
independent

old-lady life but still snatching conversation wherever
possible, the

way a dieter will keep after the cookies tucked in a
cupboard. No

wonder she worried for Deanna.

The sky had a solid white cast by now, mottled like an old
porcelain plate, and the voices began to back off or drop
out one by

one. Soon she'd be left with only the thrush song and the
rest of her

day. A few titmice and chickadees were congregating at
the spot underneath a chokecherry, a dozen yards from her
cabin, where she

always scattered birdseed on top of a flat boulder. She'd chosen a

spot she could watch from her window and had put out seed there

all winter—ordered birdseed by the fifty-pound bag, in fact, along

with her monthly grocery requisition. The Forest Service never

questioned it. It wasn't exactly policy to feed chickadees and cardinals, but apparently the government was willing to do whatever it

took to keep a wildlife monitor sane through the winter, and in

Deanna's case it was birdseed. Sitting at the table beside the window

with her coffee on snowy February mornings, she could lose hours

watching the colorful crowd that gathered outside, envying the

birds their freedom in the intense cold. Envy, even, their self-important fuss and bustle. A bird never doubts its place at the center of the universe.

Now that it was the third week of May, buds were emerging

and leaf-eating insects of every kind would soon be hanging thick

on the trees, and these little Napoleons could find plenty to eat

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{ BARBARA KING SOLVER }

elsewhere, but they'd probably gotten addicted to her handouts. She

was addicted to their presence, too. Lately she'd been thinking

about dusting off her Smokey the Bear hat (she'd been issued both

Park Service and Forest Service uniforms, as a glitch of this hybrid

job) and putting it out there on the boulder every morning with

seed on the brim so the birds would get used to landing on it.

Eventually she'd be able to put it on and walk around with a gaggle

of chickadees on her head, for no purpose other than her own foolish amusement.

She'd finished brushing out her hair. It cascaded down her back

and shoulders and folded onto the porch floor where she sat, rippling all around her like a dark, tea-colored waterfall glittering with

silver reflections. More silver each year, and less tea. She'd told her

husband (*ex-* already by then), when he asked her why, that she was

moving up onto the mountain so she wouldn't have to cut her hair.

Apparently it was a rule for women in their forties: the short, perky

haircut. He probably hadn't understood the joke, thinking it was

some embryonic vanity on Deanna's part, but it wasn't. She rarely

noticed her hair except to let it out of its braid for a run once a

week or so, like a neglected hound. She just hadn't liked the rule,

hadn't wanted to look her age, or *any* age. And who could be bothered with haircuts, weekly or monthly or whatever they had to be?

Deanna actually didn't know. She'd managed to live her life apart

from this and most other mysteries owned by women. Eyeliner, for

instance: what was the instrument of its application, did it hurt, and

what on earth was the point? She'd never quite had a real haircut.

Her dad had known better than to take a girl child to his barber, and

if he'd meant to think of some other option, he didn't get around

to it before her wild mane grew down to the backs of her knees.

The most she'd done in the way of coiffure was to untangle it from

tree branches and trim the ends with the scissors on her Swiss Army

knife. That was the only kind of woman she had ever known how

to be, in Zebulon County and later on as a schoolteacher and at 54

{ *Prodigal Summer* }

tempted wife in Knoxville. Up here in the woods, finally, she could

be the only kind of woman there was.

The kind without a man. Eddie Bondo was gone, and that had

to be for the best.

He'd said he'd be back, but she did not believe it. He'd taken

everything with him when he went—"everything" being his pack,

which admittedly wasn't much. If what he said was true, that he intended only to hike over to Clinch Peak for a day or two and then

come back to see her again, he would need his pack. So she couldn't

judge his leaving by what he'd taken or left. It wasn't that.

He'd called her hair a miracle. He'd said it was like rolling himself up in

a silkworm's cocoon.

She turned her face to the sky and listened to the blessed woods—that was what he'd left behind. A chance to listen to the

dawn chorus and brush her hair without being watched. Eddie

Bondo had left her this hard, fine gem of her very own, this diamond solitaire of a life.

She stretched her legs straight in front of her while she rebraided her hair into its familiar rope, an exercise her hands could

do without mirror or attention. When she'd snapped the rubber

band back onto it from her wrist, she bent her forehead to her

knees, giving her hamstrings a good, painful stretch. Then she lay

straight back, flat on her back like a girl, mouth and eyes
open wide

to the tree branches overhead. She gasped, dizzy, falling
up, straight

up into the treetops. Thought about the first time he'd laid
her

down on this porch. She wondered how she would look to
him

now, lying here like this.

She cursed aloud and sat up. Damned thing, self-
consciousness,

like a pitiful stray dog tagging you down the road—so hard
to shake

off. So easy to get back.

No man had ever spoken to her so freely of her body, or
compared it to such strange and natural things. Not only a
silkworm.

Also ivory, for instance, which he claimed was unnaturally
smooth.

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{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

He'd lived in Canada last summer into fall, he said—had
gone up

there to make money on the salmon run and stayed on
hunting

caribou around the Hudson Bay, and somewhere in the
process had

learned to work walrus ivory into knife handles. She
listened to his

stories, imagining the possibility of touching nature's other
faces.

She'd known no other but this one. She asked him what
birds were

there, and he seemed to know but couldn't name any
except the

game birds people shot for food. She had been listening
too hard,

she realized now, for the things he left out—what he meant
or believed. To have her bare stomach compared to walrus
ivory, was this

strange compliment hers alone? She had no idea how to
take him

but had taken him nearly as hard as possible. It still ran a
shock of

physical weakness all the way through her to think of
certain things:

his body against hers, the scent of his skin. The look of
awestruck

joy on his face when he entered her.

She jumped up, shuddered from the cold and nonsense,
and

went inside to get dressed and find her day. She walked a
circle

around the room, stepping into jeans and boots without
slowing

down much. While she buttoned her shirt with one hand,
she

banged open the cupboard with the other and reached into
the

Dutch oven to grab some of yesterday's cornbread. She
took a bite

and stuffed the rest into her jacket pocket to eat on the
trail, or later

on, while she waited in the blind she was going to build.
She'd

wasted too much of this morning already. She'd stayed away from
the den for such a long time, the first two weeks on purpose and the
last ten days of necessity. She hadn't dared to go. Even if she'd gone
out alone, or lied, he could have followed her.
She took the Bitter Creek trail down the mountain as fast as she
could without breaking into a run, which would be pointless. If
they were there, they would still be there in ten minutes. Or they
might not be there at all. They were wary creatures, almost beyond
a human's conception of wariness—and the day she'd discovered
them, they surely had seen her first. It wasn't reasonable to think she
could have outwitted or outsensed them. They could only assume

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{ *Prodigal Summer* }

she was an enemy, like every other human whose stink they'd ever
caught wind of. If this was the same family that had lost half its
members in one day over in the Zebulon Valley, the survivors
would be cautious.

She was sure it was that family, or else some other refugees of

human damage. Why else would they have ventured so high up the

mountain into this forest, so far from the fencerows and field margins that are a coyote's usual domain? When they came over here to

whelp their pups, they'd have dug themselves multiple dens. Backup

plans were their trademark, the famous coyote wiles. Everything

that was possible to know about them, though, Deanna knew. That

only the alpha female would bear young, for instance; the other

adults in the pack would forgo reproduction. They'd support the alpha instead, gathering food, guarding the den, playing with the

pups, training them to forage and hunt after they emerged with

their eyes open. If their parents got killed, the pups would hardly

suffer for their absence—that was the nature of a coyote family. That

was the point of it. And if Deanna's discovery of this burrow had

disturbed the pack, its members would have moved those pups already to another place, in the middle of the night. Any predator that

needs to sleep at night has already lost the game, with a coyote.

She slowed to a walk and then stopped a quarter mile from where she recalled the den as being, to consider building her blind.

She'd have to be near enough to see, but downwind, of course, and

the wind direction would change between morning and afternoon.

She could build only one blind, since she wanted to create as little

disturbance as possible and leave few clues in case anyone else

should be poking around here. Mornings, then, it would be. She'd

build the blind uphill and come to it only in the mornings, when

the sun had warmed the fields down below and the air was still rising up the hollows toward the mountaintop.

She'd forgotten how far down the mountain she'd come that

first time, to find this den by accident. Now as she searched it out

she couldn't even be sure whether she was still on National Forest

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{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

land or on the farm below that bordered it—there wasn't a fence

here. But it was in deep woods, and higher than you'd expect. There

wasn't enough known about coyotes in Appalachia to say what was

really normal. They surely couldn't like the mountaintops; they'd

prefer lowland fields because of field mice, among other things.

But this family had its own history. It'd been shoved to the wall.

So it had come up high, to stage its raids from safe hiding, like

Geronimo.

She began to move forward again slowly, breaking and collecting low branches from sourwood trees. She left the path, protecting

her eyes as she pushed her way through a thick clump of rhododendrons. Her intention was to circle wide around the den to

where she could look at it from across the creek. The rhododendrons were almost impossibly dense, but that was fine: no one

would find her trail. She wondered briefly about whoever farmed

the land below here, and whether he liked to hunt. Probably he

wouldn't come here. Most local farmers never set foot in the woods

except in deer season, and then only with their friend Jack Daniel's

for company. The real trouble, the bear poachers and that ilk, generally came from other places. Those men specialized and so had to

range widely.

She sidestepped slowly downhill until she could see across the

creek to the tangle of roots at the base of the giant fallen tree. She

raised her binoculars to the slice of darkness beneath the roots, held

her breath, and focused. Nothing. She sat down on a damp mattress

of last autumn's leaves and prepared to wait. No point building a

blind until she knew they were still here.

Deanna knew exactly when the morning ended. She never wore a

watch, and for this she didn't need one. She knew when the air

grew still enough that she could hear caterpillars overhead, newly

hatched, eating through thousands of leaves on their way to becoming Io and luna moths. In the next hour the breeze would shift.

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{ Prodigal Summer }

No sense taking a chance; it was time to leave, and she'd still seen

nothing—no movement, no sign. No little dogs, foxlike and wolflike

and cousin to both, so familiar from her studies that they sometimes

ran through her dreams. Awake, she'd had good long looks at only

one single animal, a pathetic captive that she'd rather forget, in the

Tinker's Mountain Zoo outside of Knoxville. She'd pleaded with

the curator to change the exhibit, explaining that coyotes were social, and that displaying a single animal was therefore not just cruel

but also inaccurate. She had offered him her services: a graduate student in wildlife biology, finishing up a thesis on

the coyote range

extension in the twentieth century. The curator had politely suggested that if she wanted to see coyotes in groups she should take a

trip out west, where the animals were so common that people got

acquainted with them as roadkill. The conversation had given her a

stomachache. So she'd written a grant proposal instead, invented

this job, and put herself in it as soon as she'd completed and defended her thesis. She'd had to fight some skeptics, wrangling a rare

agreement between the Park Service, the Forest Service, and the

Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, so that there were almost more words on her paycheck than dollars. But it was working

out fine, they all seemed to think now. Two years after her arrival,

one of the most heavily poached ranges of southern Appalachia was

becoming an intact ecosystem again. All of that was the point, but

to her mind only partly so.

She breathed out now, resigned. One day she'd lay eyes on wily

Canis latrans in the wild, right here in her own home range, on an

animal path cross-stitched by other trails to the paths she'd walked

in her childhood. It would happen. But it wouldn't be this day.

On her way back up the mountain she consciously slowed
her

step. She heard another magnolia warbler—a sign and a
wonder, it

seemed to her, like something risen from the dead. So
many others

never would rise again: Bachman’s warbler, passenger
pigeon,

Carolina parakeet, Flint’s stonefly, Apamea moth—so
many extinct

creatures moved through the leaves just outside her
peripheral vi59

{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

sion, for Deanna knew enough to realize that she lived
among

ghosts. She deferred to the extinct as she would to the
spirits of deceased relatives, paying her quiet respects in the
places where they

might once have been. Little red wolves stood as silent
shadows at

the edges of clearings, while the Carolina parakeets would
have

chattered loudly, moving along the riverbanks in huge
flocks of

dazzling green and orange. The early human settlers
migrating into

this region had loved them and promptly killed them. Now
most

people would call you crazy if you told them that
something as exotic as a parrot had once been at home in these
homely southern

counties.

She stopped and stared at her feet. Here were tracks, fresh, and

she paused to study them out: front and hind foot alternating

single-file in a long, sinuous line, the front foot a little bigger than

the hind; this was a canid, all right. The claw marks were there, too,

clear as could be. Where the tracks crossed a broad patch of clear

mud she knelt down to take a close look, measuring a cleanly outlined print with the knuckle of her index finger. Two and three

quarters inches front to back. *You learn what he is by knowing what he*

isn't, her dad used to say. This was not a gray fox, and not a red fox.

Coyote. A big one, probably male. Alpha's mate.

A little farther on, where the trail crossed a clearing and, most

likely, other animal trails, she found his scat. One single turd with

an up-curved point on its end like one of Ali Baba's shoes—this was

coyote for certain, and who but a big male would make such a show

out of his excrement? She squatted down and poked it apart with a

twig. A coyote could eat nearly anything: mice, voles, grasshoppers,

frogs. Human garbage, a house cat. The farmers down below were

right to believe a coyote could take a lamb; working together, a pack might even bring down a full-grown cow. But that would take a huge pack, two dozen animals maybe, more adult coyotes than existed in this county and probably this end of the state. And why on earth would they go to the trouble when there was so much else on the slopes of this mountain for a coyote to eat, with greater

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{ Prodigal Summer }

safety and ease? Hardly a creature on earth could thrive more capably on junk that was useless to humans. During her thesis research

she'd found the notes of a biologist named Murie who'd spent the

early decades of his century dissecting coyote scat and recording its

splendidly varied contents. He'd cataloged hundreds of different

items in his journal. Her favorites were "shreds of woolen clothing"

and "watermelon, poached."

From the crumbling consistency of this scat Deanna expected

pine nuts and berry seeds, a predictable diet for the locale. She was

surprised by the hard, dark glint of an apple seed. Then several

more. *Apple seeds* at this time of year, late May? Apples were just

barely past blossom-drop stage down in the valley. Wild apples still

hanging on to the trees down there in the wilding fields would be

a long shot. More likely this fellow had crept into an orchard where

someone grew old-fashioned leathercoats that stayed on the tree all

the way through winter into spring. Or he might have nipped into

someone's root cellar and rolled the last sweet Arkansas blacks out of

a bushel basket. Deanna was sympathetic. She'd stolen apples, too, in

her time. Her dad's tobacco farm had been short on pleasures from

a child's point of view, but when the two of them discovered

Nannie Rawley and her orchard, respectively, Deanna found seventh heaven. Nannie was a generous woman who did not count her

Arkansas blacks after the guests left.

Deanna's legs ached but she squatted a little longer, taking the

time to flatten and dissect the scat completely with her twig.

Something else here surprised her: millet seed, both red and white.

No millet grew on this mountainside, or on any farm down below,

as far as she knew. Certainly not red and white millet together; that

was a combination unlikely to be found on any farm. Mostly it

showed up in the commercial seed mixes people put out for their

birds. Probably this was the birdseed she had put out herself. She

stood up blinking, peered downhill through the tree trunks, and

thought about it. Who else around here was likely to be feeding

chickadees?

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“You rascal,” she said aloud, laughing. “You magnificent son of

a bitch. *You’ve been spying on me.*”

She spent the afternoon in an edgy distraction, curled into the dilapidated green brocade armchair that sat on her porch against the

outside wall, sheltered under the eave. With her field notebook on

her knee she cataloged the contents of the scat and the size and location of the tracks and the location of the magnolia warbler she’d

heard today. Then she reached back in her memory to the first magnolia warbler and quite a few other things she should have recorded

before now. She had ignored her notebooks completely for the full

nine days of his visit. Even now she felt abnormally jumpy, in need

of something to eat, or to look up, or to check on, and had to scold

herself like a child to sit still and focus. She stared at the blank,

numbered pages ending with today's date, May 19, and felt coldly

disgusted by her laziness and poor concentration. Anything could

have happened in those days, life or death, and she would have

missed it.

What she had here on this mountain was a chance that would

never come again, for anybody: the return of a significant canid

predator and the reordering of species it might bring about. Especially significant if the coyote turned out to be what R. T. Paine

called a keystone predator. She'd carefully read and reread Paine's famous experiments from the 1960s, in which he'd removed all the

starfish from his tidepools and watched the diversity of species drop

from many to very few. The starfish preyed on mussels. Without

starfish, the mussels boomed and either ate nearly everything else or

crowded it out. No one had known, before that, how crucial a single carnivore could be to things so far removed from carnivory. Of

course, the experiment had been replicated endlessly by accident:

removing mountain lions from the Grand Canyon, for example,

had rendered it a monoculture of prolific, starving deer that outbred all other herbivores and gnawed the landscape down to gran62

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ite. Plenty of people had watched and recorded the disaster of eliminating a predator from a system. They were watching it here in her

own beloved mountains, where North America's richest biological

home was losing its richness to one extinction after another, of

plants and birds, fish, mammals, moths and stoneflies, and especially

the river creatures whose names she collected like beads: sugarspoon, forkshell, acornshell, leafshell. Sixty-five kinds of mussels,

twenty now gone for good. There were hundreds of reasons for

each death—pesticide runoff, silt from tilling, cattle in the creek—

but for Deanna each one was also a piece in the puzzle she'd spent

years working out. The main predator of the endangered shellfish

was the muskrat, which had overpopulated to pestilence along the

riverbanks over the last fifty years. What had kept muskrats in

check, historically, was the mink (now mostly coats), the river otter

(also nearly gone), and, surely, the red wolf. There was no telling

how the return of a large, hungry dog might work to restore stability, even after an absence of two hundred years. Rare things, endangered things, not just river life but overgrazed plants and their

insect pollinators, might begin to recover.

Or maybe coyotes would turn out to be pests, as newly introduced species nearly always are. Maybe the farmers were right to

shoot them—she had to concede it was possible. But she didn't

think so. She believed coyotes were succeeding here for a single reason: they were sliding quietly into the niche vacated two hundred

years ago by the red wolf. The two predators were hardly distinct:

the red wolf may have been a genetic cross between the gray wolf

and the coyote. Like the coyote, it was a scent hunter that could

track in the dead of night, unlike the big cats that hunt by sight. It

was like a coyote in its reproductive rate, and close in size. In fact,

judging from the tracks she'd seen, the coyotes here were nearly red

wolf-sized, and probably getting larger with each generation—insinuating themselves into the ragged hole in this land that needed

them to fill it. The ghost of a creature long extinct was coming in

on silent footprints, returning to the place it had once held in the

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complex anatomy of this forest like a beating heart
returned to its

body. This was what she believed she would see, if she
watched, at

this magical juncture: a restoration. If she was not too lazy
or careless. And if she did not lead a killer to their lair.

She frowned and conjured notes, remembering the red and
white millet and wondering how else she might be
influencing the

experiment. She bit her pen, trying to concentrate. The
longer she

worked, the more surely her body's cravings grew from a
nudge to

a frank distraction. She wanted something to eat, warm and
particular. She would not let herself name this craving what it
was, so she

named it food, a thing that normally didn't merit a second
thought

in her life here—she ate when she was hungry, and
anything would

do. But for this whole day her body had been speaking to
her of its

presence: an ache in the thigh, a need in the gut.

Maybe navy bean soup would do it, she decided, jumping
up

and going inside. Navy beans steaming in an enamel bowl,
smothering the rest of the leftover cornbread. He'd made a
bright yellow

pone of it in her Dutch oven yesterday morning before he
left—to

take with him, she'd assumed, but instead he'd left most of it for

her. She would bring it back out here to the porch chair and sit facing west, with her back carefully turned on Clinch Peak. Watch the

sky turn to flame behind the trees.

She went inside, lit the kerosene lamp, and first went without

thinking to the big metal canister where she stored her ten-pound

bags of beans, but then paused there, feeling foolish. It was too late

to soak them and cook them from scratch as she normally did, making enough at one time for half a week's distracted consumption.

But she was pretty sure she had a can of precooked white beans in

the back of the cupboard. She flung back doors and raked aside jars

of spaghetti sauce, Campbell's soup, ravioli, things she'd forgotten

were here—she rarely bothered with much beyond beans and rice.

She shoved aside the Dutch oven to look behind it and was dismayed to see the heavy iron lid sitting ajar. Darn it! She must have

left it that way this morning in her rush to get out the door, and the

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army of mice in this cabin didn't need an invitation. She looked inside knowing exactly what she'd see: the crisp round edge nibbled

ragged, the scattering of black droppings over the golden surface.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she stared into the heavy pot.

“Too much of a fool-headed hurry, Deanna,” she said out loud.

It was only food, and she had plenty more, but what she’d wanted was this. She slammed down the lid, swung the heavy pot

down from the shelf, and headed outside. She *had* left the lid ajar,

no “must have” about it. Living alone leaves you no one to curse

but yourself when the toilet paper grins its empty cardboard jeer at

you in the outhouse, or when the cornbread is peppered with poop.

She could blame the mice if she wanted to, little devils. But they

were only doing their job, which was the same as everybody else’s:

surviving.

All right, then; fascinated by animal scat though she was (the last

straw for her ex-husband, *that* part of her thesis), she was not about

to eat it, nor eat after a mouse, either. She walked to the end of the

porch in her heavy wool socks and continued out to the boulder

under the wild cherry. She shook the hunks of yellow cornbread

and crumbs onto the ground, adding her loss to the nebulae of

birdseed glittering there. Then, dispirited utterly, she went back inside, sat at her table, and ate cold ravioli out of a can while she finished recording her notes. To hell with the body's cravings.

Before sunset she rose from the table and stretched because she

was cramped, then walked out to the porch for no good reason, just

in time to catch the unusual sight of a luna moth flying in the daytime. The surprising ascent, like a pair of pale hickory leaves caught

in an updraft, arrested her there in the doorway. She watched it flutter upward gradually by increments: up, down, then a little higher

up, as if it were climbing a staircase in the air. Deanna didn't realize

she was holding her breath, even when she released it finally as the

creature reached the upper leaves of the chokecherry, landed there,

and held on. Luna moths were common enough up here but still

never failed to move her because of their size and those pale-green,

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ethereal wings tipped with long, graceful tails. As if they were already ghosts, mourning their future extinction. This one was out of

its element, awake in broad daylight. A busy chipmunk might have

rousted it from a lower resting place. Or it was possible she was witnessing the fatal, final disorientation that overcomes a creature as it

reaches the end of its life. Once, as a child, waiting with her dad in

a gas station, she'd found a luna moth in that condition: confused

and dying on the pavement in front of their truck. For the time it

took him to pump the gas she'd held it in her hand and watched it

struggle against its end. Up close it was a frightening beast, writhing

and beating against her hand until wisps of pale-green fur slipped

off its body and stuck to her fingers. Her horror had made her want

to throw it down, and it was only her preconceived affection for the

luna that made her hold on. When these creatures danced above

their yard at night, she and her dad called them ballerinas. But this

was no ballerina. Its body was a fat, furry cone flattened on one end

into a ferocious face like a tiny, angry owl's. It glared at Deanna,

seeming to know too much for an insect and, worse, seeming disdainful. She hadn't given up her love for luna after that, but she'd

never forgotten, either, how a mystery caught in the hand could

lose its grace.

It was later, long past dark, after she'd pinched out the lamp and was

nearly asleep in her cot but not quite, when she heard him outside.

Those were footsteps, she felt sure, though it wasn't the crackle of a

step that she'd heard. It wasn't anything, really. She sat up in bed

hugging herself under the blanket, holding her braid in her mouth

to keep herself still. It was nothing, but *nothing* isn't an absence, it's

a presence. A quieting of the insect noise, a change in the quality of

night that means something is there, or someone. Or was it less than

nothing, just a raccoon waddling through his endless rounds, come

to scavenge the cornbread she'd thrown out?

Finally she heard something definite: the crackle of a step. She

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groped for the flashlight she kept under the cot, slipped her bare

feet into her boots, and got to the door, where she stood quiet,

looking out. Should she speak? Why didn't he come?

Out in the darkness beyond the end of the porch where she scattered the seed—that was where he was. She could actually see

movement. She put the butt end of the flashlight against her forehead, just above the space between her eyebrows. It was something

she'd learned long ago about seeing at night. A light shined from

there would reveal nothing of herself to a trespasser, and from that

spot on her forehead a beam would go straight to his retinas and return to her own eyes the characteristic color of the trespasser's eyeshine. If it *had* eyes, of course, and if they were looking at her

directly.

She waited a little longer, heard nothing. Clicked on her light:

only darkness at first. Then suddenly two small lights appeared,

bright retinal glints—not the fierce red of a human eye, but greenish gold. Not human, not raccoon. Coyote.

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[{5}](#).

[Moth Love](#)

*cause the mechanisms of olfactory tracking are so different
The spiraling flights of moths appear haphazard only be-
from our own. Using binocular vision, we judge the loca-
tion of an object by comparing the images from two eyes
and tracking directly*

*toward the stimulus. But for species relying on the sense of
smell, the organ-*

*ism compares points in space, moves in the direction of the
greater concentra-*

tion, then compares two more points successively, moving in zigzags toward

the source. Using olfactory navigation the moth detects currents of scent in the

air and, by small increments, discovers how to move upstream.

It was Lusa's nephews running a zigzag course through the metal folding chairs that had set her to ruminating on that passage

she'd read on moth navigation, and then roused her suddenly to

wonder: When was that, a hundred years ago? Day before yesterday? Reading in bed secretly, hurrying to finish a page or a chapter

before Cole got back: there would be no more of that. Now she

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could read wherever she pleased, read until she finished the book if

that was what she felt like. Lusa tried to make this strange dream feel

true but couldn't quite connect herself with the person she found

herself sitting inside of here, a woman in a borrowed black dress

that hung loose in the bosom. This funeral parlor was a place she'd

never seen on the inside or even imagined, especially not for the

occasion of her husband's wake. The rooms were painted a stale

toothpaste green, and the fancy, dark-painted molding around the

doors was actually molded plastic, textured with artificial grain to

look like wood. What an odd thing, Lusa thought, to buy and install plastic woodwork in this town surrounded on every side by

forests.

Beyond the doorway she could hear the people who waited in

line, filling the long, narrow hallway like a glass pipette or medicine

dropper that kept dispensing solemn visitors into the room, one

stricken face at a time. Visitors just now arriving for the viewing

would have to wait in line for an hour or more, Mary Edna had just

announced (seeming pleased) after going out for reconnaissance.

The line was out the door now that it was evening and people were

getting off work. Most came in their work clothes, the clean jeans

they'd worn underneath their milking overalls if need be; suits and

ties would be saved for the funeral tomorrow. Tonight was a friendlier business, their chance to look at Cole and say their private

good-byes. There was hardly a soul in the valley who had not

turned out, it seemed. Cole was very well loved—Lusa had known

this, of course. And also there was the handiwork of the undertaker

to be admired, given the accident.

Lusa hadn't had to wait in the line. She was the end of the line,

sitting near the head of the casket where people could come over

and pay their respects if they wanted to, though most of them knew

her only by name and hearsay and couldn't manage much more

than a stiff little nod. She knew they were sorry, though. To the rest

of Cole's family they were pouring out such a stream of condolences that Lusa feared she might drown in the backwash. She sat on

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a metal chair flanked by sisters-in-law—Hannie-Mavis and Mary

Edna at the moment. When Mary Edna went out front to hold

court she was replaced by Jewel or Lois or Emaline, interchangeable

blocks in a solid, black-clad wall. Maybe not precisely interchangeable. She felt a little breathing room when it was Jewel, who was less

overbearing than Mary Edna of the tree-trunk physique or Lois

with her deep smoker's croak. Or Hannie-Mavis with eyeliner à la

Cleopatra, even for this somber occasion. In the beginning, when

Lusa needed a secret mnemonic to learn their names, Mary Edna had

been Menacing Eldest; Hannie-Mavis kept Makeup Handy; Longfaced Lois was Long-haired and Loud; Emaline was Emotional. But

Jewel was just Jewel, an empty vessel with two kids and mournful

eyes the exact color of Cole's. Lusa couldn't remember ever having

had a conversation with Jewel, or having watched her do anything

beyond handing Popsicles to the children out in the yard at family

gatherings and, once, walking up the drive to ask Lusa if she'd seen

their missing bobtail cat.

Jewel's and Hannie-Mavis's five-year-olds were running underfoot, literally: one of the two had just climbed underneath Lusa's

legs and the strange black stockings someone had given her to put

on. The persistent, spiraling path of these boys through their uncle's

wake made her ponder moth navigation: were the children sampling the air for grief in different parts of the room? If so, what

would they find in the air around Lusa? She found it impossible to

feel anything. Somehow her numbness seemed connected with the

great din of noise. As the evening wore on and on, the noise

seemed to rise like a tide. So many conversations at once added up

to a kind of quacking racket that she could not begin to sort

through. She found herself considering, instead, the sounds of nonsensical phrases that bounced into her ears. Mountain speech, even

without its words, was a whole different language from city speech:

the vowels were a little harsher, but the whole cadence was somehow softer. 'At'en up 'air, she heard again and again: "That one up

there."

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Hit's not for sale. Them cows come over on Lawrence again. Wet'sit is,

won't be no more tobacco setting this week, Law, no. Hit's a line fence. Why

sure, I wouldn't care to. Widener boy, old Widener place, Law, yes, I been

up 'air.

Why yeah, fishing, when I's a kid. 'Air's a pond up 'at holler. Bitter

Holler.

No, no bid'ness of hers. That's Widener land and everybody knows it,

you-all's family place, what does she have to do with it?

No, she won't stay on it. Don't hardly see how she could.

This last, she realized with a start, was Mary Edna. Over near

the door, speaking of *her*, Lusa. How could this have been decided

already? But it was only natural, even a kindness, Lusa supposed, for

them to release her so easily. What else could they expect but for

Lusa to pack up her butterfly nets and her foreign name and go back

to Lexington now? “Where she belongs,” was the end of the sentence she didn’t hear spoken aloud.

She felt a strange lightness: Yes! She could walk away from

Zebulon County. She’d been granted more than just the freedom to

read in bed all she wanted, which would still mean hiding from

sisters-in-law who disapproved of reading and probably the whole

idea of being in bed. No, it was that she could leave this place, be

anybody she wanted, anywhere at all. She put her hands to her face

and felt a joyful urge to tell Cole: they could leave now! Oh, God,

Cole. She ground her knuckles into her eye sockets and vaguely

grasped how far gone she must be. Shock, two nights without sleep,

and two days of people eating ham sandwiches in her kitchen had

caused her to lose her mind. Her body, as if it belonged to someone

else, began to shake with a dry, sharp rick she was helpless to stop,

a strange weeping from her throat that sounded almost like laughter. Hannie-Mavis put an arm around Lusa's convulsing shoulders

and whispered, "Honey, I don't know what we'll do without him.

We're all just as lost as you are."

Lusa looked at Hannie-Mavis. Behind the fiercely curled and

blue-mascaraed lashes, her eyes did seem helpless, truly as lost as she

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claimed. What was she trying to say? That Lusa had no prerogative

to the greatest grief? First as mistress of their house, and now as

Cole's widow, Lusa was occupying a place she didn't deserve?

"You'll be all right," Lusa told her without feeling. *As soon as*

I'm gone.

The evening had the sensation of a dream she would not remember in the morning. Trapped in the endless repetition, she

shook the callused palms of men who still milked cows by hand,

and accepted the scented, too-soft cheeks of their wives against

her own.

"He was a good man. Only the Lord knows why his time came

so soon."

“Called home. He’s with the Savior now.”

“He looks real natural.”

She hadn’t looked at the body and couldn’t contemplate it.
She

could not really think it was in there, not his *body*, the
great perfect

table of his stomach on which she could lay down her head
like a

sleepy schoolchild; that energy of his that she had learned
to crave

and move to like an old tune inside her that she’d never
known how

to sing before Cole. His hands on her bare back, his mouth
that

drew her in like a nectar guide on a flower—these things
of Cole’s

she would never have again in her life. She opened her
eyes for fear

she would fall into the darkness. A tiny old woman was
there,

kneeling in front of her, startling Lusa by putting both
hands very

firmly on her knees.

“You don’t know me,” she whispered, almost fiercely. “I
have an

orchard a mile up the road from your farm. I’ve known
Cole

Widener since he was a little boy. He used to come play
with my

daughter. I’d let him steal apples.”

“Oh,” Lusa said. “Thank you.”

The woman looked upward and blinked as if she were listening

for a moment. Her eyes were very deep brown, surrounded by pale

lashes, and she wore her gray hair in a crown of braids wrapped

around her head, like someone from another country or another

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time. "I lost a child," she said, meeting Lusa's eyes directly. "I

thought I wouldn't live through it. But you do. You learn to love the

place somebody leaves behind for you."

She released Lusa's knees and grasped her hands instead, holding them tightly for a few seconds before ducking away. Her grip

had felt so cool and strong on Lusa's listless fingers, and so fleeting.

As the woman went out the door Lusa caught sight of her calico

skirt swinging to the side, like a curtain closing.

Sometime after nine o'clock, Mary Edna began to insist that

Lusa go home. Herb could take her, she suggested, and then come

back to wait out the evening with the rest of the family. Or someone else could do it—there was a volunteer, a Widener cousin, who

would stay with her so she wouldn't have to be alone in the house

until the others got there.

“But why should I go home if you’re all still staying?”

Lusa

asked, as muddled as a child. And then, like a muddled child who

senses she’s being wronged, she pushed her faltering will into a

dogged single-mindedness. She told Mary Edna she would stay here

till the end, until the last person had said good-bye to Cole and left

this room. She would see the back of Herb Goins’s bald head and

the hind ends of Mary Edna, Lois, Jewel, Emaline, and HannieMavis pass through that door, and then she would kiss her husband

good-bye. She didn’t think about Cole’s body or anything else as

she declared her intention to stay. She just repeated it, more angrily

each time, until she made it come true.

Two days and two nights after the wake, Lusa still hadn’t slept. She

couldn’t understand how her mind could fail to collapse over her

body’s exhaustion. But it was the opposite: the more tired she felt,

the more adamantly her mind seemed to want to keep vigil. Over

what? Nobody’s going to steal the silver, she mused, not that she

would give a hoot if somebody did—and well somebody might,

the house was so jammed with visitors. On Friday
afternoon, right

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after the funeral, she had dozed off for just a minute on the
parlor

couch in a room full of people dressed in their Sunday
clothes. She

could swear it was the quiet that woke her, the fact that
their talk of

crops and rain and beef prices and rheumatism suddenly
ceased

when they realized she was sleeping. Lusa had opened her
eyes onto

their sorrowful, silent stares, as if she herself were the
occasion of a

wake, and she'd felt the possibility of sleep frozen away
from her

ever since.

Things at least quieted down after dark, when all the
reasonable

hours for eating or visiting were past. Even that nudnick
the minister wouldn't show up now. But nights were the worst
for Lusa. She

had to prowl the upper rooms, avoiding the bedroom
where she

and Cole had slept but effectively being trapped upstairs
since Jewel

and Hannie-Mavis still held the downstairs, for the fifth
night in a

row. Apparently they had moved in. It was Saturday now
—Sunday

morning, rather, could that be right? Didn't they need to go home

to their husbands and children? Lusa lay on top of the coverlet on

the daybed in the spare room (her sisters-in-law called it the girls'

room), listening to the toneless mutter of their conversation. She

wished for deafness—she had already overheard too much, too

many suppositions about her fragility, her plans, her lack of religious faith or even her own kin to lean on. Mary Edna had said to

the minister, sotto voce, "Now, you *know*, the wife isn't Christian."

As though that explained, in part, her impossible bad fortune. All of

them, sisters and neighbors, intimated to one another the mysteries

of her father's long-lost parentage ("that Jewish business, in the

war") and her mother's more recent poor health ("back in the

spring, sad—no, not all that old"), without understanding how life

had left Lusa with two speechless parents. Ever since the stroke, her

mother's frantic eyes searched so desperately for words that Lusa

could hardly bear to see it, while her father resigned himself to the

silence as if it were his own death and he'd been waiting for it.

When she called to tell him her awful news, his son-in-law
dead,

her father seemed slow to grasp how this new tragedy was
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nected with him. They hadn't even discussed his coming
for the funeral.

Hannie-Mavis and Jewel were down there in the kitchen
now,

mousy, downcast Jewel playing foil to the more dramatic
HandyMakeup, whose tears invoked constant facial repair
(though the

emotive Emaline had outdone her earlier by letting out
loud wails

in front of Cole's baby picture). Things seemed to calm
down a lot

when the visitors left, but Lusa could still hear them
talking and

handling food. Everything in the kitchen remained exactly
as their

mother had organized it. When Lusa had tried to rearrange
the

cupboards, they'd all treated it as a mistake to be repaired
and forgiven. She could picture the two of them now, their
hands uncrinkling and reusing squares of aluminum foil to
cover the casseroles.

The incessant opening and closing of the refrigerator—a
whine and

a hiss—had become the theme music to Lusa's misery.

If only she could sleep, only leave this place for a little
while.

When the Regulator clock downstairs chimed one o'clock,
she

gave up. Sleep would not come to her tonight. There were ghosts

everywhere, even here in the neutral guest bedroom where Lusa

had hardly spent an hour of her life before this. The bed had no

memories in it, but there was Cole's big bass fiddle standing up in

the corner, spooking her with its presence as badly as if it were a

man standing there in the shadows. She kept thinking of Cole's

hands on its neck sliding fluidly up and down, as if there were still

some parts of him that hadn't yet conceded to die. One more piece

of the bottomless unfairness of this death: she'd never really taken

the time to listen to him play. He'd let the music go in recent years,

though she knew back in high school he'd been good enough to

travel around the area with a bluegrass band. Out of the Blue, it was

called. She wondered who the other members were—the fiddle,

the guitar, the mandolin, all played by hands that probably had

shaken hers in the last few days, though no one had mentioned it.

Now Cole was permanently missing from their number, like a

tooth knocked out, and his upright bass stood waiting in its corner.

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She stared at its dark, glossy curves, realizing that the instrument

was old, probably older even than this hundred-year-old house.

Other dead men had surely played it before Cole. She'd never asked

him where it came from. How strange that you could share the objects of your life with whole communities of the dead and never

give them a single thought until one of your own crossed over. Lusa

had come only lately to this truth: she was living among ghosts.

She sighed and got up. She would go back to her own bedroom

and read Nabokov or something to shut off her mind. Sleep wouldn't be possible in that bed, either—least of all there—but the

bedroom at least had a reading light. A book would make morning

come sooner. She thought of how Cole used to rise at five A.M.,

even earlier in the summer, and how she used to dread the break of

day with its tangle of work and choices. That dread was nothing,

now, compared to the unbounded misery of a sleepless night. At

this moment she would give her soul for daybreak.

She found her slippers and skated over the creaky floorboards,

heading downstairs to look for the book she thought she'd left in

the parlor. In her present state of mind, who knew? She could just

as easily have left it in the refrigerator. Earlier today she'd poured the

minister a glass of iced tea, stirred in the sugar, placed the sugarbowl lid on the glass and set it back in the cupboard, then served

Brother Leonard the sugar bowl. She hadn't even noticed anything

was amiss until Jewel silently got up to reverse the mistake.

She couldn't face any of them after that. Only now, finally, did

it seem safe to go down and look for her book. The kitchen had

been quiet for a while. Her sisters-in-law must be asleep at their

posts on the parlor and living-room couches.

But a fluttering white ascent startled her on the stairs: Jewel or

Hannie-Mavis, one of the two, flying upstairs in her nightgown.

"I was coming to check on you. I heard you moving around."

Jewel, it was.

"Oh. I was just coming down to get a book."

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{ Prodigal Summer }

“You can’t be reading now, honey. You need to sleep.”

Lusa’s shoulders fell helplessly in the darkness. Tell
Lazarus he

needs to get up.

“I can’t,” she said. “I’ve tried and tried, but I can’t.”

“I know. I brought you something to take. I got these from
Dr.

Gibben when Shel went away. I had the same thing.”

Went away. Jewel’s husband had left her three or four years
ago,

a fact so fully undeclared by the family that Lusa had fully
forgotten

it. And so, take what—poison? Lusa felt for Jewel’s hands,
heard the

clicking rattle of the little plastic bottle. Racked her useless
brain for

meaning. “Oh, a sleeping pill?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t think I could.”

“They won’t hurt you any.”

“I hardly ever take anything, though. Not even aspirin for a
headache. I’m kind of scared of pills. I almost feel like I’m
scared of

falling asleep right now, too. Does that seem silly?”

Jewel’s white nightgown hung from the peaks of its ruffled
shoulders, suspended in the air like a moth or a ghost. Her
voice

came from the darkness above it. “I know. You want to just
close

your eyes on all of it, but at the same time you’re thinking
there’s

something you need to see, and you'll miss it."

"That's right." Lusa leaned forward in the darkness, amazed,

wanting to touch the face she couldn't see to make sure it was really

Jewel. She couldn't reconcile this wise compassion with the woman

she knew. The empty vessel, as she had called her.

"After a while, you ... I don't know how to say it." The voice

paused, growing shy, and then Lusa could see in her mind's eye that

this was Jewel. "After a while you stop missing a man, you know, in

a physical way. The Lord helps you forget."

"Oh, God." Lusa let out a whimper, recalling a body so heavy

to her touch, so much like congealed fluid, that she had recoiled

from it, just grazing the forehead with her lips before running away.

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{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

She sank onto the carpeted stair and began to sob. She couldn't even

feel embarrassed, didn't have the energy. The white-winged apparition above her lowered itself down and hugged her tightly.

After a minute they let go of each other. "What am I saying?"

Jewel cried softly. "You're so young and pretty. You'll marry again. I

know you can't even think of it now, but you will."

Lusa felt emptied out. "You're young, too, Jewel. The same

as me."

"No," she said. "Not the same. For me it's done."

"Why?"

"Shhh." She put her hand gently across Lusa's mouth and then

stroked her hair. "You need to sleep. You have to give in sometime.

You get to a point to where you just start wishing you wasn't living,

and that's worse than being scared."

Lusa put out her hand and felt for Jewel's, felt it open the bottle

and place one weightless dot on her palm. If she looked just off to

the side of it she could see it there, like a distant, guiding star.

"You go up and take that right now. Drink you a glass of water

with it and go lay down. Sometimes you just need a little help."

She lay on her side watching the red numbers on the digital clock

on Cole's side of the bed. First she feared to feel the effects of the

pill in her limbs, and then, slowly, she arrived at the much more

dreadful understanding that there would be no effect. When the

clock downstairs chimed twice, Lusa felt pure, bleak
despair. Jewel

was right: this body of hers was crushed with the waiting.
Her mind

was longing for death.

And then it was over.

Sleep took Lusa away to a wide, steep pasture cleared out
of the

forest. A man spoke to her by name:

“Lusa.”

He was a stranger to her, no one she thought she knew. She
could hear his voice but couldn’t see him. She was lying in
the dewy

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{ *Prodigal Summer* }

grass, on her side, wrapped up completely in a dark
blanket that

even covered her head.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked him through
the

blanket, because suddenly she understood there were
women lying

all over this field, also wrapped in dark-colored blankets.

He answered, “I know you. I know the shape of your
body.”

“You’ve been looking at me closely, then.”

“I have.”

She felt an acute, erotic awareness of her small waist and
short

thigh bones, the particular roundness of her hip—things
that might

distinguish her from all the other women lying under blankets. The

unbearable, exquisite pleasure of being chosen.

“You knew me well enough to find me here?”

His voice was soft, reaching across the distance to explain his

position in the most uncomplicated terms conceivable.

“I’ve always

known you that well.”

His scent burst onto her brain like a rain of lights, causing her

to know him perfectly. *This is how moths speak to each other. The wrong*

words are impossible when there are no words.

She rolled toward him and opened her blanket.

He was covered in fur, not a man at all but a mountain with the

silky, pale-green extremities and maroon shoulders of a luna moth.

He wrapped her in his softness, touched her face with what seemed

to be the movement of trees. His odor was of water over stones and

the musk of decaying leaves, a wild, sweet aura that drove her to a

madness of pure want. She pushed herself down against the whole

length of him, rubbing his stippled body like a forest between her

legs, craving to dissolve her need inside the confidence of his embrace. It was those things exactly, his solid strength and immensity,

that comforted her as he shuddered and came into her.

She woke in a sweat, her back arched with simultaneous
desire

and release. She touched her body quickly—her breasts,
her face—

reassuring herself of her own shape. It seemed impossible,
but here

she was after everything that had happened, still herself,
Lusa.

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It was daybreak. She curled onto her side and stared for a
long

time out the open window at the solemn poplars standing
on either

side of the hollow, guarding the mouth of the mountain
that still

breathed gently into her window. Above the trees stood a
pale white

sky where the waxing moon must have hung just a little
while ago:

morning, with its tangle of work and choices. A day of her
own,

faintly scented with honeysuckle. What he'd reached out to
tell her

that morning, as she sat near the window, was that words
were not

the whole truth. What she'd loved was here, and still might
be, if

she could find her way to it.

She pulled up the sheet and closed her eyes, accepting
solitude

in the bed that was hers, if she chose it.

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[{6}](#).

[Old Chestnuts](#)

Garnett could still remember, from when he was a boy, a giant hollow log way back up in the woods on Zebulon Mountain. It was of such a size that he and the other youngsters could run through it single-file without

even bending their heads. The thought made him smile. They had

reckoned it to be theirs, for a ten-year-old boy will happily presume

ownership of a miracle of nature, and then carve on it with his knife.

They'd called it by some kind of name—what was it? Something

Indian. The Indian Tunnel.

A surprising fact occurred to Garnett then, for the first time in his nearly eighty years: the unfortunate fellow who'd chopped

down that tree, miscalculating its size and then having to leave it,

must have been his grandfather. How many times before had

Garnett stood right here at the edge of his seedling field staring up

at that mountainside, ruminating on the Indian Tunnel? But he'd

never put the two facts together. That tree must have come down

{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

near a hundred years ago, when his grandfather owned the whole

southern slope of Zebulon Mountain. It was his grandfather, the

first Garnett Walker, who'd named it, modestly choosing Zebulon

from the Bible, even though some still did call it Walker's Mountain.

Who else could have felled that tree? He and his sons would have

spent a whole day and more with their shoulders against the crosscut saw to bring down that giant for lumber. They'd have been mad

as hornets, then, to find after all their work that the old chestnut

was too huge to be dragged down off the mountain. Probably they

took away tree-sized branches to be milled into barn siding, but that

trunk was just too big of an old monster and had to be left where it

lay. Left to hollow itself out from the inside till nothing was left of

it but a game for the useless mischief of boys.

Mules, they had to use in those days for any kind of work that

got done: mules or men. A tractor was a thing still yet undreamed

of. A mule could be coaxed into many a steep and narrow place

where a tractor would not go, it was true. But! Some things could

be wrought with horsepower that were beyond the power of horseflesh. That was the lesson he was meant to draw here, God's purpose

for these paired recollections of Grandfather Walker and the Indian

Tunnel. If they'd had a logging sledge or a good John Deere, that

tree would not have gone to waste as boy-tunnel and bear den. Yes,

sometimes horsepower can do what horseflesh cannot.

That was just it, the very thing he had been trying to tell the

Rawley woman for years. "Miss Rawley," he'd explained until he

was blue in the face as she traipsed through her primitive shenanigans, "however fondly we might recall the simple times of old, they

had their limits. People keep the customs of their own day and time

for good reason."

Nannie Land Rawley was Garnett's nearest neighbor and the

bane of his life.

Miss Rawley it was and ever would be, not *Missus*, even though

she had once borne a child and it was well known in Zebulon

County that she'd never married the father. And that had been

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some thirty years ago or more, a far cry before the days
when young

girls began to wear rings in their noses and bells on their
toes as they

did now, and turn out illegitimate children as a matter of
course. In

those days, a girl went away for a decent interval to visit a
so-called

relative and came back sadder but wiser. But not Miss
Rawley. She

never appeared the least bit sad, and the woman was
unwise on

principle. She'd carried the child right here in front of God
and

everybody, christened the poor thing with a ridiculous
name, and

acted like she had every right to parade a bastard child
through a

God-fearing community.

And every one of them has forgiven her by now, he
reflected

bitterly, peering up the rise through the trunks of her lower
orchard

toward her house, which sat much too close to his own on
the crest

of a small, flat knoll just before the land rose steeply up the
mountainside. Of course there was the tragic business with the
child to

win them over, but even so, Nannie was the sort, she could
get

away with anything. *Every one of them just as pleasant as the day is long*

when they meet her out here in the lane, Nannie all rosy-cheeked amongst

her daisies with her long calico skirt and braids wrapped around her head like

some storybook Gretel. They might gossip some, for how could such

an odd bird fail to attract the occasional sharp arrow let loose from

Oda Black down at the Black Store? But even the vociferous Oda

would put a hand beside her mouth to cut short a remark about

Nannie, letting the suggestion of it hang but packaging it with deep

regret. Nannie bribed Oda with apple pies; that was one of her

methods. People thought she was comical and intriguing but for the

most part excessively kind. They didn't suspect her little figure of

harboring the devil, as Garnett Walker did. He suspected Nannie

Rawley had been put on this earth to try his soul and tempt his faith

into doubt.

Why else, with all the good orchard land stretching north from

here to the Adirondacks, would that woman have ended up as his

neighbor?

Her sign alone was enough to give him hives. For two months

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now, ever since she'd first crept over on his side to put up that sign,

he'd lain awake nearly every night, letting it get on his nerves:

Heaven knows it's one thing when a Hereford jumps a fence and

gets over onto a neighbor, *that* a body can forgive and forget, but a

three-foot plywood sign does not get up and walk. Last night he'd

fretted till nearly the crack of dawn, and after breakfast he'd made

up his mind to walk out through his front seedling field to check

the road frontage. Looking for "signs and wonders," as the Bible

said, though Nannie's sign was known only for bad behavior.

He could see it now through the weeds, the back side of it,

poking up out of the bank above Highway 6. He squinted to make

sure; his eyesight had reached the point where it required some effort. Yes, the lettered side was facing the road, but he knew what it

said, the whole hand-painted foolishness of it commanding the

roadside— *his* roadside, two hundred feet over his property line—to

be a “NO SPRAY ZONE.” As if all a person had to do to rule the

world was concoct a fool set of opinions and paint them on a threeby-three square of plywood. That in a nutshell was Nannie Rawley.

His plan for today was to hoist that sign with a mighty heave

back over her fence into the ditch, where it would be consumed by

the swamp of weeds that had sprung up in the wake of her ban on

herbicide spraying; then justice would prevail in his small corner of

God’s green earth. He hoped she was watching.

Garnett waded carefully down the embankment through the

tall weeds and yanked up the sign, with enough difficulty that he

changed his mind and hoped she *wasn’t* watching. He had to grasp

it with both hands and wobble the stake for quite a long time to

loosen it out of its hole. The woman must have swung a fourpound mallet to drive it in; he was lucky she hadn’t dug a posthole

with her antique tractor and set it in cement. He could picture it.

She had no respect for property, for her elders in general, or for

Garnett in particular. No use for men at all, he suspected darkly—

and just as well. No love lost there on either side.

{ *Prodigal Summer* }

He began wading toward the property line, swishing and hacking a path through the weeds ahead of him with the sign. He felt

like one of the knights of old, fighting his way through an army of

foes with his wooden sword. The bank and road cut were in a hateful condition, just one long tangle of poke, cockleburs, and multiflora briars nearly as high as his chest. He had to stop every few

yards to untangle his shirtsleeves from the stickerbushes. This was

all Nannie's doing, his cross to bear. Everywhere else in Zebulon

County—everywhere but here—the county road workers kept the

road cuts mowed or, if the banks were too steep for mowing, like

this one that fronted his farm, at least kept them sprayed. It took

only one good dose of Two-Four-D herbicide every month to shrivel these leafy weeds to a nice, withered stand of rustybrown stalks, easily raked down afterward to show the world a tidy

frontage. But instead he had this, now—this tangle of briars harboring vermin of every kind known to man, breeding in here and

getting set to invade his F1 chestnut seedling field. It would take

him days to cut through all this with a weed-eater or a mowing

scythe, and he wasn't sure his heart could take it. In three short

months Garnett's farm—whose fields he kept as neat as
pickle, once

you got up past the road cut—had come to look like a
disgrace to

passersby. Probably it was all they talked about down at
Black Store,

that Garnett Walker was a lazy old man(!), when it was
really none

other than Nannie Land Rawley, their dear darling friend,
working

in her unseen ways to ruin him.

It had started back in April when he left this steep weed
patch

to the county's boys for spraying, since it was a county
right-of-way.

The first of May he'd done the same again. Both times
she'd snuck

out here in the middle of the night before road-spraying
day, working in darkness like the witch she was, to move her
sign over onto

Garnett. Now it was the second of June, and the spray
truck must

be due again soon. How could she always know when it
was coming? Was that witchcraft, too? Most people around
here couldn't

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even predict when their own cows were going to calve, let
alone

prophesy the work habits of a bunch of county-employed
teenage

hoodlums wearing earplugs, jewelry, and oversized
trousers.

In previous years, he had talked to her. He'd had the patience of

Job, informing her it was her duty to keep her NO SPRAY ZONE,

if she insisted on having such a thing, inside of her own legal property boundaries. He had pointed dramatically at their line fence and

stated (for Garnett was a reader), "Miss Rawley, as the poet said,

'Good fences make good neighbors.'"

She would reply, "Oh, people just adore fences, but Nature doesn't give a hoot." She claimed the wind caused the weed killer

on his side to drift over into her orchards.

He'd explained it to her scientifically. "One application of herbicide on my bank will not cause your apple trees or anybody else's

to drop off all their leaves."

"Not to drop their leaves, no," she'd admitted. "But what if some inspector came tomorrow to spot-check for chemicals on my

apples? I'd lose my certification."

(Garnett paused, again, to untangle the sleeve of his work shirt

from a briar. His heart was pounding from the effort of bushwhacking through this godforsaken mess.)

Her certification! Nannie Rawley was proud to tell the world

she'd been the first organic grower to be certified in Zebulon

County, and she was still the loudest one. Fifteen years ago he'd assumed it was a nonsense that would pass, along with rock music and

hydroponic tobacco. But that was not to be. Nannie Rawley had

declared war not only on the county's Two-Four-D but also on the

Sevin dust and other insecticides Garnett was bound and obligated

to put on his own seedling trees to keep them from being swallowed

whole by the army of Japanese beetles camped out on Nannie

Rawley's unsprayed pastures. There was no end to her ignorance or

her zeal. She was the sworn friend and protector of all creatures

great and small, right down to the ticks, fleas, and corn maggots,

evidently. (All but goats, which she hated and feared due to a child⁸⁶

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hood "incident.") But could she really be such a fool as to fear the

certification men, coming around to spot-check her apples? That

would be along the lines of the Catholics coming to check up on

the morals of their pope. The organic-certification men probably

called up Nannie Rawley for advice.

He paused again to catch his breath. In spite of the cool day he

felt dark sweat spreading down his shirt from the armpits like a pair

of a fish's gills. His arms ached from thrashing the sign,
and he felt

a queer heaviness in his left leg. He couldn't see his feet
but could

feel that his trousers were soaked up to the knees from all
the dampness down in the weeds. It was practically a swamp.
The briars had

become almost impossible to get through, and he still had
twenty

yards to go to reach the line fence. Garnett felt purely
miserable and

almost lost heart: well, he could backtrack, walk back up
to his

mowed field, and throw the sign over into her nicely
mowed orchard. There was a gate in the fence put in by
Garnett's father and

Nannie Rawley's, who'd been the best of friends.

But no, he wanted to cross over down here below the fence
line

and throw the cursed sign into her weeds, where it
belonged. He

decided to push on, twenty more yards.

If only his poisons *would* drift over onto her trees. He
knew very

well, and had told her so, that without his constant
spraying to keep

them down, the Japanese beetles would overrun her
orchards completely. She'd be standing out there in her calico
skirt under leafless

trees, wringing her hands, wondering what'd gone wrong
in her

little paradise. Success without chemicals was impossible.
Nannie

Rawley was a deluded old harpy in pigtails.

He could see the fence now—the posts, at least. (His eyesight

had clouded to cataracts so slowly that his mind had learned how to

fill in details like fence wire, tree leaves, and the more subtle features

of a face.) But as he moved toward the property line, the sensation

of heaviness in his left leg grew so unbearable, he could hardly drag

it. He imagined what he looked like, thrashing and staggering forward like Frankenstein's monster, and embarrassment washed over

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{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

him but then was replaced, suddenly, by a terrifying thought: he

was having a stroke. Wasn't that a symptom? Heaviness in the left

leg? He stopped to mop the sweat off his face. His skin felt clammy,

and a sick ache gnawed at his stomach. Dear Lord! He could fall

down into these weeds and who would find him here? After how

many days, or weeks? His obituary would read, "The decayed body

of Garnett Walker was discovered Wednesday after the first frost

brought down the weeds along his frontage on Highway 6."

His chest felt constricted, like a bulging tree trunk wrapped too

tightly in barbed wire. Oh, sweet Jesus! Through his ragged breathing he cried out in spite of himself:

“Help!”

And there she came, down the embankment. Of all God’s creatures he had summoned to his aid Nannie Rawley, wearing a pair

of dungarees and a red bandanna around her head like that woman

on the syrup, Aunt Jemima. She came tearing out of nowhere, sliding down toward him, still carrying something in her hand from

whatever home remedy she’d been out messing with—Nannie with

her traps to catch codling moths, as if that would settle everything.

It looked like a yellow paper box with the bottom cut out. Here I

am, thought Garnett, at the end of my allotted days, staring at a yellow paper box with the bottom cut out. My last view of this earthly

life: a bug trap.

Dear Lord my God, he prayed silently. I confess I may have

sinned in my heart, but I obeyed thy fifth commandment. I didn’t

kill her.

She had already grabbed him under his soggy armpits and was

struggling him up the bank toward the flat ground of her front orchard. He had never felt her touch or her grip before and was

shocked by this little woman's strength. He tried to help with his

useless legs, but he felt as if he were participating in the sport of alligator wrestling and knew, with a sinking heart, that he was the alligator.

Then at last he was lying on his back on the grass underneath

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{ Prodigal Summer }

her winesaps. She knelt over him, peering down with concern, and

he gasped at the sight of her red-bandanna-crowned head reeling

wildly through space. He quickly turned his head to the side; this

wasn't the stroke—it always made him dizzy to lie flat on his back

looking up.

“Miss Rawley,” he said weakly once the spinning of the world

had ceased, “I don't like to trouble you. You go on with your business, but maybe if you get a chance directly you could call up the

ambulance. I think I've had a stroke.” He closed his eyes.

When she didn't answer, he opened his eyes and saw that she

was staring down at his left leg, in apparent horror. He felt confused—would there be blood, with a stroke? Or some kind of deformity? Surely not, but he couldn't make himself look.

“Mr. Walker,” she said, “you haven't had any stroke.”

“What?”

“You haven't gotten a stroke. You've gotten a turtle.”

“What?” He struggled to sit up. Suddenly his chest felt better

and his head was perfectly clear.

“Look! You’ve got a snapping turtle hanging on to the side of

your boot. I’ll bet that thing weighs fifteen pounds.”

Garnett was embarrassed beyond speech. He stared down at the

monster in its dark, humped shell, a slime-green creature that had

sprung from some other part of God’s mind, certainly, than most. It

had gotten hold of the edge of his leather sole with the vise grip the

snapping turtle is famous for, and true to its fame, it appeared to

have no plans on letting go until Zebulon County got thunder.

Although it did seem to Garnett that its dark little beady eyes were

looking up at him fairly sheepishly. Poor thing, thought Garnett, to

have to commit yourself so hard to one moment of poor judgment.

In a springtime as rainy as this one, snapping turtles strayed from

their home ponds into wet ditches, looking for new places to find

their hideous mates and breed their hideous children. *Of course* there

would be one waiting for him in that weedy ditch under all those

briars—that swamp that had been created by Nannie Rawley—and

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if he happened to have a turtle on his foot now, it was entirely her

fault.

“Well I knew *that*, ” he said, waving offhandedly at the giant

turtle. “I just wasn’t feeling well, of a sudden. But I’m better now.

I’ll just go home by the road, I think.”

She screwed up her face, shaking her head. “Not till I get that

dinosaur off your heel. Let me go get a stick and whack it to make

it turn loose of you.”

“No, really. You don’t have to.”

“Oh, Mr. Walker, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well, Miss Rawley,” he snipped, “I can’t feature it. Knowing

what a soft spot you have in your heart for pests and vermin.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I’ve had a grudge against snapping turtles ever since that big monster in my pond ate the feet off

one of my ducks. There’s nothing I’d rather do than bang this old

bastard’s brains out.” She peered down at Garnett, who winced,

both at her foul language and at her manner. “But you’d better take

off your boot,” she added. “I couldn’t be held responsible.”

“No!” he cried, gaining control of the situation. Her hands had

felt so strong, guiding him up the bank like the grip of destiny itself. Like the claws of a she-bear! Having those hands on him once

was enough for today. He wasn’t going to undress for her. “No,

now,” he told her sternly, “there isn’t any call to take out your

grudges on this old fellow. He and I will just head back home now.”

“You will,” she said.

“Yes. Thank you for your help.”

Garnett got to his feet as gracefully as possible, considering, and

limped down Nannie Rawley’s gravel drive toward the road. The

lopsided scrape of his walk sounded like a car with a flat tire. Now

he would have to hike one hundred yards up the road to get to his

own driveway, and pray to the Lord no one came driving along at

that moment to see Garnett Walker transporting fifteen pounds of

turtle up Highway 6 in a previously unheard-of fashion.

He turned sideways to cast a glance back. She just stood there in

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{ Prodigal Summer }

her bandanna and rolled-up dungarees, frowning, with her pale,

skinny little arms crossed tightly against her blouse. She was quite

put out with him, it seemed, or else she was making her mind up

that he was crazy as a loon—one of the two. It made no difference

either way to Garnett Walker.

“Oh!” he said suddenly, for he’d nearly forgotten the whole

business. He turned back toward her again, tilting his head a little to

the side. “I’m afraid your No Spray sign landed somewhere down

there in the weeds at the bottom of the road cut.”

Her glare dissolved to a happy beam he could see plainly, for

it lit up her face like sunshine on Groundhog Day. “Don’t you

worry, Mr. Walker. The spray truck went by at seven o’clock this

morning.”

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[{7}](#).

[Predators](#)

ing in the trail were no more unexpected a find on

Hey there,” he said, as if Eddie Bondo himself stand this
warm afternoon than the cluster of puffball
mushrooms she’d paused just a minute before to admire.
“Hey yourself,” she answered quietly. As if her heart were
not
pounding at its cage like a sudden captive. “How’d you
find me up
here?”
“I sniffed you out, girl. You’re a sweet, easy trail for a man
to
follow.”
Her abdominal muscles tensed. He might have thought he
was
joking, but she knew some truths about human scent.
She’d walked
down city streets in Knoxville and turned men’s heads, one
after another, on the middle day of her cycle. They didn’t
know why, knew
only that they wanted her. That was how pheromones
seemed to
work, in humans at least—nobody liked to talk about it.
Maybe excepting Eddie Bondo. “I’m fertile, that’s what got to
you,” she said
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frankly, testing him out, but he didn’t flinch. “Just so you
know, this
is the day.” She laughed. “That’s what called you down
from Clinch
Peak.”
Eddie Bondo laughed, too, shining that high-beam smile at
her
through the late-morning drizzle. Could she pretend not to
rejoice?

How could she not want him back?

“How can you know a thing like that?” he asked.

“What, that my body’s talking to yours?” She stomped her boot

down on the puffballs, releasing a cloud of spores that rose and

curled like golden brown smoke, glittering in the sunlit air between

them. Sex cells, they were, a mushroom’s bliss, its attempt to fill the

world with its mushroom progeny. “Or how can I know about my

timing? Which do you mean?”

He stomped the puffballs, too, squashing the leathery white

skins like empty baseballs, releasing more puffs. The supply seemed

endless. Deanna wondered if these tiny particles would cling to

their damp skin or enter their bodies on an inhaled breath.

“Both, I guess,” he said finally.

She shrugged. Was he serious? A woman knew both those things if she was paying attention. Deanna turned and headed upmountain, confident he would follow. “I sleep outside a lot,” she

said. “I’m on the same schedule as the moon.”

He laughed. “What are you, a were-lady?”

She stopped and turned to look at him. It amazed her, the obvious animal facts people refused to know about their kind. “Any

woman will ovulate with the full moon if she’s exposed to enough

moonlight. It's the pituitary gland does it, I guess. It takes a while to

get there, but then you stay."

Eddie Bondo seemed amused by this information. "So back

in the old days, when they slept on the ground around the fire, wrapped up in skins or however they did, then what? You're

saying all the women in the world came into heat at the same

time?"

She shrugged again, not really wanting to talk about it if he

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thought it was funny. It felt like betraying a secret. "Convenient, if

you think about it. Full moon, plenty of light."

"Damn," he said. "No wonder that sucker drives men crazy."

"Yep." She turned uphill again, feeling his eyes on every muscle

in her long, rain-slick thighs and calves, her gluteus maximus, and

the small of her back as she mounted the slope. She was wearing

cutoff jeans, a thin cotton shirt, and no bra. She'd had no thoughts

of Eddie Bondo when she dressed that morning, only a rush of

spring fever and, evidently, a body that wanted to be seen.

"Where you going?" he asked.

“Out for a walk in the rain.”

“It’s just about let up,” he contended. “Finally.”

“Don’t get used to it. We’re in for more.”

“Don’t tell me that. How can you tell?”

How? About six different ways: first, a wind just strong enough

to make the leaves show their white undersides. “I don’t know,” she

said aloud, shutting that door out of habit. Although it occurred to

her that this might be the one man she’d met since her father died

who would be interested to hear all six.

“You hillbillies around here must have gills like fish. Last few

weeks I’ve been thinking I was going to melt.”

“You didn’t, I see.”

“Turns out I’m not made of sugar.”

“Turns out.” She smiled to herself.

“So. Where you going?”

“Nowhere—a place I like to go.”

He laughed. “That sounds mighty unambitious.”

“No, I mean, nowhere important. From a wildlife-management

point of view.” From anybody’s point of view, probably.

“Well now, pretty lady. Does that mean you’re off duty?”

She caught her breath, wondering at his power to manipulate

her desire. She wanted to stop and tear him apart on the trail, swallow him alive, suck his juices, and lick him from her fingers. “It’s

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just a place I like,” she said evenly. “More a thing than a place. It’s

right up here at the top of these switchbacks.”

The trail was extremely steep from this point on to where it lay,

the great old friendly hollowed-out shelter she was headed for, a

hundred more feet up the mountain. She could hear his footsteps

and breathing right behind her, synchronized with hers.

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?” he asked.

“Vegetable. Dead vegetable. Since way before we were born.”

“Is it ... a big old hollow tree?”

She froze but didn’t turn around.

“About ten feet long and yea tall, so you just have to duck your

head when you walk into it? Nope, never seen it.”

She wheeled to face him, her braid flying. “That’s my place!”

“Don’t you think a few other people might have run across it?

It’s been lying there about a hundred years.”

“No! Nobody else ever comes up here.” She broke into a run,

but he overtook her from behind, a little faster than she was at an

uphill sprint. With his hands on her hips he pulled but mostly

pushed her, and before she could dodge him they had reached the

tunnel tree, there was no turning back from it now. There it was,

and lodged in the shadows inside of it, stashed neatly away from the

rain, were his things: his pack, his tin cup and coffeepot, his whole

Eddie Bondo life.

“I can’t believe you’ve been here,” she said, still denying it to

herself.

“Lots of critters been here, don’t you think?”

“No,” she said, and nothing more because his mouth was on

hers and his body was pushing her inside. He moved his pack aside,

moved her backward into the delicate darkness toward the tunnel’s

very center, the safest place.

“It’s mine,” she whispered.

“Who cut it down, then?”

She could see nothing but his face, feel nothing but the exquis⁹⁵

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ite grain of his skin against her cheek and his hands on her buttons.

“Nobody. It’s a chestnut. Blight killed all the chestnuts fifty years

ago.”

“Nobody chopped it down?”

She knew it was possible. Her dad had told her how people had

watched the chestnuts mysteriously dying and rushed to take what

was left standing since they needed the lumber so badly. But no, if

somebody had gone to that trouble he'd have taken the wood, not

left it lying here for dead. She started to say this, "No," but found

she couldn't form the word against Eddie Bondo's lips. It became

nonsensical beside the fact of her naked back pressed against the soft

black crumbling curved inside wall of this womb she had never

shared with any twin. He held her breasts in his two hands, looking

down at her. She couldn't bear how much she loved that gaze and

that touch, those palms on her nipples and those fingertips tracing

her ribs and enclosing her sides, pulling her against him as if she

were something small and manageable. He kissed her neck, then her

collarbones. Stopped briefly then and stood up on his knees to fish

for the crinkling packet in his jeans pocket, that premeditation. Of

course, he knew she was fertile. He'd be careful.

She sat curled with her back to the wall and her chin on her

knees. The tunnel was wide enough that he could kneel in front of

her, facing her, to untie her boots and slide off her shorts and

his own clothes. It was warm enough for nakedness, a rich, dark

warmth full of the scent of sweet old wood. He pressed his face

against her knees.

“The full moon?” he asked, against her skin. “That’s the secret

of everything?”

She didn’t say yes or no.

His hands climbed her like a tree, from ankles to knees to waist

to shoulders until he cupped her face and looked into her eyes like

a Gypsy trying to read the future in tea leaves. He seemed so happy,

so earnest. “For that, men write stupid poems and howl and hold

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up liquor stores? When all they really want is every woman in the

world, all at the same time?”

She held his eyes but couldn’t speak to tell him how far she’d left

all that behind her, so far that even her obedient ovaries sometimes

failed to be moved by the moon these days, these years in her middle forties. Some months, no heads turned. She’d been

so sure that

was what she wanted. How could this be, Eddie Bondo
looking in

her eyes, taking hold of her braid, and wrapping it around
and

around his wrist until he had her cheek pinned to his
forearm and

turned gently away from him? She lay facedown with her
head on

her hands and the full length of his body against her, his
penis gently pressing her solar plexus and his lips touching her
temple.

Between the skin of her back and his chest she could feel
small,

prickly islands of chestnut dust. "Deanna," he said in her
ear, "I

wanted you all the way from West Virginia. I was going to
want you

from here to Wyoming if I didn't come back."

He breathed on the skin beneath her earlobe and her back
arched like a reflex, like a moth drawn helpless to a flame.
She had

no words, but her body answered his perfectly as he slid
himself

down and took the nape of her neck in his teeth like a lion
on a lioness in heat: a gentle, sure bite, by mutual agreement
impossible to

escape.

By late morning the rain had stopped completely, setting
free a moment of afternoon sun. It stretched into the tunnel's
mouth to lap

at their naked feet and ankles as they lay side by side. The
sensation

roused Deanna from where she had been drifting,
someplace near

sleep but not quite in its full embrace. It was late, she
realized with

a start. She opened her eyes. This day was going. Was
gone already,

she might as well say it: to *him*, her time and all the
choices she

thought she'd made for good. Her gut clenched as distant
thunder

rumbled and echoed up the hollow, threatening more rain.

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She stared at the man who lay flat on his back beside her,
sleeping the untroubled sleep of a landlord. Flecks of soft
wood and

crumbled leaves, shreds of her forest, clung to his body,
freckling his

cheek and shoulder and even his limp penis. She filled up
with

loathing for his talkative cockiness, those placid eyelids
and the dead

careless arm slung across her, heavy as lead. She threw it
off of her

and rolled away from him, but he moved from sleep to
partial wakefulness and reached to draw her back to him.

“No,” she said, shoving him, hard. “Just *no*, get off me!”

His eyes flew open, but Deanna couldn't stop her fists
from

lashing out hard at his chest and shoulders. A bile rose up
in her gut,

a rush of physical rage that might have branded him black
and blue

if her arms had found the strength for it before he gathered back his

hunter's wits. She nearly spit in his face when he restrained her with

a grip like handcuffs on her forearms. This fury had taken her like a

storm and left her trembling.

"God, Deanna."

"Let me go."

"Not if you're going to kill me. *God*, woman!" He held her forearms upright on either side of her face and studied her like a

bad mistake. Like some mountain lion he'd accidentally caught in a

leghold trap for squirrel.

"Just let me go," she said. "I want to get my clothes on."

Carefully he opened one hand, then the other, watching her arms as she moved away from him. "What?" he asked.

"Why did you come back?" She spat the words.

"You seemed pretty happy about it an hour ago."

She shook her head slowly, breathed out through her nose, pressed her lips together so hard they turned white.

He persisted. "You didn't want me to come back?"

She hated that, too, his not knowing. She couldn't look at him.

"Christ almighty, Deanna, *what?*"

"I didn't need you here."

"I know that."

“You don’t know anything. You never saw me alone.”

“I did, though.” There was a hint of that grin in his voice.

She turned to face him with an animal glare. “Is that it?

You

were watching me like some damn predator and you think
you *have*

me now?”

He didn’t answer this. She turned her back on him again.

“I was

just fine here before you showed up. For two years, while
you were

doing whatever you did all that time, I was right here. Not
missing

people or all the chitchat about the stuff they think they
need to

have or wear or make happen. For sure not pining for a
boyfriend.”

He didn’t respond. A scarlet tanager broke the silence with
his

song. She thought of the bird hidden in leaves somewhere,
unseen

by any human eye but nevertheless brilliant red.
Nevertheless beautiful.

“And then one day you’re here, Eddie Bondo. And then
one

day you’re not. What’s that supposed to mean?”

He spoke slowly: “It’s not supposed to mean anything.”

“Damn straight it’s not.”

“I’m gone, then, no problem. Is that what you’re saying
you

want?”

She grabbed her shirt and put it on, dusting damp sawdust from

her skin and feeling angry and pathetic. The shirt was inside out,

she realized when she tried to button it, so she tied the tails in a

knot instead and quickly pulled on her shorts. She hoped to God he

wasn't looking at her. She tried to slow down her breathing and remember what she used to be. She crawled to the end of the tunnel

and sat there at the edge, facing out, right on the margin where old

chestnut wood dissolved into leafy forest floor.

"Deanna. I *said*, do you want me to go?"

"No. And I'll tell you straight, I despise you for it."

"For what?"

She still didn't turn around to look at him, didn't need to see

that face. Spoke to the woods instead. "For *shit*. For me wanting

you to come back."

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When this day started, she'd been content. Finally, after fifteen

days of heart-race and butterfly-stomach over any crackle in the

woods that might have been his footstep, she'd stopped listening.

She was sure of it. She could recall the even-keeled pleasure of hiking up the trail alone, thinking of nothing but

this log, trying to

picture how the forest had looked back when chestnuts
were the

dominant tree of the eastern forests. It was something she
could see

in her mind's eye. This giant would have been the tallest,
most immortal thing on its mountain—until the day a fungal
blight stepped

off a ship in some harbor, grinned at America, and took
down

every chestnut tree from New York to Alabama. A whole
landscape

could change, just like that.

She sat still, ignoring her own body and the one that
breathed

behind her. Out in the light she could almost see the calm
air beginning to gather itself for the afternoon, the oxygen
burgeoning

between the damp leaves. These trees were the lungs of her
mountain—not her mountain, *nobody's* damn mountain, this
mountain

that belonged to scarlet tanagers, puffballs, luna moths,
and coyotes.

This shadowy, spirited world she lived in was preparing to
exhale. It

would be afternoon, and then it would be evening and then
night.

It would pour down rain. He would share her bed.

She wiped tears from the side of her face with the back of
her

wrist and reached out with her other hand to press her
fingertips

into the soft, crumbling wood. She touched her fingers to her upper lip, breathing that earthy smell, tasting the wood with her

tongue. She had loved this old log fiercely. It embarrassed her to admit it. Only a child was allowed to love an inanimate thing so desperately or possess it so confidently. But it had been hers. Now the

spell was gone, the magic of this place that had been hers alone, unknown to any man.

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[*Moth Love*](#)

Lusa stood on the front porch, watching rain pour over the front eave in long silver strings. The gabled roof of the farmhouse—her farmhouse—was made of grooved tin that shunted the water into channels running down

its steep sides. Some of the trickles poured over as clear filaments,

like fishing line, while others looked beaded, like strings of pearls.

She'd put buckets on the wide steps under some of the trickles and

discovered that each string of droplets tapped out its own distinctive

rhythm in its bucket. All morning, the rhythm of each stream never

changed—it only grew softer as the bucket filled, then returned to

its hollow *rat-tat-a-rat-tat-tat!* after she emptied the bucket.

She'd set out the buckets to collect a drink for the potted ferns

on the porch, which were out of the rain's reach and turning

brown, even in this soggy weather, as brittle and desolate as her internal grief. She'd meant to return to her work, but the rhythms arrested her. It was a relief to stand still for a minute, listening,

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without anyone giving her pitying looks and ordering her to go lie

down. Hannie-Mavis and Jewel had gone home finally, though they

still came up several times a day to “check” on her, which mostly

meant telling her to eat, even *what* to eat, as if she were a child. But

then they'd go away afterward. Lusa could stand on her own porch

in a pair of jeans and Cole's work shirt and watch the rain and let

her mind go numb if she felt like it. If she hadn't had a gallon of

cherries to pit and pack into canning jars she could have amused

herself all morning out here, setting a bucket under each downspout and making up a song to go with it. Her grandfather

Landowski's game: he used to tap out unexpected rhythms
with his

fingertips on her bony knees, inventing mysterious Balkan
melodies

that he'd hum against the beat.

"Your zayda, the last landowner in our line," her father
used to

declare sarcastically, because his father had had a sugar-
beet farm on

the Ner River north of Lodz, and he'd lost it in the war,
fleeing

Poland in possession of nothing but his life, a young son
and wife,

and a clarinet. "Your great zayda who made a name for
himself in

New York as a klezmer musician, before leaving his wife
and child

for an American girl he met in a nightclub." Lusa knew,
though it

wasn't discussed, that with his young mistress the old man
had even

sired a second family, all of whom perished in a tenement
fire—her

zayda included. It was hard to say which part of the story
Lusa's father held against him—most of it, she supposed.
When they flew to

New York to witness the burial of the charred remains,
Lusa was

still too young to understand her father's feelings and all
the ironies

of the loss. Zayda Landowski hadn't visited her mind for
many

years. And now here he was, in a syncopated string of water drops

on a farmhouse porch in Zebulon County. He'd started out as a

farmer before bending the rest of his life around loss. What would

he have made of a rainy day in this hollow, with its rich smells of

decomposition and sweet new growth?

Lusa smoothed her shirttail and composed herself to look busy

and well nourished, for here came Herb and Mary Edna's green

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truck bouncing up the drive. But it was not the Menacing Eldest

behind the wheel this time. It was her husband, Herb, Lusa saw as

he pulled up in front of the house, and Lois's husband, Big Rickie,

who got out on the passenger's side. Both men tucked their heads

down and held the bills of their caps with their right hands as they

jogged toward her through the rain. They ducked through the

beaded curtain of drips, carefully avoiding her buckets on the steps,

and stomped their boots several times on the porch floorboards before taking off their caps. The scents rising from their work overalls

put Cole right there with them: dust, motor oil, barn hay.
She

breathed in, drawing from strange men's clothes these
molecules of

her husband.

"He needs a gutter put on this porch," Rickie told Herb, as
if

they also agreed to the fact of Cole's presence here—and
Lusa's absence. What mission required this delegation of
husbands? Were

they going to order her to leave now, or what? Would she
put up a

fight or go peacefully?

"Rickie, Herb," she said, squaring her shoulders. "Nice to
see you."

Both men nodded at her, then glanced back out at the rain,
the

absent gutter, and the waterlogged fields where they
seemed eager

to return to work. She eyed the green cockleburs planted
like tiny

land mines on the cuffs of their khaki trousers.

"Another good hard rain," Herb observed. "Too bad we
need it

like a hole in the head. One more week of this, the frogs'll
drown."

"Supposed to clear up by Saturday, though," said Rickie.

"At's right," Herb agreed. "Otherwise we wouldn't have
bothered you, but it's supposed to clear up."

"To tell me it's supposed to stop raining, you came up
here?"

Lusa asked, looking from one sun-toughened face to the other for

some clue. It was always like this, anytime she got wedged into a

conversation with her brothers-in-law. This sense of having wandered into a country where they spoke English but all the words

meant something different.

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“Yep,” said Herb. Rickie nodded to corroborate. They looked

like a comedy team: stout, bald Herb was the front man, while tall,

gangling Rickie stood mostly silent with his cap in hand and his

wild black hair molded to the shape of the cap. He had an Adam’s

apple like a round oak gall on the stalk of his long neck. People

called him Big Rickie even though his son Little Rickie had, at seventeen, surpassed him in many ways. Lusa felt some sympathy with

Little Rickie’s fate. Life in Zebulon: the minute you’re born you’re

trapped like a bug, somebody’s son or wife, a place too small to

fit into.

“So,” Herb interjected into the silence. “We’ll be needing to set

Cole’s tobacco.”

“Oh,” Lusa said, surprised. “It’s time for that, isn’t it.”

“I’ll tell you the truth, it’s past time. All this rain’s been keeping

everybody’s fields mucked up, and now here it is June, perty near

too late.”

“Well, it’s only, what, the fifth or something? June fifth?”

“At’s right. Blue mold will be setting in here come July, if the

plants aren’t up big enough by then.”

“You can spray for blue mold if you have to,” Lusa said. Tobacco

pathology was not exactly her department, but she’d heard Cole

speak of it. She felt desperate to know something in front of

these men.

“Can,” they agreed, with limited enthusiasm.

“Have you both got your own tobacco plants in? You should go

ahead and do your own first.”

Herb nodded. “I leased out my allotment this year, since them

durn cows are keeping me too busy to mess with it. Me and him got

Big Rickie’s in on Monday morning, when we had that break in

the weather. That puts Cole next.”

And what about Jewel? Lusa wondered. Are they also running

her life, since her husband ran off with a waitress from Cracker

Barrel? “So what you’re saying is,” she interpreted cautiously, her

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heart pounding in her ears, “on Saturday you and your boys will be

coming up here to set the tobacco.”

“At’s right. If it dries out for a day first.”

“And what about me? Do I get a say?”

Both men glanced at her with the exact same eye: surprised,

fearful, put out. But wasn’t it her farm? She looked away from them,

inhaling the rich scents of mud and honeysuckle and listening to

her childish project, her bucket on the step: *Tat-tat-a-tat-tat-a-tat-tat-*

tat! She heard a song against the beat, distinctly, the trilling clarinet

rising like laughter and the mandolin as insistent as clapping hands.

Klezmer music.

“It’s my farm now,” she said aloud. Her voice quavered, and her

fingers felt hot.

“Yep,” Herb agreed. “But we don’t mind helping Cole out like

any other year. Tobacco’s a lot of work, takes a whole family. ’At’s

how people around here do it, anyways.”

“I was here last year,” she said tersely. “I brought hot coffee out

to you and Cole and Little Rickie and that other boy, that
cousin

from Tazewell. If you recall.”

Big Rickie smiled. “I recall you trying your hand at riding
behind the tractor and setting a row of plants. Some of them
ended

up with their roots a-dangling up in the air and their leaves
planted

in the ground.”

“Cole drove too fast on purpose! We were just newlyweds.
He

was teasing me in front of you guys.” Lusa flushed pink up
to the

hairline, remembering her ride on the little platform
attached to the

rear of the tractor, grabbing the floppy young tobacco
plants from

the box beside her. Their disintegrating texture was like
that of tissue

paper; trying to plunge them into the chunky clay of the
furrow as it

passed beneath her seemed impossible. They had been
married only

two days. “It was my first time behind a tractor,” she
contended.

“It was,” Big Rickie conceded. “And most of them plants
was

roots-down.”

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Herb steered back to the business at hand. “We got no sets
of

our own left, but Big Rickie got up a good price on a batch from

Jackie Doddard.”

“I appreciate that. But what if I don’t want to plant tobacco this

year?”

“You don’t have to do a thing. You can stay in the house if you

want to.”

“No, I mean, what if I don’t want tobacco planted on my farm?”

Now they did not glance at Lusa sideways; they stared.

“Well,” she said, “why plant more tobacco when everybody’s

trying to quit smoking? Or should be trying to, if they’re not already. The government’s officially down on it, now that word’s finally out that cancer’s killing people. And everybody’s blaming *us*. ”

Both men turned their eyes out toward the rain and the fields,

where it was clear they suddenly wished they could be, rain or no

rain. She could see them working hard not to finger the packs of

Marlboros in their shirt pockets.

“What would you be wanting to plant, then?” Herb asked at last.

“Well, I hadn’t really thought. What about corn?”

Herb and Big Rickie exchanged a smile, passing the joke between them. “About three dollar a bushel, that’s how about it,”

Herb replied. “Unless you mean feed corn, that’s more like fifty cents a bushel around here. But a-course you’d be talking about sweet corn.”

“Of course,” Lusa said.

“Well, let’s see. Cole’s got a five-acre tobacco bottom, so put it in sweet corn, that’d get you about five hundred bushels, maybe six in a good year, not that we ever have one of those around here.”

Herb rolled his eyes up, counting on his fingers. “About fifteen hundred dollar. Minus your diesel for your tractor, your seed, and a whole bunch of fertilizer, because corn’s a heavy feeder. And some

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luck getting it sold on the right day. You might end up making near

about ... eight hundred dollars. On your corn crop.”

“Oh, I see.” Lusa blushed deeper. “We usually clear around twelve or thirteen thousand for the tobacco.”

“Yep,” said Big Rickie. “That’d be about right. Thirty-seven

hundred an acre, minus your tractor costs, your sets, and your chemicals.”

“It’s what we live on.”

She'd said it softly, but the words *we* and *live* hung heavily in the

air. She felt them pressing on her shoulders like the hands of a disapproving matron trying to get the message across to a selfish child:

“Sit down, your turn is over.”

Tat-tat-a-tat-tat-a-tat-tat-tat. Grandfather Landowski's rhythm section was fading out. She needed to empty the buckets and start

them over again. She wished these men would go away. Just leave

her to muddle through in her own way, however mistaken. She

wished she could ask someone for advice without feeling skinned

alive and laughed at.

“What else can people grow around here, on little scraps of land

at the bottom of a hollow? What can earn you enough to live on,

besides tobacco?”

Big Rickie warmed to the subject of bad news. “Turner Blevins

up 'air tried tomatoes. They told him he could get ten thousand

dollar an acre. What they didn't tell him was if two other guys in the

county try the same thing, they've done flooded the market. Blevins

fed thirty-five hundred pound of tomatoes to his hogs and dished

the rest under.”

“What about the other two guys?” Lusa asked.

“Same. They all three lost money. One of them was so sold on tomatoes, he’d put him in a ten-thousand-dollar irrigation system to water ’em with, is what I heard. Now he’s back in tobacco, and just hoping for a real dry year so he can turn on his fancy spanking hoses.”

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“But that doesn’t make sense, that they’d all lose money. People need lots of tomatoes.”

“Not all on the same day they don’t, and that’s how tomatoes

comes in. If you can’t get them suckers all into somebody’s grocery

cart in five days or less, then you’ve got you some expensive hog

food. And out here in the boondocks, no shipper’s going to touch

you before he’s sure he can make his cut.”

Lusa crossed her arms, despairing of the depth of her ignorance.

“Your tobacco, you see, now,” Rickie continued, “you hang it

in the barn to cure, and then it can just go on hanging there as long

as it needs to, till the time’s good to sell. Everybody in the county

can grow tobacco, but every leaf of it might get lit and smoked on

a different day of the year, in a different country of the world.”

“Imagine that,” Lusa said, sounding sarcastic, though she was

actually a little astonished. She’d never thought through these basic

lessons before. Tobacco’s value, largely, lay in the fact that it kept

forever and traveled well.

They stood silent for a while, all three of them staring out into

the yard. The rain fell on the big leaves of the catalpa tree, popping

them down like the keys on a typewriter.

Lusa said, “There’s got to be something else I can make decent

money on. The barn’s got to have a new roof this year.”

Herb smirked. “Mary-jay-wanna. I hear that brings in about the

same price per acre as tomatoes, and the market’s solid.”

“I see,” Lusa said. “You’re making fun of me. Well, I appreciate

your offer to set this weekend, but I’d like to think about the tobacco. Can you still get the sets from Jackie if I let you know

tomorrow or the next day?”

“I expect so. Jackie’s got that hydroponic setup. It didn’t work

out too good last year, but this year he’s done growed more’n he

knows what to do with.”

“Well, good. I’ll let you know, then, before Saturday. I’ll decide

what to do.”

“*If it stops raining,*” Herb said, lest Lusa think she was in charge.

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“Right. And if it doesn’t, then we’re all sunk together, right? I’ll

make the same nothing off the tobacco I *didn’t* grow as you will off

the crop you tried to get put in. And think of the time and money

I’ll save!”

Herb stared at her. Big Rickie smiled out toward the garage.

“That’s a smart lady, Herb,” he said. “I believe she’s got the right attitude for farming.”

“Well,” Lusa said, slapping her hands together. “I’ve got a gallon

of cherries in there that are going to rot if I don’t get them canned

today. So I’ll call you Friday.”

Herb leaned out toward the edge of the porch, looking up the

mountainside toward the orchard. She was controlling her breathing, counting the seconds until these two got into the truck and lit

their cigarettes and drove away and she could sob on the porch

swing. Standing up to them took almost more guts than she had.

“I’m surprised you got cherry one off them trees this year,”

Herb pronounced. “As many darn jaybirds as we’ve had. Last spring

I come over here and shot the birds all out of there for Cole, but I

never got around to it this year. So you got you enough for a pie or

two anyways, did you?”

Lusa managed to grimace a smile, wide-eyed and fierce. “Miracles happen, Herb.”

That would be Jewel at the door, Lusa thought. Jewel thumping her

umbrella out in the front hallway (they’d always come in without

knocking, all of them, even when Lusa and Cole were newlyweds

stealing sex in the afternoons), Jewel’s tired voice telling the kids to

wipe their feet and hang up their raincoats on the pegs. Then they

poured through the kitchen doorway, the older child carrying a box

of canning jars on his head, balancing it with both hands. Lusa had

called Jewel when she ran out of canning jars.

“Come on in,” she said. “You can set the box right down there

on the counter.”

“Lord, call the police,” Jewel cried. “They’s been a murder in here!”

Lusa laughed. “Looks like it, doesn’t it?” Her apron and the

countertops were smeared garishly with the blood of hundreds of

cherries. The hand-cranked pitter was clamped to the counter, a

mass of dark pits glistening in the bucket underneath like something from a slaughterhouse. She’d been relieved when Jewel offered over the phone to come up and help her finish the canning.

Lusa could recognize objectively, without really feeling it, that she

needed company or she’d go crazy.

Yet here was her sister-in-law with her hand to her mouth already, mortified by her slip, a joke about death. Lusa had hoped for

a sturdier kind of company than this.

“It’s OK, Jewel. I know Cole’s dead.”

“Well, I didn’t ... stupid me. Didn’t think.” She looked anguished.

Lusa shrugged. “It’s not like you’re going to remind me of something I’ve forgotten about.”

Jewel stood a minute longer with her hand to her mouth and

tears welling, staring at Lusa, while her ten-year-old slowly circumnavigated the kitchen island, balancing the cardboard box of

jars one-handed. The younger child, Lowell, reached up to steal a

handful of cherries off the butcher block. Jewel gently swatted his

hand away. “Aren’t people awful?” she asked Lusa, finally. “I *know*

what you’re saying. When Shel—” But she stopped herself to shoo

out the kids. “Go play outside.”

“Mo-om, it’s pouring down rain!”

“It’s pouring down rain, Jewel. They can play on the back porch.”

“OK, the back porch, then, but don’t bust *anything*.”

“Hey, wait a sec, Chris, here.” Lusa scooped a pile of cherries

into a plastic bowl and handed it to the older boy. “If you run out

of stuff to do, there’s a broom and a dustpan out there.”

“To sweep with?”

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“To play hockey with, you’re asking? *Yes*, to sweep with.”

Jewel waited for the door to close behind them before she spoke. “When Shel left me, everybody just stopped saying his name

or word one about him, like I’d never even been married. But

we *were*, for some of those years—I mean, *married*. Even while we

were still just dating, if you know what I mean. We ran off to

Cumberland Falls two months before the wedding and called it our

test-drive honeymoon.” For just a few seconds she stared at her

hands with a faraway satisfaction, the most womanly expression

Lusa had ever seen on Jewel. But then it vanished.

“I swear it’s sad,” she finished, matter-of-factly. “Pretending that

part of my life never happened.” She began to unscrew the clamp

that held the antique steel cherry pitter to the counter. Lusa had

spent half an hour solving the puzzle of that clamp, but of course

the pitter had been their mother’s. Jewel would know it with her

eyes closed.

“This family’s intimidating, no doubt about it,” Lusa said. She

wished she could say how hard it really was—how it felt to live

among people who’d been using her kitchen appliances since before

she was born. How they attacked her in unison if she tried to rearrange the furniture or hang her own family pictures.

How even

old Mrs. Widener haunted this kitchen, disapproving of Lusa’s

recipes and jealous of her soups.

“Oh, it’s not just the family,” Jewel said. “It’s *everybody*; it’s this

town. Four years it’s been, and I still see people at Kroger’s go into

a different checkout line so they won't have to stand there
and *not*

say something to me about Shel.”

Lusa mopped red juice from the counter with a sponge.
“You'd

think in four years they could come up with a new
subject.”

“You'd think. Not that it's the same, Shel's running off and
Cole's being ...”

“Dead,” Lusa said. “It's the same. Around here, people act
like

losing your husband was contagious.” Lusa had been
amazed at how

quickly her status had changed: being single made her
either invis**111**

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ible or dangerous. Or both, like a germ. She'd noticed it
even at the

funeral, especially among the younger ones, wives her own age who

needed to believe marriage was a safe and final outcome.

“Well, at least everybody knows you didn’t do anything to run

your husband off.”

Lusa took a pinafore apron out of the drawer and put the neck

strap over Jewel’s head, then turned her around to tie the back.

“What, and you did? God knows hand-to-mouth farming is a life

anybody would run from. I considered leaving Cole a hundred

times. Not because of him. Just because of everything.”

“Lord, I know, it’s a misery,” Jewel said, though just then they

were both gazing out the kitchen window at a drenched, billowy

mock orange in full bloom in the backyard—and it was beautiful.

Lusa took up her sponge again. “Don’t you dare tell your sisters

I thought about leaving Cole. They’d chop me up and hide the

pieces in canning jars.”

Jewel laughed. “You make us sound so mean, honey.” She donned an oven mitt and lifted the huge, flat lid of the water-bath

canner, holding it high in the air like a cymbal. “You want me to

put the jars in to sterilize?”

“Go ahead. What do you think I’ve got here, about eight quarts?”

Jewel appraised the mound of pitted cherries on the stained cutting board, doing some form of math in her head, Lusa realized.

She understood with some chagrin that she’d accepted the family’s

judgment of Jewel as a child and not a woman, simply because she

was manless.

“Are you doing preserves, honey, or pie filling?”

“Preserves, I guess, if I don’t run out of sugar. I already made

eighteen pints.”

“Of *preserves*? ”

Lusa felt foolish. “It’s a lot, I know. When I was up the ladder

out there in the tree I was proud of myself for filling up buckets.

But now I’m stuck with them.”

“Oh no, you’ll be glad to have that jam. They’re the sweet cher**112**

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ries, aren’t they, off that double-trunked tree above the apple orchard? Boy, those are the best cherries. Daddy must have planted

that tree before him and Mommy married. It was already big when

we were kids.”

“Really?” Lusa took in her gut the familiar pang of guilt for

owning this tree that Jewel had grown up loving.

“Yeah. They always said it got hit by lightning the winter Cole

was born. That’s how it got split in two that way—
lightning.”

A lightning strike and a jackknifed truck, two unexpected
events

circumscribing a life—Lusa knew how far down that road
her mind

could go, so she made herself stop. She wondered instead
how old

Jewel had been that winter of his birth, whether she’d
grown up as

Cole’s playmate or his keeper. She’d never asked him
these things

about each of his sisters. She’d expected to have years to
untangle

those threads.

Jewel must have sensed her gloom, because she spoke up
brightly. “Eighteen pints is enough preserves. Let’s can the
rest for

pie filling.”

“I can’t see myself making pies anymore, for just me.
Since nobody seems to want to come here for dinner.”

“Mary Edna was a stinker to you over that. There wasn’t
any

reason for her to get so high and mighty. Emaline thinks
so, too; she

told me. We both wish we still could have Thanksgiving
up here at

the house.”

Lusa’s head swam with this news. She’d never suspected
she had

allies at all, much less the support of a faction. How had she gotten

here, stranded in this family without rhyme or reason? Suddenly she

felt so exhausted by grief that she had to sink into a chair and put

her head down on the table. Jewel let her be. Lusa could hear the

jars clinking gently together, settling into the boiling water bath.

Finally Jewel whispered, "I think you've got about six quarts to go,

no more."

"That's still a lot of preserves."

"Let's make pie cherries, then. And if there's any left over we'll

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make some pies today. You make the best pie crust of anybody.

Better than Mommy's, I hate to say it."

"God, don't say it out loud. Your mother haunts this kitchen.

She used to stand in here stirring up fights between Cole and me."

Jewel gasped in mock dismay. "Now why would Mommy do

that?"

"The usual thing. Territorial jealousy."

The boys banged in through the screen door, preceded by their

empty bowl like a pair of cooperative beggars. The minute Lusa refilled it, though, want ceded to possession, and they started to slap

and fight. “Ow, Chris won’t share!” Lowell howled.

“Goodness, we’ve got no shortage of cherries in this kitchen.

Here, I’ll get you your own bowl.” Lusa was careful to find another

one the same size and to fill them both equally. When they retreated

again to the back porch she felt a flush of pride at having satisfied

them, however briefly. Children were not Lusa’s element. That was

how she’d always put it to Cole, that babies made her nervous. Since

moving here, though, she’d had glimpses of how the indulgence of

adult despair could yield to children’s needs.

“Five and a half quarts, like I was saying.” Jewel laughed. “Excuse me for having pigs instead of children.”

“I think I can bear the loss.” Lusa sat down at the table again,

facing the army of jars she’d already put up this day, little glass soldiers stuffed with their bright-red organs. Who would eat all this?

When she left, would she take her preserves back to Lexington in a

U-Haul? “What am I doing this for?” she asked suddenly in a dull,

hard voice.

Jewel was behind her at once, rubbing her shoulders. “For later,” she said simply.

“I should live so long.”

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Lusa said. “I just can’t picture *later*. Spending my

nothing of a life in this kitchen cooking for nobody.”

“I wish you’d make a pie for my kids once in a while. When I

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get home from work I’m so tired, I practically feed them hog slop

on a bun.”

Lusa wondered whether this was a real request or an attempt at

redeeming her empty life. “I could make a pie and bring it down

sometime.”

Jewel sat down, brushing a strand of mouse-colored hair out of

her eyes. “That’s not what I was asking for. I don’t know if this is,

well, polite to ask. But could they come up here and eat dinner

with you sometimes?”

Lusa studied her sister-in-law’s face. She seemed so tired. The

request was genuine. “Well, sure. You could, too, Jewel, if you

didn’t feel like cooking. I could use the company.”

“But I mean, if I wasn’t here?”

“What, like if you had to take the late shift at Kroger’s?
You

know you can ask me that anytime. I’m glad to help out.”

“You wouldn’t care to have the kids up here sometimes,
then?”

Lusa smiled. “Of course not.” It had taken her a year to
learn

that when mountain people said “I don’t care to,” they
meant the

opposite of what she thought. They meant “I wouldn’t
mind.”

Jewel held her eye, shy and bold at the same time. “But
they said

you’re going back to Lexington pretty soon.”

“Who did?”

She shrugged. “I can see why you would. I’m just saying
I’d

miss you.”

Lusa took a breath. “Would you get this house and the land
then?”

“Oh, no. Mary Edna would, I guess. She’s the oldest. I
don’t

even have a man to farm it.”

“So Mary Edna wants the place.”

“It’s yours, honey; you could sell it or whatever you want.
Cole

didn’t have any will, so it goes to you. She said they have
that law

now, a success statue or something where it used to be the
family

would get a farm back, but now it goes to the wife.”

Lusa felt a rush of adrenaline through her limbs. Only one thing

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could account for Jewel's acquaintance with "success statues": they

were consulting lawyers. "I haven't made up my mind about anything yet," she said. "I haven't been able to think straight since

everything happened."

"You seem like you're doing good, honey."

Lusa looked at Jewel, longing to trust, knowing she couldn't. She

felt dismayed by the complexities of even the simplest of things, a

conversation with a sister—not her own—in a kitchen, also not her

own. "Probably you all think I'm not behaving like a decent

widow," she said, surprised by the anger in her chest.

Jewel started to protest, but Lusa shook her head. "You see me

pushing right along, canning cherries like everything was normal.

But when nobody's here, sometimes I have to lie down on the floor

and just try to keep breathing. What am I supposed to do, Jewel?

I'm twenty-eight. I've never been a widow before. How does a

widow act?"

Jewel offered no advice. Lusa took one of the jelly jars in her

hand and stared at its ruby redness, that clear, proud color that she

knew she loved, theoretically, but that couldn't touch her just now.

"I grew up in a family where suffering was quiet," she said. "My father is a man who's lost everything: his family's land, his own father,

his faith, and now his wife's companionship. All for unfair reasons.

And he's just kept working, all his life. I was always more of a complainer, but I'm learning to be quiet. It seems like the only grownup way to face this brutal thing that's happened."

Jewel's eyes were so much like Cole's, so earnest and perfectly

blue, that Lusa had to look away from her.

"I may look like I'm doing all right, but I don't know if I'm coming or going. Whoever told you my plans knows more than I do."

Jewel put her hand on her mouth—a nervous habit, apparently.

"It's none of my business, but there wasn't any life insurance, was

there?"

Lusa shook her head. "Cole wasn't planning on dying this year.

We'd talked about insurance, but with everything so tight, it just

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seemed like one extra payment we didn't need. We thought maybe

we'd do it after we had kids or something."

"I'll tell you something. Mary Edna and Herb could help with

the burial. I would if I could, but they *can*. Herb and his brother are

doing good with their dairy over on Six. That's Herb's family's land,

paid off. So they're set up pretty good right now."

"I can cover the burial, it's done. That was our savings. Mary

Edna didn't offer, and I sure wasn't going to ask."

"Mary Edna's bark's a whole lot worse than her bite."

"It's not that. You know why. I'm not stupid, Jewel, I know what everybody's saying: here I am living in this house you all grew

up in, on your family's land. The so-called Widener place, and

there's no longer any Widener on the premises. Do you think I'd

feel comfortable asking your family for *anything*?"

Jewel gave her an odd look. "Is that true? Lois told me that

— that you were going to take your maiden name back now."

"What? No, I never did ..." Lusa wondered how far the misunderstandings went, and whether any of it would be possible to

untangle, after a point.

"Well, anyway," Jewel said, "having a house and a farm's not the

same as having money."

"*Tell* me. When I hear people hinting I'm a gold digger, I feel

like publishing my damn debts in the newspaper. I've got a barn to

reroof before winter, and this house, too, probably in the next year

or two. And something's wrong with the spring box; I'm just waiting for the day I wake up and have no water. What else? Oh yes,

Cole's brand-new Kubota, twenty-two thousand dollars, which

won't be paid off for another four years."

"I didn't know he'd financed the tractor."

Was Jewel spying? What difference would it make if they knew

she was destitute? None, Lusa decided. "He didn't want to. But we

had to have a tractor, and he deserved new. That John Deere of your

daddy's was older than Cole, I think. He'd been fighting with it his

whole life, holding it together with baling twine and fence wire."

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"That tractor *was* older than Cole. Come to think of it."

"And now I'll have to pay somebody to mow hay and put it in

the barn, and fix the fences and round up the cows when they get

over on the neighbors', and mess with the baler, which breaks

down every single time you use it. And run and repair the bush hog

and the side-arm mower—or am I supposed to learn to do all that

myself? I'm sure there are other costs, too; I just don't know enough

to see them coming.”

“Lord, Lord,” Jewel said softly. Her face was the saddest thing

Lusa had seen in a stretch of many sad days. Her forehead was

deeply creased, and her eyes looked like an old woman's. At close

range she looked much older than Lusa had thought she was.

“No man to farm it,” Lusa summarized. “As you put it.”

“Herb and Big Rickie will help you out.”

“Oh, they've been up here. I guess they're in charge now. Cole's

grave isn't yet healed over, and already I'm nobody.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I need help, sure. But *help*. It would be nice to be asked,

instead of bossed around like a child. Do they do that to you?”

“They don't have any business with me. I don't even plant a garden anymore. I praise the Lord for my job at Kroger's and beg Him

to strike Shel dead if that check should fail to keep coming for the

kids.”

“What about Emaline and Frank?”

“Emaline and Frank are officially out of farming for good, they

say, and I think they're just as happy about it, to both have factory

jobs instead of farming.”

“But I heard Frank complaining at the funeral about losing his

tobacco lease. And he complains about commuting to Leesport.”

“Frank would complain about the moon if it looked at him wrong. He makes good money at Toyota, and he likes everybody to

know it.”

“So who's still farming, just Lois and Big Rickie? And Herb?

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How can I live smack in the middle of you all and not know what's

what?”

“Well, because it's not really settled, that's why. About half the

time Hannie-Mavis and Joel lease out their allotment to a big

grower over to Roanoke, like Herb does. Then the next year, they

won't. But Lois and Big Rickie always do their own tobacco, four

acres and some. You might not know it, but he and Joel's got land

leased all over the county running beef cattle, too. Big Rickie's got

farmer in his blood.”

Both women jumped at the sound of a crash and breaking glass

from the porch. Lusa started for the door, but Jewel stopped her,

holding up a pair of tongs. “You take the jars out of the canner and

get the syrup boiling. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

Lusa could hear Jewel scolding and both kids crying or whining

on the porch. She tiptoed to look out the high window over the

sink. “Jewel,” she called, “if it’s those jars of green beans, it’s a good

riddance. They’ve been out there since I moved in.”

There was no answer, and from this angle she couldn’t see Jewel

or the kids but could hear a smack and a wail. “That is no way to

treat your little brother,” she heard. “You keep this up and you’re

wearing a dress tomorrow. I mean it.”

Lusa frowned and turned to the stove. She measured equal parts

sugar and hot water into the pot, hoping three quarts of syrup

would be the right amount to cover five quarts of raw-pack cherries. She should put in something acidic to lower the pH, for the

canning, but she didn’t have any lemon juice. Would vinegar work?

She added one tablespoon, a wild guess, then took up the tongs to

lift the sterilized jars from the water bath. She lined them
up on the

counter, a raft of widemouthed birds begging to be fed.

“It *was* the green beans,” Jewel sighed, coming inside. “I
got all

the glass. I told them to clean up the rest and throw it out
by the

creek, and then go play in the barn or something. I don’t
care if it’s

raining; they won’t melt.”

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“That’s fine. Truly, I’m glad about the beans. I’ve been
scared to

eat them and scared to give them away. My luck, I’d kill
somebody

of botulism.”

Jewel reached under the sink to shake a dustpan of broken
glass

like wind chimes into the trash. “She’s going to be my
death, if I

don’t kill her first. Lowell’s a handful, but he’s just little.
Crystal

Gail’s something else. It’s time for her to be growing out
of this

stage, which she’s been going through since the day she
was born.

What?”

Lusa realized she must look comically confused.
“Crystal?”

“Crys. Oh!” Jewel laughed, waved her hand. “You thought
she

was a boy. You and everybody else. When she started kindergarten,
the teacher refused to let her go to the girls' bathroom until
I
rushed down there with her birth certificate."

"Oh."

Jewel looked earnest. "Don't think it's because of Shel leaving,
some child-of-divorce thing. She's *always* been this way."

"I don't think anything about it, Jewel; I just didn't realize."

"You can't imagine. It's been going on since she was a baby. Her

first word was *no*, and her second was *dress*. No dress. No dolls, no

pretty hair bows. I gave in on that haircut because she was cutting it

herself. I was afraid she'd poke her eyes out."

Jewel looked so vulnerable, Lusa could practically see the veins

through her skin. She wanted to hug her, to trust her completely.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I'm just glad you told me so I won't

keep using the wrong pronoun. I can't believe I've known that child

a year and nobody ever set me straight."

"You and Cole only ever had eyes for each other, honey. You

hardly came to family things anyway, and if you did, it wasn't to

look at my crazy mixed-up daughter."

“Ouch,” Lusa said, burning her hand slightly on the rim of a jar.

“She’s not crazy, don’t do that to yourself. I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“You would if you were her mother. You’d worry yourself sick.

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She’s about half the reason why Shel left. He blamed me—oh,

Lord, did he blame me. He said I was making her a little homo by

letting her wear jeans and cut her hair like that. And maybe he was

right. But it wasn’t my idea. I’d like to have seen *him* try and get her

into a dress. That’s what I told him: *You* try putting panty hose on a

tomcat!”

Jewel and Lusa looked at each other and laughed.

“And anyway,” Jewel asked, a little shyly, “isn’t a homo a man?”

“Jewel, she’s just a tomboy. I was exactly like that at her age.”

“You were? But you’re so pretty. And you cook!”

Lusa felt awkwardly flattered, though she was also aware that

this wasn’t the point. “You should have seen me. I skinned my knees

and caught bugs and wanted to be a farmer when I grew up.”

“Careful what you wish for.”

“The syrup’s boiling.”

“Do you put a dash of vinegar in it, or not? Oh good, you did,

I can smell it. Here, you hold the funnel over the jars and I’ll pour—

where’s your ladle?”

Jewel knew exactly where the ladle was, and everything else in

this kitchen. The question was a gift of respect. Lusa retrieved the

ladle from its drawer and closed it with her hip, feeling acutely

grateful.

“Crystal’s pretty. The name, I mean.”

Jewel shook her head. “It doesn’t look like her. She looks like

Beaver Cleaver.”

Lusa smiled. “*Meeseh maydel, shayne dame,*” she said, her grandfather’s promise—which had finally come true, for what it was

worth.

“What?”

“ ‘Ugly ducklings grow up to be swans.’ ” Lusa felt frustrated

again—this wasn’t really her wish, to promise that Crys would grow

up straight and feminine, because maybe she wouldn’t. Her wish

was to tell Jewel that the alternative would be fine, too. But Lusa

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couldn't imagine having *that* conversation with Jewel.
"Maybe it's

not really about trying to act like a boy," she hazarded cautiously,

"but just her way of trying to be herself."

"Let's don't talk about it. Crys is just Crys. Tell me some gossip.

Tell me why you're mad at Big Rickie and Herb."

Lusa poured four cups of cherries into each jar, then held the

funnel steady over the mouth as Jewel covered them with boiling

syrup. "I'm not mad, I don't guess. I mean I am, but I shouldn't be.

I know they meant well."

"Well, but what did they *do*?"

"They came up this morning to *inform* me that they're going to

set my tobacco on Saturday."

"And?"

"And, I don't want to grow tobacco."

"You don't? Why not?"

"Oh, I'm being stupid, I guess. Farm economics, what do I know? But half the world's starving, Jewel, we're sitting on some of

the richest dirt on this planet, and I'm going to grow *drugs* instead

of food? I feel like a hypocrite. I nagged Cole to quit smoking every

day of our marriage."

“Well, honey, you didn’t ask the whole world to quit smoking.

And by the way, they didn’t.”

“I know. It’s the only reliable crop around here you can earn

enough from to live off a five-acre bottom, in a county that’s

ninety-five percent too steep to plow. I *know* why every soul in this

end of three states grows tobacco. Knowing full well the bottom’s

going to drop out any day now.”

“They’re trapped.”

“They’re trapped.”

Jewel paused between jars and pointed the ladle toward the back

window, the one that faced up Bitter Hollow toward the mountain.

“You’ve got timber.”

Lusa shook her head. “I couldn’t log this hollow.”

“Well, but you could. That hollow goes up half a mile or more

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before you get to National Forest land. We used to think those

woods went on forever.”

“I will not cut down those trees. I don’t care if there’s a hundred

thousand dollars’ worth of lumber on the back of this farm, I’m not

selling it. It's what I love best about this place.”

“What, the trees?”

“The trees, the moths. The foxes, all the wild things that live up

there. It's Cole's childhood up there, too. Along with yours and

your sisters'.”

“That's so. Cole loved it best of any of us.”

“*Cole* did? He always acts like—acted like—the woods and the

briar patches of this world were enemy number one.”

“Well, farming. You know. You've got to do what it takes.”

“Yep. And around here that's tobacco, I guess, if I want to keep

this farm. I just wish I could be the one person to think of a door

out of that trap.”

Jewel smiled. “You and Cole. He used to say that.”

“What?”

“That he'd be the first one in this county to make a killing off

something besides tobacco.”

“When did he say that?”

“Oh, he was sixteen, maybe. Future Farmers of America and

high school running-back star, what a combination. *Much* too interested in his good looks to smoke a cigarette, mind you, or grow

plain old ordinary tobacco. He was going to set the world on fire.

He tried red bell peppers one year and cucumbers the next, potatoes the next.”

“No. He never told me that.”

“I’m telling you. Right out here in Daddy’s bottom field. Every

year, whatever it was, it failed, and he had to eat a little more of his

pride. He grew up in those three years, from dreamer to farmer.

Gave up his pipe dreams and started smoking.”

Lusa shook her head. “I can’t picture that. I know Cole was energetic, but I can’t picture that he was ever so—what? starry-eyed.”

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She laughed. “Plus, I figured he was born smoking. Like a *fish*, he

was hooked.”

“No, I remember being shocked to see him smoking with the

men at Mommy’s wake. So it was right around then, when Mommy

died. The very next year, Daddy cleaned out the barn and signed the

farm over to Cole, and then he died, too. Seemed like he could trust

Cole to be a man finally. He’d be able to handle anything that came

along, after the red bell peppers, the cucumbers, and the potatoes.”

Anything but a steering column through his rib cage, Lusa

thought morbidly, recognizing how self-pity could push its nose

into any conversation like a tiresome dog. It took so much energy

to keep Cole outside her thoughts for a single minute. And yet

people still said, "I didn't want to remind you... ."

"What could go wrong with potatoes?" Lusa forced herself to

ask. "It seems like such a sure thing. Good yielder, easy to transport,

and you could spread out the harvest."

"It was the funniest thing. They said he could make a profit if

he could get them down to the potato-chip factory in Knoxville.

But then when he did, it didn't work out. They liked the Idaho

potatoes better. The ones that grow around here have too much

sugar in them. It makes them slice ragged and burn around the

edges."

"Too much sugar?"

"That's what they said. This bottomland's too rich. I mean, they're good potatoes, just not good for the market."

"Jewel, my life sounds like a country song: 'My roof's a-caving

in, my land's too steep to plow, and my bottom's got too much

sugar.'"

“Your bottom!” Jewel startled Lusa by smacking her with a dish

towel. “Let’s get your bottom to cleaning up this mess. You are not

going to starve, Loretta Lynn.”

Jewel piled things up to carry to the sink while Lusa plunged

her hands into soapy water so hot it prickled her skin. The hurt felt

like a punishment that would clean the ache out of her chest. The

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rain was picking up again, starting to hammer a quiet roar on the tin

roof, playing Zayda Landowski’s music. Yesterday was the anniversary of her wedding, which nobody had mentioned all day, but

Zayda had regaled her all through the rainy night playing klezmer

tunes on his clarinet—the Jewish wedding she never had. She and

Cole had made a small ceremony of it in the Hunt Morgan garden

in Lexington, outdoors, to sidestep the issue of religion. That had

been fine with Cole. He wasn’t churchy like his sisters.

“Jewel, I want to tell you something. Just let me say this. I loved

my husband.”

“Well, sure you did.”

In her mind's eye Lusa pictured the lower field, back when he'd

first set out to make it his own: a moving sea of leaves turning

lightly in the breeze, the bobbing red bells of ripening peppers, a

young man wading through them the way he would walk into a

lake. Cole at nineteen. A man she never met.

"We never got a chance to hit our stride, maybe. You all still

think I don't really know who he was, but I did, I do. We talked a

lot; he told me things. Just a few days before he died, he told me

something amazing."

Jewel looked up. "What? Can I ask?"

Lusa crossed her arms over her stomach, holding her breath,

transported by the scent-memory of honeysuckle across a field. *Like*

a moth, here I am, we're here. She glanced over at Jewel. "I'm sorry, it

won't make any sense to you. It's nothing I can say in words."

"Well," Jewel said, turning away. She was disappointed, Lusa

could see. Now she thought Lusa was withholding something important, some piece of her brother that would help bring him back.

"Never mind. I'm sorry, Jewel, but really it's nothing that matters now. Just that we were right for each other, for sure. Just like

you and Shel were in the beginning. Even though everybody's poisoned it now by taking a bad end and working backward."

Jewel passed the sponge from one hand to the other while she

studied Lusa. "Nobody's saying you didn't love him."

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"Nobody *thinks* they're saying that." She could feel Jewel's

scrutiny but couldn't look up. She turned back to the sink and

leaned in to the sticky preserve pot and scrubbed it hard to keep

herself from crying or yelling. Her whole body pumped with the

effort.

"My Lord, honey. What's this about?"

"That thing about changing my name back, for instance. My

husband's hardly cold in the grave, and already I've run to the

courthouse to erase his family name from the deed to your family

farm? That's for *shit*. What kind of meanspirited lie is that, and who

made it up?"

Jewel hesitated. "Lois saw your signature on something at the

funeral home."

Loud Lois, she thought uncharitably, picturing that long face

permanently puckered with worry that someone else was getting

her share. “I always had the same name, before, during, and after

Cole. Lusa Maluf Landowski. My mom’s Palestinian and my dad’s a

Polish Jew, and *never*, before I came here, did I think that was anything to be ashamed of. I’ve had it since I was born. Not that I’ve

ever heard anybody in your family say it. You talk about making

somebody disappear? You think they put the vanishing act on Shel?

Try living in a family that won’t learn your damn name!”

She and Jewel blinked at each other, shocked equally.

“Nobody meant any harm, honey. It’s just normal to take your

husband’s name around here. We’re just regular country people,

with country ways.”

“It never struck me as a regular thing to do, so we just didn’t.

God, Jewel, did you all really believe I’d take his name and then

throw it *back*, a week after he died? Some carpetbagger, erasing your

family name and stealing your homeplace, is that how you see me?”

Jewel had her hand on her mouth, and tears were welling up in

her eyes; they were back where they’d started. Lusa had raised her

voice at this timid woman who was probably the nearest thing she

had to a friend in the family or this county. Jewel shook her head

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and held out her arms to Lusa, who stepped awkwardly into her

hug. Jewel's body felt as bony and light as a bird's underneath her

apron, all feathers and heartbeat.

They clung to each other for a minute, rocking back and forth.

"Don't pay any attention to me," Lusa said. "I'm losing my mind.

There are ghosts here. There's one in this kitchen that stirs up

fight."

Over Jewel's shoulder she could look straight down the hall

through the wavy antique glass in the front door to the outside, the

yard and front pasture. This rain would never end, she thought. She

could see the fresh beginnings of yet another storm coming: the

leaves of the tulip poplar down by the barn trembling and rotating

on a hundred different axes, like a tree full of pinwheels. Beneath

it Lowell and Crystal orbited the barnyard in their dark, soaked

clothes, laughing and galloping on a pair of invisible horses, traveling in circles through the infinite downpour as if time for them had

stopped, or not yet started.

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[{9}](#).

Old Chestnuts

course of a century the unpainted chestnut planks

Garnett stood admiring the side of his barn. Over the

had weathered to a rich, mottled gray, interrupted

only by the orange and lime-colored streaks of lichen that brightened the wood in long, vertical stripes where moisture drained

from the galvanized tin roof.

He was haunted by the ghosts of these old chestnuts, by the

great emptiness their extinction had left in the world, and so this

was something Garnett did from time to time, like going to the

cemetery to be with dead relatives: he admired chestnut wood. He

took a moment to honor and praise its color, its grain, and its

miraculous capacity to stand up to decades of weather without

pressure treatment or insecticides. Why and how, exactly, no one

quite knew. There was no other wood to compare with it.
A man
could only thank the Lord for having graced the earth with
the
American chestnut, that broad-crowned, majestic source of
nuts
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and shade and durable lumber. Garnett could recall the
days when
chestnuts had grown so thick on the mountaintops of this
county
that in spring, when the canopies burst into flower, they
appeared
as snowcapped peaks. Families had lived through the
winter on the
gunnysacks of chestnuts stored in their root cellars, and
hams from
the hogs they'd fattened on chestnuts, and the money
they'd earned
sending chestnuts by the railroad car to Philadelphia and
New York
City, where people of other nationalities and religious
persuasions
roasted them for sale on street corners. He thought of cities
as being populated with those sorts of people, the types to
hunker over
purchased coals, roasting nuts whose origins they could
only guess
at. Whereas Garnett liked to think of his own forebears as
chestnut
people. Of chestnut logs the Walkers had built their cabins,
until

they had sons and a sawmill to rip and plane the trees into board

lumber from which they then built their houses and barns and finally an empire. It was lumber sales from Walker's Mill that had purchased the land and earned his grandfather the right to name

Zebulon Mountain. Starting with nothing but their wits and strong

hands, the Walkers had lived well under the sheltering arms of the

American chestnut until the slow devastation began to unfold in

1904, the year that brought down the chestnut blight. The Lord

giveth and the Lord taketh away.

That was not Garnett's to question, the fall of his family fortunes. He didn't begrudge the sales of land that by the year 1950,

when the last chestnuts were gone, had whittled his grandfather's

huge holdings down to a piece of bottomland too small to support anything but a schoolteacher. Garnett hadn't minded being a

teacher; Ellen certainly hadn't minded being married to one. He

hadn't needed to own an empire and did not resent the necessity of

close neighbors (save for one). But neither did he ever doubt that

his own dream—to restore the chestnut tree to the American landscape—was also a part of God's plan, which would lend to his family's history a beautiful symmetry. On his retirement from the

Zebulon County school system a dozen years ago, Garnett had

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found himself blessed with these things: a farm with three level

fields and no livestock; a good knowledge of plant breeding; a

handful of seed sources for American chestnuts; and access to any

number of mature Chinese chestnuts that people had planted in

their yards in the wake of the blight. They had found the nuts far

less satisfactory, and of course the tree itself had none of the

American chestnut's graceful stature or its lumber qualities, but the

Chinese chestnut had proven entirely resistant to blight. This lesser

tree had been spared for a divine purpose, like some of the inferior

animals on Noah's ark. Garnett understood that on his slow march

toward his heavenly reward, he would spend as many years as possible crossing and backcrossing the American with the Chinese chestnut. He worked like a driven man, haunted by his arboreal ghosts,

and had been at it for nearly a decade now. If he lived long enough

he would produce a tree with all the genetic properties of the

original American chestnut, except one: it would retain
from its

Chinese parentage the ability to stand tall before the blight.
It would

be called the Walker American chestnut. He would
propagate this

seedling and sell it by mail order that it might go forth and
multiply

in the mountains and forests of Virginia, West Virginia,
Kentucky,

and all points north to the Adirondacks and west to the
Mississippi.

The landscape of his father's manhood would be restored.

A loud buzz near his ear made Garnett turn his head and
look

up too fast, causing him to experience such a bout of
dizziness that

he nearly had to sit down on the grass. The Japanese
beetles were

thick as pea soup already, and it was only June. He noticed
that his

Concord grapevines, which he loved to see climbing lazy
and lush

up the slatted side of the old grain house with their leaves
drooping

like ladies' hands, were showing a rusty brown aura. From
this distance it looked as if they'd been dusted with brown
powder, but he

knew it was really the brown skeleton of the leaf showing
through.

It was something he had pointed out to his vo-ag students
time and

again, the characteristic sign of Japanese-beetle damage.
Something

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to add to his list for the hardware today: malathion. The
Sevin dust

wasn't killing them dead enough. Or it was washing off in
all

this rain.

He glanced over toward Rawley's, whence came the
plague.

She had started several new brush piles along the line
fence just to

gall him. She called them "compost" and claimed they
heated up

on the inside to a temperature that would kill beetle larvae
and

weed seeds, but he doubted it. Any decent farmer who'd
spent his

life in Zebulon County learning thrifty and effective
farming methods would know to set fire to his orchard
trimmings, but *she* was

too busy with her bug traps and voodoo to get rid of her
tree-trash

the normal way. Compost piles. "Laziness lots" would be a
better

name for them. "Stacks of sloth."

Earlier in the week he had attempted to speak to her over
the

fence: "The source of Japanese beetles seems to be your
brush piles,

Miss Rawley."

To which she'd replied, "Mr. Walker, the source of Japanese

beetles is Japan."

There was no talking to her. Why even try?

He noted that her pitiful old foreign truck was gone from its

usual spot between the lilac hedge and her white clapboard house.

He wondered where she might have gone on a Friday morning.

Saturday mornings she always went out with her produce to the

Amish market, and Mondays to Kroger's (the Black Store wasn't

adequate to her needs, according to Oda Black, who had spied

Nannie in Kroger's purchasing soya sauce), and lately she went out

on Tuesday afternoons also, for a purpose he hadn't yet discerned.

Sundays she went to the Unitarian place; Garnett was not about to

call it a church. That was just her cup of tea, he imagined: a den of

coffee-drinking women in slacks making high-toned conversation

along godless lines. Evolution, transcendentalism, things of that nature. Thank goodness it was over the county line, at least, in

Franklin, where they had the college. They had more of that kind

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over there, and as Garnett understood it, the debauchery in this

state just increased at a steady pace along an eastward line that

wound itself up in Washington, D.C. It was Oda Black's opinion

that the Unitarian women refused to wear proper foundation garments and dabbled in witchcraft. Oda was quick to point out that

she was not one to stand in judgment (though she was wide enough

to stand anywhere she pleased, and no one would argue, save for the

floorboards). She'd heard it from somebody firsthand, and furthermore two girls from the college had once wandered into her store

talking right out loud to each other about witchcraft, not caring

who heard them, while they reached into the cooler for their sodas.

Oda reported that their flesh had jiggled under their T-shirts like

jelly turned out of its jar.

That was Franklin County for you. That college was asking for

it when they let in women.

Garnett stepped up onto his porch and pulled a folded square of

paper from his shirt pocket. He had put a good day's work behind

him, five hours already this morning hand-pollinating and bagging

chestnut flowers. June was his busiest month, and this morning

when the sun finally came out after its long confinement, Garnett

had risen early and got out into his hybrid seedling fields to make

up for lost time. There was still so much to be done: the grass in his

yard was high, and weeds were springing up along the creek bank,

but he could postpone the mowing and weed killing until later this

afternoon. Now it was past eleven o'clock, and he had earned the

pleasure of a trip to town. Not that he had any kind of a joyride

planned. It was mostly errands: Black Store, Tick's Garage, and

Little Brothers' Hardware. He unfolded the square of paper on

which he'd made his list for the hardware:

1. Hacksaw blade

(The last time he'd used the saw on a stripped bolt, he'd noted

it was dull.)

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2. Black plastic for mulching between the tree rows

3. AA flashlight batteries (four)

4. 3 PVC pipe fittings, L-shape, 1/2 inch (broken irrigation line)

5. Paint markers for the hybrid trees

(He resented this item, since he knew he still had some markers

down in the barn, but he'd wasted nearly an hour yesterday looking

for them and suspected they'd been taken. Maybe by a neighbor

child. Maybe by a groundhog.)

6. Weed killer, one gallon concentrate!!

The resentment attached to this final purchase was boundless and only feebly expressed by his underlining and exclamation

points. But he couldn't delay it any longer. He had to face Oda

Black every time he needed bread, Miracle Whip, and bologna, and

he knew how they must be tarring and feathering him down there

at the store behind his back. "Here comes the county's worst road

frontage," Oda probably cried when his truck pulled up out front,

chuckling as she shoved herself up from her armchair by the front

window and slid her swollen feet toward the register. "Shhh,

everybody! It's Mr. Pokeweed." All right, then, he would spray his

front bank himself. Bring that forest of briars crashing down around

the ears of the snapping turtles. Garnett still turned red to think

about it. At least Oda didn't seem to have heard about the turtle.

He added malathion (for Japanese beetles!!) to his list,
refolded

the paper, replaced it in his shirt pocket, and went into the
house,

comforting himself with thoughts of Pinkie's Diner. In the
front

hallway he paused to sort through a stack of mail he had
brought in

yesterday but forgotten to look at: advertisement circulars,
nonsense, not even a bill. He slid the whole lot into the trash
and closed

the west-facing window in the kitchen against the heat that
would

arrive this afternoon in his absence. After his errands he
would go

to Pinkie's for the fish-dinner special that was offered
every Friday

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afternoon: all the fried catfish you could eat with hush
puppies and

slaw, \$5.99. Garnett suspected that since Pinkie's had it on
Fridays,

it was probably meant for the Catholics, but the diner was
a place of

business, after all, not a church. Catholics in Zebulon
County were

few and far between, and anyhow Pinkie Prater would
accept \$5.99

from a dog or a horse if it came in, and put it in his cash
register

with no questions asked. Pinkie's on Fridays was a settled
matter in

Garnett's mind. In fact, on the rare Friday when he failed to keep

his appointment with the fish-dinner special, rumors about Garnett

Walker's health circulated so fast that when he turned up next at

Black Store or the filling station, people were amazed to see him

alive.

No matter. A predictable mare beats a wild hare, his father used

to say. Pinkie's was Garnett's only extravagance, and he liked to look

forward to it. He did not tend to eat well since his wife had died. It

had been enough years now that he had gotten used to cold meat

sandwiches for dinner and a single place mat on the table, but he

had never learned to cook. Certainly not something like a hush

puppy. How would you even begin to make a hush puppy, what in

the world was in one? Nothing to do with a puppy, surely. Garnett

had long known, though he didn't much like to admit it, that God's

world and the better part of daily life were full of mysteries known

only to women.

He would have to change his shirt before starting out. He had

broken a sweat out there in the field, to say the least. He closed the bathroom door (though he lived alone and never had guests) and took off his shirt without looking in the bathroom mirror. After he had washed himself with a cloth, he went to his bedroom bureau to retrieve his last clean undershirt (tomorrow was laundry day) and to the armoire to take down his town shirt from its hanger. (It smelled slightly of Pinkie's fish-dinner specials; he would remember to wash it tomorrow, even though this would also mean fussing with the iron. He had never learned to make it hiss out steam the way Ellen could.) Only after he had buttoned the collar and tucked in the tails

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did he allow himself a glance in Ellen's dressing mirror. There was nothing wrong with his bare chest, beyond an old man's slightly sunken ribs and an odd nest of white hair in the middle, but modesty was Garnett's habit. He had been a widower for eight years; he kept company with his God. His body was no longer to be looked upon. If the thought caused him sadness—that he would never

again know the comfort of human touch—he sensed it was merely

a tributary to the lake of grief through which an old man must

swim at the end of his days.

He gathered up his ring of keys, counted the cash in his wallet,

and locked the kitchen door on his way out. He stole another

glance over toward Nannie's, noticing with surprise a large, roughly

cow-shaped patch of darkness on her roof. He walked a bit closer

and squinted through the tops of his bifocals. It was a patch of the

green shingles missing; they must have blown off in the last storm.

What a mess that must be, in all this rain, and what a nuisance to replace. Worse than a nuisance: those old, hand-cut shingles were impossible to find nowadays. She would have to redo the whole roof

if she didn't want it to look hodgepodge. He touched the corners

of his mouth, trying not to harbor pleasure at a neighbor's misfortune. She did not know that in Garnett's own garage there was a

stack of those green shingles, from the original lot that Garnett's

father and Old Man Rawley had ordered together and shared.

Originally, before Garnett had modernized to asbestos in the 1960s,

the two houses had borne the same style of clapboard and
the same

spade-shaped shingles. Garnett's father had been on good
enough

terms with Old Man Rawley that he'd sold him the fifty-
five acres

of orchard land with only the one decent house site, which
put the

Rawleys near enough by to hit with a rock, as the saying
went

(though no one had ever felt that particular urge until
Garnett and

Nannie). The house was modest, neat and small, with its
hipped

roof and gables facing the road. Old Rawley was a good
orchard

man who'd planted excellent stock. But anyone could have
foreseen

that his daughter stood to inherit, since he had no sons.
That was

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trouble that Garnett's father should have smelled: a
daughter away at

school in the 1950s. Before you could say Jack Robinson
she'd be

back here parading around in loud clothes, having an
illegitimate

child with mental deficiencies, and making up her mind to
grow

apples with no chemicals whatsoever, in flat defiance of
the laws of

nature. Garnett sighed and forgave his father once again. It was not

a premeditated crime, only a failure of foresight.

As successor to a lost fortune, Garnett had spent his life glancing away from visions of how things might have turned out differently. Nannie Rawley was the exception. How could he not dwell

on her presence in his life and seek its meaning? Garnett had overlooked her as a child (she was a kid, maybe ten years younger); had

hardly known her as a young woman since she was away for so

many years; and had mainly ignored her as long as his wife was alive.

(Ellen liked to have little chitchats with her, and then disapprove afterward.) But now, during these eight years alone, he'd been forced

to bear her as a burgeoning plague on his old age. Why? What made

Nannie do the things she did, before God and Man and sometimes

on Garnett's property? He suspected a connection between that

long-ago birth of a deformed child and her terror of chemicals.

The troubles had been evident at birth, the Mongol features and so

forth, and Nannie had named it Rachel Carson Rawley, after that

lady scientist who cried wolf about DDT. Everything in Nannie's

life since seemed to turn on the birth of that child, now that he

looked back. The woman had probably been normal once.
That

child had launched her off the deep end.

Where would she be now, on a Friday? She never went out
on

Fridays. He ducked behind his rose of Sharon and peered
around

the back of her house to make sure the truck wasn't parked
back

there. Sometimes she parked in back if she had something
to unload. Last week she had parked inside her barn with a
load of apple

crates piled high in the truck bed. But today there was no
sign

of her.

He climbed into his own truck, a 1986 Ford pickup, which

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started right up (he had cleaned and gapped the spark plugs
last

week), and steered carefully out onto number 6,
purposefully ignoring his disgraceful frontage. Soon enough,
soon enough! He

needed more Two-Four-D and Roundup both, for the
seedling

fields, and had neglected to order them wholesale from the
company as he had in previous years. He drove very slowly,
taking his

time with the curves. Garnett did realize his eyesight
wasn't what it

could have been; this was not something he refused to
admit. But

there was very little traffic on 6 anymore since they'd made the interstate down King Valley. Anyone who had any business on this

road would recognize Garnett's truck. They'd know to give him a

wide berth. It wasn't as if he were *blind*, for heaven's sake. He just

had some trouble judging distance. There had been a few mishaps.

He would go to Little Brothers' first, then circle around to the

filling station to top off the tank of his truck and use the air hose to

clean his air filter, two things he did each and every Friday. Today

he would also need to buy five gallons of diesel for his tractor, since

he would soon have cultivating to do. After his dinner at Pinkie's he

would stop at Black Store on the way home. That was it, Black

Store should be the last thing, lest the milk curdle in his truck on

this warm day, and the eggs incubate and hatch.

He passed by Black Store just then, at the intersection of 6 and

Egg Creek Road, though he didn't see Oda wave at him through

the window. Images from Garnett's past always lurked and rose up

from the ditches as he drove this road, pictures more real to him

than the things in plain view. A wild grapevine that had climbed

into his mother's arborvitae, covering its rounded top like a shiny

green-leather hunting cap. A sport groundhog, blond as wheat,

with a black tail and cap, that lived under their barn for a season. All

of the children had seen it before their father did, for what do children have to do in their lives but look for sport groundhogs? Father

did not believe in its existence until nearly the end of the summer,

when he finally saw it, too. Then it was real. He told neighbors

about it then. The children felt proud when he did, as if they,

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too, had become more real. As Garnett navigated Highway 6 he

breathed the air of that other time—a clearer time, it seemed, when

colors and sound were more distinct and things tended to remain

where they belonged. When the bobwhite quail could be counted

on to cry his name pensively from the fields of an afternoon.

Whatever happened to the bobwhite? You never heard him anymore. Garnett had read something from the Extension about fescue's being the cause, the ordinary fescue grass people planted for

hay. It grew too densely for the bobwhite chicks to find their way

through. Garnett could remember when fescue hay was the latest

thing and the government was paying farmers to convert their fields

from their native grasses to this new kind from Europe or somewhere fancy. (They'd thought kudzu was a great idea back then,

too—Lordy!) Now fescue was everywhere, and probably no one

but Garnett even remembered the bunchgrasses that used to grow

here naturally, the bluestem and such. It must seem strange to the

animals to have a new world entire sprouting all around them, replacing what they'd known. What a sadness, the baby quails lost in

that jungle with nowhere to go. But you had to have hay.

Now here was Grandy's bait store, not a memory but a fact,

with its hand-lettered sign: LIZARDS, 10 FOR A \$. It perturbed him slightly that people in Zebulon County could not learn

to call a salamander what it was. But it perturbed him more that

Nannie Rawley stopped in there at least once a month, bought

every "lizard" in the tank, and set them all free behind her orchard,

in Egg Creek. Everyone knew she did it. Boys seined them and sold

them to Dennis Grandy for a penny apiece, laughing all the way,

knowing full well that most would be set free again by Nannie

Rawley. Why did everyone suffer her so merrily? She claimed there

were ten or fifteen kinds of salamanders in Zebulon that were endangered species, and said she was doing her part to save the environment. Implying what, then—that anyone who went bass fishing

with salamanders was an enemy of God’s plan?

Garnett would like to tell her a thing or two about God’s plan.

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That the creatures of this earth came to pass and sometimes passed

on. That these matters were not ours to control if we were, as she

claimed, merely one more species among our brethren, the animals.

And if we were *not* the equal of animals, if we were meant instead

to be masters and keepers of Eden, as the Bible said, then “lizards”

were put here for a man to go bass fishing with, and that was that.

She couldn’t have it both ways. It was all quite clear to Garnett. Yet

his logic always cowered before her curt and snappy replies. He had

actually thought, once or twice, of writing her a letter.

He drove past the Pentecostal church, which had a spindly

clump of joe-pye weed sprouting up in its parking lot.
Oho! Too

busy speaking in tongues and throwing babies to get out
and weed

their parking lot. Garnett smiled, feeling secure in his
understanding of what God's word did and did not mean to
suggest. He felt a

slight press of guilt, then, as he steered his truck onto
Maple. He

ought to tell Miss Rawley about those shingles in his
garage. If only

she were the least bit reasonable.

There was the bank, there was the Esso. He was in town
now.

There was Les Pratt, who'd taught math at the high school
when

Garnett taught vocational agriculture. He waved, but Les
was on

the wrong side of the street. There was Dennis Grandy's
wife with

all those children, who weren't exactly dirty but never
seemed quite

clean.

And there was Nannie Rawley! Her truck, anyway. Dear
merciful heavens, could he not get away from her for at least
one pleasant trip into town? That woman was stubborn as
cockleburs and a

rash of poison ivy.

He slowed down to get a better look. It *was* her truck,
parked in

the Baptist church lot, where they let the Amish set up
their farmers' market on Saturdays. This was *Friday*, though.
Yet it was them,

all right, the Amish children in their sober black dresses and trousers,

politely selling their produce. He didn't see Nannie. He would maneuver his truck around the block and come back for a second look.

Were there so many Amish now that they had to have markets

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on Saturdays *and* Fridays? They were a burgeoning people, that

much he knew. They'd taken over a long row of farms on the other

side of the river, he'd noticed last year. How were they managing so

nicely, when every other farmer in the county was selling off his

hayfields for house lots and looking for factory work? Well, the

Amish weren't in debt up to their ears on chemicals and equipment—which gave them an unfair advantage, Garnett supposed.

Oh! He missed a stop sign, then slammed on the brakes a hair too

late, but it was all right: the car got around him. For quite a while

he'd wondered about those farms along the river, which were unreachable by car and accessible only by swinging bridges—long,

narrow ones made of planks with just cables for handrails. It would

take some courage to cross that gorge every day. He'd wondered

how on earth a man would get his television or his wife's refrigerator over there, or even a tractor, to a farm like that. Then Les Pratt

had told him the answer in a single word: Amish.

He rounded the corner and took another look at the Amish market. It was tempting to stop. He used to go nearly every Saturday

before Nannie started showing up there with her apples or, in the

early season, like now, her apple-blossom honey and basil-dasil and

whatnot for sale. Evidently you didn't have to be Amish; they

shared the space with Nannie and a handful of other farmers from

the upper end of the county. The only rule was that everything had

to be organic. The Amish didn't use any poisons, which seemed all

right to Garnett if it was a religious matter. But Nannie's presence

among them had settled it: he couldn't set foot in the place once she

became a part of it, for now it was *Organic*, capital *O*, with its

placid, irritating sense of holier-than-thou. So! No more stopping

by on Saturday mornings to buy a delicious fresh pie and stand

among these innocent youngsters with their neat stacks of vegetables, preserves, and rabbits. He missed them, he realized sadly, recognizing the same small ache that came when he thought of his

boy's face in innocent childhood—his own son barefoot with a fishing pole, the terrible mistakes all lying ahead of him still. Garnett

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missed hearing the Amish children count out his change in an accent that seemed vaguely foreign while he covertly looked at their

feet, which were thickly callused, for they wore no shoes all summer long. He knew the Amish didn't send their children to school,

and technically he disapproved of what they called godly simplicity

(actually simple backwardness). Yet he had a soft spot for those boys

and girls. He wondered why the adults sent the children to town to

do their selling. Were the adults elsewhere in town on other business, making the small, spare purchases they must surely need to

make? (A rake, some kerosene, something like that, he imagined.)

Did they feel the children would make better emissaries for representing their kind? Was it a play for sympathy? It seemed to run

against their habit of isolation, Garnett thought. Letting these children come into town to watch other families pile out of station

wagons, to see other children play with radios or the electronic

thingamajigs they all carried in their pockets now while their

mothers idly handled the melons—what were those Amish children

learning to want, that they could never have?

Half a block up from the market he slowed and pulled his truck

into a parking spot on the side of the street. He sat for a while,

considering his alternatives. He could go and buy a pie. They had

the most wonderful pies. Apple, cherry, and something they called

shoofly. But where in heaven's name was Nannie Rawley? Her

truck was there, and in front of it was a table with her kinds of

things, the frills she'd gotten into when apples were out of season:

lemon basil, lavender sachets, dried flowers—the sorts of things he

considered so unnecessary that it embarrassed him to look at them.

Where was she?

He would walk down to the end of the block and do his errands

at Little Brothers', he decided. On the walk back, if the coast was

clear, he would buy a pie. He would try to find one particular boy

he remembered, with the stiff Dutch-boy haircut and the rabbits in

a cage. He'd chatted with that young fellow and given him some advice about poultry. Ezra, that boy was. Or Ezekiel?

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Garnett mounted the concrete steps to Little Brothers' with
a

light and steady heart, but things did not go well from that
point on.

Right on the threshold where Dink Little greeted him by
name, he

realized he'd forgotten his list. He patted his shirt pocket,
ready

to whip it out with a flourish in answer to Dink's
predictable

"What'challneed deday?" Then he patted his other pocket.
But he'd

changed his shirt, of course.

"I just need to look around a minute, Dink," Garnett
replied,

feeling sure he could quickly reconstruct his list as soon as
he saw

one of the items on the shelf. But he saw nothing he
needed here.

The musty, high-ceilinged store suddenly seemed more
like an attic

than a place of commerce: tall stacks of galvanized buckets
leaned

this way and that, mops leaned lazily against shelves full
of floor

polish. Stacks of green work gloves reached out toward
him like a

host of dismembered hands. He staggered sideways around
a display

of lawn mowers on sale and bumped his head on the sign
above

them that was so large and colorful it gave him a headache
even

without his reading it (june mower sale 10% off all brands!

toro! green machine! snapper! john deere!). Garnett felt so rattled

he could hardly stand up. He set his sights on a wheelbarrow down

at the end of an aisle and headed for it just to get himself away from

the door and the register, out of sight, where he could think.

If he took his time he would remember. Weed killer, of course!

Roundup, one-gallon concentrate. He almost laughed aloud. It was

coming back: Roundup, malathion, and paint markers for the trees,

which he really shouldn't buy; he had some in the barn.

“Now does it sound like more of a whine, or more of a buzz?

Because when the gearing pops out of whack, hit'll do that on

you.” One of the brothers up at the register was chatting with a customer. That would be Big, or Marshall. Dink always stayed by the

door.

“What I'm saying is I didn't even hear it,” the customer argued.

“I turned my back and it ran off down the hill.”

Weed killer and malathion. He spied a bottle of malathion on a

shelf midway down the aisle past the galvanized buckets.
Even
though it was a spray bottle and not the size he needed, he
walked
over and seized it for courage. He was an old man lost in a
hardware
store, missing the fine print on all he surveyed; he needed
to arm
himself. What else had been on that list?
“They don’t make them any bigger than that, or any
meaner.
Just a monster, and you’ll have to take my word for it,” the
customer
said.
“Well, Big here’s the expert on *big*, ” said Marshall.
“Now, you boys aren’t listening to me,” the voice said
coily.
The brothers were laughing to beat the band, but Garnett’s
heart skipped a beat. He knew that voice. Good Lord in
Heaven,
was he meant to suffer like Job? It was Nannie Rawley.
Garnett stood next to the wheelbarrow at the end of the
aisle,
listening. How could she be *here* when she’d been down
the street
selling froufrou at the Amish market ten minutes ago? Was
she one
of those Unitarian witches, whizzing around Egg Fork on a
broomstick? He leaned forward and peered around a stack of
galvanized
buckets, looking for an escape path. He could just leave,
go home,

get his list, and come back in half an hour. There would still be time

for fish dinner afterward. Pinkie's stayed open till four.

But there was no way out. The register was near the front door,

and that was where she was, holding court, making her ridiculous

small talk with Dink, Big, and Marshall. He nearly covered his ears,

so unbearable was that voice to him. However entertaining it might

be proving at the moment to the indolent Little brothers. They

were laughing like a pack of hyenas.

"Not a snapper!" one of them cried.

"Yes, a snapper," she replied, sounding both indignant and amused.

Garnett sat down in the wheelbarrow and held his head in his

hands. This was too much to bear. This was beyond even what he

expected of Nannie Rawley, whose sole claim on any kind of decency was that she was generally not a rumormonger.

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"Law, I think I'da had to seen that to believe it," said Marshall,

practically doubled over with amusement.

How could she do this to Garnett, her own good neighbor?

How *dared* she ridicule him in public over that business with the

snapping turtle? When the whole thing had been her fault!

“It was her fault,” he said faintly, much too faintly to be heard,

from his undignified post in the wheelbarrow. “Her weeds.”

They were still braying like donkeys as they rang up her purchases—did it take all three Littles to ring up a blessed purchase?

They were acting like schoolboys, making over her as if she were

some beauty queen instead of a backbiting hag in a calico skirt. She

had this whole town under her spell. Now she was asking for their

advice about roofing compounds! Was there to be no end to this

torment? Apparently she meant to stand there flirting all day, until

Pinkie’s Diner closed and the chickens went home to roost.

Garnett was going to have to march past them. This became

clear. Suddenly all he could do was picture himself safely home at

his kitchen table reading the farm news in the paper. That was

where he wanted to be, more desperately than he desired any love

or grace on this earth or beyond it: home. He wouldn’t even go to

Pinkie’s. There was no point now. It was all-you-can-eat, and he’d

lost his appetite.

Garnett stood tall and marched toward the door, holding his
spray bottle of malathion in front of him to clear the path.
They
turned to stare as he stalked wordlessly and with great
dignity past
the counter.
“Why, Mr. Walker!” she cried.
Well howdy-do to you, he thought. There you are, caught
in
your tracks, you old biddy, you and your gossipmongering
friends.
Let your sins keep you awake at night. He nearly knocked
his head
a second time on the June Mower Sale sign but
remembered to
duck—praise Jesus!—in the nick of time.
He found his truck and was two blocks down the street
past the
Amish market before his heart stopped pounding in his
ears. And he

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was beyond Black Store, halfway up Route 6 to his house,
somewhere in front of Nannie Rawley’s farm frontage, when it
occurred
to him that her lawn mower was a Snapper. Her mower
that he
knew had been giving her trouble, which she’d purchased
at Little
Brothers’. A Snapper.

He was parked in his own driveway before he realized he had

shoplifted a bottle of malathion.

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[{10}](#).

[Moth Love](#)

from their nests in the rafters overhead toward the
S wallows looped and dived inside the barn, swooping
doorway and out into the bright-purple evening,
where the low sun glinted off their streamlined, back-
curved

wings. They were like little fighter planes, angry at any
intrusion,

expressing their ire in motion like bullets. Every evening
Lusa came

into the barn to milk, and every evening the swallows
responded

this way. Like some people, she thought: short on sense,
long on

ambition. Sunset canceled all previous gains, and the
world was

good for a fresh fight every day.

Her thoughts trailed off into a kind of trance as she milked
and

watched the barn swallows make their repetitious oval
flights out

over the flat surface of the pond, which the sunset had laminated

with gold leaf. Suddenly she jumped, startling the cow. Little Rickie

was standing in the doorway, all six and a half feet of him.

“Hey, Rickie. How’s it going?”

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He ambled toward the stanchion where she sat on a stool working the udder to its end. Down here in the cellar of the barn where

the stalls were, the roof was low. Little Rickie’s head nearly touched

the rafters.

“Good, I reckon.”

“Well, good. How’s your family?”

Rickie cleared his throat. “Fine, I guess. Dad sent me up to tell

you we won’t be setting tobacco on Saturday. Tomorrow, I guess he

means.”

“No?” She looked up at him. “Why not? The ground is drying

out. I walked out there on the tobacco bottom this afternoon, and

it’s not that bad. In fact I called down there to tell him everything

looked good for tomorrow, but nobody was home. I think the rain’s

really stopped, finally.”

Rickie looked as if he’d rather be anywhere in the county, pretty much, than in this barn talking with Lusa. A family trait.

“Well, Uncle Herb said he’s got real busy with his calves.
And Dad

said you wasn’t all that interested in us setting your
tobacco anyways, is what they said.”

“Oh, I see. I’m supposed to go down there and apologize
for

my rash attempt at self-rule and beg them on bended knee
to come

set my tobacco.” She saw she was being punished: the
tobacco had

been *their* idea, and now they were using it against her.
Lusa put her

shaking hands on her knees to force some calm onto
herself. Her

sudden anger had upset the cow enough to stop her milk
for the

moment. There was nothing doing until she let down
again. Cows

were a lesson in patience.

Rickie shrugged his shoulders inside his jean jacket, that
particular movement owned by teenaged boys trying to fit
their adult

bodies. She shouldn’t speak her mind to this kid, she
realized; he

must already consider her a hysteric. A *redhead*, Cole used
to say.

The boy kept a nervous eye on Lusa while he shook a
cigarette out

of his pack and lit it. As an afterthought he held out the
pack to her,

but she shook her head.

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“No thanks, I don’t smoke. Which is a misdemeanor in this county, I gather.”

He ran a hand through his thick black hair. “I don’t think Dad

and them is wanting you to get on your knees and beg them or

nothing.”

“No,” she said. “I’m sorry for snapping. I didn’t mean that literally.”

“Anyways it wouldn’t matter if you did, since Dad didn’t get

sets from Jackie Doddard. There’s prolly none left in the whole

county by now, I don’t reckon.”

“Oh. Well, I guess that settles it. My goose is cooked.”

She returned her hands to the cow’s udder and manipulated it

gently to submission. There was no sound in the barn but the rhythmic ring of the milk stream against the metal bucket and the syncopated, soggy-sounding drips from the waterlogged joists where the

roof had leaked. Every drip reminded Lusa of the barn-fixing

money she didn’t have and now would not earn from tobacco.

“Got some leaks,” Rickie said, looking up.

“About three thousand dollars’ worth, I’m guessing. Maybe

more, once they get into those rotten roof beams.”

“Hay’s going to spoil.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I probably won’t even get any hay

mowed or put up in the barn this summer. The baler's
broken

down, and the tractor's probably going to be repossessed. I
was

thinking I'd just let the cows eat snow this year."

Little Rickie stared at her. His big body was a cool
seventeen,

but his face looked younger. What was wrong with her,
why was

she venting her ironic wrath on this child? He was only the
messenger. She was shooting the messenger.

"Hey," he said. "I'm real sorry about, you know. Uncle
Cole."

"Thank you. Me, too." She exhaled slowly. "It hasn't even
been

a month. Twenty-seven days. Seems like twenty-seven
years."

He repositioned himself against one of the massive old
chestnut

posts that held up the upper floor of the barn. Upstairs
where they

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hung the tobacco, the barn was lofty as a cathedral, but
down here

where the animals stayed it was friendly and close with the
sweet,

mixed smells of grain, manure, and milk.

"Me and Uncle Cole used to go fishing. He ever tell you
about

that? We'd skip school together and go trout fishing up on
Zeb

Mountain. Man, it's pretty up there. They've got trees so big you

just about fall over from looking at them.”

“You'd skip school together?” Lusa considered this.

“When you

were in first or second grade, Cole was still in high school. I never

even thought about that. He was your pal. Like a big brother.”

“Yeah.” Rickie looked down, being careful where he put his

cigarette ash. “He always told me stuff. How to talk to girls and

stuff.”

Lusa raised the heel of her hand against one eye and turned away, unprepared to cry in front of Rickie. “Yeah. That was one

thing he sure knew how to do.”

The cow lowed, a small protest in the dripping silence. Her calf

in the neighboring stall immediately began to bawl, as if he'd just

woken up to the injustice of milk robbery.

“Milking, huh?” Rickie noted.

“Yep.”

“Looks like you're good at it.”

“Cole taught me; he said I had a talent. Stupid thing to be good

at, right?”

“Not really. Animals, you know. They can tell what's what. You

can't fool them like you can people."

The calf next door was still bawling, and she crooned to calm

him: "Hush now, your mama will be there in a minute." He quieted, and Lusa returned to the milking. There was comfort in this

work. Sometimes she felt flooded with the mental state of her

Jersey cow—a humble, unsurprised wonder at the fact of still being

here in this barn at the end of each day. Lusa actually enjoyed the

company. She'd been tempted to name her, until Cole pointed out

that they were going to eat her child.

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"Uncle Herb, over at his dairy? Him and the cows is like oil and

water, he says. He does all the milking with machines. Hooks up

bossy to the tank and sucks her dry."

"Yikes. Poor bossy."

"I don't think they mind it none. They're just cows."

"True."

"How many times a day you milk her, twiced?"

Twiced, they all said. *Oncet*, *twiced*. She wondered if that was a

vestige of Old English hanging on in these isolated mountain

towns. "I just milk once a day, believe it or not. Even that's more

than I need now. Just before you came in that door, I was making

up my mind for this to be my last milking.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow I’m pasturing this girl out with her calf so all

that milk can go to the stomach it was made for. It doesn’t do much

for mine.”

“Don’t care for milk, do you?”

“It doesn’t care for me. I did this for Cole because he loved fresh

cream. I like making yogurt, *laban zabadi*—I’ll miss that. But I’ve

frozen enough butter and cheese to last me all winter, and fresh

milk I just don’t need. Unless your family wants it?”

“Nah, we get a gallon a day from Uncle Herb. We drink it, too.

Mostly I do.”

“Well, good for you. I wasn’t raised on it like you were.”

Lusa

was finished. She opened the stanchion to release the cow’s head

and carefully backed her out of it. The gentle old Jersey ambled

straight to the stall that held her calf, and Lusa let her in, giving her

broad flank one good pat for good-bye. She felt ridiculous for the

tears in her eyes.

“Yeah, Mom said you were ... something.”

“She thinks I’m something, does she? That’s nice.” Lusa brushed off her jeans and shook bits of hay out of the tails of her

stained white work shirt, which reached to her knees. It was one of

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Cole’s, pulled on over a rust-colored velvet T-shirt she used to feel

pretty in, once.

“No, I mean, some nationality.”

“I knew what you meant. Rickie, everybody’s some nationality.”

“Not me. I’m just American.”

“Is that why you’ve got a Rebel flag on the bumper of your truck? Because the Confederacy tried to bust up the American government, you know.”

“A southern American, then. What are you?”

“That’s a good question. Polish-Arab-American, I guess.”

“Huh. You don’t look it.”

“No? What do I look like to you?” She stood under the light,

holding her arms out straight against the planks of the stanchion.

Her hair was curly and wild in this humidity, a strawberry-blond

halo around her face in the harsh light. Small white moths batted

circles around the lightbulb overhead. Rickie inspected her politely.

“You look like a white person,” he said.

“My mom’s parents were Palestinian, and my dad’s were
Jews

from Poland. I’m the black sheep of your family, and for
all that I

still sunburn like nobody’s business. Just goes to show
you, Rickie,

you can’t tell a book by its cover.”

“I heard Mom and Aunt Mary Edna talking about that, that
you

were one of those other Christianities.”

“I can just imagine that conversation.” She picked up the
flathead shovel to clean up the floor of the milking parlor, but
Rickie

took it out of her hands, excusing himself for bumping her
shoulder. She never knew how to take these country kids—
rudeness and

politeness in an unfathomable mix. He scraped the manure
into a

small pile and carried it a shovelful at a time to the mound
just outside the door.

“It wasn’t nothing against you, Aunt Lusa,” he said from
the

darkness, giving her a jolt. It had been so long since she’d
heard her

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name spoken aloud. Twenty-eight days, exactly. Nobody
else in the

family ever said it. Rickie ducked back into the bright
milking parlor. “It was just one time when they were just
talking about, what if

you and Uncle Cole had kids. This was before ...”

“He died. When kids were more of an option for us.”

“Yeah. I think they just wondered, you know, how the church

part would work. That it would be hard on his kids.”

She gathered up the bucket and rag she’d used to wash the Jersey’s udder, and set the lid onto the stainless steel milking bucket.

The rim felt warm.

“It wasn’t hard on me, being mix-and-match,” she said. “I’ll

grant you we weren’t really devout, either way. My dad hated his father and kind of turned his back on his religion. And I’m not a

good Muslim, that’s for sure. If I were, you’d see me turning”—she

rotated slowly in the barn cellar, finding east—“*that* way and kneeling down to pray five times a day.”

“You pray towards the chicken house?”

“Toward Mecca.”

“Where’s that at, North Carolina?”

She laughed. “Saudi Arabia. It’s where the prophet Muhammad

was born, so you send your prayers in his direction. And you have

to wash your hands first, too.”

Now Rickie looked amused. “You *wash your hands* before you

pray?”

“Listen, you haven’t *seen* religious. You’re not supposed to touch

alcohol or cigarettes, and women cover themselves up totally, all but

their eyes.” She held her hands in front of her face, peering through

her fingers. “If a man sees a woman’s *foot*, even, or her shape, it’ll

lead him to impure thoughts, see? And it’s all her fault.”

“Man, that’s harsh. I thought Aunt Mary Edna was harsh. You

believe in that?”

“Do I look like it? No, my mom never even wore the veil. Her

parents were already pretty westernized when they left Gaza. But I

have cousins who do.”

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“Yeah?”

“Yep. The American version is a scarf and a long raincoat. I’d always have to do that whenever we went to the mosque with Mom’s

relatives in New York.”

His eyes widened. “You’ve been to New York City?”

She wondered what that place was in his mind. As far from the

truth as this barn was in the minds of her Bronx cousins. “A hundred times,” she said. “My parents both came from there. We always

tried to go back for their families’ holidays. I think the deal on religion between Mom and Dad was that we’d skip the guilt-and-punishment stuff and celebrate the holidays. Feasts, basically.” Lusa

smiled, thinking of boy cousins and music and reckless dancing

among lawn chairs in a small backyard, festivals of love and fitting

in. “I grew up on the best food you can imagine.”

“Huh. I thought people that didn’t believe in God just mostly

worshiped the devil and stuff.”

“Whoa, Rickie!” She laughed weakly, sitting back down on her

milking stool. “Don’t you think there might be a couple of options

in between?”

He shrugged, embarrassed. “Maybe.”

This was her cue, surely, to shrug this boy off and shoo him

home. But then what? Wait for Cole to explain her to this family?

Her body ached with the burden of her aloneness. Nobody was going to do this for her. She pressed her folded hands between her

knees and looked up at him. “Who are you saying doesn’t believe in

God? Jews believe in God. Muslims believe in God. To tell the

truth, most Jewish people and *all* Muslims I know spend more time

thinking about God than you do around here. And definitely less of

their church time on gossip.”

“But different gods, right? Not the real one, not our’n.”

“Yes, your’n. Same exact God. His technical name is Jehovah;

all three factions concur on that. There's just some disagreement

about which son did or did not inherit the family goods. The same old, same-old story."

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"Huh," he remarked.

"Do you know that most of the people in the world are actually not Christians, Rickie?"

"Is that really true?" He grinned sideways like a schoolboy trapped by a trick question. Then lit another cigarette to recover his

dignity, raising his eyebrows in a question to make sure it was OK.

"Sure, go ahead."

"Can you say something in Jewish?"

"Hmm. Maybe you mean Yiddish. Or Polish."

"Yeah. Something in a language."

"Between Yiddish and Polish I'm not good for much. My bubeleh lived with us before she died—my dad's mother—but she

was, like, classified. Dad wouldn't let her speak anything but English

in our house. Wait, though, let me think." She rehearsed the phrase

in her mind, then recited aloud, "*Kannst mir bloozin kalteh millich in*

toochis."

"What's that mean?"

"You can blow cold milk up my ass."

He laughed loudly. "Your *mammaw* taught you that?"

“She was a pissed-off old lady. Her husband ran off with a coat-check girl in a nightclub. You should ask me about Arabic, my mom

taught me a bunch of things.”

“OK, what’s one?”

“*Ru-uh shum hawa*. It means ‘Go sniff the wind.’ Bug off, in

other words.”

“Rooh shum hawa,” he repeated, with dreadful inflection, but

Lusa was touched by his effort. His willingness to stand here and

talk with her about foreign things.

“Yeah, roughly,” she said. “That’s pretty good.”

Rickie smirked a little. “So,” he said, exhaling smoke, “did you

have other Christmases? Where you’d get presents and stuff?”

“Other Christmases, other Easters. Yep. It wasn’t so much about

presents, but definitely about food. Ramadan, that’s a whole month

where you don’t eat during the daytime, only at night.”

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“No kidding? You’d go all day?”

“Supposed to. We usually didn’t. I’d just skip breakfast and try to

be good for a month. But the best part is the end, where you

have this giant feast to make up for everything you didn’t eat that

month.”

“Like Thanksgiving?”

“Better than that. It lasts three days. Not even counting the left overs.”

“Man. A pig-out.”

“A goat-out, is what it is. My family was nix on pork, on both

sides—Jews and Muslims agree on that. But we love goat. People

think lamb’s the Middle Eastern thing but the real, true tradition is

qouzi mahshi, milk-fed kid. Mom and I would always go visit the

Arab cousins for Id-al-Fitr, at the end of Ramadan, and they’d roast

a kid over this giant spit in their backyard. Then there’s another feast

four months later, Id-al-Adha, which requires an even bigger goat.”

“I don’t think I’d care for goat.”

“No? You ever eaten it?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing. *Qouzi mahshi*, yum. It’s

like a sweet, tender calf, only better.”

He looked doubtful.

“Hey, I thought you *raised* goats, Rickie. What are those things

with horns I’ve seen back behind your house?”

“Oh, that was a Four-H project.”

“And you didn’t eat your project at the end?”

“Nah. They’re just there to keep down the weeds, I reckon.”

“Are they for milk, theoretically, or for meat?”

“They’re supposed to be slaughter goats. The idea was to sell

them at the state fair while they were still under forty pounds or

something. The judges feel their ribs and hipbones and everything

and give you a grade.”

“And did your goats make the honor roll?”

“They were pretty good. But you can’t sell a goat around here.

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Heck, you can’t give away a goat around here. I know because I

tried.”

“But I’ve seen them all over the place. Here in this county, I

mean.”

“Well, see, there was this big slaughter-goat craze a while back

in Four-H. Mr. Walker got people started on it for some reason, and

now half the back fields in the county are full of goats people can’t

give away.”

“Huh,” Lusa said. “Who’s Mr. Walker?”

“He’s uncles or cousins to us someways. By marriage.”

“Everybody within sixteen miles of here is uncles or
cousins to

you someways.”

“Yeah, but Mr. Walker, he’s the livestock adviser for Four-
H. Or

used to be, when I was a little kid. He’s prolly retired now.
He’s got

that farm over on number Six that’s all weedy in front? He
grows

chestnut trees, I heard.”

“Chestnut trees all died fifty years ago, Rickie. The
American

chestnut went extinct due to a fungal blight.”

“I know, but that’s what people say he’s growing. I don’t
know.

He knows all this stuff about plants. Everybody said he
should have

been the crop-project adviser, not the livestock adviser.
That’s why

he screwed up all these kids on the goats.”

“Huh,” Lusa said. “You think he could help me find a
cheap

goat or two for a feast? What the hell, I’d even invite your
mom and

aunts up, scandalize the family with *qouzi mahshi* and
imam bayildi. ”

“What’s that?”

“Food of the gods, Rickie. Roast goat and roast stuffed
vegetables. Actually *imam bayildi* means ‘The emperor
fainted.’ Which is

what your aunt Mary Edna would do if she saw a goat
looking at

her from the middle of her mother's walnut dining table."

Rickie laughed. He had a wonderful laugh, wide open, the kind

that showed molars. "You don't need Mr. Walker to find you a goat.

You could just run you an ad in the paper: 'Wanted, free goats. You

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deliver.' I swear, Aunt Lusa, you'd look out your window next

morning and see a hundred goats out there eating your field."

"You think?"

"I swear."

"Well, they'd keep the thistles and briars from taking over my

hayfields. I could get rid of my cows. Then I wouldn't have to learn

how to run the bush hog."

"At's a fact, they would keep your briars eat down. They don't

take much hay, either; they can feed themselves pretty good off the

brush, most of the winter."

"Are you serious? My God, then I wouldn't even have to run

my baler or put up hay? That's the best idea I've heard all day."

"You need *some* hay," he cautioned. "For when it gets bad. Just

not so much.” He lit another cigarette from the one that was still

burning. She walked over and took the pack from him.

“Can I try this?”

“Go ahead. Gives you cancer.”

“I think I heard about that.” She gave a small, mirthless laugh,

peering into the hole in the pack. “I’ll tell you, though, hanging on

to extra years in my seventies doesn’t seem high on my list right

now. Under the circumstances.” She extracted one white tube and

stared at it. It smelled like Cole. “I can’t even get excited about seeing thirty, to tell you the truth.”

“That’s how kids in high school feel. That’s why we all smoke.”

“Interesting.” She put it in her mouth and leaned toward his

lighter, which he pulled away, teasing her.

“This really your first time?”

“Yep. You’re corrupting an old lady.” She tried to inhale the tip of

the flame, but her throat recoiled and she coughed. Rickie laughed.

She waved a hand in front of her face. “I’m no good at this, obviously.”

“It stinks, it really does. You shouldn’t start, Aunt Lusa.”

She laughed. “You’re sweet, Rickie. Thanks for looking out

for me.”

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He met her gaze for a second. He was a striking young man, a

handsome union of his father's dark complexion and the Widener

looks. Lusa was seized and simultaneously mortified by thoughts of

his bare chest and arms, of putting her head there and being held by

him. What was she, losing her mind? Was this celibacy, lunacy, or

what? She glanced down at her tennis shoes.

"I really don't want to die," she said, a little shaky. "I don't mean

to sound like that. I'm depressed, but I think that's normal for a

widow. They say it passes. I was more just thinking that if tobacco's

the lifeblood of this county, I should support the project."

"Nah, you don't have to." He dragged and puffed away, making

tiny whistling sounds with his cigarette. He looked at her sideways.

"Aunt Lusa, I hope you'll take this the right way, but you're no old

lady. These guys at school, friends of mine? They seen you at

Kroger's and said you were pretty hot."

"Me?" She blushed scarlet.

"No offense," he said.

"None taken. I know, you and Cole used to skip school together and he taught you how to sweet-talk girls. I keep

forgetting

I'm not your mother."

He grinned and shook his head. "You are not my mother."

"Thank you," Lusa said primly, feeling a little guilty for all the

names she'd called Rickie's mother in her mind: long-in-the-tooth,

leather-lunged Lois. "I'm sure your mother is a better soul than me."

He snorted. "If that's what you call it. My mother believes in no

cussing, a good night's sleep, and everything in the kitchen decorated with little ducks."

"And how do you know I don't believe in those things?"

"I seen your kitchen."

"Hey, look, I can do this." She took a tiny gulp of cigarette smoke but mostly vamped with it dangling from her fingertips,

draping her arm over the top of her head. "How old is Lois, if you

don't think she'd mind my asking?"

"She's, lemme think." He looked at the ceiling. "I think she's,

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like, around forty-one or -two. Aunt Mary Edna's a whole bunch

older than her. She's like fiftysomething."

"That's about what I thought, the Magnificent Eldest. And Emaline is between them."

“Yeah, Aunt Emaline’s older than Mom. And Aunt HannieMavis is younger. She’s not forty yet. I know because she was lording it over Mom about being forty.”

“And Jewel’s what, between your mom and Emaline?”

“No, Aunt Jewel’s the youngest one. She was right before Cole,

just two years apart or something like that.”

“Jewel? Are you sure?”

“Yeah. She’s not that old. I was just a dumb little kid when she

got married—I was the ring burier. I don’t even remember it that

well, but they have these embarrassing pictures. Luckily nobody

gets them out anymore since Uncle Shel run off with that waitress.”

“Oh yeah, lucky thing that was.”

“Oh man, yuk-yuk-yuk.” He smacked his head, causing Lusa to

giggle. She felt lightheaded, on a nicotine rush, though it was the

conversation, too—the company—making her giddy. The last time

she’d talked this long with a seventeen-year-old boy, she’d probably

been in the back of a car.

She sobered some, though, to think of Jewel. Not about Shel’s

running off; about Jewel’s being thirty and looking fifty. “I *thought*

that was right, that she was younger. But lately I was wondering.

She looks older.”

“She’s the littlest sister, though. My mom and them were always

jealous of her growing up, because of Cole. He was everybody’s

favorite, right? And him and Jewel were, like, unseparatable best

friends.”

“Oh,” Lusa said, taking this in. “And then I came along. So they

could all resent me instead.”

“They don’t, Aunt Lusa.”

“But they do. You don’t have to pretend.”

He looked at her, seeming just in that moment more man than

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boy, as if he understood pain. She felt her heart stir again, but it

wasn’t desire, she realized, just a kind of love for who he might

someday become. She could see how he would be with a girlfriend:

sweet and in charge. Exactly like Cole at seventeen, probably. She

leaned against the barn wall beside him, tilting her head back

against the planks, both of them facing out the doorway into the

evening. Content for a minute to be just where they were. The surface of the pond was the color of blood oranges.

“So,” he said.

“So?”

“So, you run your ad. People start showing up to dump off their

goats, starting with me. You can have my two.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“And then what? What are you going to do with your five hundred goats?”

Lusa closed her eyes, tasting and smelling roast goat. Last time

she’d celebrated an Id-al-Fitr was years ago, when her mother was

still lively and well, someone Lusa could talk to. Someone to cook

with. A late-winter celebration, it had been then. The Muslim calendar crept up eleven days on the Christians every year. By now, Idal-Fitr would be close to Christmas.

She opened her eyes. “Rickie. Can you get a bunch of goats

pregnant all at once?”

He blushed, and she burst out laughing.

“Not *you*, ” she said, when she could speak again. “I mean if

you had a bunch of female goats and a—what do you call him? A

billy goat?”

“You call them does and bucks. If they’re meat goats.”

“Does and bucks, right. So, what happens? Don’t blush!

Rickie!” She swatted his arm. He was giggling like a child. “I’m being practical. I just had an idea. *Two* huge goat-feast holidays are

coming up, together, at the very end of the year. And that means

Id-al-Adha will be—February, March—early *April!* The same time

as Orthodox Easter and Passover. I can't believe this!" She was talk**160**

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ing fast, counting on her fingers and getting herself excited. "I need

to look at a calendar to make sure. How long does it take to make

a kid?"

"How long are they pregnant, you mean? Five months, a little

bit less."

She counted on her fingers. "That's November, that's perfect! A

month to fatten them up. Can you get them all to, you know—

don't blush!" She smoothed her shirttails, made a sober face, and

deepened her voice. "We're farmers, Rickie. Farmer to farmer, I'm

asking your advice. Could I get one stud billy to knock up a whole

field of babes at the same time?"

"Ppphhhh!" Rickie exploded, folding up on himself.

"I'm serious!"

He wiped his eyes. "I think so, yeah. You can give them hormones and stuff."

"No, no, no. These are religious-holiday goats. No hormones.

Can we do it another way?"

"It's been a long time since I was in Four-H, Aunt Lusa."

“But you know about livestock. How does it work?”

“I *think* how it works is, if you’ve got does that haven’t been

around a buck at all, and then you put them all in the field with

him, they all come into season together. I’m not positive, but I

think that’s right. You could call up Mr. Walker and find out.”

“Oh, right. I’m going to call up some old dude out of the blue

and ask him about goat sex!” She and Rickie collapsed again, starting the cow lowing in the stall behind them. Lusa tried to shush

herself and Rickie, but she had to hold on to a post just to keep

herself on her feet.

“Here, put this out for me,” she said, handing him the stub of

her cigarette. “Before I burn down my barn.”

He tamped it out on the bottom of his shoe, then ran a hand through his hair and straightened up. She saw his eyes glance twice

at the open doorway. It was no longer evening now but night, full

dark.

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“You need to get home,” she said.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Tell your dad it’s OK about the tobacco. He’s right, it really is

what I wanted, not to set tobacco this year. Thank him for helping

me stick to my principles.”

“OK.”

“Now *get*.” She smacked his thigh with the back of her hand.

“Your mother will think I’m holding you hostage.”

“She won’t, either. They’re more shy of you than anything, the

whole family.”

“I know. I’m an outsider occupying their family home. They

want their farm back, and I really don’t blame them. Most mornings I get out of bed thinking I should pack my car and drive away

without even saying good-bye.”

He raised his eyebrows. “That’d hurt some feelings.”

“Maybe that’d be my point.”

“Even if you left, we couldn’t be sure of keeping this place. My

folks or Uncle Herb and Aunt Mary Edna, they could lose it next

year to the bank.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too. Families lose their land for a

million reasons. My dad’s parents had this wonderful farm in

Poland, which they lost for being Jewish. And my mother’s people

got run off their land for *not* being Jewish. Go figure.”

“Is that true? What type of farming?”

She glanced up at him, surprised by his interest. “The Malufs

had olive groves along the Jordan River, or so I’m told. I don’t

know the details; it was pretty far back. Mom was born in New

York. But my dad was actually born on his folks’ farm, in the middle part of Poland, which people say looks like a storybook. I think

they grew sugar beets.”

“That’s something, that you come from farming people.” He

appraised her as though she’d suddenly grown taller or older. “I

never knew that.”

She saw now that his interest was not in social history but in

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crops. She’d begun to comprehend this frank pragmatism and to

suspect that if she could acquire it—if she could *want* to—she could

belong here. She shrugged. “So what, I come from farming people.

Doesn’t make any difference.”

He continued to look at her. “You talk about leaving, everybody says you’re going to, but you stay. There’s some reason.”

She sighed, crossing her arms across her chest and rubbing her

elbows. “If there’s any reason or rhyme to what I’m doing, I wish I

knew it. I'm like a moth, Rickie, flying in spirals. You see how they

do?" She nodded up at the lightbulb, where hordes of small, frantic

wings glinted through the arc of brightness in circular paths

through the air. They were everywhere once you bothered to notice them: like visible molecules, Lusa thought, entirely filling up

space with their looping trajectories. Rickie seemed surprised to realize this, that moths were everywhere. He stared upward with his

mouth slightly open.

"A calf will run around that way when it's lost its mama and

scared to death," he observed at last.

"They're not lost, though. Moths don't use their eyes the way

we do; they use smell. They're tasting the air, taking samples from

different places and comparing them, really fast. That's how they

navigate. It gets them where they need to be, but it takes them forever to get there."

"Go sniff the wind.' However you said that."

"*Ru-uh shum hawa*. Exactly. That's me. I can't seem to go in a

straight line."

"Who says you have to?"

"I don't know, it's embarrassing. People are watching me. I'm

figuring out how to farm by doing all the wrong things. And I'm

having this retrospective marriage, starting at the end and moving

backward, getting acquainted with Cole through all the different

ages he was before I met him.”

She doubted Rickie was following this, but he was respectful, at

least. They stood together watching the dizzying dance of silver

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wings through the cool air: tussock moths, tortricids, foresters, each

one ignoring the others as it wheeled on its own path, urgent and

true.

“Aunt Lusa, you worry too much.”

“I’m a widow with a farm drowning in debt, standing in a barn

that’s about to fall on me. You’re right. What, I should *worry?* ”

He laughed. “About the family, I meant. They’re just jealous

that Uncle Cole went so crazy over you. But who wouldn’t? You’re

so pretty and smart and stuff.”

She made a face at him, a squashed, sorrowful smile, to keep

from crying. “Thank you for saying that.”

He shrugged.

“And listen, Rickie, thanks for just ... I don’t know. Making

me laugh out loud. You don't know how much I needed that."

"Well, listen. If you need help with this goat thing."

"Oh, I'm just dreaming. It's desperation."

"What were you thinking? Tell me." He was a peer suddenly,

earnest and kind. She saw something of the older Cole she'd

known—not in Rickie's eyes, which were dark, but in the seriousness of his face.

"Well, what I was thinking was, I know this butcher in New

York, Abdel Sahadi, he's my mother's cousin. He probably sells—I

don't even know, a thousand goats a year? Maybe more."

Rickie whistled, long and low.

"Yeah," she said, "New York City. It's all people, eating all the

time. That's basically what you've got going there. But he sells almost all those goats at holiday times. All at once. So he doesn't want

them trickling in all year long. He needs five hundred, all in the

right week. If it's winter when you want one, you have to order it

way ahead of time, and you pay a fortune for it. You wouldn't believe what people in the city will pay for a milk-fed kid at holiday

time. It's like the ordinary rules of what you can afford don't apply

at those times."

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He was listening to her carefully. It made her listen more carefully to herself.

“Rick. Do you mind if I skip the ‘Little Rickie’? You’re not so

little, you know?”

“Hell, I wish somebody would *bury* the damn ‘Little Rickie.’ ”

“OK, Rick. Tell me this. Is there any possible way I could produce fifty or sixty suckling kids by the end of December? And then

maybe twice that many in the spring, four months later?”

He didn’t hesitate to take her seriously. “You know about worming, ketosis, birthing, all that, right? It’s some work. Did you ever

raise livestock before?” She tilted an eyebrow at him, but he was

suddenly off on his own calculations. “OK. You’d have to have two

seasons. Not the same mothers for both kiddings.”

“Right.”

“How’s your fence? A fence that won’t hold water won’t hold

in a goat.”

She laughed. “I think I’m OK. It’s electric.”

“Really? *Shoot*, that’s good. When’d you put that in?”

“I don’t even know; years ago. Cole did it. It runs all the way

around the main cow pasture up there. He had a bad stretch with

some roving cows.”

“That’s lucky, that you’ve got that. That costs some money
to
put in.”

“I know, he told me. But he said if his cows had got over
in

Mary Edna’s garden one more time it would’ve cost him
his manhood.”

Rickie laughed. “All right, then, lady, I think you’re set up.

Goats’d do fine out there on your brush; you wouldn’t
need to

grain them or hay them much, maybe just give them some
fodder

after it snows. But kidding in November, they’d need
shelter. If it

gets real cold, you’ll need to get the mothers in your barn
when

they’re ready to spring. You build them a little kidding
pen. Jugs,

they’re called.”

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Lusa looked up at the ceiling of the barn cellar,
envisioning the

space above. The door to the main gallery of the barn
opened onto

the hillside. She could change the fencing just a little to
give access

to the big pasture. “If I didn’t have it full of tobacco up
there, or

stacked full of hay, I’d have some room.”

“That’s going to be your trick,” he said. “Getting them to
settle

down and kid right, after it gets cold. That's not the normal season.

I've never seen it done, to tell you the truth."

"Oh. That must be why goat's so expensive in the middle of winter."

"Oh, yeah. They'd be worth gold to somebody that wanted them."

"But do you think I could do it?"

He spoke carefully. "It's possible. I think everybody in the county would think you were crazy for trying it."

"How about if nobody but you and me and that cow in there

knew what I was up to? And especially if nobody knew about my

cousin Abdel and holiday prices in New York?”

“Oh, well, then they’d just think you’d gone off the deep end

with too many pet goats. They’d think you were a city gal with her

nose in a book and not one lick of sense in her head.”

She grinned at her coconspirator. “Not a problem. That’s what

they think now.”

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[Predators](#)

racket of a man in her cabin: the door flung open,
From inside her dark cocoon Deanna listened to the
boots stomping twice to shed their mud at the
door, then the hollow clatter of kindling dropped on the
floor.

Next, the creak of the stove’s hinge and the crackling
complaints of

a fire being kindled and gentled to life. Soon it would be
warm in

here, the chill of this June morning chased outdoors where
the sun

could address it. She stretched her limbs under the covers,
smiling

secretly. Getting up to a warm cabin on a cold morning
without

having to go outside for firewood first, *that* was tolerable.

She felt something sharp against her leg: the plastic edge
of one

of his strings of condoms at the bottom of the bed, twisting
there like

a strand of DNA. She'd been astounded when he first
produced these

packets of cheerful little rubber disks in the primary colors,
a whole

procession of them strung together as if they'd come off
some giant

reel of condoms somewhere. "That's my stash," he'd said,
utterly

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nonchalant, pulling them out of his pack like a magician's
tiedtogether scarves from a sleeve. He claimed to have gotten
them free

at some walk-in clinic that urged them onto its clientele.
She disliked

thinking of his ambling into such a place for treatment of
Godknew-what. Didn't really care for the grim realities of this
man at all,

the fact that he was a seasonal migrant picking up
occasional work,

salmon fishing, carving knife handles for cash. A male
who shackled

up for shelter, she suspected. She'd done her best to run
him off, flying into her rage at him up in the chestnut log, yet
he persisted in her

territory. He'd been out several years from Wyoming—
with his hunting rifle, following his passion, which they did
not discuss. He talked

about everything else instead, and she found herself
swallowing his

stories like bits of live food brought to a nest: the Northern
Lights

unfurling like blue-green cigar smoke in the Arctic sky.
The paraffincolored petals of a cactus flower. The Pacific
Ocean and tidepools,

neither of which she'd seen, except for the artificial
versions of the

latter in the Chattanooga Aquarium. She thought now of
the pink

anemones waving in that water. Like herself, when he'd
first spied on

her with her sensitive, fleshy tentacles of thought waving
all around

her, until he'd touched and made her draw up quickly into
a stony

fist. But he knew just how to touch her, speak to her,
breathe on her,

to draw her out again. Physical pleasure was such a
convincing illusion, and sex, the ultimate charade of safety.

The stove's metal door banged shut and she heard the hush
of

his jeans shed onto the floor. Her body tingled with the
anticipation

of his return to her bed. She waited, though, and for a
minute too

long there came no body diving headfirst into her world
under the

quilts. She poked her head out into the morning and
blinked at its

brightness. It was late morning already. The sun was a
dazzling rectangle at the window, where a naked man danced

in silhouette, batting both hands at a frightened moth.

“Hey hey, careful!” she cried, causing him to turn to her.
She

couldn't see his expression because he was backlit, but
already she

knew that face, its guilelessness.

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“I wasn't going to kill him,” he insisted. “I'm just trying to
catch

him and put him outside. Little bugger snuck in here, he's
trying to

see you naked.”

She sat up and squinted at the desperate wings flailing at
the

window. “No, now that's a female. She's looking at *you*.”

“Hussy,” he said, trying to clap the moth between his
hands.

“Look at her, she's terrified. Never saw such a display of
manhood

in all her days.”

“Don't do it like that.” Deanna lifted aside the heavy pile
of

blankets and put her feet on the cold floor. The wood stove
radiated

a tangible field of heat that her body passed through as she
walked

to the window. “Best if you don't touch it. The scales will
come off

its wings.”

“And that would be terrible?”

“To the moth it would. I think it dies or something, without them.”

He stepped back, deferring to this dire claim. “Is that a scientific fact?”

She smiled. “My dad told me, so it must be true.” She tried with

her cupped hands to steer the moth away from the window. “Darn

it, little wing, I’d open this window for you, but you’ve picked the

only one that doesn’t open.”

“Who’s your dad, a moth scientist or something?”

“Don’t laugh, there are moth scientists. I knew of one, in graduate school.” She tried to urge the moth toward the window over

the bed, but nothing doing. It continued to throw itself eastward

like a supplicant toward Mecca.

“Maybe if we close the curtain she’ll go to a different window,”

he suggested.

“Maybe.” Carefully she drew the white cotton curtain between

the moth and the glass, but she could see that wasn’t going to help

much.

“She can still see the light,” he said.

He’d believed her when she declared the moth a female.

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Deanna was touched. “You know what, I can’t really sex a moth at

twenty paces, I was bluffing. And no, my dad wasn’t a scientist. He

could have been. He was a farmer, but he was ...” The moth settled onto the curtain and sat still. It was an astonishing creature,

with black and white wings patterned in geometric shapes, scarlet

underwings, and a fat white body with black spots running down it

like a snowman’s coal buttons. No human eye had looked at this

moth before; no one would see its friends. So much detail goes unnoticed in the world.

“I can’t really even describe how my dad was,” she finished. “If

you spent a hundred years in Zebulon County just watching every

plant and animal that lived in the woods and the fields, you still

wouldn’t know as much as he did when he died.”

“Your hero. I’m jealous.”

“He was. He had theories about everything. He’d say, ‘Look at

that indigo bunting, he’s so blue, looks like he dropped down here

from some other world where all the colors are brighter. And look

at his wife: she’s brown as mud. Why do you reckon that is?’ And

I’d say something dumb, like, maybe in indigo buntings it’s the men

instead of the ladies that like to get dressed up. And Dad would say,

‘I think it’s because she’s the one that sits on the eggs, and bright

colors would draw attention to the nest.’”

“And what did your mama say about it?”

“Yeek!” Deanna howled, startled by the darting shadow of a

mouse that burst from behind the woodpile and ran practically

across their bare feet before disappearing into a hole in the corner

between the log wall and the floor. “Damn.” She laughed. “I hate

how they make me squeal like a girl, every time.” Eddie Bondo had

jumped, too, she’d noticed.

“Your mama said ‘Yeek’?”

“My mama said not a whole heck of a lot. On account of she

was dead.” Deanna narrowed her eyes, studying the hole into which

the mouse had disappeared. She’d been stuffing holes with scraps of

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aluminum foil for two years. But anything with mice was a war you

couldn’t win, she’d learned that much.

She realized Eddie was looking at her, waiting for the rest of the

story. “Oh, it’s not a tragedy or anything, about my mother. I mean,

to Dad it was, I’m sure, but I don’t even remember her, I was that

little.” Deanna spread her hands, unable really to name the hole this

had put in her life. “Nobody ever taught me to be a proper lady,

that’s the tragedy. Oh, now look, she *is* a she.” Deanna pointed to

the moth, which was pressing the tip of its abdomen against the

fabric of the curtain, apparently attempting to lay eggs.

“My mama died, too, quite a while back,” he said, as they watched the moth closely. “Happens, I guess. Daddy remarried after about, oh, fifteen minutes.”

Deanna couldn’t imagine such family carelessness. “Did you get

along with her, at least?”

He laughed oddly. “She could have got along without *me*. She

had her own kids, that was some of the trouble, who the ranch

would go to. The whole ugly-stepsister story, you know.”

Deanna didn’t know. “My dad never did remarry.”

“No? So it was always just you and him?”

Did she want to tell him this? “Mainly me and him, yeah,” she

said. “He had a friend, but that was years later. They never moved

in together, they both had their farms to run, but she was good to

me. She's an amazing lady. I didn't even realize until just lately how

she'd been through hell and back with us. My dad was a mess on her

hands at the end. And she had a little girl, too, with Down's syndrome and a hole in her heart that couldn't be fixed. My half-sister."

Eddie Bondo put his hands on Deanna's shoulders and kissed

her. "This is you, isn't it?"

She ran a hand through his hair, newly shorn to a smoother shape—less crow, more mink. On Tuesday, her day of mortification

after assaulting him in the chestnut log, she had let him talk her into

many things, including cutting his hair with her little scissors. It was

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surprisingly thick, like the pelt of some northern animal that

needed the insulation. The exquisite tactile pleasure of that slow

hour spent out on the porch with her hands on his scalp had created

between them a new kind of intimacy. Afterward they'd stood quietly watching a pair of chickadees gather up the fallen hairs for their

nest.

"Me, no," she said, unsure what he meant, "my half-sister.

Rachel was her name."

“It’s who you are, I mean. You’re telling me a piece of your life.”

She looked at his eyes, watched him glance back and forth between her own two pupils. He was that close.

“Our bed’s getting cold,” he whispered.

“I don’t think that’s possible.”

The fire cracked loudly then, like a shot, startling them like the

mouse had, making them laugh out loud. Eddie Bondo ran for the

bed and leapt under the blankets, hooting that the posse had found

him out. She tugged at the edge of the bed, fighting him to let her

in. “I reported you to the Forest Service,” she warned. “Keeping a

wildlife manager from her work, which is a hanging crime in these

mountains.”

“I get my last meal, then.” He threw aside the covers to reveal

himself, solemn and flat on his back. She pounced and tried to pin

him, but he was strong and seemed to know real wrestling moves.

In spite of her size and longer limbs, he could have her tidily turned

with an elbow pinned behind her back every time. In less than a

minute she was helpless, laughing as he straddled her.

“What is that, Bondo? Some kind of sheep-herding maneuver?”

“Exactly.” He gathered a thick skein of her hair in one hand.

“Next I shear you.”

Instead he kissed her forehead and then each one of her ribs before nuzzling his head against her waist. But she tugged him back up

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to the pillow beside her. She needed to look at him. “OK,” she said,

“you’re saved. I’m giving you a stay of execution.”

“Governor. I’m your slave.”

She wanted to play, but her mood was wrong for it. Speaking

aloud of Nannie and Rachel had brought those two into this cabin.

And her father, too—especially him. What would he have made of

Eddie Bondo? “I told you something about me,” she said. “Now

you have to tell me one thing about you.”

He looked wary. “I choose which thing? Or you get to ask?”

“I get to ask.”

“A serious thing?”

“To me it is.”

He rolled onto his back and they both stared up at the ceiling,

its crooked log beams riddled with the small tunnels of beetles.

Deanna thought about the trees they had been once, a long time ago. Suffering more in life than in death, surely. There was a scratching sound coming from the space above the roof boards.

“What’s up there?” he asked.

“On top of those boards, cedar shingles—rotten, probably. See all the nails? Then galvanized tin on top of the whole mess.”

“I mean that noise,” he persisted.

“Mouse, probably.”

“The same one that just made you squeal like a girl?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Different one. One of his innumerable friends and relations.”

They both stared for a while at the roof, their eyes following the

sound as it moved higher, toward the peak. Deanna decided the

motion was too slow for a mouse and considered the other possibilities.

“Who built this cabin?” he asked her.

“Guy named Walker, Garnett something Walker. There was this

whole line of them, all with the same name. Kind of like land

barons in this area, a hundred years ago.”

“And this was the baron’s luxurious abode?”

“Oh, not hardly. This was just the headquarters for one of his

hundred logging camps. He and his sons logged out all these mountains. This was probably one of his last stands; the cabin is nineteenthirties or so, I’d guess. Looking at the logs.”

“What are they, oak?”

“Chestnut, every one. When people realized the chestnuts were

dying out, they had this huge rush to cut down all that were left,

even the standing deadwood.”

He studied the construction more closely. “That’s why the logs

are kind of small and twisted?”

“Yeah. Deadwood, or maybe some of the bigger limbs off huge

trunks they took for lumber. But Eddie, listen.” She turned to look

at him. “What I’m saying is, they realized the chestnuts were going

extinct. So what did they do? They ran up here and cut down every

last one that was left alive.”

He thought about it. “They were dying anyway, I guess that’s

what they figured.”

“But not all of them would have died. Some of those last chestnuts were standing because they weren’t sick. They might have

stood straight on through the blight.”

“You think?”

“I’m sure. People study this stuff. Every species has its extremes,

little pockets of genetic resistance that give it an edge on survival.

Some would have made it.”

She watched his eyes track the twisted logs as he pondered what

she’d just said. This was the thing that surprised her again and again:

Eddie Bondo paid attention. Most men of her acquaintance acted

like they already knew everything she did—and they didn’t.

“If some of the chestnuts had lived,” he asked, “how long would they have stood?”

“A hundred years, maybe? Long enough to spread their seeds.

Some of them *did* live; there’s maybe five or six per county hidden

back in the hollows, but there aren’t enough to pollinate one an¹⁷⁴

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other. If more of them had been spared they could have repopulated

these mountains over time, but nobody thought about that. Not one

person. They just sawed the last ones down, hell for leather.”

He turned his acute gaze on Deanna. “That’s why you live up

here by yourself, isn’t it? You can’t stand how people are.”

She weighed this, feeling its truth inside herself like damp sand.

“I don’t *want* to feel that way,” she said finally. “There’s people I

love. But there’s so many other kinds of life I love, too. And people

act so hateful to every kind but their own.”

He didn’t reply. Was he taking her judgment personally? She’d

been thinking of people who refused to be inconvenienced for the

sake of an endangered fish or plant or owl, not of coyote killers per

se. She forced her next words, knowing that each one had its own

cost. “You said I could ask you a question, and now I’m asking it.”

“What?”

“You know.”

He blinked but didn’t speak. Something in his eyes receded

from her.

“What brought you down here to the mountains?”

He looked away. “A Greyhound bus.”

“I have to know this. Was it the bounty hunt?”

He didn’t answer.

“Just say no if the answer is no. That’s all I want.”

He still said nothing.

“God.” She let out a slow breath. “I’m not surprised. I knew.

But I will never, ever understand who you are.”

“I never asked you to.”

No, he hadn't, and she would refrain from trying if she was capable of it. But here he was, naked beside her with his left hand lying above her heart. How could she not need to know who he was?

Were male and female from different worlds, like the indigo

bunting and his wife? Was she nothing but mud-colored female on

the inside? *She* who'd always been sure she was living her life bright

blue?

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“Where does it come from?” she asked. “I can't understand that

kind of passion to kill a living thing.”

“Not just a living thing. An enemy.”

“Tell me the truth. How many times have you seen sheep killed

by coyotes?”

“Enough.”

“A hundred?”

“On my own family's ranch? No. A hundred would wipe a man

out, even if it was spread out over four or five years.”

“On your own family's ranch, in your lifetime, how many?

Fifty? A dozen?”

He was still looking up at the roof beams. “Maybe a dozen,” he

conceded. “We’ve got sheepdogs, we’ve got good fences, but even

so. Probably that many. You can’t always tell what got them, especially if it was a lamb and whatever got it just hauled it clean away.”

“So in one or all of those cases it could have been anything. A

neighbor’s dog. A barn owl. A damn bald eagle.”

Eddie Bondo grimaced, declining to agree or disagree.

“A coyote is just something you can blame. He’s nobody’s pet;

he doesn’t belong to anybody but himself. So, great, put a bullet in

him.”

He turned to look at her full on, propping himself up on an elbow. “What you don’t understand is that ranching’s not like farming. It’s not a vegetarian proposition.”

She shook her head but said nothing, beginning to feel herself

recede in her own way. What was it about the West, that cowboy

story everybody loved to believe in? Like those men had the goods

on *tough*. She thought of her soft-spoken father, the grim line of his

mouth stretched pale as a knuckle while he worked the docking

tool and she held the bawling head end. Working to castrate the bull

calves.

The moth on the window grew restless again, fluttering against

the sheer curtain and the bright outdoors behind it. He saw her

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watching it and reached up to tug her hair gently. “Miracle of miracles, I do believe I’m in bed with an animal lover.”

She looked at him, surprised. If he only knew she’d been reminiscing about castration. It bothered her a lot, his being so sure he

had her number. She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it

again, a little startled at what she chose to say. “I’ll tell you something. If a feral cat wandered up here from some farm and started

wrecking nests and killing birds and having babies in the woods? I’d

trap it and drown it in the creek.”

He made a face of exaggerated dismay. “You wouldn’t.”

“Maybe I would. I’d want to.”

“Why?”

“Because cats like that don’t belong here. They’re fake animals,

introduced, like the chestnut blight. And just about that destructive.”

“Not a cat person,” he decided. Once again, sure he knew.

“I had cats as a kid. But people won’t be bothered to fix them,

so they breed in the barns and prowl the woods, and they don’t have

any sense about what things to take. They’re not natural predators,

except maybe in a barn. In the woods they're like a firebomb. They

can wreck a habitat so fast, overrun it in a season, because there's no

natural control. If there were still red wolves here, the place could

hold its own against a stray cat. But there aren't." Or enough coyotes, she thought.

He studied this new Deanna, potential murderess of tabby cats.

She met his gaze for a second, then rolled over and rested on her elbows, twirling the end of her hair into something like a paintbrush

and touching its tip to the palm of her other hand.

"I don't love animals as *individuals*, I guess that's the way to put

it," she said. "I love them as whole species. I feel like they should

have the right to persist in their own ways. If there's a house cat put

here by human carelessness, I can remedy that by taking one life, or

ignore it and let the mistake go on and on."

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"How much damage could a cat really do?"

"You wouldn't believe how much. I could show you a list of

species that have been wiped out because of people's laziness about

cats. Ground-nesting birds, especially."

"Not the kitty's fault."

“No,” she said, amused that her hunter seemed to be pleading

the kitty’s case. “And it’s also not a cat’s idea that every life including its own is sacred. That’s a human idea, and I can buy it for humans. But it’s some kind of weird religion to impose it on other

animals that have already got their own rules. Most animals are as

racist as Hitler, and a lot of them practice infanticide. Cats do—

lions. A lot of primates, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. And I support their right to go on murdering their babies

in the wild if that’s how they do it, unpestered by humans. That’s

the kind of animal lover I am.”

He raised his eyebrows and nodded slowly.

“It’s not like you thought, is it?”

“Heck, now I’m thinking maybe you’ll go hunting with me.”

She rolled onto her back. “Forget it. I’d never kill just for fun.

Maybe to eat, if I was hungry, but never a predator.”

“So a deer but not a fox? Plant eaters matter less than carnivores?”

She thought about this. “They don’t *matter* less. But herbivores

tend to have shorter lives, and they reproduce faster; they’re just

geared toward expendability. They can overpopulate at the drop of

a hat if nobody's eating them.”

He lay on his back next to her, at ease with this kind of talk.

“Like rabbits do, sure. But it's complicated. Up north, the lynx go

in these cycles. Every ten years, boom, there're thousands, and then

they crash.”

“All the more reason to leave them alone,” she insisted. “There's

something going on there you don't want to mess with. Maybe

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there'd be some plague let loose on the Arctic.” She wondered if

he'd seen lynx. She'd probably never see one herself.

“I know what you're saying,” he conceded. “It's been messed

with already.”

“What are they like, lynx?” She tried not to sound like a jealous

child.

“Oh, baby, there's a cat you'd love. They're just like you.”

“How's that?”

He grinned, thinking about it. “About three parts pissed off to

four parts dignified. They're gorgeous. If you find one caught in a

trap line and let it go, it won't scramble around and run, nothing

like that. It'll just stand there glaring at you for a minute, and then

turn around real slow and just *strut* away.”

She could picture it. “Don’t you get it? To kill a natural predator is a sin.”

“You’ve got your rules, I’ve got mine.”

She sat up to look at him. “Right. But then there’s the *world*,

which has got these rules nobody can change. That’s what’s wrong

with people: they can’t see *that*. ”

“And what rule of the world says it’s a sin to kill a predator?”

“Simple math, Eddie Bondo, you know this stuff. One mosquito can make a bat happy for, what, fifteen seconds before it starts

looking for another one? But one bat might eat two hundred mosquitoes in a night. Figure it out, where’s the gold standard here?

Who has a bigger influence on other lives?”

“OK already, I get it,” he said. “Chill.”

“Chill yourself,” she said. “I didn’t make up the principles of

ecology. If you don’t like them, go live on some other planet.”

Doing my best to run this guy off, she thought. But she couldn’t go on

biting her tongue. She needed this conversation.

“Fine,” he said. “But if I’m a bug rancher it’s my right to shoot

the bats off my ranch.”

She leaned back against the pillow. “What you’re thinking about

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coyotes doesn’t make a lick of sense. They’re way more important

to their natural prey than they are to livestock. I bet there’s not one

rancher in the whole American West who’s gone under because of

coyote predation.”

“Maybe not *gone under*, ” he said.

“It’s just fear, looks to me like. A bunch of macho ranchers scared of a shadow.”

“You’ve got no idea how tough ranching is.”

“I don’t see you ranching sheep, Eddie. I don’t think I can give

you the high ground here.”

“I’ll inherit fifteen hundred acres one day,” he said, sounding unconvinced, and she wondered what divides of kinship

were concealed in that flat statement, what dreads and expectations,

what it was costing him to hold his place in his family. As the

daughter of a farmer who’d lost his land, she felt only measured

sympathy.

“Right,” she said. “You’ll settle down with the little wife, raise

up sheep till you’re old, that’s the plan? Just this one little thing, you

need to run around and shoot every coyote in the world first?”

He shrugged, refusing to absorb her irony. “I’ve still got some

time. I like to get around, see a lot of country.”

Shoot every coyote, screw every woman, see the world, she thought:

the strategy of prolonged adolescence. But that wasn’t fair; he was

also kind. He’d worked hard this morning to provision her nest,

bringing armloads of firewood like bouquets. She tried to put aside

the misery of thinking too much. “Well, you’re being true to your

school,” she said. “Willing to travel great distances to make the

world safe for Wyoming sheep.”

“You make fun, but you don’t know. Sheep ranching needs all

the help it can get. You’re right on the edge of busted all the time.”

“*What* don’t I know? You start down that mountainside and

you’ll come to the edge of a field, OK? From that point on, you

can’t walk right or left without stepping on some family that’s lost

its farm to bad luck, bad weather, chestnut blight, change, **eco180**

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nomics, the antitobacco lobby. You name it, there’s some farmer I

know who got eaten by it. But they're not bitter. They go to work

at Toyota and forget about it.”

“They don't forget about it,” said Eddie Bondo. “They just don't have an enemy they can look at through a rifle sight.”

She looked at him for a long time. Thought of her father, drinking to diffuse his grief in the last year before they sold out. If

he'd had something to shoot at, what would he have done?

“I can't say you're right,” she said finally. “You don't know that.”

“If there's coyotes moving into this country now, they'll get

shot at.”

“I know that. I think about it all the time.”

“So they're here. You know where they are.”

She returned his clear-eyed gaze. “Is that why you're hanging

around me? You're trying to get information?”

His green eyes went dark, a turmoil under the surface briefly

revealed. “If that's what you think, I'll get my boots on and leave

right now.”

“I don't know if it's what I think. I've never known what to

think since the first day you showed up here. But if that's what

you're after, you should go.”

“If that were what I was after, I’d be a fool. I *know* there’s coyotes denned up around here someplace where I can’t get a bead on

them, and not for love nor money are you going to give me a clue.”

“That’s the story.”

“Deanna, don’t you think I know that?”

“If I trusted you I would show you where they are, but I don’t.

Not in that way, not that kind of trust.”

“You already told me that. The first day up there on the mountain when I found you tracking that bobcat. You told me what the

deal was. I accepted.”

“I did?”

“You did.”

“So what are we doing here?”

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“Having breakfast in bed,” he replied. “Trying to catch a moth

without harming one scale on its fuzzy little head.”

She examined his beautiful face and the exquisite planes of his

body, wishing she could look inside him to see what mixture of

love and anger and deception resided there, in what proportions.

“How old are you?” she asked him.

He seemed surprised. “Twenty-eight. Why? How old are you?”

She hesitated, surprised at herself. Sat forward and drew the

covers close around her. It was the first time in her life she'd felt uneasy owning her age. Nearly twenty years older than this man—it

made no sense.

“I don't want to say.”

“Damn, girl, get over *that*. Look at you. It takes more than thirty years to tune an engine to run like that.”

“Way more than thirty,” she said. “More than forty.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

She thought she saw a flicker of surprise, but he covered well.

“So, you're ninety-seven. You're my grandma. Come here, Granny,

I want to rub the rheumatism out of your bones.” As he pulled her

down close to him the fire cracked again, flaring brilliant orange in

the stove's small, round window. She could see the flame reflected

in his eyes.

“I want to tell you something,” she said, holding his stare.

“You're a good tracker, but I'm a better one. If you find any coyote

pups around here and kill them, I'll put a bullet in your leg. Accidentally.”

“That true?”

She knew it wasn't, but maybe he didn't. “Absolutely. I might

even follow you a ways to do it, if I had to. That's the kind of accident I'm talking about."

"A leg. Not between my eyes?"

"No."

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He smiled and rolled away from her onto his back, clasping his

hands behind his head. "OK, then, I'm fairly warned."

"Fairly warned," she agreed.

She got out of bed, trembling internally from the effort of acting so tough. She slipped her long flannel gown over her head and

shook it down over her body like a cocoon. She took a widemouthed plastic cup from the kitchen cupboard and an envelope

from the stack of papers on her desk. She turned it over: an old letter from Nannie Rawley, the only person who still wrote her here.

She went to the window and pulled back the curtain gently, sending the disturbed moth back into its frenetic charge at the glass. On

the curtain it had left a double row of tiny eggs, as neat as a doublestitched seam. It made Deanna sad to see such a last, desperate stab

at survival. She'd read that some female moths could mate with

many different males, save up all their sperm packets, and then, by

some incomprehensible mechanism, choose among them after the

boys were long gone—actually deciding whose sperm would fertilize the eggs as she laid them. Deanna studied this

little moth's

earnest work on the curtain. Maybe she'd been holding out for

some perfect guy she believed was still out there. Too late now.

"You poor thing," she said quietly, "quit bashing your brains

out, you've earned your freedom." Carefully she placed the cup

over the moth, then slid the letter between the cup's mouth and the

glass. The trapped creature clicked against the hard plastic, but it

wasn't human hands, so the scales shouldn't rub off. Deanna stepped

barefoot into her unlaced boots and clumped outside, negotiating

the door with her elbow, feeling Eddie Bondo's eyes on her as she

went. A lynx, was that really how he saw her? She didn't feel that

elegant or self-contained. He made her talk too much.

The day was gorgeous. This was summer, surely. These morning chills would soon be gone for good, dissolved into the heat of

breeding season. She inhaled: even the air smelled like sexual ecstasy. Mosses and ferns were releasing their spores into the air. Birds

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were pressing the unfeathered brood patches on their breasts against

fertile eggs; coyote pups, wherever on earth they lived, were emerging for their first lessons in life. Deanna stood at the edge of the

porch and raised the paper from the lid of the cup, giving the cup a

gentle heave to send the moth on its way. It tumbled and struggled

in the bright air, then swerved clumsily upward for several seconds,

grasping at sudden freedom.

A phoebe darted out from the eaves and snapped the moth out

of the air. In a vivid brown dash she was gone again, off to feed her

nestlings.

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[Old Chestnuts](#)

Dear Miss Rawley,

I have been greatly troubled by a suspicion that occurred to me last Friday, June 8, in the Little Bros. Hardware. I could

not help but overhear (though I did not wish to, but the conversation was quite unavoidably audible) your remarks to the

Little bros. concerning a “snapper.” I was wondering whether

this conversation referred to your lawn mower, since I am aware this is a brand of mower commonly used in this region

and sold by Little Bros. Or is it possible you were discussing a

certain event, previously known only to the two of us, involving a snapping turtle?

I write to ask you this, Miss Rawley, not because it is a matter of any great concern to me, but because in keeping with the Lord's counsel I feel I should advise you it is a sin that does not rest lightly on any soul, to slander the good name of a neighbor who has worked long and hard these { B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R } many years to serve with wisdom and dignity his county (vo-ag teacher for 21 yrs, 4-H adviser more than 10 yrs) and

his Lord.

Sincerely,

Garnett S. Walker III

P.S. On the matter of setting free the "lizards" sold at Grandy's bait store on the grounds that some of them belong

to species that are vanishing from our region, having given it

some thought, I propose three questions:

1) Are we humans to think of ourselves merely as one species among many, as you always insist in our discussions of

how a person might live in "harmony" with "nature" while still managing to keep the Japanese beetles from entirely destroying his trees? Do you believe a human holds no more special authority in this world than, say, a Japanese beetle or a

salamander? If so, then why is it our duty to set free the salamanders, any more than it is the salamander's place to swim

up to the state prison in Marion and liberate the criminals incarcerated there?

2) Or are we to think of ourselves as keepers and guardians of the earth, as God instructed us to do in Genesis

1:27–30, “So God created man in his *own* image; ... and God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply,

and replenish the earth, and subdue it! ... Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed which is upon the face of

the earth, and every tree in which is the fruit of a treeyielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast

of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth’ ”—such as salamanders, Miss Rawley—“ ‘wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat’; and it was so.” If the Holy Bible is to be believed, we must view God’s creatures as gifts to his favored children and use them for our own purposes, even if this
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asionally causes this one or that one to go extinct after a while.

3) If one species or another of those muddly little salamanders went extinct, who would care anyway?

Just wondering,

GW III

That was it exactly, he thought. That was *telling* her.
Garnett

licked the envelope and pressed it shut, feeling more pleased with

himself than he had in many years. As he walked out his front door

and down the drive to his mailbox he whistled “Pretty Saro,” casting it up to the mockingbird on the grain shed so he might catch

up a few of Garnett’s notes and weave them into his merry hymn to

the day.

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[Predators](#)

Why would you use the word *windfall* to describe something lucky?” Eddie Bondo asked, revealing a peevish edge to his personality that she’d not yet seen.

It was a fair question. She paused to scratch the back of her neck

as they fought their way through the impossible maze of sideways

trees: now the mosquitoes were finding them. Deanna had made an

unlucky choice in an otherwise perfect morning, and they’d ended

up here, climbing tediously through the horizontal labyrinth of an

enormous windfall. As nearly as she could figure it out, one huge

pine struck by lightning on the hilltop had taken down a whole

hillside of its brethren by means of their intertwined limbs. Since

she'd chosen the route, she was still trying to pretend this was fun.

“A windfall would be lucky,” she ventured, “if you'd been meaning to spend six weeks sawing down all these trees for lumber.”

“Well, I wasn't,” he stated.

They'd come out this morning in search of molly-moochers, as

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people here called them. He'd laughed at this funny pair of words

(as he laughed at her “oncet” and “twiced” and “I might could”)

but got interested when she explained what they were. Morels were

hardly more than a legend out on the arid pine slopes of the West,

but here they were real, and he wanted to taste them. She was happy

to take him looking. Officially she wasn't supposed to harvest anything out of these woods, but mushroom populations were in no

danger in the National Forest, and now was the wrong time to find

them anyhow. Her dad had taught her to hunt them in mid-May

when oak leaves were the size of squirrels' ears. Even the ravenous

will of Eddie Bondo couldn't make one appear in the third week of

June. But they'd come looking because that was how it was with

him. Some days he packed up and was gone, temporarily or for

good she never quite knew, but when he was here he was *here*; if

they began a day by waking up delighted together in her bed, it was

going to be a new adventure, another reason to ignore her notebooks and the trails she was supposed to maintain. Most days they

neglected the trails altogether to clamber into the mountain's

wildest places, straight up or down slopes so steep they had to ascend on all fours and descend on the seats of their jeans, sliding like

bobsledders on the slick leaves. They discovered groves and clearings even Deanna hadn't known before, where deer browsed quietly on moss and new leaves.

They were reaching the edge of the tangle. Deanna peered through, swatting a mosquito and rubbing her scratched-up knee.

The day was warm, but she regretted her shorts at the moment. She

could see now where they were: not very far from the Egg Creek

trail. She retied her braid into a double knot to keep it out of the

branches and pushed on to the end of this tedious maze.

As they emerged from the pine needles, they startled up a

grouse, whose coppery tail flashed as its plump body soared horizontally with a noise like an outboard motor. Deanna stood still

with her hand flat on her heart, which raised an equivalent ruckus.

Grouse always made such an *explosion*. She wished she could have

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seen their chickenish cousins the heath hens, who used to strut

around in clearings with their feathers standing straight up, inflating

the yellow balloons on their necks to make booming sounds you

could hear for miles. Not anymore, of course. In the same plaintive

tone her single friends in grad school used to complain that all the

best men were married, Deanna felt like whining, “All the best animals are extinct.”

“Is there a season on those?” Eddie asked, marveling at the grouse, his earlier irritation now gone without a trace. She gave him

a look, didn’t answer. Grouse were fairly rare here. More often she

discovered flocks of hen turkeys gabbling quietly in the woods, battering the undergrowth with their wings as they struggled into low

branches. They’d seen some yesterday, in fact. And there was one

big old tom they often saw in the early morning strutting alongside

the Forest Service road, alone, steering clear of female companionship. She unknotted her braid and let it fall down her back while she

considered the best route out of here. Eddie Bondo had begun to

whistle.

“Shhh!” she hissed suddenly. Someone or something was there

in the pines above them. She waited a second to see if it moved like

a deer or a man.

Man.

“Hey, buddy,” she called. “How you doing today?”

From the dark-green boughs he came forward: tall and a little

potbellied, with gray hair down to his shoulders and a small-bore

rifle, dressed out for jungle combat. It always killed her how these

guys dressed. Like a deer would be impressed by the uniform.

He was squinting at her. “Deanna Wolfe?”

“Yeah?” She squinted back. She’d be darned if she could name

him. She could memorize Latin names and birdcalls, but the guys

she’d gone to high school with all kind of blended together.

“Sammy Hill,” he offered finally.

“Sammy, *sure*, ” she said, as if that had been on the tip of her

tongue. Sammy Hill, could she possibly forget a name like that?

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“Dee-anna *Wolfe*, ” he repeated, directing his pleasure mainly at

her legs. “I heard you’s up here. I heard you near ’bout got eat by a

bear.” He spoke too loudly, maybe nervous, or possibly a little deaf.

A lot of guys lost their hearing on tractors and mowing machines.

“Yeah? That story’s still going around?”

“That’s how Miss Oda Black tells it. But hell, I didn’t believe it.

Gal like you getting cold all by herself up here on the mountain?

Hell, you haven’t changed a bit.”

All by herself. She glanced to the side, listened behind her. If

Eddie Bondo could be relied on for one thing, it was to disappear.

Well, fine, he didn’t need to be part of this. “Not a *bit*, since high

school?” she asked sweetly. “You’re saying I still couldn’t get a date

unless everything else female in the county had rabies?”

“No, now, you’ve got that wrong. We was all in love with you,

Deanna.”

“Well, heck, Sammy. How come I didn’t notice?”

He laughed. “We’s just asceared of you.”

“Now, is that why you brought your gun up here today?”

He looked at his rifle, dismayed. “What, this?”

“I hate to tell you, Sammy,” she said, sounding convincingly

sorrowful, “but deer season’s in the fall. And now here it is June.”

He looked at her, blinking with the effort of his innocence.

“You know what?” she said. “Down at George Tick’s gas station? He’s giving out free calendars. You could pick you up one on

your way back to town.”

Sammy chuckled, shaking his head. “Deanna Wolfe. *You.*” He

chuckled some more. “You’s just as funny as you ever was.”

“You, too, Sammy.” She kept up the smile, waiting. She knew

this routine. They were almost finished.

He seemed to have a bright idea. “Hell, I wasn’t aiming on shooting nothing today, I’s just looking for sang,” he said. “Got me

a alimony payment due.”

“Oh, well, then,” she said, nodding seriously, “good thing you

brought that rifle. Sang plants can get real mean in breeding season.”

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He chuckled and chuckled, Sammy Hill. Tilted his head back

and gave her a little wink, and then in a flash she saw him at age sixteen, in a different body altogether. Lean and

confident, the cocked

wrist tossing a wad of paper into the trash can— *that*
Sammy Hill,

the basketball player. He had a stuck-up sister, Regina,
whom the

boys called Queen of the Hill.

Sammy scratched his cheek with a knuckle, betraying a
missing

molar in his embarrassed grin. “No, now, I needed this rifle
for protection,” he said, with make-believe conviction. “Bears
and stuff.

After I heard what happened to you.”

“Well, yeah, I can sure understand that. But now, Sammy,
you

could take a bear one-handed. Athlete like you. You still
sink a

jump shot like you used to?”

His face brightened. “Naw,” he said, blushing under his
stubble.

“Well, now, here’s the bad news. There’s no sang hunting
up

here, either, anymore—the governor’s trying to let
everything on

this mountain grow back. I’m sorry, Sammy, but I’ve got
to send

you on out of here.” She truly felt sorry for this heavysset
version of

Sammy, so early to ripen and now gone so badly to seed.
“Maybe

there’s some sang up on the back of your dad’s farm,” she
suggested,

“up there by the fork.”

“You know, I bet there is.”

“How is your dad?”

“Dead.”

“Oh. Not so good, then.”

“Not so ornery, neither.”

“Well, OK,” Deanna said. “Nice to see you, Sammy. Say
hey to

Regina for me.”

“Well, hell, Regina don’t speak to me no more but to nag.

Since I busted up her Camaro. I reckon you’ll have to tell
her hello

yourself.”

“I’ll do that,” Deanna said, raising one hand in a coy little
wave.

Sammy touched the brim of his camouflage cap and
headed downhill, slow and awkward with his head craned far
forward in the way

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of tall men with potbellies and bad backs. He had to watch
his footing carefully on the steep slope.

She stood waiting a long time for the molecules of Eddie

Bondo to reassemble out of pine boughs and humid air. He
wasn’t

behind her now, it turned out, but above her, standing a
little to the

rear of where Sammy had been. She spotted his grin first,
like the

Cheshire cat’s.

“Well *hell*, Deanna,” he mocked, and spat.

“Watch it. That’s my mother tongue.”

“I bet those boys *were* all in love with you.”

“Uh-huh. Not so much that it interfered with their general disdain.”

He moved down the slope toward her as if he'd been born to

slopes. Short men really had the advantage in the long run, she decided, admiring his grace. Their backs held better. And then there

was the matter of shoulders and narrow hips and that grin—the

matter of Eddie Bondo. She felt a strange little interior pride, that

this beautiful male was her mate, at least for a season.

“What the heck is *sang*?”

“Ginseng.” She began picking her way toward the Egg Creek

trail, and he followed.

“That’s what I thought,” he said.

“You ever seen any?”

“I don’t know. What’s it look like?”

She thought about it. “A five-fingered leaf, littlish plant, dies

back to the ground in winter. It’s particular about where it grows.

Only under sugar maples, on a north slope.”

“And it’s good for ex-wives?”

She was puzzled. “Oh, right, alimony payments. Good for payments of all kinds. It’s hard to find, though. It’s been overharvested

for about five generations, I guess.”

“Daniel Boone had an ex-wife?”

“No doubt. They could always sell it for good money even back

then, get it packed off to China some way.”

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They walked quietly for a while. “Sammy Hill wasn’t looking

for sang,” she confided.

“No?”

“Nope. He’d have had a spade and a burlap bag, and he’d be a

little higher up than this, and he’d be looking in the fall. Not now.”

“You can’t find it now?”

“I could. *Sammy* couldn’t.”

Eddie clucked his tongue at her. “Bragging.”

“Well, it’s just ... you know. It’s easy to find in the fall, and

people do what’s easy. Spring and summer, ginseng’s a real shy plant,

and then in October it goes careless and gets bright-red berries and

these yellow leaves like highway construction flags.”

She didn’t mention that whenever she found it in that condition

she plucked off the gaudy leaves and tucked them in her pockets to

save it from being discovered by hunters. She scattered the ripe

berries under new groves, helping the ginseng roots to keep their

secrets. Later on, when she did her weekly washing in a tub of

scalding water, she'd roll ginseng leaves out of all her pockets like

wads of tissue. Eddie would think she was nuts if she told him that.

Hoarding this mountain all to herself, was his general accusation,

but that wasn't it. If no person ever saw it again, herself included,

that would be fine; she just loved the idea of those little man-shaped

roots dancing in their world beneath the soil. She wanted them to

persist forever, not for the sake of impotent men in China or anywhere else, just for the sake of ginseng.

Eddie Bondo was curious about the roots. When they sat down

in the moss on the bank of Egg Creek to eat their lunch of sardines

and crackers, she took a stick to the soft black dirt and tried to draw

pictures of the different forms she'd seen: one-legged man, onearmed man; they weren't always perfect. Rarely, in fact.

He wasn't looking at her pictures. He was looking at her.

"Those guys don't scare you, do they? You chew them up and spit

them out between your teeth, smiling the whole time."

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She looked down at her ginseng man. "What, you mean Sammy Hill?"

“And the best part was, he loved it. He’ll go down and tell everybody he ran into this long-haired she-wolf with legs like a pinup girl.”

She didn’t like to think about what he’d tell. “I try not to step

too hard on their manhood. You do that, next thing you know

they’re back up here with three or four of their buddies, which can

get ugly. But no, they don’t scare me.” She shrugged. “They’re just

people I grew up with.”

“I can’t picture that,” he said. “You with those guys. You driving a car, going shopping. I don’t really see you anywhere but in the

woods.”

“Well. I guess it’s been a while.”

“Don’t you miss it, any of it?”

“If you’re speaking of high school and the Sammy Hills of this

world, no, I don’t.”

“I’m not. You know what I mean.”

She tried to decide if she knew. “There’s some people I’d love

to spend the day with, sure. And certain things.”

“Like what?”

“I couldn’t even say.” She thought about it. “Not cars or electric lights, not movies. Books I can get if I ask. But walking around

in a library, putting my hands on books I never knew about, *that* I

miss. Anything else, I don't know." She pondered some more. "I

like the beach. My husband's family had a beach house in North

Carolina."

"The beach doesn't count. I mean stuff invented by people."

"Books, then. Poems, scary stories, population genetics. All

those pictures Mr. Audubon painted."

"What else?"

"Chocolate? And Nannie's apple cider. And my border collie, if

he weren't dead. But he counts, domestic pets are inventions of

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man." She closed her eyes, fishing for the taste of something lost.

"And music, maybe? That's something I used to love."

"Yeah? Did you play any instrument?"

She opened her eyes wide. "No, but I listened a bunch. My dad

played in a bluegrass band, Out of the Blue. And when I lived in

Knoxville there was this little bar where we'd go, bluegrass and

country music. People you've never heard of. These sisters used to

play there sometimes—man, they were great. They came up from

Texas, I think. The Dixie Chicks."

Eddie Bondo laughed out loud.

“Yeah, funny name.”

“Funny *you*. You’ve been out of circulation awhile. They don’t

play little joints anymore.”

“You’ve heard of them?”

“Me and everybody with ears.”

She shook her head. “Amazing. Nothing stays the same down

there.”

“Nothing stays the same anywhere.”

She looked at him earnestly. “Well, but see, up here it does. I

guess there’s big successes and failures going on, but they’re too slow

to notice in a lifetime.” She crossed her arms, hugging herself. “I

guess that’s why I like it. Nature’s just safer.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. “Tell me some more about

ginseng.”

She concentrated on her drawing of a perfect two-armed, twolegged cocky little man who had no need to dig up ginseng for

virility. He laid her down on the ground on top of her artwork and

they stayed there awhile in the shifting leafy sunlight, leaving their

own impression of human desire. Soon they were headed back

toward the cabin with nothing on their minds but their bodies.

That was when they came upon the coyotes, two females hunting in the open. They were a mile or so from the hollow that fed

Bitter Creek, not a place where Deanna would have gone looking

for them. It was in a clearing where fallen trees had opened the

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canopy, letting the sun onto a patch of forest floor that now grew

thick with a red carpet of new blackberry leaves. At first she

thought they were dogs, they were so big: thick-furred behind the

ears like huskies, and much stockier than the scrawny specimen

she'd seen in the zoo or any western coyotes she'd seen in photographs. These two appeared golden in the sunlight, arching their

backs and hopping through the foot-deep foliage, one and then the

other, like a pair of dolphins alternately rolling above the waves.

They were on the trail of something small and quick beneath the

leaves and grass. Probably a vole or a mouse. They paid no attention

to the pair of humans who stood with their boots frozen in the

shadows. Focused entirely on their pursuit, their ears twitched forward like mechanical things, tracking imperceptible sounds. Like

two parts of a single animal they moved to surround and corner

their prey against a limestone bank, tunneling after it with their

long noses. Deanna watched, spellbound. She could see how efficiently this pair might work a field edge, pursuing the mice and

voles they seemed to prefer. No wonder farmers saw them often

and feared for their livestock; if only they knew that they had nothing to lose but their mice. It occurred to her as she watched them

that this manner of hunting might actually be helpful to groundnesting birds like the bobwhite, because of the many passages it

would open through the tight clumps of fescue.

Then, without any warning that the chase was near an end, the

forward guard pounced and then raised her head with a sideways

jerk, snapping the mouse just once in the air like a small, damp dustrag she meant to shake clean, before disappearing into the woods

with her catch still writhing in her jaws. Her sister paused at the

edge of the woods and turned back on them with a dark, warning

glare.

Deanna didn't speak for the rest of the afternoon. What was

there to say, to this man whose thoughts she couldn't stand to

know? She wanted him to have seen how they really were
in that

sunny clearing, how golden and perfectly attuned to their
own ne197

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cessities. But she knew not to ask. The sight of them had
caused

him to withdraw far inside himself, carefully avoiding any
touch or

glance at her as they stood watching the animals.
Afterward, he

hadn't offered a word about what they'd witnessed.

They did not go to bed in the afternoon, as it seemed
they'd intended. Her body went cold. She put on a kettle for
tea, then boiled

some rice and reheated yesterday's black beans. She and
Eddie had

fallen into the habit of eating their meals on the bed, but on
this day

she claimed back the single chair and the table, covering it
with a

pile of books and papers and her neglected field notebook,
writing

while she ate. Eddie Bondo was restless, pacing out on the
porch.

The loudest sound on the earth, she thought, is a man with
nothing to do. Why was he still here?

For the hundredth time she asked herself what madness of
mate

choice this was. A female prairie chicken would reliably
copulate

with the cock who inflated his yellow air sacs and boomed
loudest.

Bower birds went for the guy with the gaudiest nest. What was it in

Eddie Bondo that moved her so powerfully to capitulate—his gait

that matched hers, finally a man who could keep up? Or was it his

smaller stature, after all those years of professors' bossing her

around? But he was plenty cocky, as self-sufficient as any creature

she'd met. Her match, she supposed, in that regard. She only wished

she felt less like a prairie chicken stalking dazed across the lekking

ground toward the grand display.

In the evening, when she couldn't stand any more of his proximity, she invented the necessity of walking down to the hemlock grove with a claw hammer. She would work on the trail bridge

over the creek that had collapsed back in February. She still had a

few hours of sunlight, as it was close to the summer solstice. (She

thought about this: had she missed the solstice, in fact?) She would

pull the old bridge apart, count the unsalvageable boards, and put in

a requisition for the lumber she'd need to repair it, since the Forest

Service jeep would be coming up fairly soon to drop off supplies

and collect her new list. She would order no more food than usual,

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nothing extra. She'd left the cabin without a word, unable to imagine his doing anything but cleaning his gun in her absence.

The hemlock grove was on a tributary that fed Bitter Creek, in

a strange, narrow hollow where long updrafts carried sound peculiarly well. Sometimes here she'd heard sounds all the way up from

the valley: a dog barking, or even the high, distant whine of trucks

on the interstate. That was in winter, though, when the trees were

bare. Today, as she worked to pry up boards, she heard mostly the

heavy quiet that precedes a summer evening, before the katydids

start up, when the forest's sounds are still separated by long silences.

A squirrel overhead scolded her halfheartedly, then stopped. A sapsucker worked its way around a pine trunk. Eddie Bondo had spoken of acorn woodpeckers he'd seen in the West, funny creatures

that worked together to drill a dead tree full of little holes, cached

thousands of acorns in them, and then spent the rest of their days

defending their extravagant treasure from marauding neighbors.

How pointless life could be, what a foolish business of inventing

things to love, just so you could dread losing them. She listened to

the sapsucker's methodic rapping, which ceased only when the bird

paused to flick off sections of bark that landed on the mossy ground

near the creek.

She was tearing the last boards off the log frame of the bridge

when she heard something else that caused her to stop her hammer

and listen. Voices: men talking, it sounded like. She stood up and listened more carefully. Hunters.

She wiped a strand of hair out of her eyes, feeling put out. This

must be the longest day of the year, for she'd had quite enough of

it. Talking meant there was more than one, and this late in the

day they'd be up to something stupid like sleeping in a tree all night

so they could poach wild turkeys at first light. She sighed and

walked the log back across the creek to where she'd thrown her

jacket. She'd have to head down there and summon the energy to

call their bluff.

The sounds were very distant, maybe as much as a mile off. But

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they were certain, and continuous. She listened for another minute

to the low, steady murmurs. It wasn't words. Growls, they were.

Little conversational growls and higher-pitched barks. It wasn't men

talking; this was women, *coyote* women, not howling at the moon

but snarling quietly in the language of mothers speaking to children. Those two females this morning had taken a live mouse, she'd

noticed. They hadn't eaten it or even killed it, just disabled it. Now

Deanna knew why. *Those pups are alive*, she sang to herself in a whisper. Alive in the world with their eyes open, learning to hunt.

Learning to speak. Coyote children born empty-headed like human

infants, needing to learn every skill they'd need for living. Their

protectors hadn't vocalized all spring, but now they would have to;

no social creature could grow up mute, it wouldn't survive. The

pups must be over six weeks old, nearly ready to hunt on their own.

What a sight they must be now. Quickly she stacked the good lumber against a hemlock trunk and set off for home, though "home"

didn't offer her much right now: a place where she couldn't breathe

a word of what she knew tonight, nor even sleep, until she saw

those pups with her own open eyes.

In the early-morning light, moving fast down the Bitter
Creek trail,

she stopped for a minute to listen. Nothing, only silence.
Or rather,

every kind of sound except what she was listening for.
Plenty of

noise rustling up from the dry leaves around her feet—that
would

be a lizard making itself sound as big as a bear. She walked
on,

knowing now what to listen for and knowing she would
hear it. All

spring she'd been waiting while her imagination filled with
voices

that made the small hairs stand up on the back of her scalp:
those

classic howls to the moon, the yips and polyphonic cries
she'd studied on cassette tapes till she'd worn them to
crinkled, transparent

cellophane. She was beginning to fear she'd worn out her
mind the

same way, waiting in these mountains, leaning into the
silent nights,

eventually deciding that the one sound she longed for was
not go**200**

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ing to come. Here it wasn't necessary for them to speak.
Not like

out west, where they would have to call to each other from
the tops

of desert hills for the joy of their numbers because they
were so

plentiful. They'd have to remind one another of who they were,

how many families, and where they stood. Here there was just one

single family, and it knew exactly where it stood. Best to keep quiet.

The hardest work of Deanna's life had been staying away from

that den, protecting it with her absence. Sometimes she'd felt sure

they were gone, maybe headed south toward the Blue Ridge. She

tried to believe that was for the best, but really there would be no

safe haven for this family. Wherever these coyotes went, they'd have

the hatred of farmers to contend with. Here on this isolated mountain they had the strange combination of one protector and one enemy. She didn't trust her power to bargain for their safety. In the six

weeks of her acquaintance with Eddie Bondo, including both his

presence and his absences, she'd hedged and evaded. Now he'd seen

them, and she'd spent last night curled miserably in her chair near

the wood stove, thinking, while he snored. By morning her bones

ached and her mind was raw, but she was ready to lay her cards on

the table.

"I'm going down the hill this morning, alone," she'd said. "If

you follow me, you're off this mountain for the rest of
your life or

mine. Whichever lasts longer.”

Without a word he'd packed some cold biscuits in his
pack,

hitched it over his shoulder, and hiked out whistling along
the

Forest Service road, in the opposite direction from Bitter
Creek.

Deanna stood for several minutes looking at his hat, which
he'd left

hanging on the peg by the door, and at his gun propped in
the corner. Then she dressed and flew down the trail, free at
last to go see.

Now she could listen and not be afraid of hearing the
voices that

could give away their presence. For all those weeks she'd
been holding her breath, listening and wanting not to hear.
How had she let

that happen?

She stopped again, this time hearing only the manic
laughter of

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a woodpecker pair having too much fun, moving sideways
through

the woods, hopping over each other from one tree trunk to
the

next. For a minute she watched this pileated woodpecker
couple

playing checkers with themselves. They were huge, as big
as flying

black cats, and impossible to ignore with their big, haughty voices

and upswept red crests. She received a vision of ghosts, imagined for

a moment the ivory bills—dead cousins to these pileated woodpeckers—who had been even bigger, with nearly a three-foot

wingspan and a cold, white-eyed stare. Lord God birds, people used

to call them, for that was what they'd cry when they saw one. Never

again.

Now, beneath the laughter of ghosts, she began to hear the intermittent vocalizations of the coyotes. She moved toward the

sound, another slow hundred steps down the trail, stopping finally

in a place where she could peek through rhododendrons and get a

clear view of the den. The place had altered since spring; now the

woods were thick with leaves. Air and light moved differently, and

the den had changed, too. The bank below the cave was an apron

of bare dirt, ridged with so many tiny claw marks it looked like

light-brown corduroy. She thought she saw some movement inside

the dark grin of the den's mouth, but then nothing, only stillness.

She counted her own heartbeats to pass a minute, then more minutes, and convinced herself she'd actually seen no

movement. There

had been pups here, that was sure from all the claw marks on the

bank, but it was too late, she began to believe. She'd missed them by

one day; they'd grown up and gone.

Then she saw a rustling movement in the huckleberry thicket a

little distance from the opening. A long, low whine pulled at her

heart, an irresistible appeal. An adult was in that thicket, the mother

or one of the beta females calling the children out. Instantly they

appeared all together in the opening, a row of bright eyes beneath

a forest of tiny, pointed ears. Deanna tried to count, but there were

too many, and they moved in a rambunctious swarm of ears and

tails: more than six, she decided, and fewer than twenty. They tum

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bled over one another out the doorway as the female approached

with something in her teeth, a dark, small thing she tossed into their

midst. A wake of tiny growls and yips erupted, and the little golden

furballs hopped like popcorn in a kettle. Puppies, she thought; they

were nothing but *puppies*. But kittenlike, too, in the way they were

pouncing and playing with the half-living vole that had just been

delivered to their schoolyard. Deanna sank down on her knees, into

the childhood summers when neighbors had brought litters of pups

in boxes and the barn cats had delivered their kittens practically into

her hands. Without self-consciousness her body became a child's,

her teeth holding her braid in her mouth for silence and her hands

on her chest to keep her heart from bursting.

She wished so hard for her father, it felt like a prayer: If I could

only show him this, oh, please. Let him look down from Heaven,

whatever that means, let him look up through my eyes from the

cells of genesis he planted in me, let him see this, because he would

understand it perfectly. Love was one thing he always knew when it

looked him in the face.

She wondered if there was anyone alive she could tell about

these little dogs, this tightly knotted pack of survival and nurture.

Not to dissect their history and nature; she had done that already.

What she craved to explain was how much they felt like family.



{14}.

Old Chestnuts

G muscles shielding his shoulder blades. What an
arnett turned up the hot water and let it scald the
ache he had back there, as if some schoolyard bully
had landed a haymaker squarely on his backbone.

He sighed. This life was getting to be too much for one old
man. It wasn't so much the work; he loved messing with
his chestnut trees. People presumed it was awfully tedious to
bag all the

flowers in the spring, do the careful cross-pollinating,
collect the

seeds, and plant the new seedlings, but every inch of that
was exciting to Garnett because any of those seeds might grow
up to be

his blight-resistant chestnut tree. Every white bag slipped
over a

branch tip, every shake of pollen, each step carried the
hope of

something wondrous in the making. A piece of the old, lost
world

returning, right before his eyes.

No, what got him lately was the running into one problem
after another, this farm and all its history dragging him down.
The

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farm was a darn junkyard hiding its menace under a thin
skin of

grass. Every farm around here was, to tell the truth. He'd seen a
young couple with a real estate agent looking over the farmhouse
down by Oda Black's, and he'd been tempted to holler at them out
the window of his truck, "Come looking for some history, have
you? Well, this here's the story of how Old Man Blevins buried
himself in debts and broke-down machinery, and it's just waiting to
tangle up whoever steps on it next."
Well, of course he hadn't told them anything, and they'd buy.
They had that strenuously foolish look of city people; the woman
was dressed more like a man than the man. Soon they'd be finding
out what Garnett knew by heart: on an old farm, every time you
sink a spade to plant a tree, you're going to hit some old piece of a
broken dish, a length of leather harness, some rusted metal, maybe
even a cannonball! When Garnett was a schoolboy his father used
to bring cannonballs home from somewhere and the boys would
play with them till they ended up forgotten in the orchard or buried
in their mama's flower patch, lying in wait to wreak havoc fifty years

later on a tiller, a mower blade, or some other piece of equipment

costing a day's work and too much money to repair.

This morning his plan had been modest: to finish clearing out

the edge of the back field along the fencerow to make room for a

single new row of trees. He thought the worst of it would be clearing the weeds, but no. He'd wrecked his bush hog and then his

tiller blade. Half buried in that slim patch of ground he'd found six

old fenceposts all wrapped up in barbed wire, evidently just thrown

down there after they pulled them out to put in the new fence, back

in the forties. Once he'd wrestled all that out, he'd discovered underneath it enough nails and carriage bolts scattered around to fill a

bucket three times (and three times had carried it to his trash pile in

the garage, now growing monstrous). Then, beneath all that, the

entire metal chassis of an old wagon—and the worst was still yet to

come! All in a mess at the end of the fencerow he'd uncovered a

huge roll of black plastic with something heavy inside, which

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Garnett began to fear would turn out to be a body (he'd already

found everything else there was today, so why not?). But no, it was

clumps of white powder, possibly rock salt, though he wasn't sure.

Something his father had meant to throw away when Garnett was

still a boy. That was the trouble with their thinking back in those

days: "away" simply meant "out of sight somewhere," for someone

else to run into further down the road. Garnett was fed up to the

teeth with it all, and he still hadn't cleared the ground he'd meant to

have laid open by midmorning, and now what? Good grief, that

was his telephone ringing.

He turned off the shower and listened. Yes, there it was, the

telephone on the little hall table just outside the bathroom door,

ringing off the hook.

"Hold your horses!" he cried, not very pleased to have to cut

his shower short and scurry around drying his head and wrapping

himself in a towel. He stepped gingerly out onto the floorboards in

the cool hallway and yanked up the receiver.

"Hello," he said, as pleasantly as he could manage while patting

down his wet hair. He didn't feel right to be chatting with anyone,

even a wrong number, looking like this.

“Hello, Mr. Walker?”

It was a woman. Not from around here, either; she had a townish sound to her, that way they have of hurrying up every single

word.

“Speaking,” he said.

She seemed uncertain for a moment, and he prayed she’d hang

up, but then she launched into it: “I was wondering if I could ask

you some questions about goats. I’m interested in getting started on

kind of a semi-large-scale meat-goat operation, but I don’t really

have much capital, and some people directed me to you. They said

you were the man to talk to, the regional goat maven, and you

might even know how to get me started with some ... I don’t

know how to put this.” She breathed. “OK, plain talk? I’m won206

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dering if you know anybody who’d give me goats for free. To get

me started.”

Garnett collected himself: the Regional Goat Maven, caught

with a towel around his waist and his hair standing up like a chicken

in the rain.

“Goats,” he said.

“Yes.”

“May I ask where you are located? That would be the first consideration.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot my manners. This is Lusa Landowski, I

live on the old Widener place, my husband was Cole Widener.”

“Oh, Mrs. Widener. I was awfully sorry to hear about your husband. I would have been at the funeral, but there were ... there are

some considerations between our families. I expect you’ve heard all

about that.”

She was silent for a few seconds. “You’re related to us somehow,

aren’t you?”

“By marriage,” he said. “Distantly.”

“I’m sorry; my nephew mentioned it, but I’d forgotten. That’s

right, one of my sisters-in-law is a Walker. I *think*.” She laughed,

sounding rather jolly for a new widow. “I’m still learning what it’s

like to live among six hundred relatives. I’m new to all this—I’m

from Lexington.”

“And that would be where you plan on raising the goats?”

“Oh no, *here*. I’m trying to keep this farm solvent, which would

be the point of this goat business, if I can do it. I’m not at all sure I

can, or whether it's crazy to try."

"Oh? Now, don't you have beef cattle up there on the Widener place?"

She sighed, now sounding not jolly at all. "Cattle just seem to

be a losing proposition for me, with all you have to put into them.

The Ivermec and everything, and I know I'm also supposed to

check the cows to see if they're pregnant, but a cow pelvic exami207

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nation I know from nothing. I'm scared to get close to them. I'm a

small woman, and they're so *huge*. " She gave an embarrassed laugh.

"I guess I'm not much of a farmer yet. I can't even get my hay baler

working. Two of my brothers-in-law have this leased-out cattle

empire, so I could sell them my cattle, I'm thinking. Get into a

smaller breed." She paused. "I was thinking I could handle goats."

"Well. You seem to have a plan, at least."

"It's a lot to go into; I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get into personal

business, but listen, maybe this isn't a good time for you to talk. I'm

sorry to be bothering you."

“Oh, it’s no bother at all,” he said, shifting from one bare foot

to the other, feeling a draft, and no wonder: under the skimpy towel

he was naked as a jaybird. He thought he heard someone rapping at

his front door. Oh, dear, was it a delivery? He wasn’t expecting a

delivery.

“Oh, well, that’s good,” she said, laughing a little. “At least you

haven’t said flat out that I’m crazy—yet. I was hoping to kind of

pick your brain. If I could.”

“Well, pick away,” said Garnett, miserably. He heard the knock

again, more insistent.

“First of all, do you think it’s realistic for me to try to get free

goats? How would I go about that?”

“I’d suggest you run an ad in the newspaper. You’re liable to

find yourself with more goats than you know what to do with.”

“Really? You agree that people are dying to get rid of them,

then. Which I guess ought to tell me there’s no money in it, if I had

any sense.”

“I can’t really encourage you, Mrs. Widener. There’s not a man

in this county who's made a dollar off a goat, in my recollection."

"That's what my nephew said. But it seems to me the problem

is marketing. Like everything else in farming, so I'm starting to

learn. Nobody here knows what to do with a goat, they won't even

eat them, and we're oversupplied. My nephew said we'd had kind of

a goat plague on Zebulon County a while back. Why is that?"

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Garnett closed his eyes. Was all this really happening? Some

mysterious intruder was banging down his front door, a strange

woman from Lexington was attempting to uncover his most embarrassing secret, his back ached like the dickens, and his bare buttocks were hanging out in the breeze. He did not wish he were

dead, exactly, just maybe peacefully asleep in his bed, with all the

lights out.

"Mr. Walker? Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Is this ... are you just thinking I'm some nut?"

"Oh, no, not at all. Your question about the surplus goats isn't

an easy one to answer. Six or seven years ago, they started out as a

whole slew of Four-H projects that kind of overgrew themselves.

That's the best way I can describe it. A mistake that grew like Topsy.

I was supposed to be supervising these young folks and should have

steered them into hogs or poultry, but my wife had just died—you

can understand, being a widow yourself. And my neighbor has a

very hard grudge against goats of any kind, and I had a spell of poor

judgment there. That's the only way I can describe it."

"Mr. Walker, you don't have to go into that, I'm not a reporter

or anything. I'm not even that nosy compared to most people

around here. I'm just looking for some free goats."

"Try an ad in the paper, then, that's what I suggest. But don't

give out your address in the paper."

"No?"

"Goodness, no, or people will just dump any kind of animal on

you, and you'll be sorry. Do you have a pickup truck, Mrs. Widener?"

"Sure."

"Well, then, list your telephone number in the ad, but don't make any mention of the Widener place. Just a phone, and ask

people to call you. If they have what you're looking for, then you

go pick up the animals yourself. But first ask them some questions.

Do you have a pencil and paper?"

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"Just a minute." He heard her clunk down the phone and walk

across a floor. He wondered which room she was in. Upstairs, or

down? Maybe the kitchen. They'd had the wedding right in the

front hallway, with the girl walking slowly down those beautiful

steps in her little white shoes and short white bridal dress. She'd

looked about thirteen. They'd intended to have it out in the yard,

but the weather had turned cold and rainy at the last minute. He remembered all of it. Ellen was sick. He hadn't thought about that for

years: she'd had a terrible headache, and they'd had to leave early. It

was probably connected with the cancer, they just didn't know it

yet.

"OK, I'm back."

"Oh," he said, startled. "What was I saying?"

"When people call, I should ask them about their goats ... what?"

"Oh, yes. First, you want meat goats, do you? Not for milking?"

"Definitely for meat."

“All right, then, you want to produce slaughter kids.”

“I guess that’s right. In time to sell by, oh, maybe around the end

of the year or something like that, I was kind of thinking.”

“Oh. Then you have no time to waste.”

“Is it even possible? To get them to breed at this time of year?”

“It’s not the right time for them, but there is a way to make it

happen. If you can be *sure* they haven’t been around a buck for all

of last fall and winter, they’ll be ready to come into season now. I

guarantee it.”

“Is that reasonable to expect? That people will have does that

haven’t been with a buck?”

“There are probably a hundred families in this county keeping

a handful of goats in their backyard. And people don’t generally like

billies that close to the house—they have quite a stout odor. Have

you ever smelled a billy goat, Mrs. Widener?”

“Not that I recall,” she confessed.

“Well, if you had, you would remember it. It’s an odor that ap 210

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peals to a nanny goat, evidently, but not to human beings. Most

people only want to keep the does around.”

“All right. Good.”

“So what you’ll want is does—three-and four-year-olds are the

best, nothing a whole lot older. Get as many does as you think you

can handle, but watch out for bucks. You’ll only want one, with

your does. Mrs. Widener, can you tell a buck from a doe?”

She laughed. “Mr. Walker, I’m ignorant, but I’m not stupid.”

“Well, of course not. I just meant ... you *are* from Lexington.”

He heard her breathe in sharply as if to speak, but then she paused. “OK, just one buck,” she said finally. “Got it.”

“Well, but you might as well get a spare or two. Once in a while

you’ll get a buck that doesn’t perform, so you may as well have a

few on reserve. You’ll have to keep them in a separate pasture, out

of sight.”

“Gentlemen-in-waiting,” she said.

Was that a bawdy joke? He didn’t know what was what anymore; kids laughed at you even when you said a simple word like

queer. But she didn’t seem to be laughing. She sounded more earnest

than most of the boys he’d had in 4-H.

“Now, if your does really haven’t been pastured with a buck since

before last fall, they’ll come into season right away, just a day or two

after you put the buck in the field. Some people think it helps to rub

down the buck with a rag and then walk around waving it in the shegoats' noses. But I never thought that was really necessary."

"So that's the first thing I'll ask people when they call: 'Have

you got does? And are they now or have they ever been pastured

with a buck?' Right?"

"That's right," he said.

"If they are, I should just pass?"

"That's up to you. If you want kids by the end of the year, you

should."

There was a pause. She seemed to be writing something down.

"OK. And the next question?"

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"What kind of goats are they? You'll want Spanish, or Spanish

crossed with what they call brush goats, which is what most people

have around here. Meat goats, just ask if they're meat goats. Your

Saanens, your Swiss dairy goats, anything somebody's milking,

that's probably an animal you don't want."

"OK. What else, you said the age was important?"

"Nothing over five years, nor less than one hundred pounds."

Again, she was taking notes. “What else?”

“Well, of course, you want them healthy. You don’t want parasites. Look them over when you go to pick them up. If you’re not

one hundred percent satisfied with the looks of them, don’t take

them.”

“That’s going to be hard,” she said. “To turn up my nose at somebody’s offer of free animals? Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“That’s why you have your truck. *You go to them.* They’re the

beggars, they’re hoping you’ll take the useless beasts off their hands.

You’ll decide.”

“Oh, you’re right. That’s a very good way to look at it. Thank

you, Mr. Walker, you’ve been extremely helpful. Do you mind if I

call you back if I have more questions? I’m kind of learning as I go

here.”

“Not at all, Mrs. Widener. Good luck to you, now.”

“Thanks.”

“Bye-bye.”

He hung up the phone and cocked an ear toward the front hallway downstairs. Still clutching the towel around his waist with one

hand, he tiptoed over to the window and peered out, though he

didn’t expect to see anything new in back of the house. Who could

have been at his door? He dressed very quickly in the doorway to

the landing, a place in his house where he seldom tarried, and it

gave him pause when he glanced up and caught his reflection inside

the chestnut frame of the antique mirror that hung there. He felt he

had seen a ghost, but not of himself: it was the mirror frame that

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provoked him, his surviving face circumscribed by the remains of

that extinct tree.

He padded down the stairs in his leather slippers, since he'd left

his muddy boots outside the door to clean later, feeling too tired

and fed up to do it when he came in from the field. His trousers,

covered with green cockleburs, he'd folded over a kitchen chair,

dreading the chore of picking them. The sharp burrs would prick

his fingertips and leave them with a dull, poisoned ache. Garnett

believed that if the Almighty Father had made one mistake in

Creation, it was to give us too darn many cockleburs.

At the front door he opened the screen and poked out his head,

then looked to the left and the right. Nobody. There were his boots

side by side, still waiting muddily by the door. No car in the driveway, no delivery truck or any sign that one had been here. Usually

the big UPS truck backed up on the grass and left an awful, curved

scar of mud there. That boy they'd hired to drive it had more earring holes than brains in his head.

Garnett stepped out on the porch and squinted through his cloudy corneas at the heavy afternoon air, as if he might be able to

decipher traces left in it. He didn't get unexpected visitors very often. Never, in fact—nor unexpected phone calls, for that matter,

but mercy, when it rained it poured. Someone had been here, and

he'd missed him. It wasn't an easy thing for him to let go of.

Then he saw the pie on his porch swing. A berry pie, just sitting

there, taking in the day. It had the pretty little slits in the top from

which a berry pie bleeds its purple fluids—oh, what heavenly mysteries were created by female hands. Blackberry pie was his favorite.

Ellen had always made one with the first fruits harvested from the

fencerows, after ceremoniously sending him out with a pail on the

third Saturday of June. Garnett glanced at the sky briefly, asking

God what kind of a trick this was.

He went over to take a closer look. It was a pie, all right—
fresh.

Even if his eyes could trick him, his nose never did. Stuck
under **213**

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neath it, wafting a little in the breeze, was a small
collection of papers. He slipped the thin squares of paper out
from under the pie,

along with a sealed envelope, and scowled at the whole
mess. The

squares of paper were receipts. Good grief, was someone
charging

him for this pie? No, they were *his* receipts, one from
Little

Brothers' and one from Southern States, probably taken
out of the

small metal box just inside the front door where he always
emptied

his pockets and tended to let his receipts pile up until tax
time. But

there were words on the back of these, written in an
extremely

small, tidy hand. A note, attached to a letter in a sealed
envelope.

He looked around the empty porch. Someone had brought
him

this pie, stood there banging on his door for fifteen minutes
while

that Widener woman rattled on endlessly about goats, and
then finally given up and written him a note and left the pie.
Who would

do such a thing? As if he didn't know. With a sinking
feeling he carried the note inside, pie and all, catching the door

with his elbow. He

set the pie inside a cupboard where he wouldn't be looking at it while

he read the note, and then he fetched his reading glasses and sat down

at his kitchen table to read. First, the note on the scraps of receipt:

Mr. Walker,

Well, you needn't to waste a stamp and two hours of Poke Sanford's time—think of that poor fellow having to carry a letter from your box down to the P.O. and back out the same road again to mine! I'm right next door. You could

knock. That's what I meant to do today. I had a letter written

up to give you in case I couldn't think of everything [... and

here the note continued onto the second receipt] or if you weren't in the mood to chat, but really I hoped to say most of

this in person. But now you aren't home. Oh, fiddle. Your truck is here. Where are you? I'll just leave you the pie and the letter. Cheer up, Mr. Walker. I hope you enjoy them both.

Your neighbor, Nannie Rawley

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Next Garnett tore open the long white envelope and slid out the

handwritten letter folded inside. He noticed that his hands were

shaking when he did it. Cheer up indeed.

Dear Mr. Walker,

Since you asked, yes, I do believe humankind holds a special place in the world. It's the same place held by a mockingbird, in his opinion, and a salamander in whatever he has

that resembles a mind of his own. Every creature alive believes this: The center of everything is *me*. Every life has its own kind of worship, I think, but do you think a salamander

is worshipping some God that looks like a big two-legged man? Go on! To him, a man's a shadowy nuisance (if anything) compared to the sacred business of finding food and a

mate and making progeny to rule the mud for all times. To themselves and one another, those muddly little salamander

lives mean everything.

Of all things, I'd never expect *you*, Garnett Walker III, to ask, "Who cares if one species is lost?" The extinction of one kind of tree wreaked pure havoc on the folks all through

these mountains—your own family more than any other.

Suppose some city Yank said to you, "Well, sir, the American

chestnut was just *one* tree—why, the woods are full of trees!"

You'd get so mad you'd spit. It would take you a day and a night to try and explain why the chestnut was a tree unlike any other, that held a purpose in our world that nothing else

can replace. Well sir, the loss of one kind of salamander would be a tragedy on the same order to some other creature

that was depending on it. It wouldn't be *you* this time, but I assume you care about all tragedies, not just the ones that affect the Walker fortunes. Do you recall how they mentioned in the paper last year about all the mussel shells in our river

going extinct? Well, Mr. Walker, now the mailman tells me he saw on a nature show that every kind of mussel has to live

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part of its little life as a parasite on the gills of a different kind

of minnow. If the right minnow isn't there at the right time, well, sir, that's the end of the story! Everything alive is connected to every other by fine, invisible threads. Things you don't see can help you plenty, and things you try to control will often rear back and bite you, and that's the moral of the

story. There's even a thing called the Volterra principle that I

read about in my orcharding journal, which is all about how

insecticide spraying actually drives up the numbers of the bugs you're trying to kill. Oh, it's an aggravation and a marvel. The world is a grand sight more complicated than we like to let on.

Just think: if someone had shown you a little old seedling

tree potted in a handful of dirt coming in on a ship from
Asia

all those years ago, asked you to peek into it, and
remarked,

“These piddly little strands of fungus will knock down a
million majestic chestnut trees, starve out thousands of
righteous

mountain folk, and leave Garnett Walker a bitter old man,”
would you have laughed?

If God gave Man all the creatures of this earth to use for
his own ends, he also counseled that gluttony is a sin—and
he

did say, flat out, “Thou shalt not kill.” He didn’t tell us to
go

ahead and murder every beetle or caterpillar that wants to
eat

what we eat (and, by the way, other insects that *pollinate*
what

we eat). He did not mean for us to satisfy our every whim
for

any food, in every season, by tearing down forest to make
way

for field, ripping up field to make way for beast, and
transporting everything we can think of to places it doesn’t
belong.

To our dominion over the earth, Mr. Walker, we owe our
thanks for the chestnut blight. Our thanks for kudzu,
honeysuckle, and the Japanese beetle also. I think that’s all
God’s little joke on us for getting too big for our britches. We
love to

declare that God made us in his image, but even so, he’s
three

{ *Prodigal Summer* }

billion years old and we're just babies. I know your opinion of

teenagers, Mr. Walker; just bear in mind that to God, you and

I are much younger, even, than that. We're that foolish, to think we know how to rule the world.

I'm partial to the passage from Genesis you quoted, but I wonder if you really understand it. God gave us every herb-bearing seed, it says, and every tree in which is the fruit of a

tree-yielding seed. He gave us the mystery of a world that can re-create itself again and again. To *you* the fruit shall be

food, he's saying, but just remember, to the tree it's a child.

"And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat." He's looking out for the salamanders there, you see? Reminding us that there's life in them, too, and that even weeds and pond algae are sacred because they're salamander food.

You're a religious man, Mr. Walker. Seems to me you'd think

twice about spraying Roundup all over God's hard work.

Never mind. We all have our peeves. Myself, I hate

goats (as you well know), and I sorely despise snapping turtles. I'm sure God loves them as much as he loves you or me,

but I've got new baby ducklings on my pond, and an evil old

turtle in there is gobbling them down like the troll under
the
bridge. I can't stand it. There was one duckling I loved
best,
white with a brown wing (I named him Saddle Shoe), and
yesterday while I stood and watched, that turtle came up
right underneath and yanked down poor Shoe as he flapped
and wailed for Mama. I bawled like a baby. I'd shoot that
old
S-O-B in the head if I had a gun and the heart to use it, so
help me! But I have neither, and God knows that is surely
for
the best.

Yours very sincerely,

Nannie Land Rawley

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P.S. I had to rack my brain, but yes, I recall my
conversation in the hardware. I was telling a tale on myself:
I'm not
used to the get-up-and-go hydrostat transmission they put
in
the new Snappers, compared to the old geared ones.
Marshall
claims he sold me a small, polite little mower, but I say it's
a
monster with a death wish. I left it running in the front
yard
one day while I went in to get a drink of water, and when I
came back it was gone! I called Timmy Boyer to report it
stolen! The poor man had to walk up to my porch with hat

in hand and explain to me as how he'd found my mower in
a

compromising position a hundred yards downhill from
where

I left it. Evidently while I was inside, my Snapper took a
wild

hair and decided to fling itself headfirst into Egg Creek.

Mr. Walker, I've always found people love you best if you
can laugh at your own foolish misfortunes and keep mum
about everyone else's.

Well, thought Garnett. For goodness' sakes. It was a lot to
take

in at once. He felt a moment's relief about the whole
snapper incident and an iota of sympathy for the woman's
poor ducklings (oh,

Saddle Shoe!), but only an iota, before his blood pressure
started to

rise. The longer he stared at the letter, flipping backward
through its

several pages, the more its true meaning began to reveal
itself to

him among the flimflam phrases of her mock friendliness.
Bitter old

man indeed!

He forgot the pie completely—would not remember it, in
fact,

until a day and a half later (at which time he would sample
it tentatively and find it still edible). That pie was the furthest
thing from

his mind as he stomped to his desk and tore a blank sheet
from one

of his chestnut notebooks. Without a second thought to
appearances, for this was no time to stand on ceremony, he

plucked a black

ballpoint pen out of his pen-and-pencil cup and applied it so hard

to the page that its line wavered and skipped like a terrified heart.

“Dear Miss Rawley,” he scrawled,

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I am weary of your grabbing every opportunity as a pulpit for your absurd views on modern agriculture!! If you can

prove to me your so-called Voltaire principal, i.e. spraying pesticide is good for the health of insects, then by all means I

will drink a quart of malathion, pronto!!

Furthermore, what is this business about God being three billion years old? God is ageless; the earth and its inhabitants

were created in 4300 B.C., as can be proved by extrapolating

backward from present population to the time of the first two people, Adam and Eve. You were unaware of this scientific formulation, probably, or were perhaps making a veiled

reference to Evolutionary Theory. Because if the latter, your

words fall on ears too wise for that old scam. I am a scholar

of Creation Science, and suggest you think about a thing or two, i.e. who but an Intelligent, Beautiful Creator could have

created a world filled with beauty and intelligence? How

could Random Chance (i.e. “evolution”) have created lifeforms so vastly complex as those that fill our world? I realize

you’re no scientist, Miss Rawley, but I could explain to you

the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which states that all natural things move from order to chaos, quite the opposite of what the evolutionists claim. I could go much further than

this, though I am fighting the inclination to wash my hands of you altogether and let you cast your own soul on the brimstone as you seem determined to do, and let you face in

the jaws of Satan the same fate suffered by your precious duckling.

Hah! thought Garnett, rather proud of his dramatic twist of the

knife and thinking he ought to end right there.

“But no,” he wrote, unable to stop himself,

I shall be a good neighbor and send you these thoughts which should be enough for you and your bra-burning

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Unitarian friends to ponder, I dare say, for many days to come.

Truly, Garnett S. Walker III

p.s. I am not a bitter old man.

Garnett carefully affixed not one but *two* stamps to the envelope

to prove his point (he wasn't sure exactly what point, but he trusted

his instincts) and licked its seal shut before he could give himself a

chance at failed nerve or courage. Politeness be hanged. This was no

longer simply a matter of pride. Garnett Walker was now a Soldier

of God on the way to his mailbox, marching as to war.

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[Moth Love](#)

front lawn looked like a bolt of deep-green velvet

From where Lusa stood at her upstairs window, the with just a few moth-eaten patches where the reddish ground showed through. Jewel and Emaline were setting up

the lawn chairs while Emaline's husband, Frank, and Mary Edna's

Herb carried the big walnut dining table outside. Lusa had invited

the whole family for the Fourth of July, claiming she needed to

make ice cream out of a month's worth of leftover cream sitting in

her icebox. Maybe it was just pity, but they'd all agreed to come—

even Mary Edna's son and his wife from Leesport, whom she'd met

only at the funeral.

Mary Edna had arrived an hour early with a plate of deviled

eggs in each hand (Salmonella waiting to happen, Lusa thought but

did not say). Seeing the front hallway suddenly occupied by the

Menacing Eldest in a burnt-orange pantsuit and sensible shoes had

sent Lusa into a panic; she'd called out some instructions and flown

{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

upstairs on the pretense of finding a tablecloth. But of course Mary

Edna would know that the tablecloths were in the cherry armoire

in the parlor. Right now, in fact, she was outside sailing one of her

mother's linens over the table while the men hunkered down near

the chicken house with their backs to her, stabbing beers into a tub

of ice and opening up long-necked bottles of something homemade. Hannie-Mavis was trying to organize the kids into a labor

pool for cranking the ice cream, but at the moment they were circling her like a swarm of bees threatening their queen with mutiny.

Lusa stood with one hand on the back of the green brocade chair

and looked down on all her in-laws from above, pondering their resemblance to the clucking, parti-colored flock of chickens that was

usually scattered out over her yard. The hens had
scrammed early to

their roosts to avoid this onslaught of relatives. Lusa
smiled a small,

sad smile, wishing she could watch the whole evening
from this

window. Finally they were all here, conceding to be her
guests. And

she didn't have the nerve to go downstairs.

She sighed and shut the window. It had rained earlier. The
air

had the fetid smell of mushrooms releasing their spores
into the

damp air. It was evening, though, so the men would be
shooting off

their fireworks soon, tinting the air blue with that acrid
smoke.

Having a program would help the evening go by. She
glanced in the

dresser mirror and ran a hand through her strawberry
mane, feeling

miserable. Her jeans fit too well, the black knit shirt was
too lowcut, her hair was too red—the widow Jezebel. She'd
chosen the

black top for a drab effect, but it was no small task to look
dowdy

next to Mary Edna in her waistless polyester pantsuit, or
HannieMavis in a red striped top, star-spangled shorts, gold
mules, and blue

eyeliner. Lusa pointed her feet toward the stairs and made
them go.

It time, it's time, too late to change now. A year too late.

She was right about the fireworks; there was already a movement afoot to begin. Hannie-Mavis's Joel and Big Rickie were

peering into a series of brown paper bags they'd set out in a row, arguing about some aspect of the scheme. Lusa was grateful for the

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rain—she'd been genuinely afraid they'd burn down her barn, and

not brave enough to declare a ban on the fireworks (they were a tradition). But May and June had dumped such rain on Zebulon

County that the air itself could smother a flame. Bullfrogs had wandered up out of the duck pond and carelessly laid their jellied

masses of eggs in the grass, apparently confident that their tadpoles

would be able to swim through the lawn like little sperms. Fierce

snapping turtles no longer confined themselves to the ponds but

wandered the lanes like highwaymen. In all her life Lusa had never

seen such an oversexed, muggy summer. Just breathing was a torrid

proposition.

“Hey, guys,” she called to Joel and Big Rickie, who nodded at

her, smiling broadly like schoolboys. They were thrilled about this

picnic. Lois the Loud, meanwhile, sat in a folding chair near the

food table, chain-smoking and posting a stream of complaints about

how much they'd spent on the fireworks.

"One hundred and eighty-one dollars," she boomed in a voice

deepened by decades of cigarettes. Mary Edna stood three feet

away, ignoring her and scowling at the food table. When Lois spied

Lusa coming out of the house, she perked up at the potential of a

new audience. "A hundred and eighty-one dollars!" she called out

to Lusa. "That's what these little boys spent on their little show for

tonight, did you ever hear the like?"

Lusa had already heard it all from upstairs, but she pretended to

be dismayed. "Good grief. Did they drive all the way to China, or

what?" she said, walking over toward Lois. She was relieved to see

that Lois was in the Jezebel camp, too, dressed in jeans and a

western-style shirt unbuttoned a tad too far.

"Naw," Lois said, "they went over to Crazy Harry's down there

off the interstate."

As far as Lusa could tell, the entire border of the state of

Tennessee was ringed with shacks advertising cheap fireworks. It

had to do with their being legal on one side of the line and not the

other, but she wasn't sure which was which.

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"I should have gone with them," Lois droned on in her deep,

cracked voice. "Or sent Little Rickie and the girls along to keep an

eye on them. I didn't think two grown men would act like kids in a

candy store." She examined the ends of her hair, which she wore

long and dyed coal black—not flatteringly, in Lusa's opinion, since

Lois was fair and blue-eyed like Cole, and a little long in the tooth

for the straight, dyed look. But maybe having Indian-black hair like

her husband and children made her feel like she belonged to them.

Who knew?

Mary Edna was fussing tediously with a piece of aluminum foil

over a sheet cake. She was a vision in her orange polyester, which

seemed itself a heat source in this muggy night; the outfit gave Lusa

an odd, uncomfortable sensation that Mary Edna's physical presence

would spoil the food.

Mary Edna turned around suddenly, as if reading Lusa's

thoughts, but it was Lois she snapped at: “Oh, hush your bellyaching, Lois, they do it ever year. If you’re not used to it by now, you

never will be.”

Lusa winced, but Lois was utterly unfazed. She craned her head

sideways toward Mary Edna, flicking ash in the grass.

“Why sure, go

ahead and talk. Your husband wouldn’t go spend a week’s grocery

money on cherry bombs and Martian Candles and stuff.”

“I’d ruther him do that than what he’s up to right now, down

there poking his nose in the bottles. What kind of hooch have they

got down there?”

“Lord, honey, Frank’s done made that elderberry wine. You’d

think he’d get over that little chemistry project, or Emaline would

dump it down the drain, one.”

“Oh, it’s that business.”

“He claims it’s a pure wonderful product and maybe he’ll sell it

one of these days.” Lois rolled her eyes.

Mary Edna touched her bluish, tightly coiffed hair and stared at

the men with narrow eyes. “I wouldn’t know. You ask me, I’d have

to agree with the good Lord. All of it bites as the serpent.”

{ Prodigal Summer }

Lois snorted, breathing smoke out her nose like a dragon.

“After the second bottle of that stuff, turpentine’d taste pure wonderful, I expect.”

Lusa watched the sisters volley, surprised that they could be as

mean about their own husbands and each other’s as they’d ever been

toward her. Cole had always insisted that she took his family too

personally. She’d never had brothers or sisters of her own, only parents who said “please” and “thank you” to each other and to the

child they’d produced late in life and never quite known how to

handle. Maybe Cole had been right. She’d never experienced

rough-and-tumble, the sharper edges of family love.

She walked down toward the chicken house, deciding to investigate whatever it was that was biting these men as the serpent. They

were engaged in the kind of cheerful, energetic argument that

tends to happen when all present are agreed and the enemy is absent. Farm policy and government stupidity, most likely. But maybe

not. “Blevins would lie, though,” Herb was saying. “He’d lie

quicker than a dog can lick a plate.”

“Howdy, gentlemen,” she called from a decent distance as she

approached, just in case they were about to say something they

wouldn't want her to hear. It embarrassed them to death if they let

slip even so much as a "hell" or "damn" in her presence.

"Hey there, Miz Widener," Big Rickie called to her. "I have a

crow to pick with you!"

His friendliness caught her off guard. This crow didn't seem very

threatening. "What is it now, those cows I sold you and Joel? Did

they all run off already? I warned you they were fence jumpers."

"No ma'am, them cattle are behaving just fine, thank you. But

now we *leased* them cattle, a percentage on the calves, let's don't forget. We don't owe you unless they all get busy and get theirselves in

the family way this winter."

"I recall the terms, and I gave those girls their instructions."

Lusa smiled. Rickie and Joel had made her a good deal, and she

knew it.

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{ B A R B A R A K I N G S O L V E R }

"No, now, our contention is with your antitobacco policy."

"My what? Oh, I see. You've got me chalked up as the enemy

of the small farmer."

Rickie hid his cigarette quickly behind his back. Herb, Joel,

Frank, and Herb's son all followed suit. "No ma'am," Big Rickie

said. "We've got you chalked up with Miss Butcher, our tenthgrade shop teacher. She used to throw screwdrivers at us when she

caught us smoking."

"A *woman*, you had for a shop teacher? A *Miss Butcher*? I can't

believe that."

"God's honest truth," Frank said. "I had her, Rickie and Joel

had her, and Herb's boy here did, too. By the time she retired she

was somewheres around a hundred years old, and missing three fingers."

"She should live to a hundred and twenty," Lusa said. "Look at

you. Despite her years of trial, you're all still smoking like chimneys.

Where's my screwdriver?"

They ducked their heads like little boys. Lusa felt amazed to be

the center of their attention. These men had never fully let her in

on a conversation before. Possibly it was the elderberry wine, which

Frank was now urging her to sample. He'd put it up in beer bottles,

so it was hard to tell who was drinking what.

"Wow," she said, after a taste. It was dry and strong, almost like

brandy. “Good,” she added, nodding, since they seemed very interested in her opinion. “Although I hear it bites as the serpent.”

They exploded at that, all of them, even Herb. Lusa flushed a

little, pleased to have earned this amity but also surprised to find

herself allying with these men against their women. Or maybe it

was just Mary Edna. There seemed to be resentment throughout

the ranks on the Mary Edna score.

“So, Mr. Big Rickie. What’s this crow you have to pick with

me, really?”

“Them goats up ’air in your back pasture. Now I see why you

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had Joel and me clear out all your cattle: to make way for the goats.

I know what you got ’em for, too.”

“You do?” She felt a slight panic, for no reason. Had Little Rickie shared her plan? Would it really matter if he had?

“Yep.” Big Rickie had a twinkle in his eye.

“OK, why did I get those goats?”

“To make me look bad. They’ll eat down all the thistles and rose

briars out of your hayfield neat as pickle. And see, now, a man

drives by, he’ll look on the other side of the fence and say, ‘Well, sir,

that old Big Rickie Bowling, his hay's nothing but a mess of briars.

I wouldn't buy that hay for two cents.' ”

“That's *exactly* why I got goats, to wreck your hay trade. I couldn't stand to sit here and watch you get rich selling hay.”

“Lord, Rickie,” Joel said, “woman's going to ruin you. You'd

just as well get out of farming altogether, with her running the

competition.”

Were they making fun of her now? But this was how they spoke

to each other, too—in a complicated mix of rue, ridicule, and respect that she was just beginning to grasp. They were also appreciating her figure rather frankly, especially Big Rickie and Herb's son

from Leesport, whatever his name was. Lusa pulled at her shirt,

wondering if her nipples showed through somehow. She raked her

brain for the son's name, which she couldn't have guessed if her life

depended on it. She kept hoping he would reintroduce himself, but

instead he handed her a second bottle of Serpent, as they were now

calling their drink. Had she downed the first one so fast? And why

did Rickie keep smiling at her? He was a handful—she'd never

imagined this side of him. She could see why Lois would want to

keep her hair young and her eye peeled.

“Is ’at there barn made of chestnut?” Herb’s nameless boy was

asking her now.

“You’re asking *me*? ”

“Your barn, ain’t it?”

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She was startled by this turn in the conversation that had now,

suddenly, given her authority over her barn. Their wives wouldn’t

even acknowledge Lusa’s ownership of her kitchen. But of course,

these men were in-laws, too; they hadn’t grown up in these buildings any more than Lusa had. She’d never really thought of this—

they weren’t Wideners, either.

“Yeah, I think it is chestnut,” she said. She pointed at the joinery under the peak of the gable end. “You see how the roof got

raised up at some point? That was more recent, and I think they

used oak. It’s not weathering as well. All the rafters need to be replaced.”

Herb whistled. “That’s going to cost you.”

“*Tell* me,” she said. “If you hear of anybody who likes to replace

barn roofs, tell him you know a lady who’s looking to make him

rich.”

“You ought to have him build you a gabazo up there on your

hill, while he’s at it,” said Frank. “So you could set up there in it and

watch your goats.”

“I know a man that had two gabazos,” Rickie said. “But they

died.”

“Rickie Bowling, you’re a damn fool.”

They all stood silent for a moment in the early-evening light,

studying the barn with its many seams of age and repair. From the

depths of the chicken house behind them came the low, worldweary moan of a hen slowly accomplishing an egg. In the ambient

air the choir of summer insects was tuning up its infinite clicks and

trills. By nightfall they’d be deafening, loud enough to drown out

the fireworks. But for now Lusa and the men could still hear the

constant voice of Lois, who had flagged down Hannie-Mavis and

was now bending *her* ear about the price of gunpowder.

“I’m a damn fool,” Rickie said solemnly, “what spent a hundred

dollars on fireworks, and won’t hear the end of it till Christmas.”

“I heard it was a hundred and eighty-one dollars and twelve

cents,” Lusa said. “Approximately.”

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“No, now, the eighty-one dollars and twelve cents, that was

Joel.”

“Come on,” Joel said, suddenly excited. “Let’s go shoot.”

“Hold your horses, Mr. Sexton. We can’t start till it gets good

and dark.” But Joel was already walking back uphill. They all

watched him go, observing as his path intersected with that of the

starred-and-striped Hannie-Mavis, who had broken free of Lois

and was headed in her husband’s direction carrying a hot dog on a

bun. Lusa started to make a remark about her outfit also looking

better in the dark, but she thought better of it as Hannie-Mavis

stood on tiptoe in her little gold shoes, letting Joel give her a kiss

before he took the hot dog from her. There was such a wealth of

simple fondness in his hand as it touched her back, in her stretched

calves and her head turned to receive his kiss. A vast loneliness crept

over Lusa. She needed Cole to negotiate this family. With him it

had made sense. Or could have, maybe, eventually.

Joel began poking into the paper bags, holding the hot dog

high in his other hand as he bent over. Rickie seemed nervous

about letting him do it alone. “I hate to leave such pleasant company,” he said, making a courtly bow and giving Lusa a look in the

eye that shocked her with suggestion. “But I have to go keep an eye

on my brother-in-law. He is not to be trusted.”

“I don’t think you are, either,” she said.

He winked. “I believe you may be right.”

Lusa turned her face away to hide a blush, pretending to look

uphill toward the food table. She felt incensed—here she was not six

weeks a widow, and her brother-in-law was flirting. Although he

may have just been trying to cheer her, and the alcohol muddled

everything, of course. Just for a minute, she herself had forgotten to

be sad. She felt guilty and hopeful both, realizing that beyond these

numb days lay an opposite shore where physical pleasure might

someday surprise her with its sharp touch. Where she would see

colors again.

“Gentlemen. I’d better go act like a decent hostess and see if

we're going to have any ice cream," she said. Frank reached out

to snag the empty bottle out of her left hand and press a full one

into it.

"We are sinking deep in sin," she sang quietly as she walked past

Mary Edna with a Serpent in each hand, heading down toward the

barn to check on the progress of the ice cream crankers. She felt a

tightness in her lower abdomen, not from the elderberry wine but

from something else, a body sensation she recognized but couldn't

place. She'd been feeling it all day—a fullness, not really unpleasant

but distracting, and a constant small twinge on the left side of her

belly. And then it came to her, just as she spied the bald pate of an

enormous whole moon rising above the roof of the barn. Of

course. What she felt was her cycle coming back. She'd been on the

pill for years, since college, but she'd tossed out the pink dial-pack

several weeks ago when she finally made herself clear Cole's toothbrush and shaving things out of the bathroom. Now, after years

spent suppressed in hibernation, her ovaries were waking up and

kicking in. No wonder the men were fluttering around her like

moths: she was fertile. Lusa let out a rueful laugh at life's ridiculous

persistence. She must be trailing pheromones.

Halfway down the hill, Jewel's five-year-old flew into her legs,

causing her to spill wine on herself and nearly lose her footing.

"Good grief, Lowell, what is it?"

"Crys made me cut my leg!" he wailed, pointing frantically. "It's

bleeding! I need a Band-Aid."

"Let me see." She sat down on the ground, set both her bottles

firmly into the grass, rolled up Lowell's pants leg, and scrutinized

the unbroken skin for damage. "I don't see anything."

"It's the other leg," came a weary voice through the darkness. It

was Crys, trudging up the hill after her brother. "He scratched it on

a nail in the barn cellar."

Lusa was flustered by the child's hysteria. To calm both him and

herself she held him in her lap while she examined his other leg.

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She found a scratch on the ankle, but it hadn't even broken through

the second layer of epidermis. Definitely no blood.
“You’re OK,”

she said, hugging him tightly. She picked up his leg and kissed it.

“This will heal before your wedding.”

Crys flopped onto the ground beside Lusa. “Did he say it was all

my fault?”

“No, he did not.”

“Well, he will. That’s what he’ll tell Mama. But I didn’t ask him

to climb under the barn with me. I told him not to. I *told* him he’s

a tattletale sissy and he always gets hurt and cries.”

“I am not a tattletale sissy!” wailed Lowell.

“Shhh,” Lusa said, putting an arm around Crys’s shoulders while Lowell quieted to an occasional racking sob in her lap. He

clung to Lusa endearingly, clutching her around the waist with his

small hands. “Nothing’s anybody’s fault,” she said. “It’s hard to have

a big sister who can do everything in the world. Lowell just wants

to try to keep up with you, honey.”

Crys shrugged off Lusa’s arm without a word.

“Lordy, is that my Lowell hollering?” It was Jewel calling out

from behind them, sounding worried.

“We’re OK,” Lusa called back. “Down here by the barn.

Wounded in action but headed for recovery, I think.”

Jewel appeared and sat down heavily on the grass,
reaching out
to stroke Lowell's forehead. He practically leapt from
Lusa's lap into
his mother's embrace. Crys stood up and disappeared.
"He just got a little scratch," Lusa reported. "He was trying
to
climb around in the barn with his sister. No B-L-O-O-D,
but I've
got Band-Aids in the bathroom upstairs if you think that
would
help the patient's morale."
"Who wants ice cream?" a female voice beckoned through
the
darkness—one of Lois and Rickie's teenaged daughters,
Lusa
guessed. The two of them had taken over supervising the
kids after
Hannie-Mavis washed her hands of it.

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Lowell took a deep breath, heaved himself up, and struck
out
with a loping limp in the direction of the ice cream. Jewel
leaned
against Lusa's shoulder for just a second. "Thanks, hon."
"I didn't do anything."
"You didn't smack them, that's something."
"God, Jewel, don't say that. I like your kids. They're
something
else, both of them."

“Something else, all right.” Jewel tilted her head and chanted,

“The boy’s a girl, and the girl’s a boy.”

“Maybe that’s what I like about them.”

“They’ve had it tough. Poor kids. I wish I could have done better for them.”

“Every kid has it tough,” Lusa said. “Being a little person in a

big world with nobody taking you very seriously is tough. I can relate.”

Jewel shook her head, giving Lusa to know there was a much

larger sadness here that she should not try to explain away. Lusa went

silent. She’d borne enough of people’s do-goodnik consolations lately

that she knew when to stop. For a minute they sat staring at the

moon, which was now an astonishing bronze disk hanging above the

barn. No words seemed pure enough to touch it. Out of the blue

darkness, from the depths of her memory, she heard Zayda

Landowski’s voice say, “*Shayne vee dee levooneh.*” A song, or maybe

just a compliment to a beloved child: “Beautiful like the moon.”

“Jewel, I want to ask you a weird question. This house where

you all grew up. Has anybody ever seen ghosts in it?”

“Stop that! You told me that time that Mommy was haunting

the kitchen, and it gave me the all-overs.”

“This is different. I’m talking about happy ghosts.”

Jewel waved her hand, as if to chase away gnats.

But Lusa persisted: “When it rains, I hear children running
on
the stairs.”

“That’d be the roof, I expect. That old house is noisy as the
dickens in the rain.”

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“I know what you’re talking about. I hear music and words
sometimes when it’s raining; that’s the tin-roof noise. I’ve
been having whole conversations with my grandfather, who
used to play the

clarinet. But this is different. Sometimes even when it’s not
raining,

I hear children climbing the stairs, really fast, in a kind of a
tumble,

the way several kids would come up the stairs all at once.
I’ve heard

it a bunch of times.”

Jewel just looked at her.

“You think I’m nuts, don’t you?”

“No-oh.”

“You do, too. Too much time alone, a widow losing her
marbles. Which is true, I am. But if you heard what I’m
talking about

you’d be amazed. It’s so real. Every time I hear it, I swear
I have to

stop my work and go to the steps, and I absolutely expect
to see real

children coming up. I'm not saying it's 'kind of like the sound of

footsteps.' It *is* the sound of feet on the steps."

"Well, who is it, then?"

Lusa looked at Jewel, really examined her. Even in the dark she

could see steep lines carved into her face that hadn't been there a

month ago. It was as if some wires had got crossed, and all the grief

Lusa felt inside were showing on Jewel's exterior. "Are you all

right?" she asked.

Jewel gave her a guarded look. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you don't look so hot. Too tired, or something."

Jewel adjusted the flowered scarf tied over her hair, a sort of

babushka that didn't help any. "I *am* tired. Sick and tired." She

sighed.

"What of?"

"Oh, honey. It's all right. I'm managing. Don't ask, because I

don't want to talk about it tonight. I just want to come up here and

eat ice cream with you all and watch the fireworks and have fun, for

once." She sighed deeply. "Ask me tomorrow, OK?"

"OK, I guess. But you've got me worried."

"I better go see if Lowell's going to need hospitalized. He's

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probably forgotten about it, but if I don't put a Band-Aid on it now

he'll wake up at three in the morning thinking he's going to die."

She tried, slowly, to push herself to her feet. Lusa jumped up and

helped her, then scooped up her two bottles off the grass. One was

still full.

"Did you see me parading around here with a bottle of booze

in each hand? I expect Mary Edna's praying for my eternal soul."

"Mary Edna's praying for her *husband's* eternal soul, because

those jeans fit you like the bark on a tree, and Herb Goins hasn't

taken his eyes off your bottom all night."

"Jewel! *Herb?* I thought Herb was a gelding."

"You'd be surprised. He's not the only one, either."

Lusa grimaced. "Get out of here, you're embarrassing me. Go

check and make sure there're enough plates and stuff for the ice

cream, would you? And make sure they put the peaches and blackberries in it, there're fresh peaches in that cooler already cut up. You

put the fruit in last thing."

"We'll figure it out."

"OK. I'll be up in a minute. I just want to walk down to the

pond for a second and look at this moon.”

The grass laid a cool dampness between the soles of her feet and

her rubber thongs. She moved herself along the bank until the

moon’s reflection hung dead center in the pond, a white, trembling

promise as old as night. She felt the enormous sadness inside her

waking up. Sometimes it slept, and then she could pretend at life,

but then it would rise and crowd out anything else she might try to

be, hounding her with the hundred simple ways she could have

saved him. He’d had a cold that day. He could have laid off, declined

to take that trip over the mountain. If she’d been a better wife she

would have kept him home.

“Cole,” she said out loud, just to put the round word in her mouth, but then she regretted it because it summoned his presence

so fully that her heart began bleeding out wishes: *I wish you were here*

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tonight. I wish I could have back every minute we wasted being mad at each

other. I wish we’d had time to make a baby together. I wish.

“Ssssst.”

She turned her head. The wall of the barn that faced the moon

was whitewashed in light, but she couldn't see anything else. She

smelled smoke, though. Then saw the red bouncing ball of a cigarette's lit tip.

She wiped her eyes quickly, though it was quite dark.

"Who is

that?"

"Me," came a whisper. "Rickie."

"Little Rickie?" Her coconspirator. She walked toward him,

navigating carefully around the marshy spots at the edge of the

pond. "Did you see what I got?" she asked him, trying to be glad

about this distraction from her self-pity. "Did you check out my

field up above the tobacco bottom when you drove in?"

"Shhh!" His hand closed around her wrist in the darkness and

he pulled her around the corner of the barn, into deep moon

shadow.

"What are you doing, being a bad boy, smoking behind the barn? Here, look how bad *I'm* being." She held out the bottles,

which he refused to sample.

"Pew, that hooch of Uncle Frank's is nasty."

"You think? I was just about to decide I liked it."

"That means you're skunked."

“Possibly. Who on earth are you hiding from?”

“Mom.”

Lusa laughed a little. There was no end to family charades.

“Your mom, the Queen of Camels—from *her* you’re concealing

your evil habit?”

“Not mine, yours,” he said, lighting a cigarette and putting it in

her hand. Lusa frowned at it for a few seconds, then put it to her lips

and inhaled. After a few seconds she felt a pleasant, tingling rush

running through her arms and under her tongue.

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“Uh-oh,” she said. “I’m liking this. You are a very bad influence. Did you see my goats?”

“Yep. Looked like about forty or fifty up ’air.”

“Fifty-eight, I’d like you to know, and not one of them previously pastured with a buck. They’ve got one now, though, you better believe. If he gets busy and does his job I’ll have fifty suckling

kids in time for Id-al-Fitr, and my new barn roof paid for.”

“Dang, that’s something. All from just that one ad in the paper?”

“My telephone ringer *broke*, Rickie. I swear I’m not kidding,

that’s how much it rang. Have you ever heard of a telephone wearing out? I was in the pickup pretty much dawn to dusk all last

week.”

“Yeah, Aunt Mary Edna said she seen you coming in and out.

She prolly knows how many trips. How much you have to pay out, total?”

“A dollar sixty-five for the ad is my total investment so far.

Goose-egg for the goats. You wouldn’t believe how thrilled people

were to give me these animals. You’d think I was hauling toxic waste

off their land.”

“You can thank Mr. Walker for that. He’s like the granddaddy of

all the goats in this county.”

“I do thank him—I *did*. I called him up on the phone. He was

very nice.”

“Nice, huh? That’s not what they used to call it up at school.”

“Well, I think he’s a swell old guy. Totally helpful. You know

what he told me? Sometimes you have to rub the buck with a rag

and then dance around waving it in the girls’ noses, to turn them

on.”

“O-oh ... yeah,” Rickie said, nodding slowly. “I believe I heard about that down to Oda Black’s. Somebody said they seen

you up here doing naughty things with goats.”

Lusa got elderberry hooch in her nose when she laughed.

“They did not.”

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“Oh, OK. My mistake.” He smoked and gazed out at the field.

The grass looked white in the moonlight, as if touched with hoarfrost. “Would that really *help*, you think? I mean, why would it?”

“Pheromones,” she said.

“What’s that?”

“Smells. A whole world of love we don’t discuss.”

“Huh,” he said. “So. Fifty-eight does. Think you’ll get fifty kids

out of ’em?”

“You bet. And you know what else? You won’t believe what

else.”

“What?”

“Over in the little pasture where I used to keep the calf? Three

bucks—my backup men. *And* in the old pasture, the one behind the

orchard that’s gotten way overgrown with briars? Guess.”

“What, more goats?”

“Seventy-one does.”

“Shit, girl! You’re in business.”

“Looks like it. Those are all does that have been pastured with a

buck at some point recently, or that people couldn’t be sure of. Mr.

Walker said not to take them since I couldn't make them come into

season right away. But I thought, why not just take them and keep

them over there? In October I'll turn my boys loose on them, and

then I'll have my second batch of kids born and fattened up in time

for Greek Easter and Id-al-Adha."

Rick whistled. "You've done your math."

"A regular goat-breeding genius." She tapped her head. "You're

not supposed to count your chickens before they hatch, but I talked

to my cousin already, the butcher. He's so excited you wouldn't believe it. He's going to start taking orders in September. He thinks we

can make a killing."

"Yeah? How much?"

"Well, not a killing. Enough. Enough to cover the big stuff

—

the barn repairs I need to get done right now, for instance."

"Per pound, what are we talking about?"

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"A dollar sixty, maybe a dollar seventy-five?"

She had no real frame of reference for this price, but Rickie evidently did because he whistled approvingly. "Man. That's *good*."

He grinned at her. Her eyes were fully adjusted to the darkness, and

she could see him clearly: not exactly a carbon copy of his father,

but with exactly the same gleam in his eye. She turned up her bottle and let the tail end of the Serpent bite her tongue.

“Look,” he said, pointing up toward the moonlit hillside. She

could see the pale, hump-backed shapes of her goats spread evenly

over the pasture, the way a child would put them in a drawing.

Eventually her eyes made out something else: the movement of the

dark billy. He was working his herd, methodically mounting one

doe after another. Lusa watched in awe.

“You go, boy,” she cheered solemnly. “Make me a new barn

roof.”

Rick laughed at that.

She looked up at him. “Have you ever noticed what goats do in

the rain?”

“Yeah. They get all hunkered up into a horseshoe shape.”

“It’s the funniest thing. I never knew that before. Yesterday morning when it was pouring rain, I looked out my window and

thought, *This* I need, all my goats have come down with polio or

something. But then as soon as the rain stopped, they all straightened out again.”

“Just goes to show you. You never pay much attention to a goat

till he's fixing your barn roof for you."

"How right you are, my friend."

The moon was high now, and smaller, and she felt her grief shrinking with it. Or not shrinking, never really changing, but ceding some of its dominance over the landscape, exactly like the

moon. She wondered why that was, what trick of physics made the

moon appear huge when it first came up but then return to normal

size after it disentangled itself from the tree branches. In its clear

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light she watched her goats hard at work increasing themselves. She

felt that Cole would approve of her ingenuity. But for the first time

in all her plotting she also now felt a twinge of sadness for these

mothers and for their babies who would all come to naught, at least

from a maternal point of view. Yes, it was food, and people needed

food and their merry feasts, but from this end it seemed like so

much effort and loss just to repair a barn and pay off some debts on

an old, sad farm. For the hundredth time Lusa tried and failed to

imagine how she was going to stay here, or why. When she tried to

describe her life in words, there was nothing at all to hold her in this

place. And words were all she could offer over the phone to her father, to Arlie and her other friends, to her former boss: “Less than

a year,” she was starting to say, “I’ll be out of here.”

But there were so many other things besides words. There were

the odors of honeysuckle and freshly turned earth, and ancient

songs played out on the roof by the rain. Moths tracing spirals in the

moonlight. Ghosts.

“Rick,” she said, “do you ever see ghosts?”

“You mean real ones?”

“As opposed to imaginary ones?” She laughed. “I guess that

means no. Sorry I asked.”

“Why? You been seeing ghosts?”

“They’re in my house. It’s full of them. Some are mine, people

from my own family—my dead grandfather, specifically. And some

are your family. Some I can’t identify.”

“Scary.”

“No, that’s the funny thing, is they’re not. They’re all really

happy. They’re good company, to tell you the truth. They make it

seem less lonely in the house.”

“I don’t know, Lusa. Sounds a little bit cuckoo.”

“I know it does.” He’d used her name—no one else in the family did, ever—and he had not called her *Aunt* Lusa. Whatever this

meant, it stopped the conversation for a minute.

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“Well,” she said finally. “I just wanted to tell somebody. Sorry.”

“No, it’s OK. It’s kind of interesting. I never seen any ghosts,

but I never seen Alaska, either, and it’s probably up there.”

“That’s a sensible philosophy.”

“What do they look like?”

She glanced at him. “Are you really interested?”

He shrugged. “Yeah.”

“They’re not like in the movies. They’re like actual people, in

my house. Kids, to be exact. Mostly they play on the steps. This

morning I heard them whispering. I got up and looked down over

the banister and they were sitting there on the second step from the

bottom, with their backs to me.”

“Who was?” Now he was interested.

“Promise you won’t tell anybody this.”

“Cross my heart.”

“Cole and Jewel. A boy and a girl, and that’s who they were.

About four and seven years old, maybe.”

“Nuh-uh. You sure?”

“Yes.”

“You never knew Cole when he was little, though,” he pointed out.

She gave him a look. “You’re questioning my scientific accuracy? They were *ghosts!* I don’t know how I knew it was him, I just

did. I’ve seen pictures, and you know, or maybe you don’t, but

when you’ve been that close to somebody you can learn to know

their whole life. It was him, OK? And your aunt Jewel, brother and

sister. She had her arm around his shoulders like she meant to protect her kid brother from the whole big world. Like she knew she’d

lose him someday. All of the sudden I understood this whole new

thing about both of them, how close they’d been. And I felt really

sad for Jewel.”

“Everybody feels sad for Aunt Jewel. Talk about getting the

short end of the stick.”

“What, because her husband left her?”

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“Yeah, Uncle Shel hitting the road, and then Cole dying, and

her kids’ being messed up, and now getting sick.”

“What sick, *how* sick?”

“I don’t even know. Honest to God, they don’t tell me anything. They act like I’m a little kid. But I have eyes, I can see her

hair’s falling out.”

“Oh no,” Lusa whispered, looking down. “God. Is it cancer?”

“I think so. Of the ...” He touched his chest. “She had that operation last year, on both sides, but it’s still got all through her.”

“Last *year*? After I moved here, or before?”

“I’m not really sure. It was all hush-hush, even in the family.

Nobody knows down at church. Not even her boss at Kroger’s.

He’d prolly fire her.”

Lusa found no words; she could only shake her head from side

to side.

“Aunt Hannie-Mavis’s been taking her to Roanoke for these

treatments. I only know that because she brings both their kids over

for Mom and my sisters to baby-set when they go. They never told

me anything, really, I just put two and two together.”

“They haven’t told me, either,” Lusa said. “I knew something

serious was wrong. Damn it, I *knew* that, and they won’t even let me

help.” Her voice cracked. She felt flushed and weak-kneed from this

awful news and feared that if she started to cry she might not stop.

He put his arm around her. Just from the simple comfort of that

gesture, tears flooded her eyes.

“They don’t want to put more worries on you,” he said.

“You’ve already been through the worst there is.”

“Not the worst. I’m still alive.”

“I think it’d be worse losing the person you love than dying

yourself.”

To her embarrassment, this made her cry helplessly. He was so

young, how could he know that? She pressed her face against the

cotton of his white T-shirt and the warmth of his chest and let herself stay there, sobbing, wishing she could fly away from here. In her

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mind she could easily picture it: throwing things in a suitcase, books

and clothes, practically nothing—she’d leave behind all the heavy

family furniture. Just run down the steps and away. But those two

children were on the landing with their backs to her, impossible to

get around. They stopped her.

Rick had been standing silent for a long while, she realized,

holding her patiently, stroking her hair with his other hand. She

took a breath.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling her face away and avoiding his eyes.

“Don’t be. It got my arm around you for a minute. I’d like to do

more than that: I’d like to fix your whole barn roof.” He put his finger under her chin and to Lusa’s utter shock leaned down and kissed

her very quickly on the lips.

“Rick,” she said, feeling some form of hysteria rise through her

body, “*Little Rickie*. I’m your *aunt*. For God’s sakes.” This was like a

movie, she thought. The woman with no desire left in her, pursued

for an evening by every man.

“I’m sorry,” he said, really meaning it. He actually took a step

back from her. “Oh, Lord, that was dumb. Don’t be mad. I don’t

know what I was thinking, OK?”

She laughed. “I’m not mad. And I’m not laughing at you, I’m

laughing at me. You’re a very handsome man. Your girlfriend is very

lucky to have you.”

He didn’t comment on that. He was looking at her, trying to guess what damage he’d done. “You won’t, like, tell anybody,

will you?”

“No, of course not. Who would I tell?” She smiled, shaking

her head and wiping her eyes with her palm. “Here’s the really

funny thing: your dad was considering making the same pass half an

hour ago.”

“My *dad*? Him and *you*? ”

“Don’t act so shocked. Is that any worse than *you* and me?”

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But now he was angry. “God *damn*, my dad! He didn’t get anywhere, did he? I mean, what did he try?”

She regretted her indiscretion; she’d forgotten somehow that

this was a child and his father. Lusa had no instincts for such

things—she wasn’t a mother. “He didn’t really try anything,” she

amended calmly. “He didn’t get past the planning stages.”

“Man! That old lech,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “And now

look at him. He’s up there jacking off in front of everybody with

bottle rockets instead.”

“You’re very bad.”

“I am.”

“But you’re right. I guess I’d better go supervise the show. So I

can write up a good report for the insurance after they burn the

place down.”

He touched her shoulder, stopping her. “Just don’t be mad, OK. I like us being friends, Aunt Lusa. I’m sorry I messed up.”

“Rick, I’m not mad.” She looked at her hands and clinked her

bottles together, hesitating. She still felt startled by the taste of his

mouth, the smoke and human pungency that had struck through

her numbness into some living place at her core. “You know something? I’m lonely, I’m losing my mind, and it felt so good to have

your arms around me, I can’t even think about it. I should be thanking you. That’s it, end of subject.” She gave him a quick hug and left

him there in his cloud of smoke.

She mounted the hill slowly, amazed by the vision of lights

opening out ahead of her. Hundreds of luminous fireflies were rising out of the grass while red and blue sparks rained down from the

sky. All her sisters-in-law were busy feeding children or cleaning up,

but the men were glued to their lawn chairs, hooting as the bombs

went off. One after another the missiles rocketed crazily out over

the pond or into the catalpa tree, setting dozens of small, hissing

fires among the leaves.

“Aaaw,” the male voices cried in unison when one misfired

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sideways into the grass. Then came a solid, beery cheer
when the

next one shot straight up with a loud hiss, popping open
above their

heads, flinging its sparkling seeds to the wind.

Lusa bit her lip against the strange ache in her belly. This
night

was out of control completely, she thought, but what could
you do?

We're only what we are: a woman cycling with the moon,
and a

tribe of men trying to have sex with the sky.

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H *oof!*” she cried aloud, jerking backward as if she’d
touched electricity. That right there was a copperhead.
Slowly she pulled her weed hook back from

the briars she’d been clearing away from the edge of the
trail. In one

slow, steady motion she brought the tool’s handle up to rest
on her

shoulder while the rest of her body held perfectly still,
catching up

with its lost breath. Not all snakes did that to her anymore.
She’d

seen enough of them now to conquer the instinctive recoil;
normally, when a slender-headed snake raced underfoot, a dark

nose

tapering to body in a streamlined profile, her mind instantly recognized a friend. But a triangular head made her go cold. Like a yield

sign, she'd thought once before, only here in the woods it means

stop. Here every bird and mammal knew that shape advertised a

venomous status—the profile common to pit vipers in general and

copperheads in particular. This one sunning itself at the trail's edge

was especially fat-bodied, marked in a diamond pattern like a long

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argyle sock in coppery hues of brownish pink and deep rose. They

were beautiful colors, but they did not add up to an appealing

creature.

Easy, stand your ground, her dad would sing in a low monotone.

The first copperhead of her life they'd found in the barn, coiled under a hay bale they were fixing to carry outside for the cattle. She'd

yelped and darted for the loft door that once, but never again. *You*

can't run away till you know where "away" is. You could be headed straight

for his maw. Now she kept her boots planted as she watched this fellow coil lazily over himself, headed in several directions at once, in

no hurry to choose a course. She breathed deeply and tried not to

hate this snake. Doing his job, was all. Living out his life like the

thousand other copperheads on this mountain that would never be

seen by human eyes; they wanted only their one or two rodents a

month, the living wage, a contribution to balance. Not one of them

wanted to be stepped on or, heaven forbid, to have to sink its fangs

into a monstrous, inedible mammal a hundred times its size—a

waste of expensive toxin at best. She knew all this. You can stare at

a thing and know that you personally have no place in its heart

whatsoever, but keeping it out of *yours* is another matter.

Finally the wide-jawed head nudged out of the sunlight into

the tall grass. The body elongated and followed in a sinuous line,

flowing downhill. Shortly the head reappeared, tongue flickering,

ten feet away, in another patch of sunlight. The fixed line of its

mouth ran back from the blunt nose in a little upcurve, like an

ironic smile. It was just an illusion created by the deep jowls with

the fangs tucked inside, she knew, but it filled her with sudden

emotion. The fear and anger and queasiness in her stomach made

her feel weak, but there it was. She hated the thing for its smile.

“You stay there,” she said to its unblinking stare. “Wipe that

grin off your face.” She turned and headed uphill toward the cabin

with the stout scythe balanced over her shoulder. Her legs felt as

heavy as water. There was no reason to feel this tired, except maybe

the aftermath of an adrenaline rush, but she was ready to quit for

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the day. Eat a late lunch, curl up with a book. Rain was coming.

She’d heard unexpectedly loud thunder several times already this

morning (each boom had made her jump, as the snake had): a storm

rolling in from Kentucky. She took a shortcut back to the jeep road

through a ten-year-old clear cut that was overgrown now but still

sunny, and full of cockleburs. She tried to avoid this route in summer so she wouldn’t have to spend an hour afterward picking the

burrs off her jeans. But she didn’t want to get caught in the storm.

She swiped her weed cutter at the dense stands of bristly seedpods,

taking her own perverse satisfaction in their presence, here
and

everywhere. Parakeets' revenge, was how she liked to
think of

them. They'd coevolved with an expert seed eater, the
Carolina

parakeet, which had gone extinct so soon after Europeans
settled

that little was known about it but this one thing, its favorite
food.

John James Audubon painted the birds' portrait with their
mouths

full, feasting among cockleburs, and he wrote of how the
bright

flocks would travel up and down the river valleys
searching the

burrs out, descending noisily wherever they found the
bristly stands

and devouring them until hardly any were left. That was
hard to

imagine, a scarcity of cockleburs. Now they went uneaten
and

would continue so for the rest of time. Now they grabbed
the ankles of travelers and spread into fields and farms,
roadside ditches,

even woodland clearings, trying to teach a lesson that
people had

forgotten how to know.

She picked up her step when the first fat raindrops began
to

spatter through the leaves. An hour ago she'd been
sweating, but as

the storm moved in she felt the air temperature plummet as if she

were swimming deep into a lake. She stopped to untie her windbreaker from around her waist and put it on, pulling the hood forward to her eyebrows before taking off again at a trot. By the time

the trail met the Forest Service road that ran up from the valley,

she'd picked up her pace to a dead run.

She slowed down on the road because its ruts could turn an ankle, and because the mountain was steep; she needed to catch her

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wind. Why did people always run in the rain? She still had half a

mile to go, so she'd be soaked when she got home, regardless. She

smirked at herself, then stopped to listen.

It was a vehicle. She stood waiting for it to round the corner so

she could see what manner of human intrusion this was to be. Sad

to say, she assumed people meant trouble. She knew the Forest

Service wouldn't approve of her inhospitable outlook, but this

mountain would be a superior place if people stayed off it altogether. She waited, feeling her shoulders tense up, and was surprised

when the flat green flank of the Forest Service jeep appeared

through the damp tree trunks. *Today?* What was it, July already?

She thought about this. Yes, well into the first week of July.

Darn it, they'd sent up her supplies, and she'd missed what's-hisname again. Jerry Lind was his name, the guy who usually drove up

with her mail and groceries. She needed to give him her requisition. Her heart was pounding, and not just from running uphill.

Eddie Bondo was up there. This morning she'd left him sitting on

the porch in his bare feet reading her *Field Guide to the Eastern Birds*.

Oh, hell.

"Hey, Deanna! You look like the Grim Reaper." Jerry was driving with his head stuck out the open window.

"Hey, Jerry. You look like Smokey the Bear."

He touched his hat brim. "Keeps the rain off." He cut the engine, slowing to a roll next to Deanna and then pulling the brake on

hard, causing the whole vehicle to jerk. The road here was deeply

cut with ruts that were starting to run like small chocolate rivers.

She cocked her left foot up against the jeep to tie her soggy bootlaces.

"What'd you do with my stuff, just plunk it down on the porch

stoop?"

"Nah, I put it inside. With rain coming. Your mail's on the table

with the food boxes. I put your bottled gas for your stove
on the
porch.”

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She studied him for some sign of what he'd discovered at
the

cabin. “You run into any trouble?” she asked cautiously.

“What, you mean that door? I'd say so—those hinges are
ninety

percent rust. You got any WD-40, or should I bring you up
some

next month?”

That was all he'd run into? Trouble getting the door open?
She

watched his face. “I got oil,” she said slowly. “I do have a
list for you,

though, for next month. I need some lumber to patch up a
bridge,

and I've got a list of books I need.”

Jerry shifted his hat and scratched his forehead. “Man
alive,

more *books*. Don't you ever want, like, a TV?”

“A TV that runs on batteries? Don't tell me they make
such a

thing. I don't even turn on the radio I've got.”

“You don't listen to the *radio*? Man. The President could
get

shot or something and you wouldn't know it for a month.”

She dropped her left foot and hiked up her right to retie her

other bootlace. “Tell me something, Jerry. If the President got shot

this afternoon, what would you do tomorrow that’d be any different from what you’d do if he hadn’t?”

Jerry considered the question. “Nothing whatsoever, except

probably watch a bunch of TV. On CNN, see, they’d tell you every

fifteen minutes that he was still dead.”

“Why I like my life, Jerry. I watch birds. They do something *dif-*

ferent every fifteen minutes.”

“Get in,” he said. “I’ll drive up and get your req list. I promise I

won’t tell you any news from the world.”

“All right.” She walked around behind the boxy metal truck to

climb in on the passenger’s side, tossing her weed hook onto the

floor behind the seats with a loud clang. “What were you going to

do if you didn’t run into me, just repeat last month’s requisition?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” The jeep lurched forward in pulses

as Jerry lifted his foot off the brake. The road was extremely steep.

“That’s true, it wouldn’t,” she agreed. “I’m still eating the rice

you doubled up on me in November.” What had he seen in the

cabin? She felt embarrassed and raw, as if Jerry had seen her naked.

She studied him for signs of his thoughts while receiving whiplash

in small doses as the jeep pitched downhill. Jerry seemed like his

usual self—a kid, in other words. She resisted telling him to gear

down and use the transmission instead of the brake. Who was she

to backseat-drive? She hadn’t driven a car in two years.

He squinted at the single-lane track. The shoulder dropped off

steeply to the left, while the mountain rose straight up to the right.

“I never had to backtrack on this road before. Is there someplace

wide enough to turn around?”

“Not for about a mile and a half. Down at that farm’s the first

place it widens out.” She shifted in her seat. “Who owns that place

at the bottom of the hollow? I guess you wouldn’t know.”

“I do, though; it’s the Widener place. Cole Widener. Forest Service had to get a right-of-way through him when we rehabbed

this cabin. Before you came.”

She looked off to the side, thinking about it. “Wideners,” she

said, nodding slowly. “They’ve got some kind of timber, let me tell you. There’s some virgin stuff in there, I swear, right back up against our border. Every year I’m scared to death they’ll discover what they’ve got and log it. It’d cut the heart out of some wonderful habitat, all the way up this side of the mountain.”

“Hey, he died, I heard. Truck blew two tires on the same side at once and he hit a bridge piling or something. On Seventy-seven, going over the mountain.”

“Jerry, no news. You promised.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“That’s sad, though. I wonder who that farm will go to now.

They’ll log it, I bet anything.”

“That I can’t tell you.”

“Widener. What was his first name? You said it a minute ago.”

“Cole, like Old King Cole. Except I heard he was pretty young.”

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“Cole. I’m trying to think if I knew him. I went to school with

Wideners, but they were girls.” Not a very friendly bunch, either,

as she recalled. They came to school in handmade dresses and kept

to their own company like a club.

“Don’t ask me,” Jerry said cheerfully.

“I know. You’re from Roanoke, and you’re twelve.”

“Yes ma’am, that’s almost right. Twenty-four, actually. So,” he

said, still rolling very slowly downhill. “A turnaround?”

“Oh, sorry. There’s really no place reasonable—your best bet

here’s to just put it in reverse and back uphill real slow.”

Jerry followed her advice, though it was a tricky business to negotiate the road uphill and backward. “Dang,” he said repeatedly,

driving with his body half turned around, frequently turning the

wheels the wrong way. “This is like writing your name in a mirror.”

“You know what, Jerry? You could just park. I’ll walk up and

get my list.”

“That’s OK, sit tight, I’ll drive you.”

Deanna felt uneasy approaching the cabin. He’d missed running

into Eddie his first time up, apparently, but good luck didn’t strike

twice. “No, really,” she said, “I don’t care to walk it. Stop here, it’ll

just take me ten minutes.”

“You don’t *care to*? Or you wouldn’t *mind*? ”

She looked at him, exasperated. “Would you please just let me

out?”

He continued his slow backward progress, letting one tire run

off the road for a second. “It’d take you an hour, and it’s raining cats

and dogs. What’s wrong with you, you got the all-overs?”

“Whatch’ all doin’, Jurry, takin’ a college course somewheres in

hillbilly English?”

“My mammaw says that, ‘You’ve got the all-overs.’ She’s from

Grundy.”

“Fine. I’ve got the all-overs from sitting here waiting for you to

rear-end a tree or plow over the cliff. Will you just let me walk?”

“No.”

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She gave up. Fighting with Jerry to be allowed walk in the rain

seemed ridiculous. She faced forward and watched the road wind

out in front of them like a film running backward in slow motion.

Could he really be that blind? Even if Eddie Bondo hadn’t been

there, the cabin was full of him. His coffeepot on the stove, his pack

under the bed. Come to think of it, there were very few signs.

There was next to nothing. She relaxed.

“Hey, I met your boyfriend.”

“*What!*”

“He’s pretty cool. I never met anybody from Wyoming before.”

“What’d you do, interview him? He’s not my boyfriend, Jerry.

He’s just a friend who hiked up to see me for a couple days. He’s

packing out tomorrow.”

“Yeah, right.”

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing. He’s packing out tomorrow.”

Well, Deanna thought, he might be, for all she knew. She shifted her legs; this jeep wasn’t built for tall people. Soldiers must

have been short in World War II. “Why does everybody assume

boyfriend when a girl and a guy are friends?”

Jerry touched his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat.

“Maybe because of the twenty-five-pack of rubbers laying on the

floor by the bed?”

She turned to face him, openmouthed. “*Lying* on the floor.

Jesus, Jerry, that’s none of your business. He’s just a friend, OK?

People see a single woman and think she’s got to have a man hidden

somewhere.”

Damn him, she thought, why couldn’t he have been gone? Last

month when Jerry brought the mail he was gone, *usually* he was

gone, last week he'd stormed out and stayed away for four days, in

the rain, just because she'd looked at him wrong. Of all the days for

Eddie Disappearing Act Bondo to get domestic.

"OK," Jerry said. "Whatever you say."

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Deanna stared ahead. "He probably thought *you* were my boyfriend."

Jerry blushed.

"Scary thought, huh, Jur? Gives you the all-overs, don't it?"

"I didn't say that."

"OK, just pull in here by the cabin. I'll run in and get my req

list. And don't you be telling the boss I've requisitioned extra food

for a visitor, OK? Because I haven't."

"I'm not going to tell on you, Deanna. Government employees

are allowed to have a life. At the office I think they'd all be *glad* if

you were shacking up with some guy up here. They worry about

you."

"Oh, do they?"

"They think you should come down on furlough more often.

You've got about a hundred vacation days saved up that you've

never used.”

“How do you know I’ve never used them? Maybe I’m on vacation right now.”

“You *live* here,” he said firmly. “You *work* here. You take a vacation in *civilization*. TV, electricity, city streets, cars, honk honk.

Remember?”

“Not my idea of civilized, pal.” She slammed the jeep door and

headed her long-legged stride toward the cabin. She flung open the

door with no heed for its rusty hinges and stood for a second inside

the doorway, glowering at Eddie Bondo in his blue corduroy shirt,

unbuttoned. He was reading, leaning so far back in the chair that it

was balanced on its two hind legs like a dancing dog. She pointed a

finger at him.

“As soon as he’s out of here, I’ve got a crow to pick with you.”

Eddie raised his eyebrows.

She snatched the requisition list off the desk and was out the

door again. Through the kitchen window he could see her out

there standing in the rain, talking a mile a minute to the kid in the

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hat. She could picture how she looked to him; her hood had slid off

the back of her head, her hands flew as she spoke, and her braid

hung out the bottom of her jacket, lashing at the backs of her knees

like the tail of an animal setting off at a gallop. When she bent over

to pull her long-handled scythe from behind the seat, the kid cowered as if he thought she might take his head off. Eddie Bondo

would be smiling.

She hung up her tools on the outside of the cabin with a hard

thump while the jeep turned out and pattered down the hill.

“What are you grinning at?” she demanded when she came back in. “I saw a copperhead a while ago, making a face just like

that.”

“I’m grinning at you, girl. Just like that snake was.”

“Should I chop you into pieces like I did him?”

“Don’t lie, tough girl. You didn’t hurt a hair on his little copper

head.”

She looked at him. “*What, then?*”

“Nothing. You’re just beautiful, that’s all. You look like some

kind of a goddess when you’re mad.”

What did he think she was, some high school girl he could sweet-talk? Tight-lipped, she began to shove pots and pans around,

putting away cans from the wooden crates Jerry had left on the

table. She lugged the huge, mouseproof canisters out from under

the pantry shelves and heaved in the sacks of beans and corn flour.

Eddie Bondo couldn't stop grinning.

"I'm not kidding," she warned him. "I'm just about mad enough to throw you out, rain or no rain."

He looked amused by this toothless threat. "What did I do now?"

She turned around to face him. "You couldn't have gone out?

You couldn't just step into the outhouse or something for ten minutes when you heard the jeep?" She stood with her hands on her

hips, amazed, as if confronted with a fabulously unruly child. "For

once it didn't occur to you to disappear?"

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"No, it didn't. May I ask why I'm supposed to hide?"

She went back to slamming cupboards. "Because you don't exist, that's why."

"Interesting," he said, looking at the backs of his hands.

"I mean here you don't. You're not a part of my life." She unzipped her parka and came out of it like a snake shedding its skin,

shaking out the full length of her miraculous hair. She hung the

windbreaker on a peg, wrung out the end of her braid, sat down on

the bed with a put-out sigh, and began unlacing her soaked boots.

With one damp, wool-stockinged foot she kicked the long string of

condoms back into the darkness under the bed. “Jerry was impressed with your supply of prophylactics,” she said.

“Oh, I see. I blew your cover. Deanna the Virgin She-wolf has

her reputation to think about.”

She glared at him. “Would you put all four legs of that chair on

the floor, please? I’ve only just got the one. I’d thank you for not

breaking it.”

He obliged, with a thump. Closed his book, looked at her, waited.

“Rainy day got you down?” he asked finally. “PMS? What?”

The PMS joke made her wrathful. She had a mind to tell him

the truth, that she was apparently menopausal. July’s early full moon

had snuck past her with no ovulation, and she couldn’t even recall

when she’d menstruated last. Her body was going cold on her. She

tossed her boots at the door and stood up to pull off her soaked

jeans. She didn’t care if he watched or not, she didn’t even feel like

being modest. She was no virgin she-wolf, just an old woman with

no more patience for keeping a boy around.

“What reputation?” she said, hanging her wet clothes on a peg

near the stove and getting a clean towel out of the cabinet.
“Other

than Jerry and the guy who cuts my paycheck, there’s hardly anybody who remembers I’m up here. I’m that far gone.”

As she toweled her hair, she bent over toward the wood stove.

Her chilled-to-the-bone body was treating it as a source of warmth,

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she realized, even though there was no fire there. She also noticed

he was watching every move of her naked limbs, taking in the long

muscles of her thighs.

“If you don’t care what people think,” he said, “then what’s the

problem? Why was I supposed to hide from young Smokey?”

“He’s not that much younger than you are. You’re both just a

couple of kids. Button your shirt, my God, it’s freezing in here.”

“Yes, Mother.” He made no move to button his shirt.

She stood up, hugging the towel to her chest. “Why are we playing house here, you and me? Do you know I’m forty-seven

years old? The year you were learning to walk, I had my first affair

with a married man. Does that not freak you out?"

He shook his head. "Not really."

"Does me. All of it does. That I spent six years researching an

animal you'd like to see purged from the planet. That I'm half a foot

taller than you. Nineteen years older. If we walked down the street

together in Knoxville, people would gawk."

"As far as I know, walking down the street together in Knoxville is not in the plans."

She sat on the bed in her underwear, shivering, feeling suddenly

too exhausted even to sit up. She got under the blankets and pulled

them up to her chin. She tried that out, looking at him sideways

from the pillow. "As far as I know, there *are* no plans."

"Is that a problem?"

"No," she said, miserably.

He put his bare feet flat on the floor and leaned forward with his

elbows on his knees. When he spoke again he used a new version of

his voice, quieter and kinder. "I guess we might seem like a weird

pair to anybody who was looking. But if nobody's looking, there's

no weirdness. I thought it was pretty simple."

"If pride falls in the forest and nobody hears it, did it really

fall?”

He blinked. “What?”

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“You’re ashamed of me,” she said. “*I’m* ashamed of me, of us.

Otherwise we’d be able to walk down the street anywhere.”

He studied her face, seeming momentarily older—as if he could will himself into moments of maturity, she thought, but normally just didn’t bother. He was twenty-eight, a juvenile male. Like

a yearling red-tailed hawk with his dark adult feathers just starting

to show through. On the matter of mate choice, she was apparently

addled.

“Where I come from, people keep their treasure under the mattress,” he offered finally. “They don’t have to advertise it all over creation.”

“But if they keep it hidden they never get to use it.”

“What is there to *use* about you and me? Where are we supposed to be spending ourselves besides here?”

“Nowhere. I don’t know what I’m saying. Forget it.”

He sat up against the straight chair back and crossed his arms

over his chest. “I know what you’re saying. I’m really not all that

stupid. My immaturity notwithstanding.”

She lay still for a long time, looking at him from her prone position. His blue-green eyes, the exposed skin of his chest, the white

bone buttons on his corduroy shirt—all of his planes and angles

held a clear light whose beauty cut her like a knife.

“Eddie. It’s not like I want to get married and live happily ever

after.”

He winced a little, she thought, at the blunt mention of that possibility, even in the negative. “If you did,” he said slowly, “I’d be

in Alberta about now.”

“Alberta, Canada?” she asked. “Or Alberta, Kentucky? Just how

repellent are we talking about here?”

He stared at her, offering no answer.

She shook her head. “You’re not big enough to break my heart.

I’m not some schoolgirl, give me a little credit. But I’m not sure I

can be like you, either.”

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“What does that mean, ‘like me’?”

“Living with no plans at all. I keep bumping into walls.” She

rolled onto her back, unable to look at him anymore.

“When I

moved up here I thought I’d be just like the phoebes and wood

thrushes. Concentrate on every day as it came, get through winter,

rejoice in summer. Eat, sleep, sing hallelujah.”

“Eat, sleep, screw your heart out, sing hallelujah.”

“Well, yeah.” She covered her face with both hands and rubbed

her eyes. “The birds were getting a lot more action than me. But

you know what? Turns out they *do* have a plan. I’m an outsider, I’m

just watching. They’re all doing their own little piece of this big,

rowdy *thing*. Their plan is the persistence of life on earth, and they

are working on it, let me tell you.”

“You’re persisting.”

“In a real limited way. When I’m dead, what have I made that

stays here? A master’s thesis in the U.T. library, which eleven people

on the face of the earth have read or ever will.”

“I would read it,” he said. “So, twelve people.”

“You don’t want to.” She gave a short, unenthusiastic laugh. “It’s

the last thing you’d ever want to read. It’s about coyotes.”

“What about them?”

She turned her head to look at him. “Everything about them.

Their populations, how they’ve grown and changed over time. One

of the things it shows is how people’s hunting them actually increases their numbers.”

“That can’t be.”

“You wouldn’t think so. But it’s true. I’ve got a hundred pages

of proof.”

“I think I ought to read that.”

“If you want to. It’d be a nice gesture.” A gift before parting, she

thought. She turned back to the ceiling and closed her eyes, feeling

the distant pressure of a headache coming on. His reading it, or not,

wouldn’t buy her a place in the scheme of the planet. She pressed

her fingertips to her eyelids. “Maybe it’s my age, Eddie. You’ve got

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more time to pretend your life is endless. Before you face up to the

bigger picture.”

He didn’t ask her about the bigger picture. And he didn’t get up

and walk out the door. He asked if she would like him to make a

fire, and she said she would. Her body was shivering visibly. She

pulled the blankets over her head, leaving a small window through

which she could watch his careful, steady hands place kindling inside the stove. She thought about the things people did with their

highly praised hands: made fires that burned out; sawed down trees

to build houses that would rot and fall down in time. How could

those things compare with the grace of a moth on a leaf,
laying perfect rows of tiny, glassy eggs? Or a phoebe weaving
a nest of moss

in which to hatch her brood? Still, as she watched him
light a match

and bring warmth into the cabin while the rain pounded
down

overhead, she let herself feel thankful for those hands, at
least for

right now. When he climbed into bed beside her, they held
her until she fell asleep.

“You’re getting sick,” he told her when she opened her
eyes again.

She sat up, groggy and unsure of the time of day. He was
up and

dressed, shirt buttoned, even, working at the stove. He’d
hooked up

the new bottle of propane—a regular handyman. “What
time is it?”

she asked. “What do you mean I’m getting sick?”

“You sneezed in your sleep. Four times. I never heard
anybody

do that before.”

She stretched her limbs, feeling very tired and a little achy
from

the weed cutting, but nothing else. No headache; that threat
had

passed. “I think I’m OK.” She inhaled the rich, convivial
scent of

onions frying in oil, something wonderful. Occasionally it
took all

her wits to resist loving this man. She thought of coyotes;
that

helped. Something big enough to break her heart.

“You sneezed in your sleep,” he insisted. “I’m going out to get

some more firewood.” He dumped two handfuls of chopped veg²⁵⁹

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etables into the pot, poured in water from the kettle, and settled the

iron lid on it with a happy little ring.

“Is it dark? Wait! What time is it?” She scratched her scalp and

squinted at the window.

“Dusk. Why?”

“Be careful about the phoebe nest on the porch. Don’t scare her

off the nest. If she goes off it this late she might stay off all night,

and the kids will freeze.”

“It’s not that cold out. It’s July.”

“For a featherless little quarter ounce of bird it’s cold out.

They’ll die overnight if she’s not on them.”

Eddie seemed to have trouble believing in the summertime cold

up here, what people called blackberry winter. But he knew the

truth of her warning, that a bird chased off its nest at dusk wouldn’t

come back. She might sit fifty feet away from it, crying out to her

babies all night, stranded. Deanna had never known exactly why,

but Eddie had told her what a hunter knows about animal perceptions: most birds can't see in the dark. From one minute to the next,

at dusk, they go blind and can't see at all.

He smiled at her from the doorway. "I don't need four dead babies on my conscience, on top of all my other sins."

"It's important," she persisted.

"I know it is."

"It *is*. She's already lost one brood, thanks to us tromping around out there."

"I'll be careful," he said. "I'll tiptoe."

He did, apparently. She didn't hear another sound until he came

back in and stoked up the fire. She felt the mattress shift when he sat

down on it, heard the hiss of the match, and smelled its sulfur when

he leaned over to light the kerosene lamp on the table beside the

bed. "Roll over, I'll rub your back where it hurts."

"What'd you do, eat some Mr. Nice Guy mushrooms?" She

opened her eyes. "How do you know my back hurts?"

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"I'm always a nice guy, you just fail to see through my irritating

demeanor." He kissed her forehead. "You're coming down with

something. The flu or something. You felt hot as a furnace a while

ago. Roll over.”

“The epizooty,” she said. “Nannie used to say that. It’s a catchall

disease category.” She rolled over and lay with her face buried in the

pillow, smiling, suffocating with comfort as he massaged her shoulders. “Nannie was my dad’s girlfriend,” she said into the pillow,

which muffled her words completely.

“What?”

She turned over onto her back. “Nannie was my dad’s girlfriend.”

“Oh. I thought you said, ‘Eddie is a mad birdbrain.’ ”

“Well, yeah. That, too.”

“The apple-orchard lady, I know. You got free apples, and old

Dad got lucky.” His hands moved expertly down her sides, working

gently from rib to rib but pausing just under her breasts and finally

resting there, distracting her senseless. When she could no longer

stand the suspense, he unzipped his jeans and got under the quilts.

For a long time he stroked her without speaking.

“So,” she said. “You remember this junk I tell you about my life?”

“She had a baby with a hole in her heart. But she wouldn’t marry your dad.”

“You do remember. I’m never sure if you’re listening.”

“No future doesn’t mean I’m not here *now*.”

She wanted to believe it but couldn't, quite. "I don't know why

you'd invest the effort," she said. "If you're just going to have to forget it all later."

"You think I'm going to forget you when we're finished here?"

"Yes."

"No." He kissed her for a long time. She kept her eyes open,

watching. Kissing her with his eyes closed, he looked so vulnerable

and yielding that it was nearly painful to see it.

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"I'll forget you," she lied softly into his mouth. "The minute

you're gone."

He pulled away from her a little, looking at her eyes to see what

she meant. She couldn't focus as close as he could. That was age,

again.

"I'll make sure you don't," he promised, and she shivered, feeling the prescience of some deep change or damage. He would

make sure. The coyotes came unbidden to her mind: children in the

woods, huddled in their den away from the storm.

But Eddie Bondo's mind seemed to be here, focused on her,

making amends for whatever hurt he felt he'd delivered earlier—the

Alberta crack, she supposed. This was their strange dance.
More

than once now she'd flown into a rage at him and then
spent days

afterward offering food, cutting his hair, washing his
socks, her

unguents of apology. It made her think of the bobtail cat
she'd had

in childhood that would sometimes get mean when they
played and

scratch her, drawing blood; afterward he would always
hunt down a

mouse and bring her its liver.

Eddie had rolled on his side and propped himself up on
one elbow, the better to uncover her body and look at it. It had
taken

some getting used to, this. She fought the persistent urge to
cover

herself with the sheet.

"How come they never got hitched up?" he asked, tracing
her

aureoles with his index finger. "Your dad and his lady
friend."

"Nannie never did want to. I'm not sure why. I guess I
admired

her for it, though, for knowing her mind and wanting to be
on her

own. The county gossip was always that *Dad* wouldn't
marry *her*."

"You girls always get the losing end of gossip."

"Oh, you noticed. Yeah. And Nannie was kind of an odd
bird.

She still is. But he would have married her in a second. He was like

that, just a plain honorable guy.”

“Unlike me.”

“Very. I think it turned him sad in the long run, that she wouldn’t marry him. Especially after Rachel turned out so sickly.

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When she died, it tore everybody up. Dad was losing our farm at

the time, and he just fell to pieces drinking. I’m sure it broke

Nannie’s heart, too, but she wore it better.”

“And what about you? She was your sister. Half-sister.”

“Yeah, she was. I can’t explain it, but I always knew she was going back to Heaven. She’d just come to be my little sister for a

while. Rachel was this angel. We’d play pirate ship and I’d be the

captain and she’d be the angel. She was happy all the time. She had

this kind of creamy skin you could almost see through. It was a local tragedy when she died.”

Deanna closed her eyes, feeling weirdly hollow inside from this

talk. It might be a fever, making her so loose and dreamy. “Nannie’s

tough, though; she’s carried on all these years. She lives her life how

she wants to, no matter what people say.”

“So that’s where you learned it from.”

Deanna laughed. “Oh, boy. You should see what a mess I made out of life. I went to college and proceeded to go to bed with my professors left and right.”

He moved his body against hers, all of it, hard and warm and impossible to ignore. “You were pursuing higher learning.”

“Low learning. I don’t know what I was doing. I think I had this daddy complex. I listened to my instructors. I married one of my instructors. He thought I was brilliant, so I married him. He said I talked like a hillbilly, so I stopped saying ‘Hit’s purty’ and ‘Oncet in a while.’ He said I should be a teacher, so I got certified and taught school in Knoxville and spent my twenties and half my thirties going out of my gourd.”

“What did you teach?”

“Science and math and Please Shut Up, to seventh graders.”

While they’d been speaking he had moved on top of her, supporting his weight on his elbows, and gently slid inside her without changing the tone of his voice or the conversation. She inhaled sharply, but he touched a finger to her lips and kept talking. “No, I can’t see you with an apple on your desk. I see you throwing chalk.”

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She lay perfectly still, catching her breath. As if she'd seen
a
snake.

“Maybe I threw some chalk, I don't remember. I liked the
kids

sometimes, but mostly I felt like I was under siege.” She
spoke

slowly and calmly, and it all seemed very secret, as if their
bodies

were hiding from their minds. “I'm an introvert,” she
continued

carefully. “I like being alone. I like being outside in the
woods. And

there I was. Living in a little brick house in a big-city
suburb,

spending my days with hundreds of small, unbelievably
loud human

beings.”

He had begun to move inside her, unhurriedly. It took
some

concentration to keep her voice steady. She felt the corners
of her

mouth drawing back involuntarily, like the copperhead's
smile.

“You'd think I could have figured it out, but I was restless
for ten

years before it dawned on me that I needed to go to
graduate school

and study wildlife biology and get myself out of there.”

“And here you are.” He held her eyes, smiling, while he
slowly,

slowly moved his hips. Her pelvis tilted, reaching for him.

“And here I am.”

“And you and the professor never had kids?”

“Oh, that was out of the question. He’d been married before.

He had two teenagers already when I met him. The way he did the

math, he and his ex-wife had replaced themselves. There was no

more room on the earth for him to put another kid.”

“Wow. That’s some pretty strict math.”

“He was like that. German.”

“But you hadn’t replaced *yourself*.”

“I guess that wasn’t his problem. He had a vasectomy.”

“And that was that. No regrets?”

“I’m not all that maternal.”

He slipped a hand under the small of her back and pushed himself up very far inside her until she began to lose her train of

thought. He had a way of reaching against her pelvic bone, creating

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a kind of pressure in a place no man had found before.
Intercourse

with Eddie Bondo was a miracle of nature. He held her there, with

her back arched, and chuckled softly against her cheek.

“*You*. You spend more time making sure you don’t hurt a spider

or a baby bird than most people do taking care of their kids. You're maternal."

He was still listening to her. She couldn't even remember what she'd said.

"Shhh," he said suddenly, tightening his grip on her and going perfectly still. "What *is* that?"

They listened to the soft sliding noise overhead in the roof boards. It was a dry, rough, papery scrape, almost like sandpaper

moving through slow circles over a rough board. The sound had become nearly constant these days, in the evenings, when the rain

wasn't drowning it out.

"It's not a mouse," Deanna conceded finally.

"I know it's not a mouse. You always say it's a mouse, but it's

not. It's something long and slidey."

" 'Slidey'?" she asked. "And *you* make fun of the way *I* talk?"

"Long and scaly, then."

"Yeah," she said. "It's a snake. Probably a big old blacksnake that

came in out of the rain one day, hit the mouse jackpot, and decided

to stay."

Eddie Bondo shivered. She felt him going soft inside her, and

she laughed. "Don't tell me you're scared of snakes? You are!"

He rolled off of her, throwing an arm over his face.

“Why, my lands, Eddie *Bon* do. A brave guy like you.”

“I’m not scared of them. I just don’t like the idea of one crawling around above me while I sleep.”

“Oh, well, don’t sleep, then. Just lie here listening for it. Tell me

if he’s headed down here for the bed. Good night!” She leaned

over, feigning to blow out the lamp.

“Don’t do that!” He struck a tone of true panic at the combi**265**

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nation of snake and darkness. But then he grabbed her pillow and

whacked her with it, to cover his embarrassment. She let the lamp

burn and fell back on the bed, delighted with herself.

“Lady,” he said, “you are one mean son of a gun.”

She took the pillow from him and settled it back under her head, relishing the upper hand. All her life in Zebulon County she’d

known big, husky men who worked dispassionately with fierce machinery and steers big enough to kill them, but who freely admitted to a terror of snakes of any kind. At nine years of age Deanna

Wolfe had made a legend of herself by bringing an eight-foot

blacksnake to school.

“It just does not make any sense to despise that snake up there,”

she told Eddie. “He’s on our side. I hate mice, is what I hate—getting into my food. Making their nest in the drawer so

my socks stink

like mouse pee. Running over my feet in the morning and making

me throw my coffee against the wall. If you took all the snakes out

of this world, people would be screaming bloody murder at the rodent plague. Not just here. In cities, too.”

“Thank you, Miss Science Teacher. Too bad we’re not all as logical as you are. You know what?” He rolled over and whispered in

her ear, “You’re scared of thunder.”

“I’m not, either.”

“You are. I’ve seen you jump.”

“That’s a startle response, not fear. Thunder is nothing but two

walls of split-apart air coming back together, which could not hurt

a fly.”

He lay back against the pillow beside her, grinning fiercely.

“Which causes you to jump out of your skin.”

“Mice make me jump, too, but that’s not fear, that’s disgust.”

“OK, then. Snakes aren’t scary, they’re just disgusting.”

“Foolish choices, Eddie. People make them every day, but hating predators on principle is like hating the roof over your head on

principle. Me, I’ll take one snake over fifty mice in my house any

day. A snake in every roof.”

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He shuddered.

“Snakes have manners, at least—they stay out of your way.”

“Stay out of my way,” Eddie Bondo said to the roof.

“Don’t worry.” She pulled the covers up and put her head on

his shoulder. It was true that she had her own irrational fears. She

spoke quietly, stroking the hard, indented midline of his chest and

thinking of the cartilage that sheltered his heart. “It’s a singleminded predator, and its prey is not us. From a snake’s point of

view, we don’t even exist. We’re nothing to him. We’re safe.”

They lay still for a minute, listening to the cricket music of a

midsummer night. From somewhere nearby she heard the quiet little chirping call of a screech owl. It was not the breathy hoot of the

great owls but a more private sound, a high-pitched descending

chuckle. She listened for the answer and immediately it came, a series of soft, quick barks the little owls use at close range in breeding

season. They were finding each other out there in the darkness,

making their love right under the window. Deanna grazed the

length of Eddie Bondo’s collarbone with her lower lip. “So,” she

said, “could we go back to our previous conversation?”

“I’m not sure.” He lifted the blankets and looked. “Yes.”

She rolled away from his arms just long enough to blow out the

lamp. In a habit carried over from childhood, her mind whispered a

prayer of thanks, as small and quick as the extinction of lamplight

into darkness: *Thanks for this day, for all birds safe in their nests, for what-*

ever this is, for life.

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[Old Chestnuts](#)

with rain. Garnett could only look the hillside up

The bank of Egg Creek was soaked like a sponge

and down and shake his head. The ground had gotten so soft that a fifty-year-old oak growing out of it had leaned

over, pulled its roots out of the mud like loose teeth, and fallen over

before its time. What a mess. Somebody would have to be called,

some young man with a chain saw who could tame this tangle of

trunk and branches into a cord of firewood. Oda Black's son, now

there was a polite boy who could do it in one morning and not

charge a fortune.

The cost wasn't the problem, though. Finding a man to do it

wasn't even the problem. This section of Egg Creek stood as the

property line dividing Garnett's land from Nannie Rawley's, *that*

was the problem. It was only fair that she pay for half the cleanup—

or more, really, since it was *her* tree that had fallen on *him*. But they

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would have to come to some agreement, and for the likes of *that* no

precedent existed in the history of Garnett and Nannie.

He stared at the mess and sighed. If only she would come up

here and notice it so he wouldn't have to be the one to take the first

step. If Garnett brought it up, she would act like he was asking for

a favor. Which of course, he was not. He was calling attention to

her negligence, was all. Any farmer worth his salt walked his property lines after every storm to look for damage like this. But then

there was Nannie Rawley.

“Oh, me,” he declared aloud to the birds, some of whom were

merrily singing from the branches of the fallen oak without a care

over their world's sudden shift from vertical to horizontal. For that

matter, the fallen tree still burgeoned with glossy oak leaves—probably still trying to scatter its pollen to the wind and set acorns as if

its roots were not straggling in the breeze and its bulk doomed to

firewood.

Birds and oak trees have minds like hers, he thought, surveying this

profoundly deluded little world with an odd satisfaction.

He noted that more than half a dozen trees along this bank were

leaning precariously downhill from her side toward his. The next

storm would likely bring down more. One old cherry seemed particularly threatening, with nearly a forty-five-degree lean to it, right

out over the path he used to get up here. He made a mental note to

walk fast and not tarry anytime he had to pass under it. “Oh, me,”

he said again, as he turned back down the path toward his house

and whatever he had to do next.

It would have to be face-to-face. Not over the telephone. She

was never in her house, and she had one of those confounded machines that beeped at you and expected you to speak your whole

mind on the spot without even warming up to the subject. His

heart couldn't take those things; whenever one surprised him these

days he'd have to go lie down afterward. No, he would walk over

there today and get Nannie Rawley over with, like a dose of castor

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oil. Garnett felt a flutter of anger against his fate. Anytime he

thought he'd washed his hands of the woman, she'd turn up again

somewhere else nearby. She was worse than mildew. Why did God

insist on running this woman smack up against him, time and again?

He knew the answer, of course: Nannie Rawley was a test of his

faith, his cross to bear. But when would enough be enough?

"Haven't I done what I could?" he asked as he walked, raising

the palms of his hands and mouthing the words without sound.

"I've written letters. I've explained the facts. I've given her scientific

advice, and I have given her the Holy Word. Good God, have I not

done enough on behalf of that woman's mortal soul?"

One of the leaning trees in the bank shifted hard, with a groan

and a crack, causing the old man's heart to leap in his chest like a

crazed heifer trapped in the loading chute. He stopped dead on the

trail, laying a hand on his chest to calm that poor doomed beast.

“All right,” Garnett Walker said to his God. “All *right!*”

Garnett did admire a well-set orchard, he’d give her that much. He

liked the cool, shaded ground spread under the trees like a broad

picnic blanket, and he liked how the trunks lined up for your eye as

you walked through: first in straight rows and then in diagonals, depending on how you looked. A forest that obeyed the laws of man

and geometry, that was the satisfaction. Of course, these trees had

been planted by old Mr. Rawley back in ’fifty-one or so, while she

was off at her college. If *she’d* done the planting, why, they’d surely

be all higgledy-piggledy like trees in a woodland glade. She’d have

some theory about that being better for the apples.

He knew for a fact she was putting in a new section of trees in

the field on the other side of her house, though he hadn’t been over

there, so he couldn’t say if they were straight or not. She’d mentioned that they were scions cloned off one of the wildings that had

sprung up in the fallow pasture on the hill behind her orchard. That

field looked awful, the way she was letting it grow up, but she

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claimed it was her and the birds' big experiment and that she'd discovered a particularly good accidental cross up there, which she'd

patented under the name "Rachel Carson." What did she think she

was doing, patenting a breed and grafting out a whole new orchard?

Those trees wouldn't start to bear apples for another ten years. Who

did she think would be around to pick them?

Garnett's plan today had been to go right up and rap on her screen door, but on his way up the drive he'd spied her ladders and

picking paraphernalia scattered around out here in the orchard on

the west side. He crossed over just below her big vegetable garden,

which looked well tended, he had to admit. By some witchcraft she

was getting broccoli and eggplant without spraying. Garnett didn't

even plant broccoli anymore—it was just fodder for the looper

worms—and his eggplants got so full of flea beetles they looked like

they'd taken a round of buckshot. He inspected her corn, which

was tasseling nicely, two weeks ahead of his. Did she have corn earworms, at least? He tried not to hope so. He'd gone almost as far as

the line fence that separated their fields when he heard her humming up in the foliage and saw her legs on the ladder,

sticking out

below the ceiling of green leaves overhead. *This is how a duck must*

look to a turtle underwater, he thought wickedly. Then he took a deep

breath. He wasn't going to dally around here.

"Hello! I have some news," he called. "One of your trees came

down on me."

Her dirty white tennis shoes descended two rungs on the ladder, and her face peered down at him through the branches. "Well,

you don't look that much the worse for it, Mr. Walker."

He shook his head. "There's no need to behave like a child."

"It wouldn't hurt you, though," she said. "Now and then." She

climbed back up into the boughs of her apple, a June Transparent—

he could tell from the yellow fruits lying on the ground. She was

picking June apples in the middle of July. It figured.

"I have a piece of business to discuss with you," he said sternly.

"I would appreciate talking with you down here on solid ground."

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She climbed down her ladder with a full apple basket over her

arm, muttering about having to work for a living instead of collecting a retirement pension. She set her basket on the

ground and

put her hands on her hips. “All right. If you’re going to be sanctimonious about it, *I* have a piece of business to discuss with *you!*”

He felt his heart stutter a little. It aggravated him no end that she

could scare him this way. He stood still, breathed slowly, and told

himself that what he beheld was nothing to be afraid of. This was

no more daunting than a piece of ground that needed plowing—a

small, female terrain. “What is it, then?”

“That god-awful Sevin you’ve been spraying on your trees every blooming day of the week! You think you’ve got troubles, a

tree came over on you? Well your poison has been coming down on

me, and I don’t just mean my property, my apples, I mean *me*. I have

to breathe it. If I get lung cancer, it will be on your conscience.”

Her hail of words stopped; their gazes briefly met and then fell

to the grass around each other’s feet. Ellen had died of lung cancer,

metastasized to the brain. People always remarked on the fact that

she never had smoked.

“I’m sorry, you’re thinking about Ellen,” Nannie said. “I’m not

saying your poisons caused her to get sick.”

She had thought it, though, Garnett realized with a shock.

Thought it and put it about so other people were thinking it, too.

It dawned on him with a deeper dread that it might possibly be

true. He'd never read the fine print on the Sevin dust package, but

he knew it got into your lungs like something evil. Oh, Ellen. He

raised his eyes to the sky and suddenly felt so dizzy he was afraid he

might have to sit down on the grass. He put a hand to his temple

and with the other reached for the trunk of a June Transparent.

"This isn't going well," Nannie observed. "I didn't mean to start

off hateful, right off the bat. I thought I'd give us some room to

work up to it." She hesitated. "Could you maybe use a glass of

water?"

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"I'm fine," he said, recovering his balance. She turned over a

pair of bushel baskets and motioned for him to sit.

"I've just been festering about it too long," she said. "Just now I

was up there stewing over a whole slew of things at once: your poison, the bills I need to pay, the shingles off my roof I can't replace.

Dink Little claims they don't make that kind anymore, can you

imagine? It's just been one darn thing after another this week, and

when you came hollering at me all of a sudden, I let the dam

burst." She reached between her knees and scooted her bushel forward so they faced each other directly, within spitting distance.

"What we need is to have a good, levelheaded talk about this pesticide business, farmer to farmer."

Garnett felt a pang of guilt about the shingles but let it pass. "It's

the middle of July," he said. "The caterpillars are on my seedlings

like the plague. If I didn't spray I'd lose all this year's new crosses."

"See, but you're killing all my beneficials. You're killing my pollinators. You're killing the songbirds that eat the bugs. You're just a

regular death angel, Mr. Walker."

"I have to take care of my chestnuts," he replied firmly.

She gave him a hard look. "Mr. Walker, is it my imagination, or

do you really think your chestnuts are more important than my apples? Just because you're a man and I'm a woman? You seem to forget, my apple crop is my living. Your trees are a *hobby*."

Now, that was low. Garnett should have called on the phone.

Talking to a brainless machine would beat this. "I never said a thing

about your apples. I'm helping you out by spraying. The caterpillars

would be over here next."

"They *are* over here. I can keep them under control my own

way, normally. But your spraying always causes a caterpillar boom."

He shook his head. "How many times do I have to listen to that

nonsense?"

She leaned forward, her eyes growing wide. "Until you've *heard* it!"

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{ BARBARA KING SOLVER }

"I've heard it. Too many times."

"No, now, I haven't explained it to you right. I always had a

hunch, but I couldn't put it in words. And, see, last month they had

a piece on it in the *Orchardman's Journal*. It's a whole scientific thing,

a principle. Do you want me to get you the magazine, or just explain it in my own words?"

"I don't think I have any choice," he said. "I'll listen for the flaw

in your reasoning. Then you'll have to hush up about this for good."

"Good," she said, shifting her bottom on the basket. "All right,

now. Goodness, I feel a little bit nervous. Like I'm back in college,

taking an exam.” The anxious way she looked up at him reminded

Garnett of all the years of boys who’d feared him in his vo-ag

classes. He wasn’t a mean teacher; he’d just insisted that they get

things *right*. Yet they’d dreaded him for it. They were never his

chums, as they were with Con Ricketts in shop, for instance. It

made for a long, lonely life, this business of getting things right.

“OK, here we go,” she said finally, clasping her hands together.

“There are two main kinds of bugs, your plant eaters and your bug

eaters.”

“That’s right,” he said patiently. “Aphids, Japanese beetles, and

caterpillars all eat plants. To name just a few. Ladybugs eat other

small bugs.”

“Ladybugs do,” she agreed. “Also spiders, hornets, cicada killers, and a bunch of other wasps, plus your sawflies and parasitic

hymenoptera, and lots more. So out in your field you have predators and herbivores. You with me so far?”

He waved a hand in the air. “I taught vocational agriculture for

half as long as you’ve been alive. You have to get up early in the

morning to surprise an old man like me.” Although, truth to tell,

Garnett had never heard of parasitic hymenoptera.

“Well, all right. Your herbivores have certain characteristics.”

“They eat plants.”

“Yes. You’d call them pests. And they reproduce fast.”

“Don’t I know it!” Garnett declared.

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“Predator bugs don’t reproduce so fast, as a rule. But see, that

works out right in nature because one predator eats a world of pest

bugs in its life. The plant eaters have to go faster just to hold their

ground. They’re in balance with each other. So far, so good?”

Garnett nodded. He found himself listening more carefully than

he’d expected.

“All right. When you spray a field with a broad-spectrum insecticide like Sevin, you kill the pest bugs *and* the predator bugs,

bang. If the predators and prey are balanced out to start with, and

they both get knocked back the same amount, then the pests that

survive will *increase* after the spraying, fast, because most of their enemies have just disappeared. And the predators will *decrease* because

they’ve lost most of their food supply. So in the lag between sprayings, you end up boosting the numbers of the bugs you don’t want

and wiping out the ones you need. And every time you spray, it gets

worse.”

“And then?” Garnett asked, concentrating on this.

She looked at him. “And that’s it, I’m done. The Volterra principle.”

Garnett felt hoodwinked. How could she do this every time? In

another day and age they’d have burned her for a witch. “I didn’t

find the fault in your thinking,” he admitted.

“Because it’s not there!” she cried. “Because I’m right!” The little woman was practically crowing.

“The agricultural chemical industry would be surprised to hear

your theory.”

“Oh, fiddle, they know all about it. They just hope *you* don’t.

The more money you spend on that stuff, the more you need. It’s

like getting hooked on hooch.”

“Pssht,” he scolded. “Let’s don’t get carried away.”

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and looked at him

very earnestly with eyes that had the color and deep shine of a polished chestnut. He’d never noticed her eyes before.

“If you don’t believe those fellows are bad eggs, then you’re a

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dupe, Mr. Walker. Have you been getting those fliers from the

Extension? Now all the companies are pushing that grain
with its

genes turned out of whack, and fools are growing it!”

“Modern farmers try new things,” he said. “Even in
Zebulon
County.”

“Half the world won’t eat that grain; there’s a boycott on
it. Any

farmer that plants it will go bankrupt in a year or two.
That’s modern farming for you.”

“That’s taking a dim view.”

She slapped her hands on her knees. “Look around you,
old

man! In your father’s day all the farmers around here were
doing

fine. Now they have to work night shifts at the Kmart to
keep up

their mortgages. Why is that? They work just as hard as
their parents did, and they’re on the same land, so what’s
wrong?”

Garnett could feel the sun’s insistent heat on the back of
his

neck. Nannie, facing him, was forced to squint. They’d
started this

conversation in the shade, but now the sun had moved out
from behind a tree—that was how long they’d been sitting
here on bushel

baskets speaking of nonsense. “Times change,” Garnett
said. “That’s
all.”

“*Time* doesn’t change; *ideas* change. Prices and markets
and

laws. Chemical companies change, and turn your head
along with

them, looks like. If that's what you mean by 'time,' then
yes, sir, we

have lived to see things get worse."

Garnett laughed, thinking for some reason of the boy who
drove the UPS truck. "I won't argue with that," he said.

She shaded her eyes and looked right straight at him.
"Then

why do you make fun of my way of farming for being
oldfashioned, right to my face?"

Garnett stood up, brushing invisible dirt off the knees of
his

trousers. There was a high, steady buzz that he'd thought
was his

hearing aid, but now he decided it was coming from the
trees and

the air itself. It made him feel jumpy. This whole place was
giving

him the all-overs.

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She stayed seated but followed him around the glade with
her

eyes, waiting for an answer he couldn't assemble. Why did
Nannie

Rawley bother him so? Dear Lord, if he had world enough
and

time, he still couldn't answer. He stopped pacing and
looked down

at her sitting there wide-eyed, waiting for judgment. She
didn't

look old-fashioned, exactly, but like a visitor to this day from an earlier time—like a girl, with her wide, dark eyes and her crown of braided hair. Even the way she was dressed, in denim dungarees and a sleeveless white shirt, gave her the carefree air of a child out of school for summer, Garnett thought. Just a girl. And he felt tongue-tied and humiliated, like a boy.

“Why does everything make you so mad?” she asked finally. “I only wish you could see the beauty in it.”

“In what?” he asked. A cloud passed briefly over the sun, causing everything to seem to shift a little.

“Everything.” She flung out an arm. “This world! A field of plants and bugs working out a balance in their own way.”

“That’s a happy view of it. They’re killing each other, is what they’re doing.”

“Yes, sir, eating others and reproducing their own, that’s true.

Eating and reproducing, that’s the most of what God’s creation is all about.”

“I’m going to have to take exception to that.”

“Oh? Are you thinking you got here some way different than the rest of us?”

“No,” he said irritably. “I just don’t choose to wallow in it.”

“It’s not *mud*, Mr. Walker. It’s glory, to be part of a bigger something. The glory of an evolving world.”

“Oh, now,” he cried. “Don’t even get started on your evolution.

I already put you straight on that.” He paced in a circle like a dog

preparing to lie down, and then stopped. “Didn’t you get my letter?”

“Your thank-you note for the blackberry pie I baked you? No, I

don’t believe I got any such a thing. I got some evil words about bra277

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burning Unitarian women and casting my soul to the jaws of Satan

like the snapper that ate my duckling. I think some crazy man must

have addressed that letter to me by mistake. I threw it in the trash.”

He had never seen her get quite this agitated before. Garnett

said nothing. She got up and picked up an apple from the grass,

then tossed it from hand to hand. “That was mean, about my duckling,” she added. “And the Unitarian position on underwear is none

of your business, if there even *was* one, which there isn’t. Nobody’s

seen *my* underwear since Ray Dean Wolfe died, so you can keep

your thoughts about my body to yourself.”

“Your body!” he said, mortified. “That letter was not how

you're telling it. It was about your mistaken belief in a flawed theory of the earth's creation, answered clear and plain beyond a

shadow of a doubt."

"You live your whole darn life beyond a shadow of a doubt,

don't you?"

"I have convictions," he said.

She tilted her head, looking up at him. He could never tell if

she was coy or just a little hard of hearing. "You want to make

everything so simple," she said. "You say only an intelligent, beautiful creator could create beauty and intelligence? I'll tell you what.

See that basket of June Transparents there? You know what I put on

my trees to make those delicious apples? Poop, mister. Horse poop

and cow poop."

"Are you likening the Creator to manure?"

"I'm saying your logic is weak."

"I'm a man of science."

"Well, then, you're a poor one! Don't tell me I can't understand

the laws of thermodynamics. I went to college once upon a time,

and it was *after* they discovered the world was round. I'm not scared

of big words."

"I didn't say you were."

“You did, too! ‘I realize you’re no scientist, Miss Rawley,’” she

mocked, in an unnecessarily prissy version of his voice.

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“No, now, I just meant to set you straight on a few points.”

“You self-righteous old man. Do you ever wonder why you don’t have a friend in the world since Ellen died?”

He blinked. He may have even allowed his jaw to go a little

slack.

“Well, I’m sorry to be the one to break it to you. But just listen

to yourself talk!” she cried. “‘How could random chance—i.e.

evolution—create complex life-forms?’ How can you be so self-satisfied and so ignorant at the same time?”

“Goodness. Did you *memorize* my letter before you threw it in

the trash?”

“Oh, phooey, I didn’t have to, I’ve heard it all before. You get

your arguments straight out of those dumb little pamphlets. Whoever writes those things should get some new material.”

“Well, then,” he said, crossing his arms, “how *does* random

chance create complex life-forms?”

“This just seems ridiculous, a man who does what you do claiming not to believe in the very thing he’s doing.”

“What I do has nothing to do with apes’ turning helter-skelter

into thinking men.”

“Evolution isn’t helter-skelter! It’s a business of choosing things

out, just like how you do with your chestnuts.” She nodded toward

his seedling field and then frowned, looking at it more thoughtfully.

“In every generation, all the trees are a little different, right? And

which ones do you choose to save out for crossing?”

“The ones that survive the blight best, obviously. I inoculate the

trees with blight fungus and then measure the size of the cankers.

Some of them hardly get sick at all.”

“All right. So you pick out the best survivors, you cross their

flowers with one another and plant their seeds, and then you do it

all over again with the next generation. Over time you’re, what,

making a whole new kind of chestnut plant?”

“That’s right. One that can resist the blight.”

“A whole new species, really.”

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“No, now, only God can do that. I can’t make a chestnut into

an oak.”

“You could if you had as much time as God does.”

Oh, if only I did, Garnett thought with the deep despair of a man running out of time. Just enough years to make a good chestnut, that was all he wanted, but in his heart he knew he couldn’t

expect them. He had thought sometimes of praying for this but trembled to think what God would make of his request. Ellen

had not been granted time enough even to make peace with her

own son.

But he was drifting. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,”

he said irritably.

“What you’re doing is artificial selection,” she replied calmly.

“Nature does the same thing, just slower. This ‘evolution’ business

is just a name scientists put on the most obvious truth in the world,

that every kind of living thing adjusts to changes in the place where

it lives. Not during its own life, but you know, down through the

generations. Whether you believe in it or not, it’s going on right

under your nose over there in your chestnuts.”

“You’re saying that what I do with chestnut trees, God does

with the world.”

“It’s a way to look at it. Except you have a goal, you know what

you want. In nature it’s predators, I guess, a bad snap of weather,

things like that, that cull out the weaker genes and leave the strong

ones to pass on. It’s not so organized as you are, but it’s just as dependable. It’s just the thing that always happens.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t liken God’s will to a thing that just hap-

pens.”

“All right, then, don’t. I don’t care.” She sounded upset. She sat

back down on her bushel, tossed the apple away, and put her face in

her hands.

“Well, I *can’t.*” He tried to hold still instead of pacing around,

but his knees hurt. “That’s just a godless darkness, to think there’s

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no divine goal. Mankind can’t be expected to function in a world

like that. The Lord God is good and just.”

When she looked up at him, there were tears in her eyes.

“Mankind functions with whatever it has to. When you’ve had a

child born with her chromosomes mixed up and spent fifteen years

watching her die, you come back and tell me what’s good and just.”

“Oh, goodness,” Garnett said nervously. The sight of a woman’s

tears in broad daylight should be against the law.

She fished in her pocket for a handkerchief and blew her nose

loudly. “I’m all right,” she said after a minute. “I didn’t say what I

meant to, there.” She blew her nose again, like nobody’s business. It

was a little shocking. She rubbed her eyes and stuffed the red bandanna back in her pocket. “I’m not a godless woman,” she said. “I

see things my own way, and most of it makes me want to get up in

the morning and praise glory. I don’t see you doing that, Mr.

Walker. So I don’t appreciate your getting all high and mighty about

the darkness in my soul.”

He turned his back on her and looked out over his own land.

The narrow, bronze-tipped leaves of the young chestnuts waved

like so many flags, each tree its own small nation of genetic

promise. He said, “You called me a bitter old man. That wasn’t

nice.”

“Any man who’d cut off his own son like a limb off a tree is bitter. That’s the word for it.”

“That’s none of your business.”

“He needs help.”

“That’s not your business, either.”

“Maybe not. But put yourself in my shoes. I’d give up the rest

of my life in one second if it could help Rachel, and I’ve lost that

chance. If I could have gotten the doctors to cut out my heart and

put it into her, I would have. So how do you think it feels to watch

other people throw away their living children?”

“I have no children.”

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“You did have one for twenty years. And he’s still alive, last I

heard.”

Garnett could feel her eyes on the back of his shirt like the

noonday sun, but he couldn't turn around. He just let her go on hitting him with her words, blunt as rocks. "He's walking around

somewhere carrying your genes and Ellen's." She paused, but he

still didn't turn around. "Even your same *name*, for heaven's sakes.

And you won't help him, or claim him? Looks to me like you've

given up on the world and everything in it, including yourself."

Garnett wanted nothing but to walk away from there. But he

couldn't let her be right about this, too. He turned to face his

neighbor. "I can't help that boy. He has to help himself. There

comes a time."

"You think he's still a boy? He must be in his thirties by now."

"And still a boy. He'll be a man when he decides to act like one.

It's not just me that thinks that. Ellen went to those meetings for years,

and that's what they told her. With the drinking and all that, they have

to decide for themselves to get better. They have to *want* to."

"I understand," she said, crossing her arms and looking down at

all the bruised apples strewn through the grass. She kicked at one

with the rubber toe of her small white canvas shoe. “I just hate to

see you forget about him.”

Forget? Garnett felt a sting of salt in his eye and turned his head

away, looking for something to look at. What a useless, pathetic

business, the human tear duct! His cloudy vision settled on a square

white wooden box at the edge of her garden. He puzzled over it for

a minute and then remembered that Nannie kept beehives. She was

in thrall of bees, as of so many other things. It was true what she’d

said: she was a surprisingly happy woman most of the time. And he

was often quite glum.

“We had that boy too late in life,” he confessed, keeping his

back to her. “We were like Abraham and Sarah. At first we couldn’t

believe our luck, but a baby worried us to death, and a teenager

plain bewildered us. Sometimes I wonder what Abraham and Sarah

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would have done if they’d had their son in the day of hot rods and

beer.”

He was startled by her hand, laid gently on his upper arm
for

just a few seconds. She had surprised him by coming up on
him that

way, from behind. After she took her hand away he could
still feel

its pressure there, as if his skin were somehow changed
underneath

the cloth of his shirt.

“There’s always more to a story than a body can see from
the

fence line,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

They stood side by side with their arms crossed, looking
over

toward her blossoming garden and his field of young
chestnuts behind it. At such close range, standing quiet this
way, Nannie lacked

her usual force. She just seemed small—the crown of her
head

barely came up to his shoulder. *Goodness, we are just a
pair of old folks,*

he thought. *Two old folks with our arms folded over our
shirtfronts and our*

sorry eyes looking for heaven.

“We’ve both had our griefs to bear, Miss Rawley. You and
I.”

“We have. What worse grief can there be than to be old
without young ones to treasure, coming up after you?”

He cast an eye out over his field of robust young chestnuts
yearning for their future. But the pain was so great, he
could not

look that way for long.

An indigo bunting let out a loud, cheerful song from the fencepost, and the strange buzzing sound also rose in the clear air. Why,

that was her bees, Garnett realized. A world of busy bees doing

their work in field and orchard. Not his hearing aid.

When he felt sure most of the emotions had safely passed over,

Garnett cleared his throat. “The reason I came down here, like I

said, is because one of your trees has come down on my property.

Up in the back.” He nodded toward the rise of the mountain.

“Oh, up there across the creek?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not surprised. There’s trees galore up there threatening to

come down. I won’t miss it much. What kind was it?”

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“An oak.”

“Well, that’s sad. One less oak in the world.”

“It’s still in the world,” he pointed out. “On my property.”

“Give it a year,” she said. “The carpenter ants and bark beetles

will take it on back to good dirt.”

“I was thinking of something more expeditious,” he said. “Such

as Oda Black’s boy and a chain saw.”

She looked at him. “Why on earth? What harm is that tree doing you up there in the woods? For heaven’s sakes. The raccoons can

use it for a bridge. The salamanders will adore living under it while

it rots. The woodpeckers will have a heyday.”

“It looks unsightly.”

She sighed, overdramatically in Garnett’s opinion. “All right,”

she said, “call Oda’s boy if you want. I expect you’ll want me to pay

half.”

“Half would be fair.”

“The firewood’s mine, though,” she said. “All.”

“It’s on my land. It’s my firewood.”

“My oak!”

“Well, now. A minute ago you wanted it to rot into topsoil.

Now you want the firewood. You don’t seem to know what you

want.”

She let out a little explosion of air through her nose. “You are a

sanctimonious old fart,” she announced, before stooping to pick up

her basket of June Transparents and tromping off toward her barn.

Garnett watched her go. He stood there for quite a while, in fact,

letting his shoes inhabit Nannie’s green, manure-drunk orchard

grass while he pondered the risky terrain of a woman’s mind.

He really had intended to thank her for the pie.

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[Moth Love](#)

In the summer after her husband's death Lusa discovered lawn-mower therapy. The engine's vibrations roaring through her body and its thunderous

noise in her ears seemed to bully all human language from her head,

chasing away the complexities of regret and recrimination. It was a

blessing to ride over the grass for an hour or two as a speechless

thing, floating through a universe of vibratory sensation. By accident, she had found her way to the mind-set of an insect.

Like so many tasks that had always been Cole's, the mowing was

something she'd initially dreaded taking on. For the first weeks

postfuneral, Little and Big Rickie did it alternately without a word.

But then the day came when she noticed that the yard was calf-deep

in grass and dandelions. The world grows quickly impatient with

grief, she observed, and that world seemed to think her chores were

her own now. Lusa would have to put on her sunglasses
and boots

and go see if she could get the mower started.

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At first she'd been dismayed by the steepness of the slopes
and

by how perilously the riding mower tilted toward creeks
and ditches,

but she'd concentrated on finding the Zen of a straight,
even roadside or a spiral of tightening concentric circles in a
yard. After her

first few hours she realized she had stopped thinking
altogether. She

was just a body vibrating like one of Heaven's harp strings
in the

sharp, green-scented air. The farmhouse was surrounded
by acres of

yard, side yard, and barnyard, not to mention a mile of
shoulder on

both sides of her road that she had to keep clear. In a
summer as

rainy as this one she could hardly afford to pass a dry day
without

spending some part of it on the mower.

So that was where she was on the morning Hannie-Mavis
and

Jewel drove up to drop off Crys before heading to
Roanoke for another chemo. Not both Jewel's kids, only
Crystal. The plan was for

Lois to pick up Lowell from T-ball and keep him overnight
while

his sister stayed here. Evidently Crys had used up all her
other aunts:

her last time at Lois and Rickie's she'd had a fit, broken a porcelain

praying-hands statue on purpose, and hidden out overnight in the

barn. This was reported to Lusa along with the claim that Emaline's

new work schedule made her too tired to take the kids, and Mary

Edna wouldn't have the child in her house, period, until she quoteunquote straightened up and flew right. Lusa understood that they

must be desperate to ask for her help; she didn't know the first thing

about taking care of a child like Crys. But at least she didn't enforce

a dress code.

She killed the mower engine as they pulled up, but the two women waved frantically and called out that they were running late

for Jewel's appointment. Crys got out of the back of the sedan,

Hannie-Mavis reminded her to get her overnight bag, and Jewel

yelled at her to be good, all in the same instant, and then they were

off, sending gravel flying. Crys stared at Lusa with her eyes narrowed and her chin tucked down, like a guard dog on the brink of

its decision. Lusa could only stare back at this sullen, long-legged

urchin in her Oliver Twist haircut and high-water jeans. In her hand

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she clutched a small, white, squarish overnight case from another

era—probably something her mother or aunts had used in their

teens for happier sleepovers than this one. Here we are, Lusa

thought, widow and orphan, at the mercy of a family that takes no

prisoners.

“Hi,” Lusa said, trying not to sound too much like she was from

Lexington. She would never get the long, flat *i*, though, not the

way they said it around here.

“Hi-y,” the child mimicked, sure enough, eyeing Lusa with disdain.

Lusa licked her lips and thumped the steering wheel a couple of

times with her thumbs. “You want me to show you your room? So

you can unpack your bag?”

“ ’S got nothing in it. I just brung it so Aunt Hannie-Mavis would think I had clean underpants and stuff.”

“Oh,” Lusa said. “Then I guess you don’t need to unpack. Just

pitch it up there on the porch, then, and come help me finish the

mowing.”

Crys tossed the hard little cube toward the porch, underhand,

like a softball pitch. It hit the step and flew open, letting
fly a square

of mirror that broke to pieces on the stone steps. A banty
hen

scratching in the flower bed next to the porch let out a
squawk and

scrambled for safety. Lusa felt shaken by this child's
untempered hostility, but she knew enough not to show it.
"Oh, well," she said

carelessly. "There's seven years of bad luck."

"I already done had ten years of it," said Crys.

"No way. How old are you?"

"Ten."

Lord help me get through the next thirty hours, Lusa
pleaded to any

God who would listen.

"You know what, Crys? I've just got a few minutes left to
go on

this yard. You want to sit here on the seat with me and help
me

mow? Then we'll be done with this chore and we can find
something more fun to do."

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"Like what?"

She racked her brain wildly; suggest the wrong thing here
and

she might lose an eye. "Hunt bugs, maybe? I love bugs,
they're my

favorite thing—did you know I'm actually a bugologist?"

The child crossed her arms and looked elsewhere, waiting
for

Lusa to say something interesting for a change.

“Oh,” Lusa said, “but I guess you hate bugs. All the other women in this family fear and despise bugs. I’m sorry, I forgot.”

Crys shrugged. “I ain’t asceared of bugs.”

“No? Good, that makes two of us, then. Thank God I’ve finally

got somebody to go bug hunting with.” She pressed the clutch,

turned the key, and started the engine roaring again, then sat and

waited. After a second of hesitation Crys crossed the yard and

climbed onto the seat of the mower in front of Lusa.

“Uncle Rickie says you can’t do this ’cause hit’s dangerous,” she

declared loudly as they backed up a little and headed into a circular

path around the lower yard.

“Yeah, it’s probably dangerous for little kids,” Lusa yelled over

the engine noise. “But holy smokes, you’re *ten*, you’re not going

to fall off and get run over or anything. Here, put your hands on

the steering wheel, like this.” They bounced down a small embankment. “OK, you’re driving now. Don’t run over the chickens, or we’ll have chicken salad. And watch out for the rocks. Go

around, OK?”

She helped Crystal steer around a limestone outcrop on the

bank between the barn and the henhouse. Lusa had learned to give

it a wide margin, to spare the mower blade and also because she

loved the flowering weeds that had sprung up in this little island.

“What’s them orange flowers?” Crystal asked loudly. She seemed unperturbed to be having a conversation at this decibel level.

“Butterfly weed.” Lusa tried not to be shocked by her grammar,

which was noticeably worse even than that of the other kids in the

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family. She wondered if everyone had given up on Crystal, and if

so, how long ago.

“What’s butterflies do, smoke it?”

Lusa ignored this. “They drink nectar out of the flowers. And

there’s one kind, the monarch, that lays its eggs on the leaves so the

caterpillars can eat butterfly weed when they hatch out. And you

know what? The leaves make them poisonous! The whole plant’s

full of poison.”

“Like ’at stuff the doctor’s putting in Mama,” Crystal said.

It was unnerving to have this sad, bony little body so close to

her on the seat; it was all Lusa could do to keep from wrapping her

arms around it. “Yeah,” she said. “Kind of like that.”

“It makes Mama poison. Whenever she comes home from Roanoke we can’t go in her room or touch nothing in the bathroom after she goes pee. Or we’d die.”

“I don’t think you’d die. You’d get sick and throw up, maybe.”

Lusa allowed her chin to brush against the crown of the blond,

cropped head that bobbed just in front of her chin. It was brief, a

gesture that could pass for an accident. They stopped talking for a

minute while Lusa helped steer the mower around the shrinking

swath of remaining grass. “You know what?” Lusa said, “That’s exactly what happens to the monarch butterflies.”

“What does?”

“The caterpillars eat the poisonous leaves, and their bodies turn

toxic. So if a bird eats them, it vomits! It’s kind of a trick the butterfly plays on the birds to keep her caterpillars from getting eaten.”

Crystal seemed unimpressed. “But if a bird eats it and vomits,

the caterpillar’s already done keelt.”

It took a second for Lusa to interpret this. “It’s already been

killed? Well, yeah, *that* one has. But the birds learn their lesson, so

most of them don’t get eaten. It’s a scientific fact. Birds avoid eating

the caterpillars of monarch butterflies.”

“So what,” Crystal said after a minute.

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“So that’s one weird way that mothers can take care of their

children,” Lusa said. “Making them eat poison.”

“Yeah, but so what for the one that’s dead.”

“Good point,” Lusa said. “So what for him.” She would not go

into the current theories on kin selection. She reached under the

seat and pulled the lever that lifted the blade. “Let’s head into the

barn. We’ve done enough mowing for today; let’s go hunt bugs.”

She helped guide the mower in through the door of the barn cellar

and parked it inside.

When she cut the engine, her ears were left singing the high,

ringing complaint of assaulted eardrums. She and Crys climbed off

the machine and stood dazed for a minute while their eyes and ears

adjusted to the dim, dusty silence. Crys was peering up at the steps

that rose to a trapdoor in the floor of the barn above them. It was

more of a permanent stepladder than a staircase, and so twisted by

a hundred years of this structure's settling that none of its angles

squared with gravity anymore. It always made Lusa think of an

Escher drawing of a spiral staircase whose every flight seemed to

define "up" in a different direction. This thing looked so crazily

hazardous that she had never used it, even though it was a long walk

around to the ground-level entrance on the hillside.

"Can we go up there?"

"Sure." Lusa swallowed a taste of panic. "Good idea. We need

to go up to the storage room anyway, to get nets and collecting

jars."

The girl grasped the rickety, splintered wood and started to climb in the many different directions this staircase called "up." On

a wing and a prayer, Lusa followed. The trapdoor gave easily when

they shoved it. They stuck out their elbows like chickens spreading

their wings in the dust, pulled their bodies up through the hole, and

emerged into the main room of the barn. Lusa inhaled its perfume,

a faint petroleum pungency but mostly the mellow sweetness of old

tobacco. A fine brown dust of crumbled leaves inhabited every

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crevice of this place where Wideners had stripped, hung,
and baled

tobacco for over a hundred years.

The storeroom was a former corncrib, framed out in a
corner

of the barn and carefully rodent-proofed by means of wire
mesh

nailed over every square inch of its floor, walls, and
ceiling. Lusa

unlatched the door and felt depressed by the sight of this
dusty,

quiet room full of equipment. Everything here had been
touched

by Cole's hands at one time or another. He'd moved it,
stored it,

kept it in repair. A lot of it she didn't even know how to
use: sprayer

arms and tractor attachments, a long row of chemicals
stored on the

shelf. Vehicle parts. Stranger things, too: an antediluvian
oil furnace

and an assortment of horse and mule tack left from the
days before

tractors. An empty piano, just the wooden case, with
nothing inside. Lusa stored her own things in this room but
had never really

looked around at everything else. Before this moment, it
had never

all belonged to her. She pinched her nose against a sneeze
that was

bringing tears to her eyes and tried to stave off whatever sadness was

coming on; this child would brook no self-pity. And given the set

of woes *she'd* been handed at ten years of age, why should she? Lusa

wedged herself through an aisle between the piano case and some

large bundles of baling twine and stooped to blow some dust off the

huge iron hulk of an ancient machine.

“Holy cow. Look at this, Crys.”

“What is it?”

“A grain mill. An old-fashioned one—look, it has all these cloth

belts and things.” She studied the way it was put together. “I guess

they hooked it up to some kind of a turning axle to power it.

Maybe a mule in a yoke, walking in a circle.”

“What for?”

“No electricity. This thing’s a hundred years old. It was your

great-great-grandfather’s, probably.”

Crys sounded scornful, as if Lusa were very slow to keep up: “I

mean, what’d they use it for?”

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“It’s a mill. They used it to grind their flour.”

Crys squatted underneath the machine and looked up inside of

it. “To grind up flowers?”

She pronounced it “flars,” puzzling Lusa for a second.

“Oh, no, *flour*. You know. To make bread. Everybody around

here used to grow their own wheat and corn for bread, plus what

they needed for their animals. Now they buy feed at Southern

States and go to Kroger’s for a loaf of god-awful bread that was

baked in another state.”

“Why?”

“Because they can’t afford to grow grain anymore. It’s cheaper

to buy bad stuff from a big farm than to grow good stuff on a little

farm.”

“Why?”

Lusa leaned against a fifty-five-gallon drum that had solidified

creosote in the bottom. “Boy, that’s hard to answer. Because people

want too much stuff, I guess, and won’t pay for quality. And also,

farmers have to follow rules that automatically favor whoever already has the most. You know how when you play marbles, as soon

as somebody starts getting most of the marbles then they’re going to

win everything?”

“No.”

“No?”

“I don’t play with marbles.”

“What do you play with?”

“Game Boy.” Crys had drifted away and was putting her hands

on things, drawing circles in the dust, looking under tables.

“What’s’is?”

“A bee smoker.”

The child laughed. “For smoking bees? Do you get high off

’em?”

Lusa wondered what this child knew about getting high but decided again not to react. “No. Smoke comes out of there, and it

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drugs the bees, as a matter of fact. It makes them dopey and lazy so

they won’t sting you when you take the top off their hive and steal

their honey.”

“Oh.” Crys leaned back and bounced herself against a bedspring that was standing on its end, propped against the wall.

“That’s where honey comes from? People steal it?”

Lusa was surprised at the extent of the girl’s ignorance—her

generation’s ignorance, probably. “People raise bees, for honey.

Everybody around here used to, I'm sure. You see old
broken-down

bee boxes everywhere.”

“Now it just comes in a jar.”

“Yep,” Lusa agreed. “From Argentina or someplace. That’s
what

I mean about big farms far away taking the place of little
farms right

here. It’s sad. It’s not fair, and it stinks.” She sat down on a
side-arm

of the ancient grain mill, which startled her by giving way
an inch

or two before it held. “Nobody cares, though. I used to live
in a

city, and I’ll tell you, city people do not think this is their
problem.

They think food comes from the supermarket, period, and
always

will.”

Crys continued to bounce herself sideways against the
bedspring. “My mama works at Kroger’s. She hates it.”

“I know.” Lusa looked around at the dim boneyard of
obsolete

equipment and felt despair, not only—or not *specifically*—
for the

loss of her husband, but for all the things people used to
grow and

make for themselves before they were widowed from their
own

food chain.

“She hates it because it makes her tired. They won’t give
her no

days off.”

“I know. Not enough, anyway.”

“Mama’s sick.”

“I know.”

“I can’t stay at Aunt Lois’s no more. Lowell can, but I can’t. You

know why?”

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“Why?”

Crys stopped throwing herself against the bedspring. She stepped carefully into a broken baling box and out the other side.

“Why, Crys?” Lusa repeated.

“She made me try on stupid dresses. Hand-me-downs from Jennifer and Louise.”

“Yeah? I never heard that part of the story.”

“She said I had to wear them. They’s ugly.”

“Probably out of style, too. Jennifer and Louise are a lot older

than you.”

Crys shrugged her shoulders, a quick, unhappy jerk. She sat

down on a tractor tire and put her feet into the center of it, with

her back to Lusa. “They were stupid.”

“Who was?”

“The dresses.”

“Still. Breaking Aunt Lois’s knickknacks on purpose, that might

not have been the best way to handle it.”

“She made me go in the bathroom and give her out my clothes,

while I was supposed to be trying the dresses on. And you know

what she done? Cut up my corduroys and plaid shirt with scissors so

I couldn’t put ’em back on.”

Lusa was appalled. She stared at the back of the child’s head,

feeling her sore heart open up to this dejected little creature whose

straw-colored hair stood up at the crown of her head like a porcupine’s quills. “I think that’s awful,” Lusa said finally. “Nobody told

me that part. Those were your favorite clothes, your old faithfuls,

right? I don’t think I ever saw you in anything but those corduroys

and that shirt on the weekends.”

Crys shrugged again, offering no reply.

“So then what? I guess you had to put on one of the dresses.”

She shook her head. “I run out of the house neckid. Just underpants. I went and hid in the barn.”

“What about the praying-hands statue? How did that get broken?”

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“I don’t know.”

“Just kind of happened, on your way out?”

The porcupine head nodded.

“I’d say that was a fair trade. Her treasure for yours.”

Lusa saw the hair on the back of the girl’s head shift subtly, from a

change in the musculature under her scalp. Smiling, was a good guess.

“I’m not saying it was *helpful*, ” Lusa amended. “It’s made things

kind of tense between you and your aunt, which doesn’t make life

any easier on your mother. She’s the one you probably need to be

thinking about right now. I’m just saying I understand.”

“I told Jesus if I wore them clothes every day he’d make Mama

get better. Now they’re cut up in Aunt Lois’s ragbag, and Mama’s

going to die.”

“Just thinking something like that doesn’t make it happen.”

Crystal turned around and looked at Lusa through a diagonal

shaft of light that fell from a hole in the roof to the floor between

them. Dust motes danced up and down in the light, inhabiting their

own carefree universe.

“How are things with Lowell?” Lusa asked gently. “He must be

pretty scared about your mom’s being sick.”

Crys picked at a ribbon of loose rubber where the sole of her

tennis shoe was coming apart. “He don’t like it over there, either.

He's asceared of Aunt Lois. She's mean."

"*How* mean? Does she hit him or anything?"

"Nuh-uh, they don't usually paddle us. She just won't be nice

to him like Mama is. She won't put his clothes on the chair the right

way and make him what food he likes and stuff. Her and Jennifer

and them just all holler that he's a big old baby."

Lusa's hand went to her mouth, but she kept her voice nonchalant. "Next time why don't you both come over here? Would that

be OK, if I asked your mom to let you do that?"

Crys shrugged, continuing to pick her shoe apart. "I guess."

"OK. But today, since it's just the two of us, we can do whatever we want. I'd like to catch some bugs, if it's OK by you." Lusa

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pulled two short-handled collecting nets out of her box. "Here's

yours. Let's go, the day's wasting out there."

Crys took the net and followed Lusa out of the barn. They began by skirting the edge of the goat pasture. Lusa led, running as fast

as she could uphill, sweeping her net through the tall grass along the

fence. They were both breathing hard when they reached the hilltop. Lusa flung herself on the ground, panting, and Crys sat down

cross-legged.

“Careful,” Lusa said, sitting up and reaching for the other net.

“Here, fold the net over the frame like this so they won’t get out.

Now, let’s see what you’ve got.” She carefully let a few bugs crawl

out onto the outside of the mesh. “These are grasshoppers, and this

is a buffalo leafhopper. Big difference, see?” She held out a brightgreen grasshopper with its legs writhing in the air. To her surprise,

Crys took it and held it up a few inches from her face.

“Hey,” she said. “It’s got wings.”

“Yeah. Most insects have wings—even ants, in one stage of their

life. Grasshoppers definitely. This guy can fly if he wants to. Look.”

She lifted the green wing case with her fingernail, extending the

brilliant red cellophane fan of wing underneath.

“*Whoa,*” said Crys. “Are they always that color?”

“Nope. There’re twenty thousand kinds of grasshoppers, crickets, and katydids in the world, and no two kinds are alike.”

“*Whoa!*”

“My sentiments exactly. Here, look at this one.” She reached

into the net and extracted a flat, cross-eyed creature that looked like

a leaf with legs. “That’s a katydid.”

Crys took it, looking it in the eye. She glanced up at Lusa.

“They make all ’at racket at night? *Keety-did! Keety-didn’t!*”

Lusa was impressed with the imitation. “That’s right. You never

saw a katydid before?”

She shook her head rapidly. “I thought katydids was some’n *big*.

A big old whopper bird or some’n.”

“A *bird*?” Lusa was truly shocked. How could rural kids grow

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up so ignorant of their world? Their parents gave them Game Boys

and TVs that spewed out cityscapes of cops and pretty lawyers, but

they couldn’t show them a katydid. It wasn’t neglect, Lusa knew. It

was some sad mix of shame and modern intentions, like her own

father’s ban on Yiddish. She watched Crys study this creature’s

every infinitesimal feature, handling it with utmost care, eating it

with her eyes. Like a good taxonomist.

“How’s it holler so loud with that little mouth?” she asked finally.

“Not with its mouth. Look, see this? Wings again.” She extended them carefully. “There’s a scraper on one and a little ridged

thing like a file on the underside of the other. He rubs them together. That’s how he sings.”

Crys practically put her nose against the thing. “Where at?”

“Those parts are hard to see. Really teeny.”

Crys looked skeptical. “Then how’s it so *loud*?”

“Did you ever hear a little teeny piece of chalk screech on a blackboard?”

She raised her eyebrows and nodded.

“That’s how. A rough thing pushed against a hard thing. Big isn’t

everything. I should know: I’m only five foot one.”

“Is that little?”

“Yeah. For grown-ups, that’s little.”

“How big’s Aunt Lois?” *Ain’t* Lois, she always said, as if to

negate the woman. Lusa could appreciate the sentiment.

“I don’t know; big. For a woman. Five foot ten, maybe. Why?”

Crys looked warily down the hill. “She said you was pushing

everybody too far.”

Lusa lay back on the grass, crossed her arms behind her head,

and watched a cloud loll in the sky. She wondered whom Crys

wished to hurt with this betrayal. “Some of your aunts think I

shouldn’t have this farm. That’s what that’s all about.”

Crys lay down, too, with the top of her head a few inches from

Lusa’s. “How come?”

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“Because I’m different from them. Because I wasn’t born here.

Because I like bugs. You name it. Because your uncle Cole died and

I’m still here, and they’re mad because life’s not fair. I don’t know

exactly why; I’m just guessing. People don’t always have good reasons for feeling how they do.”

“Is my mama going to die?”

“Wow. Where did that come from?”

“Is she?”

“I don’t know the answer to that. That’s the truth, I swear.

Nobody knows. I do know she’s doing everything she can to get

better, for you and Lowell. Even going up to Roanoke and taking

poison once a week. So she must love you pretty much, huh?”

No answer came.

“Another thing,” Lusa said. “I know for a fact that Jesus will not

hurt your mother just because Aunt Lois chopped up your clothes.

If he was in a position to punish somebody, which is debatable, I

think it’d be Aunt Lois, don’t you?”

“So will he kill Aunt Lois instead of Mama?”

“No, he won’t, that one I *can* answer. Life is definitely not like

that. God doesn't go around calling fouls like a referee, or else we'd

have a different world by now. Ice cream three times a day and no

spankings and no stinky dresses if you didn't want them."

Crys chuckled. For the first time since she'd planted herself

fiercely on Lusa's driveway that morning, she sounded clear and

transparent, like a child. Like the crystal she was. Lusa couldn't see

her face, but she could feel her body next to hers in the grass and

hear her relaxed breathing.

"Hey. Did anybody ever tell you what a crystal is?"

"A stupid thing. Jewry."

Lusa was startled for an instant. *Jewelry*, she must mean. "Nope.

It's a kind of rock. Hard, sharp, and shiny. There are a lot of different kinds, actually. Salt is a crystal, even." She sat up. "Hey! Our

bugs got away."

Crystal sat up, too, looking desperately disappointed.

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"It's OK," Lusa said, laughing. "We were going to let 'em go

anyway. We can catch more." She waved at the pasture. "All the

bugs you'll ever need, right there. Can you believe people spray insecticide all over their fields?" She shook the last stragglers out of

the two nets. “Look at all the beautiful creatures that die.
It’s like
dropping a bomb on a city just to get rid of a couple of bad
guys.
See, that’s what’s so great about my goats—I don’t have to
use any
chemicals to grow them. I only have to kill fifty animals,
not fifty
thousand.”

Crys frowned through the fence at Lusa’s goats. That field
was
shaping up, Lusa noticed. All the gangly thistles left
standing by the
cows were getting mowed down evenly, pretty as a
Lexington lawn.

“For real, how come you got all them goats?”

“Well, it’s true what I said, I hate pesticides, and I have to
raise
something here to make some money. Plus, I said some
bad words
about tobacco, so that’s out. And I don’t like sticking my
hand up a
cow’s butt.”

The child’s mouth flew open and she laughed a beautiful
laugh.

“Well, you asked. That’s one thing you have to do if you
want
to raise cows.”

“*Yuck!*”

“I’m not kidding. You have to make a fist and stick it way
up in

there and feel if they're pregnant. And that's not even the worst of

it. Cows are big and stupid and dangerous and nothing but trouble,

in my opinion." She laughed at the face Crys was making. "Why?

You been hearing your uncles talk about me and my goats?"

The child nodded, looking slightly guilty. "They said you was a

dope."

Lusa leaned over toward Crys, grinning. "Your uncles took over

my *cows*. So who's the dope?"

Sometime near midnight, Lusa was surprised to hear a car in the

drive. She'd fallen asleep on the parlor couch reading a W. D.

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Hamilton article on monarch mimicry and kin selection. The

knack for sleep must be returning to her—she hadn't conked out on

the couch since before Cole died. She had to sit up and think for a

minute to get her bearings. It was Tuesday night. Crys was settled

on the daybed upstairs. Jewel was supposed to call tomorrow, as

soon as she felt up to having the kids back. Lusa smoothed her shirttail and went to the window. It was Hannie-Mavis's car. She hurried

to the front door and flipped on the porch light. “Hannie-
Mavis? Is

it you?”

It was. The engine stopped and her small figure got out. “I
just

come up to see if y’all was all right. I figured if all the
lights was out,

fine, then, I’d go on home.”

“You haven’t been home yet? Goodness.” Lusa looked at
her

wrist, but she wasn’t wearing her watch. “What time is it?”

“I don’t even know, honey. Late. I’ve been down there
with

Jewel, she’s bad this time. I couldn’t leave her till she was
good and

settled. But she’s asleep now. If you’re all right with the
young’un,

I’ll go on home. I just thought I better check.”

“Oh, we’re fine. She’s asleep. I was just reading on the
couch.”

Lusa hesitated, worried by the strain in her sister-in-law’s
voice.

“What is it? What are you saying, then—that Jewel’s been
sick all

afternoon and evening? Ever since you got back from
Roanoke?”

Lusa heard a long, strange exhalation in the darkness. “We
couldn’t even get in the car to come back for three and a
half hours.

Even then we had to make a stop ever ten miles for her to
upchuck.”

Lusa shivered in the chill air. Tiny moths whirled around her head. “My God, you’ve been to hell and back. Come in for a minute. Let me make you a cup of tea.”

Hannie-Mavis hesitated on the walkway. “Oh, it’s late. I hate to pester you.”

“It’s no trouble.” Lusa came down the steps to meet her sister-in-law and was surprised when the small woman nearly tumbled

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into her arms. Lusa held her for a minute, there on the steps under

the porch light. “She’s really bad, isn’t she?”

She was shocked to see, at closer range, that Hannie-Mavis was

weeping. “They said it’s no good, the chemo’s not helping her.

Everything she’s went through, vomiting and losing her hair, for

nothing. She’s *worse*.”

“How can that be?” Lusa asked numbly.

“It’s all over her, honey. Her lungs and her spine. The doctor

told me today.”

“God,” Lusa whispered. “Does she know yet?”

Hannie-Mavis shook her head. “I didn’t tell her. How could I?

I started telling her the doc said no more chemo, and she thought

that was *good* news. ‘Oh, Han,’ she says, ‘wait’ll I tell the kids. Let’s

go get us a ice cream to celebrate!’ Mind you, this was between

throwing up and throwing up, when she said that.” Hannie-Mavis

took a deep, racked breath, then let out a long wail. Lusa just held

on, feeling awkward, not yet sensing in her body the full weight of

this new grief.

“How will she leave her babies!” Hannie-Mavis cried.

“Shhh, one of them’s asleep upstairs.” Lusa took her by the shoulders and steered her up the last step, across the porch, and in

through the front door. In the bright hallway Hannie-Mavis seemed

to pull into herself, appearing suddenly more contained and absurdly cheerful in her red-and-white-striped dress made of some

silky material. She even had on snappy red high heels, Lusa noticed.

The image of her two sisters-in-law dressing up this morning to go

to the city, for this awful trip, was devastating. She watched HannieMavis dab at her ruined eye makeup with a ball of tissue that appeared to have been in her hand for much too long.

“Come on. Come in the kitchen and sit down.”

Hannie-Mavis hesitated again but then moved slowly toward

the kitchen door under her own power while Lusa ran upstairs for

a box of tissues. When she came back down to the kitchen and put

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on the kettle, her sister-in-law had vanished. Lusa heard intermittent nose-blowing from the bathroom. By the time Hannie-Mavis

emerged, hairdo and makeup fully repaired, the kettle had already

boiled and Lusa was steeping the tea. Seeing her standing in the

doorway brought Lusa a sudden, harsh memory of the funeral, of

looking at all that blue mascara and saying something cold. She

wished she could take it back, whatever it had been. She felt penitent for all the times she'd nearly called her Handy Makeup out

loud. You had to be so careful with large families. Who knew how

things would turn around, whom you'd need in the end, and what

could cause you to see even eye shadow in a different light? At this

moment Lusa had to admire the woman's art and energy in the face

of heartache. After Cole died, it'd probably been three weeks before

she herself had even managed to put a comb to her hair.

Hannie-Mavis sighed as she put her palms flat on the table and

eased herself down like an old woman. "Well. How'd *your* day go?"

“Fine.”

She looked at Lusa. “What do you mean, ‘fine’?”

Lusa shrugged. “I mean it went fine. We had fun.”

“You don’t have to tell me a tall tale, honey. That child’s stinking as a polecat. I’d never say this to Jewel, but I took over driving

her to the doctor’s mainly so I wouldn’t have to keep her kids.”

Lusa got spoons, sugar, and teacups—just everyday mugs, not

her china cups with moths painted on their rims—and opened her

mouth to begin at the beginning, with the broken mirror on the

front steps. But a sudden loyalty caught hold of her, imposing its

own decision: they could keep some secrets, she and Crys. She sat

down without speaking and poured out the tea. “She’s a tough nut

to crack, yeah,” she said at last. “But I kind of like her. I was exactly

that same kind of kid. Strong-willed.”

“OK, then, honey. You get the Purple Heart.” Hannie-Mavis

unsnapped her purse and rummaged inside. “Is it all right if I smoke

in here?”

Lusa jumped up and got an ashtray from the small drawer by the

sink. Put there last by Cole, she realized, feeling a small, electric

sting at the thought of his hands on this object. Each little stab like

this seemed to move the larger pain further away from her center.

She was beginning to understand how her marriage would someday be fully apparent to her memory's eye and yet untouchable. Like

a butterfly under glass.

“What'd y'all do?” Hannie-Mavis asked, clicking her lighter.

“Well, first we mowed. Then we looked at old junk in the storeroom, and then we caught bugs for a couple of hours. I taught

her how to identify insects, if you can believe it. Does she make

good grades in school? She's very sharp.”

“She makes grades when she feels like it. Which is not very often.”

“I'll bet. So then we made a bonfire and weeded the garden in

the dark, which was actually fun, and then we came in and ate *eggah*

bi sabaneh at ten o'clock.”

“Well, mercy. That sounds fancy.”

“Not really. Just greens and hard-boiled eggs.”

“You got that child to eat *greens*? Good God in Heaven.”

“It was the purslane and pigweeds we pulled out of the bean

patch. Weeds for dinner, she thought that was just dandy. She said,

and I quote, ‘This here’d make Aint Lois shit her britches.’”

Hannie-Mavis clucked her tongue. “Oh, boy. No love lost between those two.”

“Listen, do you know what Lois did to make her so mad?”

“Made her try on a dress, is what I heard.”

Lusa rested her elbows on the table. “Yes, and while she was at

it she took Crys’s favorite corduroys away from her and cut them up

for rags.”

“Oh, now, that’s bad.”

“Crys had made some deal with Jesus about wearing those clothes till her mother got better. Poor kid.”

“Oh, no. That is bad. Lois should not have done that.”

“No, she shouldn’t. That kid needs all the love she can get right

now, and that’s just hateful.”

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Hannie-Mavis smoked in silence for a minute. “It is. But it’s

Lois all over for you. Lois is just mad at the world, and she takes it

out on anybody.”

“Why? She’s got a good husband, nice kids. Ten million knickknacks. What’s her complaint?”

“Law, honey, I don’t know. She was always that way. Mad she

wasn’t born prettier, I guess. Mad because she’s big-boned.”

“But Mary Edna’s big-boned, too—even more so.”

“Yes, but see, Mary Edna don’t know it. And Lord help the poor soul that ever tells her so.”

Lusa hazarded a weak laugh, rubbing her eyes. She suddenly felt

exhausted. These were serious revelations, though. Even without having known their parents, she could see the two different

bloodlines: Hannie-Mavis, Jewel, and Emaline were sensitive and

fine-featured; Mary Edna and Lois were confident, big-handed,

long-jawed, hefty. Cole was all these genes come together perfectly

at last, the family’s final measure. Cole Widener, adored by all, won

by Lusa, stolen by death. No wonder this family was still quaking in

the aftermath. It was a Greek tragedy.

The two women sat looking at each other across the table, then

dropped their eyes and sipped their tea. “I’m fine to keep Crys till

tomorrow or the next day, even,” Lusa said. “Truly, it’s fine with

me, if Jewel needs the rest. Tell Lois she can send Lowell up here,

too. I think they’d be better off together.”

“Those poor children,” Hannie-Mavis said.

“They’ll be all right. Whatever happens, they’ll be OK. Big

families are a blessing, I can see that.”

Hannie-Mavis looked at her, surprised. “You think we’re all right?”

“Who, your family? I think you’re a hard club to join, is all.”

She laughed a little. “That’s what Joel said for years after we got

married: ‘Going to a Widener get-together is like a gol-dang trip to

China.’ Why is that? We don’t seem like anything special to me.”

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“Every family’s its own trip to China, I guess. For me it’s been

extra hard because of everything. I know it must have been a shock

when he took up with me so fast.”

“Now, that’s so. He was hightailing it up to Lexington ever chance he got, and for a while there we didn’t even know why.

Mary Edna was worried he was going to the racetracks. We all just

about dropped our drawers when he sets right there in that chair

one Sunday supper, I think Jewel and me were cooking for everybody, and he says, ‘Next Sunday you get to meet the smartest, prettiest woman ever to walk on top of this world, and for some reason

she’s agreed to be my wife.’”

“It was kind of a shock to me, too,” Lusa said quietly, willing

her thoughts to go blank. “And then, now, this.” She glanced up at

Hannie-Mavis. “Me inheriting the place. I do understand why the

family resents me.”

Hannie-Mavis looked at her with a gaze Lusa recognized—that

same lost, helpless, blue-lashed stare from the funeral. She’d said, *I*

don’t know what we’ll do without him. We’re all just as lost as you are.

“We don’t resent you,” she said.

Lusa shook her head. “You resent that I inherited the farm. I

know that. I know you even talked to a lawyer about it.”

Hannie-Mavis gave her a worried glance.

“Or somebody did,” Lusa dodged. “I don’t know who.”

Hannie-Mavis smoked her cigarette and poked at the edges of

her polished nails, which were as shiny and red as her shoes. “It was

Mary Edna,” she replied finally. “I don’t think she meant you any

harm. We just wanted to know what would happen, you know, *af-*

ter. Since he didn’t have any will.”

“Look, I don’t blame you. I live every day in this beautiful old

house you all grew up in, on the best of your family’s land, feeling

like I stole it from you. But there are problems, too. This farm has

debts. I sure didn't plan on having my life turn out this way."

"Nobody planned what happened to Cole." She smoked

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awhile, letting that sentence hang alone in the stratified blue haze

above their heads. Then she asked suddenly, "You want to know

what I really think?"

"What?" Lusa said, a bit startled.

"Daddy knew what he was doing. He did us girls all a favor by

giving us pieces too little to live off of."

"How can you say that?"

"It's true! We're better off. Think about it. Which one of us would rather be up here trying to keep body and soul together with

this farm? We don't want it, me and Joel—Lord, he's just cars, cars,

cars. That's the only work that makes him happy. I'd hate us to be

tied down to this place. And not Jewel, even if she was still married

and not sick. She loves the house better than any of us, but Sheldon

was no farmer, honey. And Mary Edna and Herb, see, they have his

family's dairy—they're set up just fine, they couldn't handle another

farm. Emaline and Frank, I think they're just as happy both working jobs instead of farming. I *know* they are."

“What about Lois and Big Rickie? They’re still farming.”

“Big Rickie loves to farm, that’s true. But he’s got no more call to own this place than you do. He’s married in, just the same

as you.”

“Well, but Lois. They could be up here.”

Hannie-Mavis blew air through her lips like a horse. “First of

all, Lois couldn’t grow a tomato to save her life, nor do the canning,

either. She hates to get dirty. I don’t think Lois gives a hoot about

this place, really and truly. She might act like it. But if it was hers, I

tell you what, she’d tear this house down and build her something

brick with plastic ducks in the yard and a three-car garage.”

Lusa could see that whole picture in a flash.

“They don’t any of them want it, really,” Hannie-Mavis said

earnestly. “Here’s what it is: They just don’t want anybody else to

have it.”

“Me, you mean.”

“No, I don’t mean *you*, honey. But see, we all know what’s go**306**

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ing to happen. First we thought you’d leave and the farm would

come back to us. Now it looks like you’re staying. Well, that’s good.

That's fine, that you're here. But see ..."

Hannie-Mavis reached for the box of tissue, dabbed the corners

of her eyes carefully, and added another small white wad to the

population that was growing on the table. Lusa could see that whatever she meant to say next was very difficult.

"What?" she asked gently. She felt frightened.

"Well, a few years down the line you'll marry somebody around

here. Then this farm will be *his*."

Lusa let air burst through her teeth. "That's ridiculous."

"No, it is not. Nobody says you shouldn't get married again.

You will, and that's fine. But see, it'll pass on to his children. It won't

be our homeplace anymore. It won't be the *Widener* place."

Lusa was stunned. She'd never dreamed this was the problem.

"How can you think that?"

"Think what?"

"I don't know, all of it. Who around here am I going to marry?"

"Honey, honey, you're not even thirty yet. We all loved Cole,

but nobody thinks you're going to carry a torch for him the rest of

your life."

Lusa looked down into the bottom of her empty teacup, which

was blank. No leaves, no future to read. “I have to think about this

in the light of day,” she said. “I have no idea what to say. I just had

no idea.”

Hannie-Mavis tilted her head. “I didn’t aim to hurt your feelings.”

“No, you didn’t. I thought the problem was *me*. I didn’t realize

the problem was—what would you call it? Progeny. The family

line.”

“Well,” she said, slapping her hands flat on the table. “I’m going

to call it a night. This day’s done me enough damage already.”

“I think it’s tomorrow already.”

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“Law, so much the worse. I’ve got to get home and feed the

cats, ’cause I’m sure Joel forgot, and then get back over to Jewel’s.”

She gathered up her balls of Kleenex and stuffed them in her purse.

Lusa wondered if this was a country custom, to take your own secretions with you when you left. They stood facing each other for

a second but held back from a hug.

“Please tell Jewel I’d be happy to keep both kids for another day.

And if she needs *anything*—I mean it. You can't do all the nursing

by yourself. You get some rest.”

“I will, honey. And I'll tell Lois to bring up Lowell, if he wants

to come. Thank you, honey.”

“*Lusa*,” Lusa said. “I'm your sister now, you're stuck with me, so

you could all start using my name.”

Hannie-Mavis stopped and turned back in the hallway, touching the sleeve of her dress. She seemed hesitant to speak. “We're

scared of getting it wrong, is why we don't say it. Is that a Lexington

name?”

Lusa laughed. “Polish. It's short for Elizabeth.”

“Oh, well, I thought so. That it was foreign.”

“But it's not hard to say,” Lusa insisted. “What kind of name is

Hannie-Mavis?”

Hannie-Mavis smiled and shook her head. “Just strange, honey.

Just awful, awful strange. Daddy was original, and Mommy couldn't

spell. You get what you get.”

In the morning Lusa was startled awake, once again, by the sound

of car tires on the gravel drive. She sat up in bed, looked at the light

in the window, and checked the clock. She'd slept late. Whoever it

was out there was going to catch her in her nightgown at
ten

o'clock, a mortal sin in farm country.

But she heard the car door slam and the tires slowly roll
away

down the hill again. She heard footsteps come toward the
house at

a clip, and footsteps in the next room as well, bare feet
muffled by

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the hall rug and then slapping quickly down the steps. Lusa
got up

and walked quietly out into the hall but heard nothing
more. Then

voices, whispering. She looked down over the banister and
her face

went hot, then cold. There they were again, side by side,
sitting

very close together on the second step from the bottom. A
small

boy and a bigger girl with her arm around his shoulders to
protect

him from the world. He was not the little boy she'd
believed she

would know anywhere, at any age, and the older one was
not his

sister Jewel.

Not Jewel and Cole. Crys and Lowell.

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[Predators](#)

he sound of a shot startled Deanna awake.

froze, listening to the after-ring of that sound

T

She

through the hollow and the forced, universal silence that spread out behind it. There was no mistaking it for anything but a gunshot. She sat forward and looked around groggily,

trying to shake the wool out of her head. This was the third or

fourth occasion she'd fallen asleep smack in the middle of the day,

this time in the old overstuffed brocade chair on the porch, where

she'd sat down to rest just for a minute.

She rubbed absently at the viny pattern of the nubbly green upholstery, tracing with her fingers the long brown stain that ran

across one of the arms onto the seat—she sometimes wondered

how this chair had plunged from an elegant former life in someone's parlor to humble service on this porch. And how had *she* gotten here today, catnapping in this chair? Deanna tried to reconstruct

her afternoon. She remembered only plopping down in the chair

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and pulling the knots out of her bootlaces to appease her
aching

feet; that was the last thing. Before that, a morning-long
battle with

exhaustion. It had felt like walking through neck-deep
pond water

just to drag herself up here from the hemlock bridge where
she and

Eddie had been working earlier. Two big trees had fallen
across the

trail and had to be cleared. Eddie happily took up the ax
and set to

limbing and chopping while she wielded the chain saw,
and yes,

she'd been glad for the help. But she hated the way he
showed her

up, stripping off his shirt so the sweat ran down the planes
of his

neck and working cheerfully all morning without a break.
She

didn't like being skunked. She hated feeling older than him
and like

a weakling, a girl. An old lady, if the truth be told. After
the first

hour her arms had ached and her knees had been set to
buckle and

the roar of the chain saw had drowned out her grumbling at
the

sweat and sawdust in the collar of her T-shirt. By noon her
one and

only wish was to go flop down in the middle of the cold
creek

branch, clothes and all. When the chain saw ran out of gas,
she was

deeply grateful.

Her plan had been to sit down here on the porch for a
minute

before hurrying to refill their water jug and the gas can and
get

straight back down there. Right. She shaded her eyes and
frowned

at the sun, which was touching the crowns of the poplars.
She'd

slept for hours. Then she noticed the ax lying at the end of
the

porch. She studied it, puzzled. He must have come back up
here

looking for her when she didn't return. Saw her asleep, left
again,

and now was—where? Panic rose into her throat. The
gunfire, that

would have been *him*. Eddie Bondo had shot something
while she

slept.

She jumped up and paced the porch, gripped with the
surreal

possibility that her obsessive dread had come true. But
there had

been only the one shot; he couldn't have killed much with
just one

shot, since they weren't all together anymore. They were
leaving the

den to hunt now, all of them. She'd seen one or two young
at a time

running with an adult, as high up as the hemlock grove and
all the

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way down to the boundary line. Most nights now she heard
their

yips and tremulous, rising howls. They were all over this
mountain.

She couldn't keep them safe anymore. Dragging her untied
bootlaces, she went quickly inside the cabin and checked the
corner

where his rifle had stood for most of two months. No
surprise: it

was gone. *Bastard.*

She went to her desk and yanked open the drawer where
she

kept her pistol, but then she just stared at it. What did she
think she

was going to do? She slowly closed the drawer and stood
with her

head back and her eyes closed, stood that way for a long
time while

tears crept onto her temples. No more shots rang out. Only
the one.

She was still not ready to face him—maybe would never
be—when

she heard him whistling at a distance, coming up the Forest
Service

road. She glanced out the window, went to the door and
bolted it,

sat back down on the bed, put her boots back on, stared
some more

at the book she'd been staring at, then went to the window again.

Here he came, grinning like a polecat, resting his gun on one shoulder and in his other hand toting some object that resembled a dark

jacket. She squinted. Something black. Something feathered, with

wings, bouncing along limply in his hand as he carried it by its feet.

A *turkey*. She ran outside, banging her forehead hard against the

door in her haste to get through it, having completely forgotten

she'd bolted it shut a minute before. She watched him from the

porch, holding her head. The pain burned tears into her eyes, but

relief made her laugh like a child.

When he saw her there he hitched a small, extra step into his

gait and held up his trophy. "Happy Thanksgiving!"

"Happy Easter's more like it. Turkey season was done with in

April." She touched her fingers to her forehead and looked at them,

but she wasn't bleeding. She felt delirious, unable to stop laughing.

He halted ten feet away and appraised her.

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{ *Prodigal Summer* }

"Well, hell. You're going to let me live. I thought you'd skin me

for this.”

“I’m mad as hell,” she declared, trying to sound like it.

“It’s high

summer. That turkey could be brooding a whole clutch of young.

If that’s so, you’ve killed a family.”

“Nope. This was Daddy.”

“It’s a tom? Did you know that *before* you shot it?”

He gave her a wounded look.

“Well, I’m sorry. You’ve got a good eye, and you know better

than to shoot a hen turkey in July. But still, look at you, poaching.

Smack under the nose of a game warden.”

He walked straight toward her, turkey and all, and kissed her

mouth with such enthusiasm that she had to take several steps backward. “This is the warden’s dinner,” he said.

“You don’t need to be shooting me any dinner. And it’s too late

for dinner anyway, it’s suppertime.”

“It’s your *supper*, then”—he kissed her again—“and I did need

to do it. I’ve been bumming off you all summer. You don’t even

know what a good provider I am. I considered bringing you a deer.”

She laughed. “Oh, boy. That’d be hard to hide if one of my colleagues happened to show up.”

He handed her the bird and checked the chamber of his rifle

before he set it carefully against the wall. “You need protein,” he

said. “You’ve been living too long on bird food, and you’re peaked.

You’re walking around here with iron-poor tired blood.”

She laughed. “You’re too young to even know what that means.

Now what are you doing?” He’d picked up the shovel and was over

at the edge of the clearing by the boulder, eyeing the ground

around it. “You thinking to give it a Christian burial?”

“We need a fire pit. I’ve been hankering to do this all summer.”

She smiled at his *hankering*. “Where’d you learn to talk like ’at,

young fella?”

“Some beautiful long-haired hillbilly girl.”

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He poked the point of the shovel into the soft dirt. Deanna studied the bird in her hand, holding it out at arm’s length. It

weighed more than a gallon jug of water—ten or twelve pounds,

maybe. “So what are your exact plans for tom here?”

“Pluck him.”

“Right. But you have to scald him in hot water first to get the

feathers loose, and I don’t think I have any pot big enough to dunk

this old boy in.”

“Yes, you do—one of those big metal cans you keep the beans

and rice in,” he said without looking up. He was excavating a goodsized pit. “We’ll boil the water to scald it in there first, and then we

can empty it out and cook the bird inside there, with the coals piled

all around it.”

She looked at Eddie, surprised. “You *have* been thinking about

this all summer.”

“Yep.”

“Carnivorous fantasies,” she said.

“Yep.”

She went inside, smiling in spite of herself as she checked the

bottoms of the storage canisters and emptied out the one that

looked more watertight. She felt excited. She’d passed so many days

now on forest time, timeless time, noting the changes in leaf and

song and weather but imposing no human agenda. Even her own

birthday she’d let pass without mentioning it to Eddie. But something in her body had been longing for a celebration, or so it

seemed right now. He’d guessed right. She *wanted* this feast. An extravagant event to mark this extravagant summer.

When she carried the empty canister outside, Eddie had already

lined the pit with rocks and was starting the fire. While he
built up

kindling and the rising flame licked around the tall metal
can, she

carried water one kettleful at a time from the pump spigot
inside

the cabin. The cold water hissed and sheared into columns
of steam

as she poured it down the inside of the hot cylinder. On her
trips

back and forth she paused just once to examine the turkey.
She let

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herself touch the bumpy red skin on his head and wattles
and his

translucent eyelids, then stroked the iridescent sheen on his
dark

feathers. Not a human's idea of beauty, maybe, but she felt
something for all the days he'd passed in the filtered sunlight
of this forest, meditating on fat berries and the far-off sound of
a mate. Eddie

was right, they'd done no damage to anyone's childhood
here—

turkey paternity was the hit-and-run kind. But she
wondered what

mark this grand male had left on his mountain. She hoped
the last

of his genes were warm in a nest being brooded
somewhere.

It was going on dusk by the time the water finally boiled.
They

argued about whether it was really necessary to scald the bird before

plucking, and Deanna went ahead and pulled the long, stiff wing and

tail feathers; she couldn't remove the softer breast feathers without

tearing the flesh, since the bird was already cold. Eddie deferred to

her expertise. She was surprised her hands still knew the motions

of plucking and squeezing out pinfeathers after so many years of

grocery-store birds or none at all. In recent years she'd hardly eaten

meat. But nearly every weekend of her childhood she'd helped

butcher a chicken or two. This carcass was impressively large by comparison, even after she'd stripped it naked. Eddie helped her to lift it

by the feet and dunk it into the boiling pot for a full minute, and later,

to hold it over the flame to singe off the down feathers, and he steadied the bird while she used the ax to chop off its head and feet. He

also managed to drag the heavy pot to the edge of the fire pit and

continued to build up the coals while she settled down on the flat

boulder to eviscerate their prey.

"Leaving the dirty work to the womenfolk," she muttered, not

really minding the task but still faintly put out with Eddie for being

so cheerful this morning while she was dying on her feet.
She put

both hands deep inside the bird and gently loosened the
membrane

that attached the intestines and lungs to the body wall. He
watched,

impressed, as she pulled the entire mass out in a single
glistening

package and used her knife to cut carefully around the
excretory

vent, freeing the mess of viscera, which she set on the
boulder be**315**

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side the carcass. She poked through it, extracted the heart,
and

looked at it closely, then pitched it to Eddie, causing him to
yelp.

She laughed. “Anything you’re willing to eat, you ought to
be willing to look under its hood first. That’s what Dad used to
tell me.”

“I’m not squeamish; I just never cared for bird guts. I’ll
gut a

deer over a turkey any day.”

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know—personal preference. It’s not so delicate.
You

don’t have all those crops and craws and things to deal
with.”

“Oh, I see. This is a more skilled surgery than you’re
qualified

to handle.” She cut the skin all the way down the length of
the

tom's long neck after carefully examining the wounds that had

killed it. It was a good, clean head-and-neck shot: Eddie had done

well. The carcass wouldn't be riddled with the hazard of toothcracking bird shot, as had so often been the case with the squirrels

and turkeys that neighbors gave to her dad. She reached in with two

fingers to pull out the damaged esophagus and windpipe. "Boy, he

had a voice, this guy. Look at that."

"He has gobbled his last."

"He has," she agreed.

"I can't believe you," he said. "The happy carnivore."

She looked up. "What? Humans are omnivores. We've got meat

teeth and fiber teeth and a gut that's fond of both. I know a little bit

too much about animals to try to deny what I am."

"But I shot a bird off your precious mountain. I thought for sure you'd grab the gun and shoot *me*."

"Then why'd you do it?"

He flashed his one-sided grin. "You know me. I like a challenge."

She rinsed her hands in a bowl of water, then set to the task of

washing every inch of the carcass, looking it over for the last pinfeathers. After it was clean and dry she would rub its skin with salt

and a little oil. "It's just a turkey," she said after a minute.

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“What do you mean, ‘just a turkey’? You won’t even let me

squash a spider in the outhouse with my shoe.”

“A spider’s a predator. You kill that gal and we’ll have a hundred

flies in there, which is not my idea of a good time.”

“Oh, right, predators matter more.” He went to the firewood

pile for another armload of kindling.

She shrugged. “I won’t say this guy didn’t matter. Everybody in

Zeb County can’t be up here shooting turkeys, or they’d all be gone

by full dark. But something would have gotten him sooner or later.

An owl, maybe, if he stuck his neck out after dark. Or a bobcat.”

Eddie was picking through the pile, pulling out medium-sized

hickory logs, but he stopped to stare at her with raised eyebrows.

“What?” she asked. “It’s a prey species. It has fallen prey to us. I

can deal with that. Predation’s a sacrament, Eddie; it culls out the

sick and the old, keeps populations from going through their own

roofs. Predation is *honorable*.”

“That’s not how Little Red Riding Hood tells it,” he said.

“Oh, man, don’t get me started on the subject of childhood

brainwash. I *hate* that. Every fairy story, every Disney movie, every

plot with animals in it, the bad guy is always the top carnivore.

Wolf, grizzly, anaconda, *Tyrannosaurus rex*. ”

“Don’t forget Jaws,” he said.

“Oh, yeah: shark.” She watched him return to the fire with his

carefully stacked armload of wood. He squatted and began feeding

the flames again with such tender care, examining each stick on

both sides before extending it toward the tongues of the fire, that

he might have been feeding a cranky toddler. “I will never understand it,” she said. “We’re the top of *our* food chain, so you’d think

we’d relate to those guys the *best*. Seems like we’d be trying to talk

them into trade agreements.”

Eddie laughed at that. “So you’re telling me that as a kid, you

were rooting for the wolf to eat the Riding Hood babe?”

“My last name was Wolfe. I took it all kind of personally.” She

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finished drying the carcass inside and out with a rag and inspected

the cavity. “I sure as heck wanted Wile E. Coyote to get that stupid

roadrunner.”

“But then the show would be over,” he protested.

“Amen to that.” She stood up and dried her hands on her jeans.

“I’m going to get some salt.”

Inside the cabin she poured some olive oil from the square metal container into a jar and dug out her moisture-proof can of

salt. She peered into the vegetable bin: plenty of onions, and some

potatoes left, too, burgeoning with pink sprouts. Four carrots. She

would throw all these into the pot with the turkey once it was

halfway cooked. And then drop in a few smoldering hickory twigs

and put the lid on to give it a nice smoky flavor. She glanced at the

clock on the bookshelf and tried to guess how long this would all

take. Hours, of course. And she was ravenous. They would get to

smell the heavenly, mounting fragrance and anticipate their feast for

hours. Nothing was more wonderful than waiting for a happiness

you could be sure of. The pleasure of food was something she’d

nearly forgotten. Her sympathy for Jaws and *T. rex* notwithstanding,

Deanna was a little surprised at herself—to be engaged in this act of

carnivory and just thrilled about it.

When she came outside she saw that Eddie had managed to
dump the hot water out of the pot without dousing the fire, which
was now roaring. He was piling on logs the size of arms and legs.
Luckily her woodpile was in no danger of depletion: there were
oak and hickory and poplar logs neatly split and stacked head-high
against the cabin's west wall, in spite of its being only July.
Splitting
firewood seemed to be Eddie's favorite exertion—or secondfavorite, anyway. She paused to admire his body as he stood back
from the heat and brushed bark off his hands. It was so easy to let
go of their animosity in these moments of animal grace. She felt
moved by what he'd done for her, his act of provision.
He turned and caught her watching. "What are you thinking
about?" he asked.

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"Hankerings," she said. "Eating that bird. You may be right
about me, I may be a little anemic. Why, what are you thinking
about?"
"The gospel according to Deanna. It's a sin to kill a spider
but

not a turkey.”

She walked over to the boulder and settled down beside her

next meal. “Oh, *sin*, who knows what that is? Something invented

by mothers, I guess. And me never having one.” She glanced up.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Just you. I was trying to be serious. For

once.”

“What, about spiders and turkeys? You know about that as well

as I do, it’s not complicated. Removing a predator has bigger consequences for a system.”

“Than taking out one of its prey. I know. Numbers.”

“Simple math, Eddie Bondo.”

He seemed thoughtful, squatting by the fire with his hands between his knees. “How many big carnivores on this mountain, you

think?”

“What does ‘big’ mean? Mammals, birds?” She looked down

the narrow cleft of the hollow, where lightning bugs were beginning to rise in irregular yellow streaks. “Maybe one bobcat per five

hundred acres. One mountain lion per mountain, period. Big birds

of prey, like great horned owls, one pair needs maybe”—she

thought about this—“two hundred acres, I’d guess, to feed itself

and raise two or three young in a year.”

“And how many turkeys?”

“Oh, gosh, there’s gaggles of them walking around this hollow.

A turkey lays fourteen eggs without half thinking about it. If something gets one of her babies she might not quite notice. If a fox gets

the whole nest, she’ll go bat her eyes at tom here and plunk out

fourteen more eggs.” She pondered the equation for a minute as she

worked. “But still, turkeys are scarce compared to their prey. Grubs

and things, there’s *millions* of them. It’s like a pyramid scheme.”

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Eddie was silent, poking at the fire but still listening. He seemed

to understand that this was not a casual conversation to her. She

shook a handful of salt out of the can into her palm and rubbed

the bird’s stippled skin, first with the gritty salt and then with the

smooth, cool oil. When she spoke again, she took care to keep the

emotion out of her voice.

“The life of a top carnivore is the most expensive item in the

pyramid, that’s the thing. In the case of a coyote, or a big cat, the

mother spends a whole year raising her young. Not just a few

weeks. She has to teach them to stalk and hunt and everything there

is to doing that job. She's lucky if even one of her kids makes it

through. If something gets him, there goes that mama's whole year

of work down the drain."

She looked up, catching his eye directly. "If you shoot him, Eddie, that's what you've taken down. A big chunk of his mother's

whole life chance at replacing herself. And you've let loose an extra

thousand rodents on the world that he would have eaten. It's not

just one life."

He was looking away. She waited until she had his eye again.

"When you get a coyote in your rifle sight and you're fixing to pull

the trigger, what happens? Do you forget about everything else in

the world until there's just you and your enemy?"

He thought about it. "Something like that. Hunting's like that.

You focus."

" 'Focus,' " she said. "That's what you call it? The idea that

there's just the two of you left, alone in the world?"

"I guess." He shrugged.

“But that’s wrong. There’s no such thing as *alone*. That animal was going to do something important in its time—eat a lot of things, or be eaten. There’s all these connected things you’re about to blow a hole in. They can’t *all* be your enemy, because one of those connected things is you.”

He reached into the fire pit with a stout, forked limb, carefully rearranging the burning logs into a square with a space in the center

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where the pot would go. “I would never shoot a bobcat,” he said without looking at her.

“No? Well, good. You’re not as stupid as some predator hunters, then. Let’s give you a medal.”

He glanced up sharply. “Who stepped on *your* tail?”

“I know about this stuff, Eddie.” She wiped her hands with the rag and listened to her heart beating in her ears. Two months she’d

known this man, and for two months she’d been nursing an outrage

without giving it a voice. She spoke quietly now, as her father used

to when he was angry. “They have those hunts all over. It’s no secret; they advertise in gun magazines. There’s one going

on right

now in Arizona, the Predator Hunt Extreme, with a ten-thousand-dollar prize for whoever shoots the most.”

“The most what?”

“It’s a predator kill, period. Just pile up the bodies. Bobcats,

coyotes, mountain lions, foxes—that’s their definition of a predator.”

“Not foxes.”

“Yes foxes. Some of your colleagues are even terrified of a little

gray fox. An animal that lives on mice and grasshoppers.”

“It’s not about fear,” he said.

“Can you feature the damage those men will do to the state of

Arizona in just one weekend, the plague of mice and grasshoppers

they’ll cause? If you can’t feel bad for a hundred mother-years left

to rot in a pile, think of the damn *rats*.”

He didn’t respond. She lifted the bird with care, cradled it against her forearms, and carried it over to the empty canister,

which seemed large enough but not quite the right shape. She stood

looking down into it for a minute and decided to stand the bird

more or less on its head—or rather, the region of its former head.

She shifted the carcass around until its drumsticks stuck up satisfactorily, but the joy of this celebration had ebbed.

“Here,” she said,

“help me get this on the fire.”

Between them they lifted the heavy pot and lowered it
down

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into the center of the fire. She poured in a little water from
the kettle and settled the lid onto the pot, then washed her
hands with the

rest of the water. There was a faint chill in the evening air,
enough

that the cold water stung her hands. But then her hands and
feet

were always cold, lately. She held her palms up to the
fire’s warmth.

Almost immediately the pot began to hiss with satisfactory
little

crackles, the age-old conversation of steam and fat.
Deanna sat

down on the ground on the opposite side of the fire pit
from Eddie,

facing him through the flames. He poked at the fire a little
more,

seeming restless. He was squatting on his heels, not sitting.

“It’s *not*, ” he finally said.

“What’s not what?”

“Hunting predators. It’s not about fear.”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and put her arms
around

them, holding her elbows in her palms. “Then what’s it
about? Do

tell. I’m ready to be enlightened.”

He shook his head, got up to collect two more logs from the woodpile, then shook his head again. “You can’t be crying over every single brown-eyed life in the world.”

“I already told you, that’s not my religion. I grew up on a farm.

I’ve helped gut about any animal you can name, and I’ve watched

enough harvests to know that cutting a wheat field amounts to

more decapitated bunnies under the combine than you’d believe.”

She stopped speaking when her memory lodged on an old vision from childhood: a raccoon she found just after the hay mower

ran it over. She could still see the matted gray fur, the gleaming jawbone and shock of scattered teeth so much like her own, the dark

blood soaking into the ground all on one side, like a shadow of this

creature’s final, frightened posture. She could never explain to

Eddie how it was, the undercurrent of tragedy that went with

farming. And the hallelujahs of it, too: the straight, abundant rows,

the corn tassels raised up like children who all knew the answer.

The calves born slick and clean into their leggy black-and-white

perfection. Life and death always right there in your line of sight.

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Most people lived so far from it, they thought you could just

choose, carnivore or vegetarian, without knowing that the chemicals on grain and cotton killed far more butterflies and bees and

bluebirds and whippoorwills than the mortal cost of a steak or a

leather jacket. Just clearing the land to grow soybeans and corn had

killed about everything on half the world. Every cup of coffee

equaled one dead songbird in the jungle somewhere, she'd read.

He was watching her, waiting for whatever was inside to come

out, and she did the best she could. "Even if you never touch meat,

you're costing something its blood," she said. "Don't patronize me.

I know that. Living takes life."

A fierce hiss came from inside the pot, inspiring her to listen for

a minute to this turkey's last lament.

"Good, we agree on that," he said. "Living takes life."

"But it can be thoughtful. A little bit humble about the necessity, maybe. You can consider the costs of your various choices. Or

you can blow big holes in the world for no better reason than simple fear."

He held her eye. "I'm not *afraid* of a coyote."

“Then *leave* it ... the *hell* ... *alone*. ”

They glared at each other through the trembling haze of heat

above the fire.

“Why does it come down to this?” he asked.

“Because I’m going to change your mind or die trying.”

“Die trying, then. Because you can’t and you won’t change my

mind. I’m a ranching boy from the West, and hating coyotes is my

religion. Blood of the lamb, so to speak. Don’t try to convert me,

and I won’t try to convert you.”

“I won’t go shoot your lambs in the head, either.”

“You are, though,” he said. “In a way you are. If you’re trying

to save those bastards, you’re slaughtering lambs.”

She uncrossed her arms and threw a handful of dry grass into

the fire, watching each strand light up and glow like the filament of

a lightbulb. “If you only knew.”

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“Knew what?”

“You said you’d read my thesis. You promised me you would,

one time.”

He shook his head, grinning. “You never give up.”

“You *did*. You gave me your word.”

“I must have been trying to get you into bed.”

“I think we were already there.”

He leaned sideways, looking at her around the edge of the flames. “Likely.”

“So?”

“So? Tell me why I should read it.” Still on his heels, he made

his way around the fire pit like some bent-kneed insect and stopped

a few feet away from her. “What will I learn about coyotes that I

don’t already know in my mean little fearful heart?”

“That they have one of the most complex vocal systems of any

land mammal. That they live on rodents and fruits and seeds and a

hundred other things besides lambs.”

“Lambs are on the list, though.”

“Lambs are on the list.”

“I already knew that.”

She tossed another handful of grass into the fire. “OK. And they

have elaborate courting rituals that involve a lot of talking and licking, and they bring each other presents of food. Meat, especially.”

He looked at the pot on the fire, and then at Deanna.

“And once they form a pair bond,” she said, “it’s usually for life.”

“And I’m supposed to admire that?”

“You’re not supposed to feel any way about it. It’s just information.”

He nodded. "OK, what else?"

"They're the most despised species in America. Even the U.S.

Government is in the business of killing them, to the tune of maybe

a hundred thousand animals a year, using mainly cyanide traps and

gunning from helicopters. Not to mention the good work done by

your pals at the predator-hunt extravaganzas."

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"Yep. Go on."

"And after a hundred years of systematic killing, there are more

coyotes now than there have ever been, in more places than they

ever lived before."

"There. Stop right there. Why is that?"

"It's a mystery, isn't it? We kill grizzlies, wolves, blue whales,

and those guys slump off toward extinction as fast as they can. Darn

coyotes, though, they're more trouble. I think the Indians are right:

they're downright tricky."

"And?"

"And the more we attack them, the more of them there are. I

can't tell you exactly why, but I have a lot of ideas."

"Give me one good guess."

“OK. Coyotes aren’t just predators, they’re also a prey species.

Unlike the blue whale or the grizzly, they’re real used to being

hunted. Their main predator before we came along was wolves.

Which we erased from the map of America as fast as we could.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh* is right. Wolves. There’s no such thing as killing one

thing, that’s what I’m trying to tell you. Every dead animal was

somebody’s lunch or somebody’s population control.”

He took up a longer stick and jabbed at the framework of burning logs surrounding the pot, sending an impressive display of

sparks swirling high into the air.

“Will you quit that?” she said, laying a hand on his arm. “You’re

going to burn down the woods. Just leave it alone.”

“I’m trying to get the coals to settle.”

“Gravity does that.” *This fire can burn itself*, she wanted to tell

him, *without a man in charge of it*. “My dad used to say if you play in

the fire, you’ll pee in the bed.”

“Worth it,” Eddie said firmly, jabbing and sending up more sparks.

“Quit it,” she said, taking away his stick. “Here, *sit*, you’re making me nervous.”

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He sat with his shoulder against hers. They listened to the elaborate sounds of the fire and the cooking bird. There was even a

high, musical whistle—steam escaping from somewhere. Deanna's

hunger had grown to a sweet, gnawing ache in her belly.

“So we helped them out by killing the wolves,” he said, unexpectedly. “And what's your next good guess?”

“It's not a guess, it's a fact. Coyotes breed faster when they're being hunted.”

He stared straight ahead, into the fire. “How?”

“They have bigger litters. Sometimes they'll even share a den, so

where you'd normally see just the alpha female breeding, now one

of her sisters breeds, too. They work in family groups, with most of

the adults helping to raise one female's young. It might be that

when some adults are killed out of a group, there's more food for

the young. Or maybe there's a shift in the reproductive effort.

Something happens. What we know for sure is, killing adults increases the chances of survival for the young.”

“Wow.”

She turned toward him. “Hey, Eddie Bondo.”

He turned to face her. “What?”

“Boo. Life's not simple.”

“So I'm told.”

“Hey. Read the book. It’ll keep you on the edge of your seat.

My major professor claimed he remained conscious through the

whole two hundred pages.”

Eddie looked back at the fire. “I don’t think I’m going to care

for the ending.”

The moon was up somewhere, and big, just a little past full. It

hadn’t yet climbed above the mountains that shadowed this hollow,

but the sky was collecting a brightness Deanna could sense through

her closed eyelids. She willed her body to find a flat plane of repose

instead of turning and turning like a rolling pin on a piecrust. On

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these sleepless nights she got the blanket in a tangle that left Eddie

exposed to the elements.

They’d dragged the mattress outside before collapsing on it in a

turkey-stuffed delirium. But she’d always slept outside in summer,

whenever the nights were warm enough; moonlight didn’t usually

disturb her sleep. *Nothing* usually disturbed her sleep. She’d never

known insomnia before these last few weeks. She'd never
known

falling asleep in the daytime, either. Something had gotten
her out

of whack. Deanna wasn't sure whether these worries
roaming her

brain were keeping her awake nights or whether they had
just

moved into the vacant apartment of an insomniac head.

The urge to roll over consumed her like pain, she couldn't
resist

it any longer, so she moved cautiously from her side to her
back.

Immediately that felt uncomfortable, too. She tried to
forget her

body, her immensely full stomach, and Eddie beside her—
all these

troublesome symptoms of being human. She tried, slowly,
to inhale

and absorb this night instead. It was an extraordinary time
to be

awake, if you gave in to it: these hours of settled darkness
when the

insects quieted and the air cooled and scents rose delicately
out of

the ground. She could smell leaf mold, mushrooms, and
the faint

trace of a skunk that must have come poking around the
turkey

bones in the woods right after she and Eddie fell into bed
and she

fell asleep, hard, briefly, before popping indelibly awake
again.

Now her brain settled on phoebe worries: they might have
scared the mother off her nest before dark, or a baby might
have

fallen out, something that had already happened twice. The
fledglings were nearly old enough to fly and slightly bigger
even than

adults now because of their fluffy juvenile feathers—big
enough to

make it way too crowded in there. Two days in a row,
Deanna had

picked up a fallen nestling off the ground and tucked it
back in on

top of its siblings. Eddie claimed a bird wouldn't return to
a nest

once a human had touched it; Deanna knew better from
experience, but she let the mother bird answer. She swooped
back onto

her nest just seconds after Deanna stepped away from it.

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Please gather your feathered courage and fledge soon, she
beseeched

these babies, for they were getting to be a handful. She'd
been tiptoeing around underneath the phoebe nursery for
weeks and forcing Eddie to do the same. This mother had
already lost her first

brood to their carelessness, and it was too late in the
season for her

to start again if this one failed. In a few more days, maybe
tomorrow, their worries would be over. These children would
stretch

their wings and leave home for good.

She flexed her left foot against a cramp and fought the urge to

roll over onto her stomach. Impossible to keep still in this mess of

blankets. The only thing to do with such a restlessness was get up

and keep it company. She would walk in the woods. There would

be enough light with this moon, once it had crested the mountaintop. But first she would check on the phoebes. Taking great care not

to disturb Eddie, she got up quietly, found her boots next to the

mattress, pulled on her jeans and buttoned them under her nightshirt, then went into the cabin to fetch the flashlight. She moved

very quietly around to the porch to take a peek. The flashlight

wouldn't disturb the mother if she was on the nest; this late at night

it wouldn't make her fly. Deanna searched the eave for the neat,

round mound of woven grass. As she'd dreaded, the mother's

brown-feathered head and little pointed beak weren't there where

they ought to have been. Quickly she checked the porch floor for

fallen angels, but none were there. She went inside and brought out

the ladderback chair, then climbed up carefully, steadying herself

with one hand on the roof joist. Nothing! The inside of the nest

was a tidy pocket, perfectly empty. How could that be?
Deanna had

watched the mother catch bugs all afternoon, a slave to those four

huge appetites. They wouldn't fledge at night. So where were they?

She shone the beam on the floor again, searching all around the legs

of the chair and farther away, in case they'd traveled as far as the

edge of the porch in a feathery little panic. Nothing.

She clicked off the flashlight and thought a minute.
Clicked it

back on again. With the focused halo of light she scanned every

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inch of the top of the joist all the way out to the end of the eave,

then searched along the other rafters. She passed over and then

came back to what looked like a pile of black tubing.
Studied it.

Found the small, round, wide-set eyes shining back at her, perched

smugly on top of the partially coiled body. She swept the light very

slowly down the dark body until she found them: four discernible

lumps.

She breathed hard against the urge to scream at this monster or

tear it down from the rafters and smash its head. Breathed three

more times, blowing out hard through her lips each time, feeling a

faint coil of nausea inside her anger. This was her familiar, the same

blacksnake that had lived in the roof all summer, the snake she had

defended as a predator doing its job. Living takes life . *But not the ba-*

bies, she cried in her mind. *Not these; they were mine. At the end of the*

summer the babies are all there will be.

She climbed down from the chair, clicked off the flashlight, and

headed out into the woods, tense with fury and sadness. She didn't

understand how far her emotions were running away with her until she felt the coolness of tears running down her face. She wiped

them with the heel of her hand and kept walking, fast, away from

the cabin and the scent of fire and flesh, up into the dark woods.

What was this uncontrollable sorrow that kept surging through her

body like hot water? In the last few days she had cried over everything: phoebes, tiredness, the sound of a gunshot, the absence of

sleep. Idiotic, sentimental tears, female tears—what *was* this? Was

this what they meant by hot flashes? But they didn't feel hot. Her

body felt full and heavy and slow and human and *absent*, somehow,

just a weight to be carried forward without its enthusiastic cycles of

fertility and rest, the crests and valleys she had never realized she

counted on so much. Deadweight, was that what she was now? An

obsolete female biding its time until death?

Why did she feel so miserable about this? She'd never entirely

approved of human beings and all their mess to begin with. Why

would she have wanted to make more of them?

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Halfway up the hillside she stopped to wipe her eyes and nose

on the hem of her nightshirt. When she turned back toward the

cabin she understood that the moon must have risen behind her.

The trees on the opposite side of the hollow were washed in brilliant white light. They glowed like a fairy forest or a hillside of

white birches far from home. She breathed in slowly. This was what

she had. The beauty of this awful night. She listened for small yips

in the distance, something to put in her heart beside the lost

phoebes and the dread of another full moon rising with no more

small celebrations from her body, ever again. She kept herself still

and tried to think of coyote children emerging from the forest's

womb with their eyes wide open, while the finite possibilities of

her own children closed their eyes, finally, on this world.

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G heart was beating harder than seemed entirely nec arnett paused halfway up the hill to take a rest. His

essary. He could hear the grumble and whine of the

boy's chain saw already at work up there. She would be there, too,

by now. They'd agreed to meet at noon to work out dividing the

firewood and so on, and it was fourteen after, if his watch could be

trusted. Well, she could wait. He was her elder; she could have a little respect. He sat down on a log next to the creek, just for a

minute.

A damselfly lit on the tip of a horsetail reed very close to his

head, near enough for him to see it well. He couldn't remember

looking at one of these since he was a boy—they'd called them

snake doctors—and yet, after all those years, here one was. Probably

they'd been flittering around this creek all along, whether he paid

them any notice or not. He leaned closer to inspect it: it was just

about like a dragonfly, except that its wings folded back when it sat

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still instead of sticking out to the sides. This one's wings were black,

not quite opaque but sheer like lace, with a pearly white dot at each

wingtip. It reminded Garnett somehow of the underthings of

women he'd known long ago, back when women wore garter belts

and other contrivances that took some time and trouble to remove.

Maybe women still did wear such things. How would he know?

Ellen had been dead eight years, and for decades before that he certainly had had no occasion to learn about women's undergarments.

He was a faithful man, a good Christian, and Ellen had been, too.

She'd believed in the kind of sturdy cotton you could hang on the

line without shame.

Now, why on earth was he sitting here in the woods
thinking

about women's underthings? He felt deeply embarrassed
and prayed

hastily to the Lord to forgive the unpredictable frailties of
an old

man's mind. He found his feet and headed on up the hill.

She was there, all right, having some kind of jolly
conversation

with the boy, who had put down the chain saw and fallen
into her

thrall as people always did. Like lambs to the slaughter,
Garnett

thought, but he found himself unexpectedly amused by the
sight of

this immense young hoodlum nodding courteously to the
tiniest

gray-haired woman ever to stalk the woods in a long skirt
and hiking boots. They both turned to greet him.

"Mr. Walker! Now, you remember Oda's son Jarondell,
don't

you?"

"Of course. My regards to your mother." Remember
Jarondell,

he thought. That was a name for you. He was more likely
to remember the expiration date on his can of Sevin dust.

"We were discussing maybe taking down a few more of
these

leaners," she told Garnett. "As long as we've got Jarondell
up here.

That cherry down the path, for one. It's over so far, I'd be
surprised

if it made it to the end of summer."

Oh, dear Lord, that cherry! Garnett had forgotten all about it,

had sat right under it five minutes ago when he paused to rest by the

creek. He'd forgotten to worry about the tree falling on him! The

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thought set him nearly into a panic, so that he was much too aware

of the beating of his heart. He laid a hand on his chest.

“What’s wrong? Are you attached to that cherry?” She watched

him with a worried look, causing him a strong and unwelcome recollection of the day she’d bent over him in the grass and declared

that he hadn’t had a stroke, he had a turtle.

“Goodness, no,” he said huffily. “That’s fine, you might as well

take that tree down. It’s a danger and a nuisance.”

She looked relieved. “Oh, I wouldn’t go that far. It’s just a tree.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Now of course you’ll agree that if Jarondell

gets it to fall on my side of the creek, the firewood is all mine.”

How that woman loved to aggravate him! She was like a little

banty hen just spoiling for a fight. Garnett forced a smile, or the

nearest thing to it. “That sounds fair.”

She gave him a second look before turning back to Oda's boy

(already he'd forgotten the name). The boy stood with his muscular

arms crossed and his shaved head gleaming like that Mr. Clean-Up

man on Ellen's ammonia bottles, so tall and strapping that Nannie

had to shade her eyes from the sun when she looked up at him,

though of course that didn't slow her down any. She talked nonstop,

pointing this way and that and up into the trees as they chatted (did

she not realize they were paying this boy by the hour?). She seemed

very interested in the process of felling trees. But of course, that was

Nannie Rawley. She was interested in what your dog ate for dinner.

Garnett shook his head dramatically—for no audience, it turned

out, since she and the boy had already forgotten he was there. He

might as well be a tree himself. When the chain saw roared up again,

he had to raise his voice considerably to get her attention. "If you get

the cherry," he called, "then this one is going to be mine, I gather."

She held her hands over her ears and motioned that they should

go down the path. He followed her around a bend where
the roar

receded to a whine, but she kept walking, all the way down
to the

log where he had rested earlier. The damselflies were still
hovering,

a great many of them now, collecting as if for a social
event.

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“Not here,” he said with alarm, pointing up. “We really
mustn’t

tarry here.”

“Good *night*, ” she cried. “Don’t tell me you think that
cherry’s

going to fall on you! You think you’re that special?” She
sat down

on the log beside the creek, fluffing her yellow print skirt
modestly

down over her calves. She looked up at him expectantly.
“Well,

come on, take a load off.”

He hesitated.

“It would sure make the paper, wouldn’t it? ‘Two Old
Fogies

Felled by a Single Tree.’ ”

“All *right*, ” Garnett said, sitting down grumpily a yard
away

from her on the log. The woman could make you feel a
fool just for

minding your own business.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “I’m in a tizzy today.”

Today, he thought. “Over what, now?” He tried to sound like a

father indulging a child, but the effect was lost on her. She launched

eagerly onto her soapbox, leaning forward and clasping her hands

on her knees and looking him straight in the face.

“It’s *bees*, ” she said. “Down at the Full Gospel church they’ve

got themselves in a pickle from killing their bees. *Killing* them—

they fumigated! Why didn't they call me *first*? I'd have smoked them

and got the queen out so they'd all come out of the walls in time. I

could use another hive on my place. Goodness me, I could use

twenty more hives—the way people are using insecticide around

here, I can use every bee I can get to pollinate my apples. But no,

now they call me. After they've got a mess on their hands that any

child could have predicted.”

Garnett worried over her phrasing. What mess was caused by

killing bees that any child could predict? He was evasive. “Well.

That must be a bother for them at the worship services.” He cast a

nervous eye up toward the leaning tree.

But Nannie was heedless of their peril. “Honey two inches deep on the floor of the whole church, oozing out of the walls, and

they're blaming the poor dead bees.”

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Oh, goodness, what a picture. Garnett could just see the women

in their church shoes. “Well,” he contended, “it *was* the bees that

made the honey in the wall.”

“And it’s the bees that need to vibrate their wings over it
night

and day to keep it cool in July. Without workers in there to
cool the

hive, that comb’s going to melt, and all the honey will
come pouring out.” She shook her head sadly. “Don’t people
know these

things? Are we old folks the only ones left that think twice
about

the future?”

He felt a small thrill to be included in her compliment. But
he

studied her face and couldn’t quite work out whether she
meant

him in particular or old people in general. And now she
was headed

off on her own tangent.

“You’d think young people would be more careful.
They’re the

ones that are going to be around in fifty years. Not *us*.”

“No, not us,” Garnett agreed mournfully. He tried not to
think

of his chestnut fields overgrown with weeds, waving their
untended, carefully crossbred leaves like flags of surrender in
a world

that did not even remember what was at stake. Who would
care

about his project when he was gone? Nobody. That was the
answer:

not one living soul. He had kept this truth at a distance for
so long,

it nearly made him weep with relief to embrace the simple,
honest

grief of it. He rested his hands on his knees, breathed in and out.

Let the cherry tree fall on him now, get it over. What did it matter?

They sat silent for a while, listening to the wood thrushes.

Nannie pulled a handful of cockleburs from her skirt and then,

without really appearing to give it much thought, reached over and

plucked half a dozen from the knees of Garnett's khaki trousers. He

felt strangely moved by this fussy little bit of female care. He realized vaguely that as a mortal man, he was starved. He cleared his

throat. "Did it ever cross your mind that God—or whatever you

want to call him, with your balance of nature and so forth—that he

got carried away with the cockleburs?"

"There's too many of them. I'll have to agree with you on that."

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Garnett felt faintly cheered: she agreed. "You can't blame me

for that one, now, can you? People's spraying or meddling. For the

cocklebur problem."

"Oh, I probably could if I tried. But it's a nice day, so I won't."

They sat awhile longer in silence. "Why did they call *you*?" he

asked finally, thinking of the woman who had been phoning him

up lately for livestock advice. A *goat maven*, she had called him. He

glanced over at Nannie, but she seemed lost in her own thoughts.

“The church ladies, with their bee problem?”

“Oh, why me and not somebody else? I guess I’m the only one

around here that keeps them anymore. Isn’t that sad, that nobody in

this county under the age of seventy knows how to work bees?

Everybody used to. Now they’ve all let their hives go.”

Garnett did think this was sad. As a child he had enjoyed putting

on the bee bonnet and helping his father with the honey chores,

spring and fall. He honestly couldn’t say why he had let that go.

“What did you tell them? About the honey on the floor?”

She grinned and looked at him sideways. “I’m afraid I wasn’t

very nice. I told them that the Lord moves in mysterious ways, and

that among all his creatures he loves honeybees just about the best.

I told them it was in the Scripture. I expect they’re all leafing

through their Bibles right now to see what it says about God’s sending down a plague on the killers of bees.”

“What does it say?”

“Oh, nothing. I just made that up.”

“Oh,” Garnett said, suppressing a smile in spite of himself.

“Then they probably just called all the ladies to come down with

mop buckets.”

Nannie Rawley snorted. “What a lot of sweetness wasted on a

bunch of sourpusses.”

Garnett declined to comment.

“It was that Mary Edna Goins that called me. Mad as hops, like

the whole idea of a honeybee was my fault.” She glanced over at

him, then looked away. “Mr. Walker, I don’t like to say an unkind

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word about my fellow man, and I hope you won’t think I’m a gossip. But that woman has about the worst case of herself I’ve ever

seen.”

Garnett laughed. He had known Mary Edna Goins since before

she was a Goins. Once she had called up to tell him that having goat

projects in 4-H was giving young people an undue opportunity to

think about Satan.

He carefully kept an eye on the cherry tree. “We were going to

discuss firewood,” he said. “You can have this one.”

“Thank you, it’s mine already,” she said primly. “Are you going

to give me my house and land, too?”

“All right, no need to get huffy,” he said.

“I agree. I don’t need that much firewood anyway. I’ll take the

wood from this one, you take the oak, and we’ll split whatever

Jarondell charges us to cut up both.”

He knew better than to accept her offer without thinking it over first. He gazed up into the dimness of her woods and was surprised to notice a sapling wagging its leaves in the breeze, uphill

from the creek. “Why, look, that’s a chestnut, isn’t it?” He pointed.

“It is. A young one,” she said.

“My eyes aren’t good, but I can spy a chestnut from a hundred

paces.”

“That one’s come up from an old stump where a big one was

cut down years ago,” she said. “I’ve noticed they always do that. As

long as the roots keep living, the sprouts will keep coming out

around the stump. But before they get big enough to flower, they

always die. Why is that?”

“The blight chancre has to get up a head of steam before it sets

off other little chancres and kills the tree. It takes eight or nine years

out in the open, or longer in the woods, where a tree grows slower.

The fungus inside there is more or less proportional to the size of

the trunk. But you're right, they're just about sure to die before they

get up enough size to set any seeds. So biologically speaking, the

species is dead."

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"Biologically dead. Like us," she said with no particular emotion.

"That's right," he said uncomfortably. "If we consider ourselves

as having no offspring."

"And unlikely to produce any more at this point." She let out

an odd little laugh.

He didn't need to comment on that.

"Now, tell me something," she said. "I've always wondered this.

Your hybrids are American chestnut stock crossed with Chinese

chestnut, right?"

"That's right. And backcrossed with American again. If I can

keep at it long enough I'll get a cross that has all the genes of an

American chestnut except for the one that makes it susceptible to

blight."

“And the gene for the resistance comes from the Chinese side?”

“That’s right.”

“But where did you get the American chestnut seed stock to

begin with?”

“That’s a good question. I had to look high and low,”
Garnett

said, pleased as punch. No one had asked him a question about his

project in many a year. Once Ellen had talked her niece into bringing her third-grade class out to see it, but those children had acted

like it was a sporting event.

“Well, such as where?” she asked, truly interested.

“I wrote letters and made calls to Forest Service men and what

all. Finally I located two standing American chestnuts that were still

flowering, about as sick and old as a tree can get but not dead yet. I

paid a boy to climb up and cut me down some flowers, and I put

them in a bag and brought them back here and pollinated a Chinese

tree I had in my yard, and from the nuts I grew out my first field of

seedlings. That gave me my first generation, the half-Americans.”

“Where were the old trees? I’m just curious.”

“One was in Hardcastle County, and one was over in West

Virginia. Lonely old things, flowering but not setting any seeds be**338**

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cause they had no neighbors to cross with. There are still a few

around. Not many, but a few.”

“Oh, I know it.”

“There were probably plenty, back in the forties,” Garnett went

on. “Do you remember when the CCC was telling us to cut every

last one down? We thought they were all going anyway. But now, if

you think about it, that wasn’t so good. Some of them could have

made it through. Enough to make a comeback.”

“Oh, they would have,” she agreed. “Daddy was adamant about

that. Those two up here in our woodlot, he was determined not to

let anybody get. One night he stopped a man that was up here aiming to cut them down and haul them off with a mule before the sun

came up!”

“You had chestnut trees in your woodlot?” Garnett asked.

She cocked her head. “Don’t you know the ones I mean?”

There’s the one about a quarter mile up this hill, just awful-looking

because of all the dead limbs it’s dropped. But it still sets a few seeds

every year, which the squirrels eat up. And the other one is way on

top of the ridge, in about the same shape.”

“You have two reproductive American chestnuts in your woodlot?”

“Are you fooling with me? You didn’t know?”

“How would I have known that?”

She started to speak, then paused, touched her lip, then spoke.

“I never really think of the woods as *belonging* to us, exactly. I walk

all over your hills when I feel like it. I just assumed you did the same

with mine.”

“I haven’t trespassed on your land since the day your father

bought it from mine.”

“Well,” she said cheerfully. “You should have.”

He wondered if this was really possible, what she was telling

him. Certainly she knew apples, but did she honestly know a chestnut from a cherry? He glanced up at the offending cherry tree again

and became convinced it was leaning farther than it had been this

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morning. A squirrel bounded carelessly up its trunk, which was just

too much for Garnett. The sound of a loud crack overhead caused

him to look straight up, even though he knew better and had long

been in the habit of avoiding that movement. Oh, oh, oh!
The

curse of his dizziness came crashing down. He held his
head and

moaned aloud as the woods spun around him crazily. He
leaned

over and put his head between his knees, knowing it would
do no

good for him to close his eyes—that would only make him
want to

throw up.

“Mr. Walker?” She leaned down and looked into his
terrorstricken face.

“Nothing. It will pass. A few minutes. Don’t mind me.
Nothing

you can help.”

But she was still peering into his face. “Nystagmus,” she
pronounced.

“What?” He felt annoyed and foolish and weak and
fiercely

wished she would go away. But she kept looking right at
his eyes.

“Your eyes are jerking to the left, over and over—it’s
called nystagmus. You must be having a doozy of a dizzy
spell.”

He didn’t answer. The spinning tree trunks were slowing
up

now, like a merry-go-round winding down. It would pass
in a few

more minutes.

“Do you get it in bed, too, lying on your back?”

He nodded. “That’s the darnedest. It wakes me up if I roll
over

in my sleep.”

“You poor thing. That’s a misery. You know how to fix it, don’t

you?”

He moved his head very carefully to face her. “There’s a cure?”

“How long have you had this?”

He didn’t like to say. Forever. “Twenty years, maybe.”

“You never saw a doctor for it?” she asked.

“At first I thought it must be something awful gone wrong inside my head,” he confessed. “I didn’t want to know. Then the years

went by, and it didn’t kill me.”

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“It won’t; it’s just a nuisance. BPV is what they call it. ‘Benign

positional vertigo,’ or something close to that. I can’t remember.

Rachel had it bad. Usually old people get it, but you know, everything on Rachel that could fall apart, did. Look here, here’s what

you do. It’s simple. Lie down here on this log.”

He protested, but she already had him by the shoulders and was

guiding him down onto his back. “Turn your head to the side, as far

as it will go. Let it drop backward a little, down off to the side.

That’s right.” He gasped and clutched at her hands like a baby when

the dizziness descended again, worse than ever. No matter how he

braced for it, that feeling of careening through space never failed to

terrify him.

“It’s OK, that’s good,” she crooned, holding on to his hand with

one of hers while she cupped her other palm behind his head,

steadying him. “Stay there if you can stand it, just hold right still till

it stops.” He did as he was told. It was a minute, maybe two, before

the world slowed and arrested its dance.

“Now,” she said, “roll your head straight back till it starts up

again. Don’t be scared. Go slow, and freeze when it hits you.”

He became so terribly aware of her hands. She was holding his

head in her competent, tender grip like a mother, pressing his face

against her skirt. It was all he could think about as he passed through

one more bout of dizziness, then turned his head and endured another. He wondered if he would ever be able to look Nannie

Rawley in the eye after this.

“You’re almost done,” she said. “Now. Listen. I’m going to help

you. Sit straight up and tilt forward like this.” She put her chin on

her chest to demonstrate. “Ready?”

She helped lift him back to a sitting position and guided his head forward. He waited, feeling a strange sensation of reassembly in his head. When it passed he relaxed his shoulders, raised his head, and looked around at a world that seemed to have been made new.

She watched him intently. “OK,” she said. “You’re done.”
“Done with what?”

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“You’re fixed. Try looking up.”

He was skeptical, but he did it, cautiously. He felt a feint of movement, but it was small. Compared with the usual, it was hardly

anything. No real dizziness. He looked at her, astonished.
“Are you

a witch? What did you just do to me?”

“It’s the Something maneuver—Epley, maybe?” She smiled.

“Rachel and I discovered it by accident. I used to roll her around

and tickle her to distract her from her dizzy spells. Then a long time

later Dr. Gibben told me there was an easier way to do it, and a

name for it. You’ll have to do it again, every so often. Maybe every

day at first.”

“What did you fix?”

“It’s caused by these little tiny crystals—”

“Ohhh! Don’t even tell me. If it’s your hocus-pocus theory of everything.”

“No, now, listen. It’s little hard crystals like rocks that form in

the balance-what’sit thingamabob inside your ear. That’s a scientific fact.”

“Well, how did they get there?”

“Some people just get them, that’s all I can tell you. What do

you want me to say, that they’re caused by orneriness? Listen here,

old man, did I fix you up, or not?”

Garnett felt chastened. “Did.”

“All right, then, listen to me for a change. You’ve got you some

little rocks in there that float around and make trouble if you tilt

your head the wrong way. The trick is to roll them up into a deadend corner where they can’t get out and bother you.”

“Are you sure? Is this real, what you’re telling me?”

“Real as rain, Mr. Walker.”

“All these years?”

“All these years, that’s been your trouble. You’ve had rocks in

your head.”

They sat without speaking for a long while, listening to the gasoline-powered sounds of an oak turning into a cord of wood. At

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length she asked, “Would you like to walk up on the hill with me

and see those two chestnuts? Would it do you any good to have two

more seed sources for your breeding program?”

“Do you have any idea?” he asked, amazed and excited once

again. He’d momentarily forgotten the chestnuts. “It would double

the amount of genetic variation I have now. I would have a faster,

healthier project by a mile, Miss Rawley. If I had flowers from those

two trees.”

“Consider them yours, Mr. Walker. Anytime.”

“Thank you,” he said. “That’s very kind of you.”

“Not at all.” She folded her hands on her lap.

Garnett could picture the two old chestnuts up there, anomalous survivors of their century, gnarled with age and disease but

still standing, solitary and persistent for all these years. Just a stone’s

throw from his property. It was almost too much to believe. He

dared to hope they still had a few flowers clinging on, this late in the

summer. What that infusion of fresh genetic material would do for

his program! It was a miracle. In fact, now that he thought about it,

if those trees had been shedding pollen all along they
might already

have helped him out, infusing his fields with a little bit of
extra diversity. He thought he'd been working alone. You just
never knew.

He turned his head to the side and received an unbidden
picture of the rocks in his head, stashed out of harm's way for
the moment but poised, surely, to roll back out and make
trouble. Without

meaning to, he also remembered the stack of green
shingles in his

garage, hiding there, burning a hole in his conscience like
a cigarette dropped on a couch.

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hold on tight to the last moments between sleep

One of the skills of grief that Lusa had learned was to
and waking. Sometimes, then, in the early morning, taking
care not to open her eyes or rouse her mind through its

warm drowse to the surface where pain broke clear and
cold, she

found she could choose her dreams. She could call a
memory and

patiently follow it backward into flesh, sound, and sense. It
would

become her life once again, and she was held and safe,
everything

undecided, everything still new. His arms were real,
carrying her

over the threshold as he joked that she weighed more than
one bag

of groceries but less than two. Cicadas buzzed and the air
was hot

and sticky—June, just after the wedding. She still had on
her blue

rayon skirt but had taken off her stockings and shoes in the
car on

the drive down from Lexington. The light-blue skirt
flowed like

cool water over her thighs and his forearms as he carried
her up the

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stairs. He stopped on the landing, kissed her there, and slid
his hands

under her so her whole weight was nothing held in his
hands. She

was weightless, floating in air with her back to the window
and his

strong arms beneath her thighs. The air around his head
seemed to

shiver with the combined molecules of their separate
selves as he

entered her and she gave in to the delirium of flight, this
perfect

love made on the wing.

Sometimes the dream changed itself then, and his
comforting

presence had the silky, pale-green wings of the stranger
who had

first come to her after the funeral, on the night Jewel gave her the

sleeping pill. He always said the same thing to her: “I know you.”

He opened his wings and the coremata rose from his abdomen, fragrant and intricately branched like honeysuckle boughs, and once

again she felt the acute pleasure of being chosen.

“You knew me well enough to find me here,” she said.

And his scent burst onto her brain like a rain of lights, and his

voice reached across the distance without words: “I’ve always

known you that well.”

He wrapped her in his softness, touched her face with the movement of trees and the odor of wild water over stones, dissolving her need in the confidence of his embrace.

“Aunt Mary Edna says they’re praying when they do that,” Crys reported doubtfully.

“I guess you could say that. Butterfly church.”

Lusa and Crys had stopped in the dirt road to admire another

dense crowd of swallowtail butterflies congregated on the ground

surrounding a muddy spot. Every fifty feet or so they came upon

another of these quivering pools of black and yellow wings that

rose and scattered as they approached, then settled again on the

same spot after they’d passed by. It had rained again yesterday, so

there was no shortage of puddles.

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“I’ll tell you something, though,” Lusa said. “It’s a no-girlsallowed church. All those butterflies you see there are probably

boys.”

“Why?”

“What *why*? Because they have little peckers!”

Crys yelped out her sharp bark of a laugh. Lusa lived for this, to

crack her up. It had become her pet secret challenge, to try for these

moments when you could see all the lights come on, ever so briefly,

in this child’s dark house.

“I know what you meant,” Lusa said. “Why do just the males do

that. It’s called puddling, believe it or not. That’s what real-live bug

scientists call it.”

“Yeah? Why do just the boy ones do it?”

“They’re sucking up a certain mineral or protein from the mud,

some special thing butterflies need to be healthy. And then they actually give it to the girl butterflies, like a valentine.”

“How do they give it to them?”

Lusa paused, then asked, “Do you know how babies get made?”

Crys rolled her eyes. “He sticks his pecker in her pee hole and

squirts in stuff and the baby grows in there.”

“O- *kay*, you know the story, all right. So that’s how he gives her

the minerals. When he gives her the baby-making stuff, he actually

puts it together with this whole package of other goodies she likes.

It’s called the spermatophore.”

“Boy. That’s weird.”

“Isn’t it? You know what? Nobody else in Zebulon County knows that, except you and me. Even your teachers don’t.”

She glanced up. “Really?”

“Really. If you want to know about bugs, I can tell you things

you will not believe.”

“Are you mad at me for saying ‘pecker’ and ‘shit’ and stuff?”

“Nah, not at all. *Hell*, no,” she swore, to make Crys laugh. “As

long as you know where *not* to say those words. Like in church, or

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at school, or within one and a half miles of Aunt Mary Edna. But

here, who cares? It won’t hurt my ears.”

“Well, hot damn,” the child declared. “Shit fire.”

“Hey. Don’t use them all up in your first five minutes.”

Crys picked up a small stone and tossed it toward the crowd of

butterflies, just to see them rise.

“Come on,” Lusa said, “let’s hunt moths. Today I’m going to

find you a luna moth or bust.” They walked slowly toward the puddle, passing straight through the cloud of quivering butterflies the

way Lusa remembered Superman walking between the molecules of

a wall in the cartoons. She and Crys were hiking up the old cemetery road into the woods behind the garage, for no reason in particular, just out for a little adventure while Lowell napped on the parlor

couch. Jewel was having a very bad day and had asked Lusa to watch

them for the third time in two weeks. Lusa was happy to oblige,

though she wondered what kind of a parental substitute she was—

encouraging Crys to swear like a tinker, for instance. She didn’t

know the first thing about kids. But no one else in the family could

get a word out of Crys at all. You get what you get in this world, as

Hannie-Mavis had once told her. Lusa and Crys had gotten bad luck

and the judgment of the righteous. And apparently, each other.

“What’s that?”

Lusa looked into the woods where Crys pointed. Birdsong rang

like bells in the rainwashed air, but Lusa couldn’t see anything in

particular. “What, that plant?”

“Yeah, ’at booger one climbing up the trees.”

“ ‘ *Booger* one’?”

Crys shrugged. “Uncle Rickie says ’em’s boogers. Them vines

that gets all over everywhere. He hates ’em.”

“This one’s nice, though; it’s *supposed* to grow here. It gets covered with white flowers at the end of summer, and then it makes

millions of seedpods that look like little silver starbursts. It’s called

virgin’s bower.”

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“Virgin’s like Jesus’s mama, right?”

“Right. Or any girl or woman who’s never gotten the pecker

business we were talking about.”

“Oh. Virgin’s power?”

“No, virgin’s *bower*. It means her bed.” Lusa smiled. “Same thing

in this case, actually.”

Crys leapt ahead of Lusa with a dozen or so strange, stiff giant

steps. She seemed to like trying out different ways of walking,

which Lusa just watched, bemused. She was wearing the same outgrown pair of jeans she always wore now, and also, today, a strange,

ragged creation over her T-shirt. It looked like a man’s denim work

shirt with its tail and sleeves cut to ribbons with a pair of scissors.

“I like bugs better than flowers,” Crys said decisively, after a while.

“Good, then you’re in luck, because I know a million times more about bugs than I do about flowers. And we’re looking for a

luna moth, remember? Look on the trunks of the trees, on the side

that’s in shade. Do you know what a hickory tree looks like? With

the really shaggy bark?”

Crys shrugged.

“Luna moths especially like hickories. Those and walnuts. They

lay their eggs on the leaves because that’s what their caterpillars eat.”

“How come?”

“That’s just how their stomachs are made. They specialize. You

can eat the seeds of wheat, for instance, but not the grass part.”

“I can eat all kinds of stuff.”

“Other animals should be so lucky. Most of them have pretty

specialized diets. Meaning they can eat only one exact kind of

thing.”

“Well, that’s dumb.”

“It’s not dumb or smart, it’s just how they’re built, like you have

two legs and walk on your feet. A dog probably thinks *that’s* dumb.”

Crys didn't comment.

"But yeah, specialization makes life more risky. If their food

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dies, they die. They can't just say, 'Oh, never mind, my tree went

extinct, so now I'll just order a pizza.'"

"Lowell has that."

"Has what?"

"The special-food problem."

"Yeah?" Lusa was amused by this analysis of her brother. "What

does he eat?"

"Just macaroni and cheese. *And* chocolate malted-milk balls."

"Well. That is a specialized diet. No wonder he didn't eat my

lentil soup the other night. I should have put malted-milk balls

in it."

Crys let out a tiny laugh, just air escaping between her teeth.

"Look here, on the mossy side of this tree. See these little white

moths?" They both bent close as Lusa prodded gently at a translucent wing. The moth roused and crawled a few inches up the rough

bark. Crys was backlit by the sun, so Lusa could see the pale down

on her curved cheek, like the fuzz on a peach. There was a softness

to her features in these moments of concentration that
made Lusa

wonder how so many adults—herself included—could
ever take

this child for a boy.

She looked up. “What are they?”

“These are called cankerworms. The worm stage got
noticed

first with these guys, so mama moth is stuck with not such
a nice

name. She’s kind of pretty, though, isn’t she?” Lusa let it
crawl onto

her finger, then held it up and blew on it lightly, sending it
fluttering in a crooked arc toward another tree. Crys stood for
a minute

longer watching its sleepy colleagues on the tree before
she was

willing to move on. “How come you know so much about
bugs?”

she asked.

“Before I married your uncle Cole and moved here, I used
to

be a bug scientist. In Lexington. I did experiments and
learned stuff

about them that nobody knew before.”

“They got a lot of bugs in Lexington?”

Lusa laughed. “As many as anywhere, I guess.”

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“Huh. Aunt Lois said you’s a miner.”

“A miner?”

“Gold miner.”

Lusa puzzled over this. “Oh. A gold digger.” She sighed.
This

time she was sure Crys hadn’t meant to hurt her.

“Is it true?” Crys asked.

“Nope. No gold mines for me, past or future. Aunt Lois
has got

her head up her butt on that particular subject.”

Crys closed her mouth in a tight, conspiratorial grin and
rolled

her eyes at Lusa. They were finding their ways of living
with the

judgment of the righteous.

“This is a good spot, let’s look up here,” Lusa said,
pointing up

a steep embankment to a grassy clearing above the road,
bathed in

dappled light. They’d come as far up this road as she
wanted to go.

They shouldn’t stray too far from the house since Lowell
was napping alone. Also, Lusa really didn’t want to face the
family cemetery

that waited around the next bend. Cole wasn’t in it, but too
many

other Wideners were.

Crys was already scrambling ahead of her through the
plumes of

the daylilies that had escaped from someone’s garden long
ago and

were now as common as weeds. They were pretty, though.
Their

straplike leaves spilled like waterfalls over the banks,
crowned with

circles of bright orange-eyed flowers and long, graceful
buds. They

grew in bobbing rows along nearly every unmowed
roadside in the

county, punctuated with the intermittent purple-pink of
sweet

peas. Before they started to bloom a few weeks ago, Lusa
had never

noticed either one of these plants. The whole county was
one big

escaped flower garden.

Crys yanked the head off one of the lilies as she mounted
the

bank. "Watch this." She rubbed its center against her chin
before

tossing the bedraggled flower on the ground.

"Very nice. Now you've got an orange beard," Lusa
observed.

Crys attempted an evil grin, touchingly childish. "Like the
devil."

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"You know what that is, that orange stuff? Pollen. You
know

what pollen is?"

She shook her head.

"*Spe-erm.*" Lusa exaggerated the word thrillingly.

"Eew, yuck." She wiped her chin fiercely.

“Don’t worry. It won’t make you get pregnant and have flowers.” She walked past her to the edge of the clearing where a stand

of hickories had caught her eye. She began to search the trees’

north sides systematically, moving deeper into the woods.

Crys trailed along behind her at a little distance. “D’you think

it’s, like, going to hail?” she seemed to be asking.

Lusa glanced up at the bits of sky she could see between trees.

“No way. There aren’t any rain clouds in the sky.”

“I’m talking about *hail*, ” the child insisted.

Lusa moved deeper into the woods, scanning limbs and the undersides of leaves with a practiced eye. “It takes a big storm to bring

hail. Why do you care, anyway? You don’t have a crop in the ground.”

“*Hail*, I said!”

There was enough frustration in her voice to bring Lusa out of

her own thoughts and make her turn around. Crys had her feet

planted and was glaring at her, aggravated.

“What about hail?”

“*Hail!*” the child said, frankly annoyed. “Where the *devil’s* at.”

Lusa slowly turned over this mystery. “Are you asking me about

hell? ”

The child shrugged. “Just for *git* it.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I guess we kind of missed our moment there

to talk about the afterlife.” Crys had tromped ahead, yanking sassafras leaves off the bushes as she passed.

“I’m just curious,” Lusa said, catching up to her. “How do you

tell the difference between ‘hail’ that falls from the sky and ‘hail’

where the devil is?”

Crys stopped and looked up at her, stupefied. “Duh! They’re

spailed different!”

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“Oh,” Lusa said. “Duh.”

Crys studied her for a moment. “Aunt Lusa, did you know you

talk really funny?”

“Yeah. It’s starting to sink in.”

Lusa cajoled Crys into sparing the sassafras bushes and helping

her look for a luna instead. “It will be the biggest green moth you

can imagine. They’re amazing.” Crys seemed unwilling to believe in

the possibility of finding magic, here or anywhere, but she did

come running when Lusa finally let out a yelp and cried, “Oh,

look, look, *look!* ”

“Where?”

“Way up there—it’s too high for us to get. Do you see it, though? Right in the crotch of that branch sticking out.”

Crys squinted, seeming less than impressed. “We could poke it with a stick.”

“You don’t want to hurt it,” Lusa argued, but she’d already had

the same thought and was twisting a long, skinny limb off an oak

sapling. She reached as high as she could, jumping a little, waving

the switch like a broom to brush against the hickory trunk just

below where the luna rested with its wings serenely folded. It

twitched a little and took flight. They watched it dip and climb, dip

and climb, high into the branches until it was gone.

Lusa turned to Crys, her eyes shining. “*That* was a luna.”

Crys shrugged. “So?”

“So? So *what*? You want it should sing, too?” Crys laughed, and

Lusa felt a little startled. They took her by surprise, these moments

when her zayda slipped right past her father’s guard into her own

tongue. “Come on, let’s go look in the grass for things we can get

our hands on.” She led the way back to the grassy clearing on the

bank above the road and flopped down in the center of it. She was

content for a minute just to lean back on her elbows and look at the

toes of her sneakers and past them, down through the enticing

woods. She'd been cooped up in the house or weeding or mowing

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or checking the health of her goats for too many days. She ought to

get herself into the woods more often. The grass in this clearing was

a little damp—she could feel it soaking her shorts—but the sun felt

so good. She closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the sky.

“What’s this one?”

Lusa leaned over and looked closely at the shield-shaped green

bug that Crys had coaxed onto her wrist. “Southern green stinkbug,” Lusa pronounced.

Crys studied it closely. “Does it stink?”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“Is it kin to that red and black one we found on the peach tree?”

“The harlequin bug? Yes, it is, as a matter of fact. Same family,

Pentatomidae.” She looked at Crys, surprised. “That’s very good.

You have a really good eye for this, did you know that? You’re a

good observer, and you remember things well.”

Crys flicked the bug off her wrist and rolled over onto her stomach, looking away from Lusa. She parted the grass carefully

with her hands, here and there, like an animal grooming its kin.

Lusa left her alone, rolling over to study her own patch of grass.

Crys eventually gave up the chase and lay on her back, staring into

the treetops. After a while she declared, “You could cut down all

these trees and make a pile of money.”

“I could,” Lusa said. “Then I’d have a pile of money and no

trees.”

“So? Who needs trees?”

“About nineteen million bugs, for starters. They live in the leaves, under the bark, everywhere. Just close your eyes and point,

and you’re pointing at a bug.”

“So? Who needs nineteen million bugs?”

“Nineteen thousand birds that eat them.”

“So? Who needs birds?”

“I do. You do.” She so often wondered whether Crys was really

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heartless or only trying to be. “Not to mention, the rain would run

straight down the mountain and take all the topsoil off my fields.

The creek would be pure mud. This place would be a dead place.”

Crys shrugged. “Trees grow back.”

“That’s what you think. This forest took hundreds of years to

get like this.”

“Like what?”

“Just how it is, a whole complicated thing with parts that all

need each other, like a living body. It’s not just trees; it’s different

kinds of trees, all different sizes, in the right proportions. Every animal needs its own special plant to live on. And certain plants will

only grow next to certain other kinds, did you know that?”

“Sang only grows under a sugar maple tree.”

“What does? Ginseng? Where’d you learn that?”

She shrugged again. “Uncle Joel.”

“So he’s a sang digger, is he?”

She nodded. “Him and his friends like to go up ’air on the mountain and dig it up. There’s a lady up ’air hollers at ’em for it,

too. You’re not supposed to dig it up. He says she’s proolly fixing to

shoot his hide if she catches him one more time.”

Lusa looked up the mountain. “Some lady *lives* up there? Are

you sure? That’s just supposed to be Forest Service land, above this

farm.”

“Ask Uncle Joel. He’ll tell you. He says she’s a gol-dang wild

woman.”

“I’ll bet. I think I’d like to meet her.” Lusa poked an inchworm

out of the grass and let it make its way up her finger.

“What does

Uncle Joel say about me? Is he the one who thinks I should cut

down my trees?” She felt only slightly guilty about exploiting this

new source of inside information.

“No. He’s the one says you’ve gone plumb goat-crazy.”

“Him and everybody else. They’re all just dying to know why,

aren’t they?”

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Crys shrugged and looked over at Lusa, a little guarded. But she

nodded. “I guess you wouldn’t tell, though.”

“I’d tell *you*, ” Lusa said quietly. She would love to give this child

a gift that mattered. Her confidence, that would be something.

Her face lit up. “You would?”

“Only if it was just you, not Uncle Joel or anybody else. You

couldn’t tell them no matter what. Can you keep a secret, cross your

heart?”

With earnest solemnity, Crys drew a cross on her chest.

“OK, here it is. I’ve got this cousin in New York City, he’s
a

butcher, and we’ve made a deal. If I can get all those goats
up there

on the hill to have babies a month before New Year’s, he’ll
pay me

so much money for them your uncle Joel will keel over.”

The child’s eyes grew wide. “You’ll be *rich*?”

Lusa grinned and hung her head. “No, not really. *But* I’ll
be able

to pay the guy who’s redoing all the plumbing in the
house, and

that friend of your uncle Rickie’s who’s fixing the barn
right now.”

“Clivus Morton?” Crys made an awful face. “He’s got
B.O.”

Lusa tried not to laugh. “Well, that’s no reason not to pay
him,

is it? If so, I just wasted nine hundred dollars, because I
wrote him

a check this morning.”

Crys seemed astonished by this figure. “Shit fire. I guess
now

he’s rich.”

“It takes a bunch of money to keep a farm in one piece.
Sometimes you don’t make as much in a year as you have to
pay out.

That’s why people moan and groan about farming. Just in
case you

were wondering.”

“What if your goats don’t do that—have their babies?”

“I’ll still have to pay Clivus Morton a whole bunch more money when he’s finished. Whether or not he takes a bath.” Lusa

lay down on her back in the damp grass, crossed her arms behind

her head, and sighed. “It’s risky. But the goats are the only way I

could think of this year to make some money off a little patch of

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briar scrub and keep the farm in one piece.” She glanced at Crys,

who didn’t seem to be listening, though it was hard to tell. “So

that’s what I’m doing with the goats. Just trying to keep my little

piece of heaven from going to *hail*.”

“Uncle Joel said you was throwing the place away.”

“He’s welcome to make a suggestion if he has a better idea—he

and my vegetarian friends Hal and Arlie in Lexington, who’ve informed me I’m a sellout. There’s not one crop I can put in the ground

here that’ll earn as much as it costs to grow. Other than tobacco.”

Crys looked at her. “Are you that?”

“Am I what?”

“Veg-arian.”

“No, I’m one of the other Christianities. As your cousin Rickie

put it.”

Crys had taken up a stalk of long grass and was very lightly

touching Lusa’s skin in the spot where her T-shirt rode up and exposed her belly. It was the closest thing to intimacy she’d ever seen

this child share with anyone. Lusa held her breath and lay very still,

stunned by luck, as if a butterfly had lit on her shoulder. Finally she

breathed out, feeling a little dizzy from watching the high, thin

clouds race across the blue gap in the trees overhead. “Listen to me

moan and groan. I guess I must be a real farmer now, huh?”

Crys shrugged. “I guess.”

“If my goats don’t work out, I’m what you call screwed. I hate

to think about it. I’d feel like a murderer logging this hill, but I’m

not sure how else I can keep this farm.”

Crys turned suddenly from Lusa and tossed the grass stem away.

“Why do you have to keep it?”

“That’s a good question. I’m asking myself that question. You

know what I come up with?”

“What?”

“Ghosts.”

Crys leaned over and peered down into Lusa’s face. She looked

puzzled, briefly, before her expression went neutral.
“That’s stupid.”

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“Not really. You’d be surprised.”

Crys pulled a handful of grass out of the ground. “Ghosts
of

who?”

“People who have lost things, I think. Some are your
family,

and some are from mine.”

“Real people? *Dead* people?”

“Yes.”

“Like who?”

“My zayda, my grandpa on my dad’s side. Once upon a
time

he had this beautiful, beautiful farm, right? And people
took it

away from him. It was a long time ago, before I was born.
My

mother’s grandparents had a farm, too, in a whole different
country,

and the same thing happened: gone. Now they’ve all
wound up

here.”

“Are you scared of them?” Crys asked quietly.

“Not at all.”

“Do you really believe in ghosts?”

Lusa wondered why on earth she was talking about this
with a

child. But she needed to speak of it, as badly as Crys needed to

curse. They both had their reasons. She sat up and looked at her until at last she caught her eye. “I’m not scaring you, am I?”

The girl shook her head rapidly.

“Maybe I shouldn’t even call them ghosts. It’s just stuff you can’t

see. *That* I believe in, probably more than most people. Certain

kinds of love you can’t see. That’s what I’m calling ghosts.”

Crys wrinkled her nose. “What do you do, then, *smell* ’em?”

“I do. And hear them. I hear my grandfather playing music when it rains. That’s how I know he’s here. And your uncle Cole’s

here, too. I smell him all the time. I’m not kidding: three or four

times a week. I’ll open a drawer or walk into the corncrib in the

grain house, and there he is.”

Crys looked truly unhappy. “He’s not there for real, though. If

you can’t see him, he’s not.”

Lusa reached out and rubbed her shoulder, a hard little point of

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bone beneath a tense little blanket of muscle. “I know, it’s hard to

think about,” she said. “Humans are a very visual species.”

“What’s *that* mean?”

A monarch butterfly drifted into the shaft of light in front of

them and batted lazily into the cleared path through the trees toward the fields below. Lusa said, “What that means is, we mainly

love things with our eyes.”

“You mean like Rickie does with those girl magazines under his

bed?”

Lusa laughed hard. “That is exactly what I mean.”

They both watched the monarch, a bouncing orange dot receding downhill until it was nothing, just a bright spot melting into

the light of day.

“A lot of animals trust their other senses more than we do.

Moths use smell, for instance. They don’t have to see their husbands

or wives at all to know they’re there.”

“So? You’re not a moth.”

“So. I guess you’re right. Pretty stupid, huh?”

Crys shrugged her shoulders. “When you die will you be a ghost hanging around here, too?”

“Oh, yeah. A good one.”

“And who’ll be here then, after you?”

“That’s the sixty-four-dollar question. The ghosts of my family

and yours are having a big disagreement over that one. Mine say

stay, yours say go, on account of who comes after me. I have no idea

how to make everybody happy.”

Crys studied her. “Which side you figure to pick?”

Lusa stared and shrugged back at her, the same quick, introverted jerk of the shoulders that Crys kept ready at hand to answer

all questions. A stolen gesture.

“Come on,” she said then, jumping up and pulling Crys up by

the hand. “We’d better go see if Lowell’s awake.”

“He’ll still be asleep. He’d sleep forever if you let him.”

“Maybe he’s just a little sad about your mom. Sometimes people

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need to sleep more when they’re sad.” She reached over to give

Crys a hand down the bank into the road cut, but the girl took the

plunge by herself in one huge leap.

“Not me,” she said, landing on her feet.

“No? What do you do?” Lusa climbed more slowly through the

daylilies down onto the road, feeling like the turtle trailing the hare.

“Nothing. I don’t think about it.”

“Really. Not ever?”

Crys shrugged, then caught herself at it. They didn’t speak for

several minutes as they walked side by side downhill, through puddles of light in the road spilled by gaps in the forest canopy. Every

fifty feet or so they scattered up another cloud of swallowtails—the

choirboys turned out of church. Lusa liked the idea of butterfly

church. Frankly, it was no more far-fetched than the notion of a

communal sucking-up of sodium for sperm valentines. She wondered what would happen if she submitted a paper to *Behavioral*

Ecology on the spiritual effects of swallowtail puddling. Lusa was still

amusing herself with the idea when they rounded the corner above

the house and she was stopped dead in her tracks.

“Oh, no, *look,* ” she cried.

“Shit, Aunt Lusa. The damn booger honeysuckles et your garage.”

Lusa could not think of a better way to put it. The mound of

dark-green leaves was so rounded and immense, there was hardly

any sign that a building lay underneath. An ancient burial mound,

Lusa might have guessed. A Mayan temple crumbled to ruin. Could

this really have happened in just one wildly rainy, out-of-control

summer? She hadn't been up the cemetery road for as long as she

could remember, and certainly hadn't looked at the garage from the

back side since before Cole's death. Now she could only stare, recalling the exact content of their argument about

honeysuckle before he was killed: the absurd newspaper column about spraying it

with Roundup; her ire on the plant's behalf. How could she have

gotten so sanctimonious about honeysuckle? It wasn't even native

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here, it occurred to Lusa now. It was an escapee from people's gardens, like the daylilies—like most weedy things that overgrew, in

fact. No local insects could eat it because it was an introduction

from someplace else—Japan, probably. *Lonicera japonica*, that would

be right, like Japanese beetles and chestnut blight and the horribly

invasive Japanese knotweed and the dreaded kudzu. One more artifact of the human covenant that threatened to strangle out the natives.

You have to persuade it two steps back every day, he'd said, *or it will*

move in and take you over. His instincts about this plant had been

right; his eye had known things he'd never been trained to speak of.

And yet she'd replied carelessly, *Take over what? The world will not end*

if you let the honeysuckle have the side of your barn. She crossed her arms

against a shiver of anguish and asked him now to forgive a city person's audacity.

Her head filled with the scent of a thousand translucent
white
flowers that had yellowed and fallen from this mountain of
vine
many months before. Maybe years before.
Crys was looking up at her so anxiously that Lusa touched
her
own face to make sure it was still intact.
“Don’t worry, it’s nothing,” she said. “I saw a ghost.”

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[Predators](#)

bridge in the hemlock grove, nervously picking off
Dog days. Deanna sat on her freshly completed
splinters from the end of a pine plank and tossing
them into the water, listening to the clan of red-tails
screaming at
one another up in the sky. Sometimes the birds dipped into
the trees
overhead, and their reflections glanced briefly across the
surface of
the water below her feet. She pulled her bandanna out of
her back
pocket and wiped sweat out of her eyes, leaving a trail of
grime and
sawdust across her forehead. A hawk goes blind in the dog
days,

people used to say. And her dad said different: *Nothing about a hot*

summer day could make a bird lose its sight. They're pushing their young

out of the nest in August, is all. The parents fly around crazy, diving into

the treetops to try to get away from their full-grown young following them

around screeching to be fed, unwilling to hunt on their own. Her dad

didn't know the word *fledge*, but he knew what it meant. *Look close,*

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he always used to tell her. *If it doesn't sound true, it isn't. There's always*

a reason for what people say, but usually it's not the reason they think.

Deanna was at a loss to invent any more work for herself today.

Nothing she'd be able to keep her mind on, anyway. She'd finished

this bridge. She'd also collected four wheelbarrow-loads of firewood from the pile here, where they'd cut up the trees, and pushed

them all the way up to the cabin. She'd cleared weeds and retrenched the steepest part of the upper mountain trail. She had run

into a pair of hikers up there on the ridge, a young, very dirty couple who seemed delighted with the world and each other. They'd

wandered over here as a side trip from the Appalachian Trail.

Hiking the whole A.T. this summer from Maine to Georgia was

their plan, as they'd eagerly relayed it to her. They had gotten this

far, worn out a pair of boots each, and were looking forward to

picking up a care package from one of their mothers, including

new boots, down where the trail came out in Damascus, before

continuing on south. They thanked Deanna, impressed with the

upkeep of the trails here in the Zebulon Forest—as if she'd done all

the work just for them. Which answered *one* of the two questions

she'd been asking herself all summer, anyway. As she watched the

pair hike away in their baggy, colorful shorts, she wondered how

that would feel, to have a mother leaving you care packages when

you ran out of boot leather. Or to hike hundreds of miles beside

another person, always knowing which way the trail ahead of you

ran, and exactly how far.

He was sitting up there right now in the green porch chair, reading her thesis. She had not felt this nervous since the day of her

final oral defense, when her committee made her go out in the hallway while it deliberated her case.

This humidity had to break. There was a storm in the air,
which

was probably making the hawks act up even more. She
didn't want

to be down here when it hit. In her tenure on this mountain
she'd

been caught outside in a lightning storm exactly twice:
once she'd

made it into the shelter of the big chestnut log (back when
it was

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still her own), and the other time she'd had to cower
against the

trunk of a hemlock in the lowest spot she could get to.
Both times

had been more awful than she liked to admit. He was right
about

her and thunder. She wasn't afraid of snakes, but thunder
paralyzed

her. There wasn't any reason, it just was. Even as a girl
she'd dreaded

loud noises, could not fire a gun without breaking a cold
sweat,

even just for target practice at a can on a fencepost. Her
dad used to

sit with her through storms. Eddie had done that, too, and
almost

the same way, though she didn't tell him so: rubbing her
back as she

lay with the pillow pulled over her head, counting out loud
with

her the distance between flash and boom. One fifth of a mile per second.

If not for that, she thought, this would be easy. If not for those

nights and early mornings and half minutes when he was suddenly

kinder and truer than seemed possible, given everything. Given

what he couldn't understand. What did she really think he would

do now, when he finished reading the book of her knowledge and

beliefs? *Change?* No. Tear his hair for guilt? No. Stay, or walk out the

door? Which did she want him to do?

That was the question. When a body wanted one thing wholly

and a mind wanted the opposite, which of the two was *she*, Deanna?

She leaned far forward from the bridge so she could see her face

in the water. Her braid swung over her shoulder and hung down,

nearly touching the water, swaying like a bell rope. *Pull me in*, she

said silently to the girl in the water. *Make up my mind for me. Take*

from me this agitation, the likes of which I have never known in all my life.

This morning she had wept for no reason she could possibly

name. The forest hadn't seemed large enough for her grief.
She'd

startled up a white-spotted, flag-tailed fawn and sent it
crashing

downmountain from the bed of leaves where its mother
had carefully hidden it. Deanna curled herself into the spot it'd
fled, and

sensed the small body's warmth still there in the brown
leaves.

There was no loss here, she told herself; the fawn would
bleat for its

mother and be found. But she'd suddenly felt so despairing
and

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tired, such an utterly lost cause, that she'd lain on the
ground and

put leaves in her mouth.

Bang! A thunder boom hit now like a hammer on the back
of

her spine, jerking her up onto her feet on the raw wooden
planks

of the bridge. She was grateful for that, at least—one
decision made

for her. By the time the second boom hit, rolling up the
hollow like

a wave and crashing over her head, her feet were already
headed up

the mountain. They would get her to the cabin before the
lightning

arrived. *What do I want, what do I want?* her feet on the
trail demanded, the rhythm of her breathing demanded. If she
couldn't say

what she wanted, she could say nothing—wouldn't look at him,

would have to go on feeling trapped with him in that place, like

predator and prey closed tight in a box, waiting for word on which

was to be which.

She was breathing hard by the time the cabin came into sight.

Why had she been getting out of breath at the drop of a hat lately,

was that age, too? Was she running faster than she used to? Through

the trees she could just see the south face of her house, where the

logs had been completely overgrown this summer by a single

Virginia creeper vine. She'd pondered whether to rip the hairy little tendrils off the logs or just leave them there to protect the old

wood from wind and rain, like a lively green skin.

She angled up the hill, coming up on the cabin from the back.

Her mind was running ahead of her and off to the side, but it

snapped back when she saw something odd at the place where the

roof gable butted against the uppermost log in the cabin's wall. The

small hole there she'd noticed before, but now something was

moving out of it, a dark loop. She approached slowly, catching her

breath and keeping her eyes on the spot.

She could see now exactly what it was: the cabin's
summerlong

resident guardian angel who kept down the mice, the devil
who

took the phoebes, the author of that slow sandpaper sound
in the

roof—her blacksnake. He was leaving. Deanna planted her
feet and

watched the entire, unbelievable length of him pour out the
small

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hole in the side of the roof gable. He oozed down the log
wall in

an undulating, liquid flow like a line of molasses spilling
over the

edge of a pitcher. When most of his length had emerged,
he suddenly dropped into the tall grass, which trembled and
then went

still. Then he was gone, for good. Just like that, today of
all days, for

reasons she would never be able to know. Whether she had
loved or

hated this snake was of absolutely no consequence to his
departure.

She considered this fact as she watched him go, and she
felt something shift inside her body—relief, it felt like,
enormous and settled,

like a pile of stones on a steep slope suddenly shifting and
tumbling

slightly into the angle of repose.

The pounding of *What do I want* went still in her breast. It didn't

matter what she chose. The world was what it was, a place with its

own rules of hunger and satisfaction. Creatures lived and mated and

died, they came and went, as surely as summer did. They would go

their own ways, of their own accord.

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[Old Chestnuts](#)

G her about the shingles. *Today*, he would tell her.

arnett had made up his mind. He was going to tell

Nothing was going to get him off the track this

time: she could go ahead and be rude, shocking, or blasphemous, it

wouldn't matter, he was still going to give her those shingles. He

was a Christian man hovering near eighty, and there was no telling

when a fellow his age might just keel over. It had happened to

younger men, Lord knew. It was not going to happen to Garnett

Walker with those shingles moldering in his garage and the sin of

spite staining his soul like an inkblot.

Maybe, while he was at it, he would remember to thank her for

the pie.

As he walked across his yard toward the gate, he paused to take

stock of a pokeberry weed that had shot up in the ditch beside his

driveway, out of reach of the mower. He'd been meaning to get

down here with the Weedwhacker, but somehow this poke plant

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had slipped past his good intentions and grown into a monster. It

was a *tree*, practically, ten feet tall, dangling its big, slick leaves and

bunches of green berries—all that growth accomplished in just four

months, from the ground up, since poke was killed to the ground

by frost. He stood with his hands on his hips, scrutinizing its purple

trunk. He hated a weed on principle but could not help admiring

this thing for its energy. His eye wandered up toward the row of

trees that towered along the fencerow, giant leafy masses like tall

green storm clouds, and he felt unexpectedly awestruck. A man

could live under these things every day and forget to notice their

magnitude. Garnett had gradually lost the ability to see individual

leaves, but he could still recognize any one of these by its shape: the

billowy columns of tulip poplars; the lateral spread of an oak; the

stately, upright posture of a walnut; the translucent, effeminate

tremble of a wild cherry. The small, lacy locusts were faintly brown

this late in summer, and the catalpa at the corner post wore a palegreen color you could pick out on a hillside a mile away, or even

farther when it was dangling all over with the long pods that made

people call it a bean tree. The sourwood had its white flowers

reaching out like skeleton hands in the spring. Trees. Every kind assumed a different slickness in the rain, its particular color in the fall,

its own aspect—something you couldn't describe in words but

learned by heart when you lived in their midst. Garnett had a

strange, sad thought about his own special way of seeing trees inside

his mind, and how it would go dark, like a television set going off,

at the moment of his death.

What in heaven's name was he doing out here in his driveway

looking at trees and thinking about death? He started to turn back

toward his house, but from the corner of his sight he registered the

rounded shapes of the regularly spaced apples beyond the fencerow

and knew, of course, that was it. His mission was Nannie Rawley

and the shingles. He thought of going to the garage to check on

them first, just to make sure they were in a condition to be offered.

But he suspected he might merely be postponing the inevitable. *Just*

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pull up your knickers and go, young man, he scolded himself, and

obeyed.

He found her in back of the house, where he knew she would

be. He'd been keeping an eye out this morning and had seen her

carrying an old locust fence rail back there. He'd actually grown a

little curious about what she was up to, though he knew curiosity

had killed the cat, and that was probably even without the assistance

of Nannie Rawley.

She waved merrily when she saw him coming. "Mr. Walker!

How's your BPV?"

His what? Was she asking him about underwear? “Fine,”
he

said, with reserved commitment.

“No more dizzy spells? That’s wonderful. I’m happy to
hear it.”

“Oh, *that*, ” he said, and the memory of her firm, tender
hands

cradling his head sent a shock of adrenaline through his
old body.

He’d had a dream about her, so real to him that he’d
awakened

plagued with the condition he hadn’t known for years. He
blushed

now to recall the whole business again. He nearly turned
tail

and ran.

“Are you all right?”

“Much better, yes,” he replied, getting his bearings. “I’m
not

used to it yet. I was so used to getting dizzy, it’s taking me
a while

to get used to *not* being dizzy.”

“That’s old age for you, isn’t it?” she asked. “If I got out of
bed

one morning and my knees didn’t hurt, I’m not sure how
I’d know

to walk.”

He stared at her, distracted. She wasn’t wearing much.
He’d noticed that earlier, when he saw her dragging the locust
rail up from

the ditch. Just a little yellow sleeveless-blouse sort of
thing, and

short pants. *Short pants*, on a woman of her age. It was hot, but not

so hot as to drive a person to indecent exposure.

“I prayed about that dizziness,” he confessed to her. “For several

years, I did.”

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“God moves in mysterious ways,” she replied breezily, probably

without meaning it in the least. Next she’d be suggesting *she* was the

answer to Garnett’s prayers.

“Personally, I’ve found that my prayers seldom go unanswered,”

he said, a little more haughtily than he’d meant. “Last August, when

it was so dry and so many people were about to lose their tobacco,

I got down on my knees and prayed for rain, Miss Rawley. And I

want you to know, the very next evening it rained.”

She looked at him strangely. “Right before you came over here

I had a sneezing fit. I guess my sneezing caused you to come.”

“That’s a very peculiar thing to say, Miss Rawley.”

“Isn’t it, though,” she replied, turning around and taking up her

hammer again.

“I take it you don’t put much stock in miracles.”

“I’m not in a position to believe in miracles,” she said
without
turning around. She sounded a little angry, or perhaps just
a little
sad. She was building something, all right, working on that
locust
rail he’d seen her dragging about. Now she had it propped
up onto
a sawhorse here in the doorway of her garage and was
nailing a
crossbar to it. Goodness, it looked like the cross the
Romans used
for crucifying Jesus Christ. He wasn’t going to ask—he
made his
mind up on that. His second vow of the day; he’d better get
to the
first.
He cleared his throat and then said, for no good reason,
“Did
you know there’s a pokeberry bush by my driveway that
must be
eleven feet tall? I’ve never seen the like.”
She paused her hammer and turned back around, eyeing
him
carefully. “Is that what you came over here to tell me?”
He thought about it. “No. It’s just an incidental piece of
information.”
“Oh. Well, that’s something, an eleven-foot pokeberry. If
they
gave out an award for weeds at the county fair you’d have
a contender there. Wouldn’t they all be surprised: Garnett
Sheldon

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Walker the Third, first place in the weedy annual category.” The

usual good cheer had returned to her voice, and he couldn't keep

from smiling a little himself. Poke was a half-hardy perennial, not an

annual, he was pretty sure, but he refrained from correcting her.

“If I'd thought about it,” he said with mock seriousness, “I'd

have given it a little ammonium nitrate. I think I could have gotten

it up to fourteen feet.”

She put down her hammer and seemed to relax. Her trousers,

he could plainly see, were a pair of old work pants cut off with scissors. What a thing to do. “You know what I really admire, this time

of year?” she asked him.

“I wouldn't dare to guess, Miss Rawley.”

“Blackberry canes,” she said. “Now you go ahead and laugh at

me, because everybody else does; I know they're an awful nuisance.

But they're amazing, too.”

“I expect they're the fastest-growing plant this side of China,”

he said.

“Yes, sir! They shoot up out of the ground and by mid-June they're eight feet tall. Then the top starts to bend back down to the

ground, and by August they've made an arch of a size to walk under, if you wanted to. Did you ever notice how they do that?"

"I've noticed, and noticed," he said. "I've gone through about

eight bush hogs in my lifetime, noticing how blackberries grow."

"I know. I'm not *defending* them. They'd eat up my whole orchard if I didn't keep them cut back to the fence. But sometimes in

winter I just have to stand back and stare at those arches going down

the road, up and down, like a giant quilter's needle sewing its way

across Zebulon County, one big arched loop per year. You can love

them or hate them, either one, but there's no stopping them." She

looked at him sideways, like a mother scolding. "And you have to

admit, the berries make the best pie there is."

He flushed. "Oh, I've been meaning for the longest time to mention that pie. I thank you for that pie." *Short pants*, on a woman

of her age. From what he could see, she had the legs of a much

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younger woman. Certainly not what he would have expected in the

way of *Unitarian* legs.

"You're welcome," she said. "Better late than never. If recent

trends continue, maybe I'll bake you another one next year."

He looked at her long and hard, wondering frankly if they would both be here next summer. After a certain point, you had to

think that way. "Miss Rawley," he declared, "I can't say as I've ever

seen short pants on a woman your age."

She looked down at her knees—which were maybe a little pale

and knobby, on second thought. If one were to pay attention. She

looked back up at him with a girlish grin. "I got hot, Mr. Walker. I

got inspired by the UPS boy. He drives that truck in nothing but his

swimming suit. I figured if that's legal, then surely an old lady can

take a pair of scissors to her old khakis once in a while."

Garnett shook his head. "Dignity is the last responsibility of the

aged, Miss Rawley."

"Fiddlesticks. *Death* is the last responsibility of the aged."

"Don't get fresh with me," he warned. "And don't expect to see

me running around in short pants, either."

"I'd sooner expect to see a pig fly, Mr. Walker."

"Well, good, then," he said. But then asked, "Are you saying

I'm a pig?"

She crossed her arms. "Are you saying I'm immodest?"

“If the shoe fits,” he replied curtly.

“Self-righteous, tedious,” she said. “There’s a couple of shoes

you can try on.”

That was it, then. They had stooped to name-calling, like a pair

of grammar school children. He took a deep breath. “I think I’m

finished here.”

“No, you’re not,” she said firmly, looking at him with a menacing eye. “Tell me what’s wrong with me. Let’s just get it out. All

these years you’ve been picking at me like a scab. What have you really got against me?”

She stood there fearless, daring him to tell the truth, exciting

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him toward actually doing it. Garnett turned the thought over in his

mind and sighed. With profound sadness, he understood that he

could never tell her the answer because he didn’t know it himself.

He said, feebly, “You don’t act normal for your age.”

She stood with her mouth a little open, as if there were words

stuck halfway between her mind and the world around. At last they

came out: “There isn’t any *normal* way to act seventy-five years old.

Do you know why?”

He didn't dare answer. Was she really seventy-five, exactly?

"I'll *tell* you why," she said. "Considering everything—the whole history of things—people are supposed to be dead and

buried at our age. *That's* normal. Up till just lately, the Civil War or

something, they didn't even know about germs. If you got sick,

they slapped leeches on you and measured you for a coffin.

I wouldn't doubt but hardly anybody even made it to fifty. Isn't

that so?"

"I suppose it is."

"It *is*. Our mammaw and pappaw got to keep their dignity, just

working right up to the end and then dying of a bad cold one day,

with most their parts still working. But then along comes somebody

inventing six thousand ways to cure everything, and here we are,

old, wondering what to do with ourselves. A human just wasn't designed for old age. That's my theory."

He hardly knew what to say. "That's *one* of your theories."

"Well, think about it. Women's baby-business all dries up, men

lose their hair—we're just a useless drain on our kind. Speaking

strictly from a biological point of view. Would you keep a chestnut

in your program if it wasn't setting seeds anymore?"

He frowned. "I don't think of myself as obsolete."

"Of course not, you're a man! Men walk around with their bald

heads bare to the world and their pony put out to pasture, but they

refuse to admit they're dead wood. So why should I? What law says

I have to cover myself up for shame of having a body this old? It's a

dirty trick of modern times, but here we are. Me with my cranky

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knees and my old shriveled ninnies, and you with whatever you've

got under there, if it hasn't dropped off yet—we're still *human*. Why

not just give in and live till you die?"

Garnett was so hot under the collar he could scarcely breathe.

He had never sworn in front of a woman in his life, not since grammar school, anyway, but this was a near occasion. She was asking for

it. Nannie Rawley needed a willow switch, was what she needed. If

they'd both been sixty-five years younger, he'd have turned her over

his knee. Garnett swore a silent oath, turned on his heel, and walked

away without so much as a word. For an occasion like this, there just

weren't any words that would do.

An hour and ten minutes later, Garnett returned to Nannie's backyard with one asphalt shingle in his hand. She was carrying a bushel of Gravensteins to her pickup truck, starting to load up for the Amish market tomorrow, and was so startled to see Garnett Walker that she stumbled and almost dropped her basket. He held up the shingle, showing her the peculiar heart-shaped profile that matched the ones on her roof, and then he threw it at her feet. It lay there in the grass next to a puddle, this thing she needed, like a valentine. A bright crowd of butterflies rose from the puddle in trembling applause. "There are two hundred of those in my garage. You can have them all." She looked from the shingle to Garnett Walker and back to the shingle. "Lord have mercy," she said quietly. "A miracle."

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[Moth Love](#)

It was nearly noon on a Sunday when Jewel came

up to collect the children. Lusa was in the garden picking green beans when she saw her coming up across the yard, moving slowly. “Honey, it’s the Lord’s day of rest,”

Jewel called out when she reached the gate. “You shouldn’t be

working this hard.”

“What was God thinking, then, when he made green beans and

August?” Lusa replied, trusting that her sister-in-law wasn’t really

scolding her for sacrilege. Jewel looked pale but jaunty in a little

blue cloche someone had crocheted for her. She hadn’t ever bothered with a wig but just wore scarves and hats.

“Come on through

the rabbit fence,” Lusa called to her. “The gate just has a wire

around the top.”

Jewel fiddled with the chicken wire and found her way in.

“Lord, this is pretty,” she remarked. Lusa sat back on her heels, feeling proud. Red and yellow peppers glowed like ornaments on their

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dark bushes, and the glossy purple eggplants had the stately look of

expensive gifts. Even the onions were putting up pink globes of

flower. During all the years of childhood she’d spent sprouting seeds

in pots on a patio, she’d been dreaming of this.

“You must be a slave to this garden,” Jewel said.

“Just about. Look at this.” She gestured at the long row of unpicked beans. “I’ve done forty quarts of beans already, and I’ve still

got two more rows to go.”

“You’ll be glad, though. Come next February.”

“That’s the truth. Between this and my chickens, I may not have

to go to Kroger’s again till next summer. I’ve got tomatoes put up,

spaghetti sauce—maybe twenty quarts—and I’m freezing broccoli,

cauliflower, you name it. *Tons* of corn. Your kids ate their own

weight each in corn last night, by the way.”

Jewel smiled. “They would. Lowell will even eat roasting ears,

and he is Mister Picky. They didn’t put much dent in your broccoli,

though, did they?”

“No.”

“You could quit on the green beans right now,” Jewel said. “If

you’ve got forty quarts, you could just stop picking and say, ‘Well,

sir, I’m done.’ It’s not against the law.”

“I could,” Lusa said. “But Cole planted these beans. He put in

most of this. Remember how it got warm early, in May? I feel like

as long as I’m up here picking stuff, he’s still giving me presents. I

hate to think of the fall, when I’ll have to turn it under.”

Jewel shook her head. “It’s your work, too, though. I swear, this

is *pretty*. It looks like a woman’s garden, some way. It doesn’t look

like other people’s gardens.”

Lusa thought, but did not say, that this was because she was an

outsider. She planted different things: five-color Swiss chard instead

of collard greens, and several rows of fava beans to dry for falafel

meal. She’d grown four different kinds of eggplants from seed, including the pink-and-white-streaked “Rosa Bianca” for her

beloved *imam bayildi* and *baba ganouj*.

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Jewel was examining the tomato plants, rubbing their healthy

leaves between her fingers. “What do you kill the hornworms with,

Sevin dust?”

“No, not that. It kills too many of my friends.”

Jewel looked over at her with a horrified face, and Lusa laughed. “Bugs, I mean. I know you all laugh at me, but I’m so fond

of bugs, I can’t stand to use a general pesticide like Sevin. I use different things. I use Bt on the tomatoes.”

“B-T?”

“It’s a germ, *Bacillus thuringiensis*. A bacterium that gives hornworms indigestion when they eat my tomatoes but doesn’t hurt

bees or ladybugs.”

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“Nope. Well, *bad* indigestion—the hornworms die. It works on

cabbage loopers, too. Here, there’s a peck basket by the fence there,

why don’t you pick some tomatoes for you and the kids to take

home?”

“I won’t eat them; my stomach’s shot for anything acid, I guess

from the chemo. I still can’t even drink orange juice. But I’ll pick

you the ripe ones, instead of just standing here useless. Something

else for you to put up.”

“I *have* quit on canning tomatoes. Now I just slice them up with

basil and olive oil and eat them for breakfast.”

“Oh, shoot, I stepped right on your marigolds.”

“That’s okay, I don’t care what they look like. I just put them in

to keep nematodes away from the roots of the tomato plants.”

“Now, that is something. That is really something. Cole was

starting to get real interested in all that the last couple years. How to

poison things without using poison. He went up to U.K. to take a

class on that.”

“That’s how we met,” Lusa said, looking down. “I was his

teacher.”

“Oh!” cried Jewel, as if she’d been stung by a bee. Was she jealous? Lusa wondered. She didn’t usually seem to be, not so much as

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the other sisters, even though she and Cole had been so close. Jewel

alone had always seemed willing to share him. Lusa bent close to her

beans to keep the sun out of her eyes as she neared the end of her

row. She moved along on her knees, dragging a nearly full paper

grocery bag along beside her.

“Believe it or not,” she said to Jewel, “I had both your kids up

here for half the morning handpicking the bean beetles and squashing them. I told them I’d pay them a penny apiece if they kept

track, and would you believe, they did a body count. They’re going

to go home rich today. You got any overdue bills you need paid, talk

to Crys and Lowell.” She glanced up. “Jewel? *Jewel?* ”

Lusa scanned above the whole row of tall tomato plants for Jewel’s head, but it wasn’t there. She stood up and walked along the

end in a panic, looking down between the rows. There Jewel was

on the ground, gripping her knees and rocking with her face tight

with pain and a basket of tomatoes spilled out on the ground beside her. Lusa flew to her side and put both arms around her to

steady her.

“Oh, God,” Lusa said, several times. “What should I do? I’m

sorry, I’m not one of those people who’re good in emergencies.”

Jewel opened her eyes. “It’s no emergency. I just need to get to

the house. I guess I overdid it. I’ve got pain pills in my purse.”

Leaving beans and tomatoes strewed on the ground and the rabbit fence wide open, the two small women struggled down the

slope and across the yard to the house. Lusa practically carried Jewel

up the steps. Upper-body strength had come to her unbidden in the

last months: nearly every day she did something she used to have to

ask Cole to do, and it startled her, always, to glance at her body in

the mirror and see planes where soft curves used to be. Carrying a

relative up the porch stairs, though, was a first.

They paused in the front hallway, hearing the children’s voices.

Lowell and Crys were in the parlor with a stack of ancient board

games Lusa had pulled out of a closet. Their favorites were

Monopoly and the Ouija board, which they pronounced “Ow-jay.”

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“Where are your pills?” Lusa asked.

“Oh, shoot, my purse is in the car.”

“Let’s get you onto the parlor couch, then. I’ll run and get it.”

Jewel gave Lusa a pleading look. “Could we go upstairs? I hate

for the kids to see me like this.”

“Of course.” Lusa felt stupid for not thinking of that. Jewel gripped the banister with a tight, white hand, and Lusa carried

most of her weight up these stairs, too. She guided Jewel into the

bedroom, deciding not to care that the bed wasn’t made and clothes

were on the floor. “Here, you sit and I’ll be right back.”

She flew down to the car and back, breathless, just taking a quick glance at the kids to see that they were occupied. They were

arguing over Monopoly money, so they hadn’t noticed anything.

Keeping her voice as calm as she could, she asked them to go out

and close the rabbit fence around the garden and then gather the

eggs, which she knew Lowell loved to do, so long as his sister protected him from the rooster. Then she ran back upstairs, pausing in

the upstairs bathroom to draw a glass of water from the tap. When

she returned to the bedroom she found Jewel settled into the green

brocade chair by the window, Lusa's reading chair. She was running

her fingers over the vine pattern on the nubbly green fabric, as if

reading something written there in Braille. Lusa handed her the

glass of water and sat on the floor at her feet to work on the childproof cap.

When she got it open at last, Jewel swallowed the pills and drank

the whole glass of water, obediently, like a child. She set down the

glass and went on rubbing the arms of the chair, thoughtfully. "We

used to have two of these," she said. "A pair. Mommy's good parlor

chairs, till they got old. Lois finally spilled something on one of

them. Or, no, she cut her leg open with a pocketknife and got a big

streak of blood from here to there. Lordy, she was in trouble."

"For cutting her leg?"

"Well, no, see, for doing it in that chair. She was trying to make

a soap carving of Marilyn Monroe! We weren't supposed to be in

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the parlor at all; it was just for company. That was a whole mess of

trouble. Mommy about had a fit. She couldn't clean it for anything.

She had to throw that chair out! Lord, I wonder where it ever ended up.”

“Probably in the barn, along with everything else in the free world. Do you know there's part of a piano in there?”

“No,” Jewel said quietly, her eyes fixed on the wallpaper over the bed. “She put it down by the road. That's the way you did back

then, when we were kids. Somebody would always come along that

was worse off than you and didn't mind putting a sheet over a

stained chair, and they'd take it. It's somewhere now. Somebody's

using it someplace.” Her eyes focused and came down like a pair of

blue butterflies to light on Lusa's face. “Isn't it funny how you never

know how things are going to wind up? I get so mad, thinking

about not having a chance to get old. Darn it. I want to see what

Lois looks like with white hair.”

“I don't think any of us will live to see *that*. As long as Lady

Clairol's still in business.”

Jewel let out a weak laugh, but Lusa felt bad for trying to cover

this awful, important moment with a joke. She had suffered so

much herself from people's platitudes and evasions of death, yet

here with Jewel she had no idea what else to say. "You never know,

Jewel, you still might outlive us all," was what came out.

Jewel shook her head, keeping her eyes steady on Lusa. "I'm not

going to see another summer. I'll be gone before you're done eating the canned goods in your pantry."

"I'm sorry," Lusa whispered. She reached up to take both of

Jewel's hands in hers and held on to them without speaking for several minutes. An occasional syllable of the children's shouts drifted

in through the open window. The position eventually became awkward for Lusa and she had to let go, stroking her sister-in-law's fingers gently as she did. She looked back up at Jewel's face, which

seemed empty now. The hat looked sad and undignified indoors,

seeming to mock her seriousness, but Jewel had been adamant

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about not spending money on a wig. Lusa had wondered whether

it signified optimism that her hair would grow back or realism, an

acknowledgment that there wouldn't be much time. Now she

knew.

“Jewel, I want to ask you a question. Something I’ve been thinking about. You don’t have to answer today; you can think it

over as long as you need to. Or maybe you’ll just say no, and that’s

fine, too. But I want to ask.”

“Ask me, then.”

Lusa’s heart pounded. She had imagined asking this in a more

casual setting, maybe while she and Jewel did something together in

the kitchen. She hadn’t realized before today that it was too late for

casual. And this was not a casual thing.

“What is it, then?” Jewel seemed troubled now by the pause.

“I wondered if, when the time came, *if* the time came ...”
Lusa

felt her face grow hot. “Forgive me if this is inappropriate to ask,

but I wondered what you’d think about the idea of my adopting

Crys and Lowell.”

“Taking care of them or adopting them?”

“Adopting them.”

Jewel studied Lusa’s face, surprisingly unshaken. She didn’t seem

angry, anyway, as Lusa had feared she might be.

“We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,”
Lusa

said. “I can’t imagine anything harder to think about.”

“Don’t you think I think about it every minute of the day?”

Jewel said in a flat voice that frightened Lusa.

“I guess you do. *I* would. That’s why I brought it up.”

“Well, it’s not something you ought to feel obligated about,” she

answered finally. “I’ve got four sisters.”

Lusa looked at the floor, at her callused knees and dirt-streaked

thighs beneath the hem of her shorts, and then she took Jewel’s

hand back in hers without looking up. “You’ve got *five* sisters. I’m

the only one without children.” She glanced up then at Jewel, who

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was listening. “But that’s not the reason. That wouldn’t be a good

reason. I love your kids, that’s the reason. I love Crys and I love

Lowell. I’m not sure I’d be the greatest mother, but I think I could

learn on those two. Lowell’s easy, he’s a heart stealer, and Crys ...

Crys and I are two peas in a pod.”

“You’d have plenty of help, right down the hill,” Jewel said

equivocally.

“*Plenty* of help,” Lusa agreed, encouraged by Jewel’s use of the

conditional. She hadn’t said no. “More help than you can shake a

stick at. Although to be honest I don't think Lois and a stick should

be allowed near those kids. At least till they're older."

"Not till they're older," Jewel echoed, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the big green chair. "Can you picture

Crys at the senior cotillion?"

"Believe it or not, I can," Lusa said gently. "But she might be

wearing a tux. She's got the world by the tail; she just needs help

figuring out what to do with it. It's going to take an open mind.

When I look around this family, the best candidate I come up with

is me."

Jewel opened her eyes and looked down at Lusa with a new expression. "There's some papers I have to get their father to sign before I can really decide the next step. I've been thinking about all

this since I first got sick. I had the papers drawn up already at the

lawyer's."

"For what, releasing them for adoption?"

"Well, just releasing them to me. He doesn't even know I'm

sick. There's no telling what he'd do. I don't think he'd really come

scoop them up, but you never know with him. With Shel, that's the

one thing you can count on, is that you never can tell. He might

think he wanted them, for a week or two, and then he'd
dump

them out like kitties by the side of the road when he
figured out a

kid has to eat and shit.”

She closed her eyes again and winced. Lusa stroked the
backs of

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her hands until whatever it was passed over. She wondered
what this

invisible beast was doing to Jewel on the inside, what parts
of her it

already owned. She thought of an old tale her zayda used
to tell

about the beast that ate the moon every month and then
slowly spat

it back out. A happier ending than this. She could feel the
heat and

ire of Jewel's monster right through her thin skin.

“So I'll get those sent off to Shel,” Jewel said after a
minute.

“Just to get that part squared away. I'll do that today. I've
been

putting it off.”

“Nobody could blame you,” Lusa said, and then they sat
still

again while the clock out in the hallway chimed half past
the hour.

Lusa collected several questions in the silence, but she
waited until

Jewel opened her eyes again before asking them. It was impossible

to be too eager about any of this. She tried to talk slowly.

“Do you even know where Shel is? And will he sign the papers?”

“Oh, yeah, I know where he’s at. He moves around a lot, but

the state’s got a garnishee on his wages. See, I had to go to court for

that, after he took off. Any employer that writes him a paycheck has

to take out three hundred dollars a month and send it to me. That’s

how I keep track of him.”

“Gosh,” Lusa said. She had never remotely pictured Jewel in

court, standing up to her abandonment. She could imagine the gossip that must have generated. And there were people in this county

who would shun Jewel to the end of her life on account of it.

“That’s exactly why he’d sign off his claim to the kids,” Jewel

said. “So he could quit paying. I think he’ll sign in a heartbeat. But

would you want him to?”

Lusa studied Jewel’s furrowed brow, trying to follow the quick

turns this conversation had made. “Would I take the kids without

the money, you mean?” She thought about it for less than ten seconds. “It’s the safest thing. Legally, I think it would be best. Because

I'd like to be able to put their names on the deed to this farm. So it

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would go to them, you know, after me." She felt a strange movement in the air as she said this, a lightness that grew around her.

When she gathered the will to look up at Jewel again, she was surprised to see her sister-in-law's face shining with tears.

"It just seems right to do that," Lusa explained, feeling selfconscious. "I'm thinking I'd add 'Widener' to their names, if that's

all right with you. I'm taking it, too."

"You don't have to. We all got over that." Jewel wiped her face

with her hands. She was smiling.

"No, I want to. I decided a while ago. As long as I live on this

place, I'm going to be Miz Widener, so why fight it?" Lusa smiled,

too. "I'm married to a piece of land named Widener."

She got up and sat on the arm of the green chair so she could

put her arm gently across Jewel's shoulders. They both sat looking

out the window at the yard and the hayfield behind it, across which

Lusa had received her husband's last will and testament. Today her

eyes were drawn to the mulberry tree at the edge of the yard,

loaded with the ripe purple fruits that Lowell had christened "long

cherries” when he discovered and gorged himself on them,
staining

his teeth blue. At this moment in the summer the mulberry
had become the yard’s big attraction for every living thing for
miles

around, it seemed. It dawned on Lusa that this was the
Tree of Life

her ancestors had woven into their rugs and tapestries,
persistently,

through all their woes and losses: a bird tree. You might
lose a particular tree you owned or loved, but the birds would
always keep

coming. She could spot their color on every branch: robins,
towhees, cardinals, orchard orioles, even sunny little
goldfinches.

These last Lusa thought were seed eaters, so she didn’t
know quite

what they were doing in there; enjoying the company,
maybe, the

same way people will go to a busy city park just to feel a
part of

something joyful and lively.

“I’m going to have to talk to my sisters about it,” Jewel
said suddenly. “The other sisters,” she amended.

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“Oh, sure. I know. Please don’t feel any hurry or pressure
or

anything. God knows I don’t want to hurt anybody’s
feelings. If

they don’t think I’m in a position.”

“You’re in a position.”

“Well, I don’t know. I’ve never had any idea how I fit into this

family picture.”

“You have an idea, honey. More than you think.” Jewel pressed

her lips together in thought, then spoke again. “They’ll act hurt for

a minute, because they have to. But as soon as we leave and close the

door behind us, they will praise the Lord. We will all praise the

Lord.”

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[Predators](#)

after, Deanna would remember this day. A cool F or the rest of her own life and maybe the next one snap had put a sudden premonition of fall into the air, a crisp quality she could feel with her skin and all the rest of her

newly heightened senses: she could smell and taste the change, even

hear it. The birds had gone quiet, their noisy summer celebration

hushed all at once by the power of a cold front and the urge rising

up in their breasts to be still, gather in, wait for the time
soon to

come when they would turn in the darkness on a map made
of stars

and join the vast assembly of migration. Deanna clung to
her perch

on the rock, feeling the same stirring in her breast, a sense
of finished business and a longing to fly. She had climbed up
onto a

lichen-cruste d boulder fifty feet above the spot where the
trail

ended at the overlook. From here she could look down on
everything, the valley of her childhood and the mountains
beyond it. If

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she stood and spread her arms, it seemed possible she
would sail out

beyond everything she'd yet known, into new territory.

From the branches behind her she heard a sociable
gathering of

friends hailing each other with their winter call: *chicka
dee-dee-dee!*

The chickadees, her familiar anchors. Deanna would not
fly away

today; this thrill was only something left over from
childhood,

when a crisp turn in the weather meant apple time, time to
hunt for

paw-paws in Nannie's woodlot. At some point between
yesterday

and today the air had gone from soggy to brittle. The
Virginia

creeper on the cabin had begun to turn overnight; this morning

she'd noticed a few bright-red leaves, just enough to make her pause

and take note of history. This was the day, would always be the day,

when she first knew. She would step somehow from the realm of

ghosts that she'd inhabited all her life to commit herself irrevocably

to the living. On the trail up to this overlook today she had paid little mind to the sadness of lost things moving through the leaves at

the edges of her vision, the shadowy little wolves and the brightwinged parakeets hopping wistfully through untouched cockleburs.

These dispossessed creatures were beside her and always would be,

but just for today she noticed instead a single bright-red berry

among all the clusters of green ones covering the spicebushes. This

sign seemed meaningful and wondrous, standing as a divide between one epoch of her life and the next. If the summer had to end

somewhere, why couldn't it be in that one red spicebush berry beside the path?

She slipped the small, borrowed mirror—his shaving mirror—

from her back pocket and looked closely at her face. With the fingertips of her left hand she touched the slightly mottled, darker skin

beneath her eyes. It was like a raccoon's mask, but subtler, spreading

from the bridge of her nose out to her cheekbones. The rest
of her

face was the same as she remembered it, unmoved if not
untouched. Her breasts were heavier; she could feel that
change internally. She turned her face to the sun and slowly
unbuttoned her

shirt, placing his hands like ghost fingers where hers were
now. His

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touch on her skin would be a mantle she could shed and
put on

again through the power of memory. Here on this rock in
the sun

she let him enter her like water: the memory of this
morning, his

eyes in hers, his movement like a tide pushing the sea
against the

sand of its only shore. Her body's joy was colored darker
now from

knowing that each conversation, every kiss, every
comforting adventure of skin on skin might be the last one.
Each image stood still

beside its own shadow. Even the warmth of his body
sleeping next

to her afterward was a dark-brown heat she stroked with
her fingers,

memorizing it against the days when that space would be
cold.

Fifty feet below her was the overlook where she'd nearly
ended

her life in a fall two years ago, and then, in May, where
she'd fallen

again. *Sweet*, he'd said. *Did you ever see a prettier sight than that right*

there? And she'd replied, Never. She was looking at mountains and

valleys, all keeping their animal secrets. He was looking at sheep

farms.

She touched her breast and took up the mirror again to look

closely at the deep auburn color of her aureole. It seemed like a

miracle that skin could change like this in color and texture in such

a short time, like caterpillar skin taking on the color and texture of

moth. Briefly, as if testing the temperature of water, she touched

her abdomen just under her navel, where the top button of her

jeans no longer conceded to meet its buttonhole. Deanna wondered

briefly just how much of a fool she had been, for how long. Ten

weeks at the most, probably less, but *still*. She'd known bodies, her

own especially, and she hadn't known this. Was it something a girl

learned from a mother, that secret church of female knowledge that

had never let her in? All the things she'd heard women say did not

seem right. She had not been sick, had not craved to eat anything

strange. (Except for a turkey. Was that strange?) She'd only felt like

a bomb had exploded in the part of her mind that kept her on an

even keel. She'd mistaken that feeling for love or lust or perimenopause or an acute invasion of privacy, and as it turned out it

was all of those, and none. The explosion had frightened her for the

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way it loosened her grip on the person she'd always presumed herself to be. But maybe that was what this was going to be: a long,

long process of coming undone from one's self.

Deanna tried to imagine the night of her own conception, something she'd never before had the courage to consider. The

rumpled Ray Dean Wolfe making love to the mother she'd never

known. That woman had been flesh and blood—a person who'd

moved like Deanna, maybe, who'd walked too fast, or dreaded

thunder, or bitten the ends of her hair when she was too happy or

too sad. A woman who'd gripped life in naked embrace and gone

on living past any hope of survival.

Deanna had not been a fool, she decided. She'd just lacked guidance in matters of love. Lacking a mother of her own, she'd

missed all the signs.

Nannie had done her best, and that wasn't bad—just a broader

education, by far, than most daughters were prepared for. Nannie

Rawley, as reliable and generous as her apple trees, standing in her

calico skirt in the backyard calling Deanna and Rachel down out of

a tree, not for fear of their climbing but because she could occasionally offer them something better, like cider or a pie. Only then.

They'd lived in trees, Rachel low to the ground on a branch where

Deanna put her for safekeeping while she herself climbed enough

for the both of them, mounting the scaffold limbs like the girl on

the flying trapeze. If she looked down, there was Rachel, peering

up through the leaves with her sweet, sleepy eyes and her lips parted

in eternal wonder, permanently in awe of her airborne sister.

“What made Rachel that way?” she'd asked Nannie, only once.

The two of them were up on the hill behind the orchard.

Nannie answered, “Her genes. You know about genes.”

Deanna was an adolescent girl who loved science and read more

books than anyone she knew, so she said yes, she did.

“I know,” Nannie said quietly, “you want a better answer than

that, and so do I. For a long time I blamed the world. The chemicals and stuff in our food. I was reading about that when I was car388

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rying her, and it scared me to death. But there's other ways of looking at Rachel."

"I love her how she is," Deanna said. "I'm not saying I don't."

"I know. But we all wish she didn't have so many things wrong

with her, besides her mind."

Deanna waited until Nannie decided to speak again. They were

walking uphill through an old, weedy hayfield. Deanna was taller

than Nannie now, had passed her around her twelfth birthday, but

by walking ahead of her on this steep hill Nannie had regained the

advantage.

"Here's how I think about it," Nannie said. "You know there's

two different ways to make life: crossing and cloning. You know

about that from grafting trees, right?"

Deanna nodded tentatively. "You can make a cutting of scionwood from a tree you like and grow it out into a new one."

"That's right," Nannie said. "You call that a scion, or a clone. It's

just the same as the parent it came from. And the other way is if two

animals mate, or if two plants cross their pollen with each other;

that's a cross. What comes of that will be different from either one

of the parents, and a little different from all the other crosses made

by those same parents. It's like rolling two dice together: you can get

a lot more numbers than just the six you started with. And that's

called sex."

Deanna nodded again, even more tentatively. But she understood. She followed the path through the tall grass that Nannie was

tramping down in front of her.

"Sexual reproduction is a little bit riskier. When the genes of

one parent combine with the genes of the other, there's more

chances for something to go wrong. Sometimes a whole piece can

drop out by mistake, or get doubled up. That's what happened with

Rachel." Nannie stopped walking and turned around to face

Deanna. "But just think what this world would be if we didn't have

the crossing type of reproduction."

Deanna found she couldn't picture the difference, and said so.

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“Well,” Nannie said, pondering this, “probably for just millions

of years there were little blobs of things in the sea, all just alike,

splitting in two and making more of themselves. Same, same, same.

Nothing much cooking. And then, some way, they got to where

they’d cross their genes with one another and turn out a little variety, from mutations and such. *Then* starts the hullabaloo.”

“Then there’d start to be different kinds of things?”
Deanna

guessed.

“More and more, that’s right. Some of the kids turned out a little nicer than the parents, and some, not so hot. But the better ones

could make even a little better. Things could change. They could

branch out.”

“And that was good, right?”

Nannie put her hands on her knees and looked Deanna earnestly in the eye. “That was the *world*, honey. That’s what we live in.

That is God Almighty. There’s nothing so important as having variety. That’s how life can still go on when the world changes. But variety means strong and not so strong, and that’s just how it is. You

throw the dice. There’s Deannas and there’s Rachels, that’s what

comes of sex, that’s the miracle of it. It’s the greatest invention life

ever made.”

And that was it, the nearest thing to a birds-and-bees
lecture

she'd ever gotten from Nannie, the nearest thing to a
mother she

had. It was a cool fall day—September, probably—and
they were

making their way through the hillside field that had gone
derelict

since Nannie took over running the farm. It was full of
sapling apple trees sprouted from seeds left here in the
droppings of the deer

and foxes that stole apples from the orchard down below.
Nannie

claimed that these wild trees were her legacy. The orchard
trees

planted by her father were all good strains, true to type,
carefully

grown out from cuttings so they'd be identical to their
parent tree.

All the winesaps in the world were just alike. But Nannie's
field

saplings were outlaws from seeds never meant to be sown,
the progeny of different apple varieties cross-pollinated by
bees. Up here

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stood the illegitimate children of a Transparent crossed
with a

Stayman's winesap, or a Gravenstein crossed with who
knew what,

a neighbor's wild apple or maybe a pear. Nannie had
stopped mowing this field and let these offspring raise up their
heads until they

were a silent throng. "Like Luther Burbank's laboratory,"
was how

she'd explained it to an adolescent girl who wanted to
understand,

but Deanna could think of them only as Nannie's children.
On

many an autumn Saturday, the two of them had beat their
way

through the grass of this overgrown field from one tree to
the next,

tasting apples from these wild trees, the renegade products
of bee

sex and fox thievery. They were looking for something
new:

Nannie's Finest.

Deanna knew what to do; she had a plan. This was the first
week of

August, which meant Jerry would be coming up soon with
her

groceries and mail. She could send a letter back to town
with him.

Instead of putting on a stamp, which she wasn't even sure
she had,

she'd draw a map of Egg Fork Creek and Highway 6 on
the back of

the envelope so Jerry could find the orchard and deliver it straight.

Deanna smiled to think of Nannie's opening the envelope with the

map on the back. Maybe she would pause first to study that line of

blue ink connecting Deanna's cabin to her own orchard, like a maze

in a child's puzzle book painstakingly completed. Maybe, just from

that, Nannie would be able to guess the contents of the message

inside.

Deanna already knew how the letter would begin:

Dear Nannie,

I have some news. I'm coming down from the mountain this fall, in September, I think, when it starts to get cold. It looks like I'll be bringing somebody else with me. I wonder

if we could stay with you.

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G thinking about the fish at Pinkie's Diner and arnett was on his way home from a trip to town, whether it had been as good as usual, and just arriving at the place where Egg Fork joined up with Black Creek and

the road dipped into a little piece of woods, when he was stopped

by an animal in the road. There it stood in broad daylight, causing

Garnett to brake hard and stop completely. It was a dog, but not

a dog. Garnett had never seen the like of it. It was a wild, fawn-colored thing with its golden tail arched high and its hackles standing up and its eyes directly on Garnett. It appeared to be ready to

take on a half-ton Ford pickup truck with no fear of the outcome.

“Well, then,” Garnett said aloud, quietly. His heart was pumping heartily, not from fear but from astonishment. The creature was

looking into his eyes as if it meant to speak.

It turned its head back toward the side of the road it had come

from, and out of the weeds crept a second one, walking slowly. Its

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tail was held lower, but its color and size were about the same. It

hesitated out in the open, then picked up its pace and crossed the

road quickly at a neat trot. The first one turned into line behind it

and followed, and they both disappeared into the chickory at the

edge of the road without so much as a glance back at Garnett. The

blue-flowered weeds parted and then closed like curtains in a movie

house, and Garnett had the strangest feeling that what he'd witnessed was just that kind of magic. This was no pair of stray dogs

dumped off bewildered beside the road and now trying to find their

way back to the world of men. They were wildness, and this was

where they lived.

He sat for a long moment gazing at the ghosts of what he had

seen on the empty road ahead of him. Then, because life had to go

on and his prostate wasn't what it used to be, he put the truck into

gear and pressed on, minding his own business and keeping fairly

well to his own side of the road. He had nearly closed in on the

safety of his own driveway when a young man flagged him down.

Garnett was still thinking about the dogs, so much so that he went

right on past the Forest Service jeep and on down the road a piece

before it registered that the boy in the jeep had meant for him to

stop.

He pulled over slowly until he heard the chickory weeds in the

ditch brush the side of his truck, which told him he was well off the

road. Then he shut off the ignition and sat peering nervously into

the rearview mirror. The Forest Service people weren't the police.

They couldn't *make* you stop. This wasn't like Timmy Boyer's

pulling a fellow over and giving him a lecture on old age and bad

eyesight and threatening to take away his driving license. Goodness,

maybe those animals he'd just seen were something the Forest

Service had lost and was looking for? But no, of course not, that

was a ridiculous idea. This was just a little, green, open-sided army

jeep, not a circus train. If anything, this boy had likely been signaling to Garnett to get back over the center line. He'd been so preoccupied with what he'd just seen back at the fork that he wasn't

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paying a lot of attention to anything else. Garnett knew he strayed;

he would admit to that, if asked.

He was still stewing over whether to try to back up and speak

to the young man or just go on down the road and forget about it

when the fellow hopped out of his jeep and came walking toward

him at a brisk pace. He had some kind of a paper in his hand.

“Oh, for pity's sake,” Garnett muttered to himself. “Now

they're letting children from the Forest Service hand out driving

tickets.”

But that wasn't it. Goodness, this boy seemed too young to be

operating a vehicle, much less claiming any authority whatsoever

over other drivers. He stood next to Garnett's open window studying some kind of scribbling on the paper he had there, and then he

asked, “Excuse me, sir, would this be Highway Six?”

“It *would* be,” Garnett replied, “if the fools that run the nineone-one emergency-ambulance business hadn't decided to put up a

road sign calling it Meadow Brook Lane.”

The young man looked at him, a little startled. “Well, that's exactly what the sign back there said. Meadow Brook Lane. But I've

got this map here that says I'm supposed to be on Highway Six, and

it seems like that's where I'm at.”

“Well,” said Garnett. “There isn't any *meadow*, and there isn't

any *brook*. What we've got here is just a lot of cow pastures and a

creek. So most of us go right on ahead and call it number Six, since

that's what it's been ever since God was a child, as far as I know.

Just showing up here one day and banging up a green metal sign

doesn't make a country road through a cow pasture into something

it isn't. I've always had the impression the nine-one-one emergency ambulance people must be from Roanoke."

The young man looked even more surprised. "I'm from Roanoke."

"Well, then," Garnett said. "There you have it."

"But," he said, seeming to waver between confusion and irritation, "is this Highway Six, then, or *isn't* it?"

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"Who wants to know, and who would he be looking for?"

Garnett asked.

The fellow flipped over his paper, which looked like an envelope, and read, "Miss Nannie Rawley. Fourteen hundred twelve,

Old Highway Six."

Garnett shook his head. "Son, is there some reason why you

can't do your business with Miss Rawley through the United States

Mail, like everybody else? You've got to go bothering her yourself?

Do you have any idea how busy that woman is this time of year,

with an orchard to run? Has the Forest Service got such a shortage

of forests to service nowadays, that it needs to be getting into the

postal-delivery business?"

The young man had his head cocked and his mouth partly open, but he seemed to have run out of questions and answers

both. Whatever business he had with Nannie, he wasn't going to

 speak of it to Garnett.

 “All right, go on, then,” Garnett finally said. “That’s it right up

 there. That mailbox sticking out of the bank at a funny angle with

 all the butterfly weeds around it.”

 “That’s Nannie Rawley?” the boy asked, practically jumping

 out of his skin.

 “No,” Garnett said patiently, shaking his head as he started up

 the ignition in his truck. “That’s her *mailbox*.”

 It was only reasonable to be curious, Garnett told himself, taking

 his cup and saucer from this morning off the drainboard and

 putting them away. Strangers didn’t come up this way much, and

 that boy was young. People of that age were liable to do anything—

 if you read the newspaper at all, you knew they scared elderly ladies

 just for sport. And she *was* busy. In another month apples would be

 falling from the sky like hail over there, and she had just such a short

 while to get them all in. Half her crop she sold to some company in

 Atlanta Georgia with a silly name, for apple juice without any pes**395**

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ticides in it. She got the price of gold for her apples, he'd give her

that much, even if she did let the bugs have free run of her property. But it always worried Garnett when those pickers came in to

work for her during the peak harvest. Last year half her pickers had

been those young Mexican banditos who came up here for the tobacco cutting and hanging and stayed on until stripping time.

Which right there, to begin with, was a sure sign of things gone out

of whack: farmers had so little family to count on anymore that

they had to turn to a foreign land to get help with their tobacco

cutting and stripping. You could hear those boys in town, summer

or fall, making themselves right at home and speaking in tongues.

Apparently they meant to settle in. The Kroger's in Egg Fork had

started selling those flat-looking Mexican pancakes, just to lure

them into staying here year-round, it seemed. That was how you

really knew what the world had stooped to: foreign food in the

Kroger's.

Garnett held aside the curtain in his kitchen window and angled for a better view, though it was fairly hopeless at this distance.

Dr. Gibben had been pestering him for years to get the surgery for the cataracts, and up until right about now Garnett hadn't even considered it. His thinking was, the less he could see of this world of woe, the better. But now he realized it might be the gentlemanly thing to do, to let those doctors take a knife to his eyes. For the sake of others. With so many bandits running loose, you never knew when a neighbor might need you to come to her aid. Well, the boy had left, he'd seen to that. Garnett had stood his ground right here by his kitchen window and watched while that boy gave her the envelope and then high-tailed that little green jeep back to Roanoke, where people had nothing better to do than think up ridiculous new names for old roads. But Nannie was acting strange. That was what worried Garnett. She was still standing out on the grass in front of her house as if that boy had said something awful enough to glue her to the spot. He'd driven away five minutes ago, and she was still standing there with

the letter in her hand, looking up at the mountains. The look of her

wasn't right. She seemed to be crying or praying, and neither one

of those was a thing you reasonably expected from Nannie Rawley.

It weighed on Garnett's mind, wondering what the young man had

said or done to upset her this much. Because, really, you never knew

who might be next.

When Garnett positively couldn't wait any longer he went to

the bathroom, and when he came back to the window she was

gone. She must have gone into the house. He tried to putter around

his kitchen and get his mind on something else, but there weren't

any dishes to wash (he'd just had dinner at Pinkie's). And there was

no point even thinking about what to cook for supper (Pinkie's was

all-you-can-eat!). And he didn't dare go outside. It wasn't that he

meant to spy on Nannie outright. Whatever was going on over

there, it really didn't matter to him one way or the other. He had

plenty of other things to do, and people who were counting on him

to do them. That girl over at the Widener place with her goat troubles, for one. Poor little thing, a Lexington girl!

Petunia in the

onion patch. He would go upstairs right now and get down his veterinary manual and look up about the vaccine, check whether those

goats would need seven-way or eight-way. He hadn't been sure

when he told her. They didn't get red-water disease in goats around

here, but there might be some other reason to go with the eightway. Now he couldn't even remember which one he'd told her to

use. It had felt so strange going over there to that house again. It had

put his head in a peculiar twist, as if Ellen could be alive again, just

for the time being.

Her greatest regret was that she'd never gone to see that baby—

that was what she told him, last thing, there in the hospital bed.

Greatest regret, as if there'd been a whole host of others a husband couldn't be told about. And now there were two babies, a

boy and a girl, Garnett believed. Ellen never even knew about the

second one. Garnett had come so close to asking the Widener girl

about them, the other day when he went over there. He'd stood

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right there on that porch and had it in him to do it, the words in his

mouth, but then he'd turned uncertain. Who was this gal with her

goats, anyhow? She was nice enough for a city person, surprisingly

nice, but how in tarnation had she wound up here in a man's longtailed shirt in the middle of a field of thistles and nanny goats?

Garnett had asked several polite questions but never had been able

to work out exactly what business she had running that farm by

herself. It was still the old family homeplace, but the people in it

seemed to have shifted. Were those two children even still around?

What if they and the mother had moved to Knoxville like everybody and his dog seemed to be doing these days? What if Garnett

had been sitting twiddling his thumbs and in the meantime lost his

chance to find out about those kids? People were just piling up their

belongings and racing for Knoxville like it was the California gold

rush, since day one after they put in that Toyota plant over there.

Pretty soon there'd be no one left in this county but old folks waiting to die.

The hall window upstairs gave a good view of the side orchard

and Nannie's backyard, and a little later on toward evening he was

able to spot her from there, working in her garden. She was picking

her tomatoes. She had more tomatoes than you could shake a stick

at and sold them for a scandalous price at the Amish market. He

squinted through the wavy, ancient glass of this window.

Well. There was somebody out there with her! That blue and

white blotch at the edge of her garden was, now that he looked at

it, a man in a hat leaning on the fence. It wasn't the Forest Service

boy, it was somebody else, a heavier-set kind of fellow that Garnett

didn't recognize as a neighbor. Could it be one of the pickers, arrived too early? Who else on earth could it be? Clivus Morton had

been coming around lately to work on hammering up the new

shingles for her, and even Oda Black's boy what's-his-name had

come by once to visit her, for reasons unknown to Garnett. So! Was

Nannie Rawley suddenly attracting men of all ages, from miles

around? A seventy-five-year-old woman puts on a pair of short

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pants, and the fellows come swarming around her like bees to a

flower, was that it? (Although Clivus Morton was no honeybee.

Garnett had known honey *dippers* who smelled better, even after

they'd pumped out your septic tank.) *Was* this Clivus? He squinted.

Darn this window, he swore mildly, it was as hazy as his eyes. Dirty,

too. He hadn't cleaned it since—well, he'd never cleaned it, period.

He moved to the other side of the window, but it didn't help

much. He could see she was out there filling her bushel basket and

evidently talking up a storm because that stranger, whoever he was

(and no, it was *not* Clivus), just stood there leaning forward with his

elbows on the top rail of her garden fence as if he had nothing in

this world to do but stand there leaning on her fence. He didn't

seem to have a speck of manners, either. He could have at least offered to carry the bushel basket while she picked. Garnett would

have done that much. You didn't have to agree with everything a

person said, or approve of the condition of her soul, to show some

simple consideration.

Garnett felt his blood pressure going up. It began to agitate him

so, he had to step away from the window. For goodness' sakes, whoever that man was out there, he had no business with her. Garnett

felt a murky, un-Christian feeling clouding in his heart. He hated

that man. He hated his whole bearing, leaning on that fence as if he

had nothing better to do with his life than listen all day to Nannie

Rawley and look at her picking tomatoes in short pants.

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[Moth Love](#)

Lusa felt energized by the change in weather, which Thursday dawned cool again, and stayed cool all day. It was lucky for her since the work never stopped. If she'd known how much work there would be in August, she would

have considered July a vacation. The garden was like a baby bird in

reverse, calling to her relentlessly, opening its maw and giving, giving. She spent the whole morning with the canner rumbling on the

stove, processing quarts of cling peaches, while she cut up and

blanched piles of carrots, peppers, okra, and summer squash for the

freezer. She had put up thirty pints of kosher dills and still had so

many cucumbers that she was having desperate thoughts. Here was

one: She could put them in plastic grocery sacks and drive down

the road hanging them on people's mailboxes like they did with the

free samples of fabric softener. She tried the idea on Jewel when she

came up to bring Lusa her mail.

Jewel asked, "Have you done any pickles yet?"

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Lusa leaned forward on her stool until her forehead rested on

the cutting board.

"I take it that means yes," Jewel said. "Lord, I can't believe what

you've done here." Lusa sat up and caught Jewel's nostalgic admiration. The jars of golden peaches lined up on the counter looked like

currency from another time. "Nobody's done this much putting up

since Mommy died. You should be real proud of yourself. *And* you

should quit. Don't kill yourself. Give it away."

"*I have.*" Lusa gestured with her paring knife. "People down the

road run the other way when they see me coming. I caught Mary

Edna behind her house throwing the squash I'd given her on the

compost pile.”

“Don’t feel bad. Some summers just overdo it like this and there’s a little too much of everything. You can let some of it go.”

“I can’t, though. Look at those peaches, I should throw those

away? That would be a sin.” Lusa smiled, self-conscious but proud

of herself. “The truth is, I like doing it. I won’t have to spend

money on food this year. And it seems like hard work is the only

thing that stops my brain from running in circles.”

“Isn’t that the truth. I’d be up here helping you if I had the energy.”

“I know you would. Remember that day you helped me with

the cherries?”

“Lord, Lord.” Jewel sat against the table. “A hundred and ten

years ago.”

“Seems like that to me, too,” Lusa said, recalling her ravaged

psyche that day when widowhood had still been new and fierce: her

helplessness against life, her struggle to trust Jewel. Crys and Lowell

had been strangers she was a little afraid of; Crystal, in fact, had

been a boy. A hundred and ten years ago. “You can just throw the

mail on the table. Looks like junk and bills—all I ever get.”

“All anybody ever gets. Who’d think to write a letter anymore?”

Lusa swept her pile of sliced carrots into the colander for

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blanching. Thirty seconds of steam did something to their biochemistry that colored them as orange as daylilies (so why did the

canning book call this step *blanching?*) and kept them perfect in the

freezer. “How are you feeling today, Jewel?”

Jewel put a hand against her cheek. “Pretty good, I think. He’s

letting me take more of the painkillers now. It makes me stupid as a

cow, but boy, I feel great.” She sounded so sad, Lusa wanted to go

sit down next to her and hold her hand.

“Anything I can do for you today? I’m going to bring down

your mother’s vacuum and do your rugs when I get a chance. That

thing works miracles.”

“No, honey, don’t put yourself out. I need to get back to the

house. I left Crys in charge of burning the trash, and you know

where that could lead. I really just came up to show you something.”

“What?” Lusa wiped her hands on her apron and crossed to the

kitchen table, curious to see what Jewel was pulling out of an envelope.

“It’s the papers from Shel. He signed them. I knew he would,

but still, it’s a load off my mind. It’s good to be done with it. I wisht

I’d done it a year ago.” Jewel unfolded the sheaf of stiff-looking papers and handed them to Lusa for her inspection. She sat down and

looked them over, her eyes skimming through words invented by

lawyers that seemed to complicate something so pure and simple.

These children belonged to their mother. Soon, probably sooner

than anyone was prepared to believe, they would come to live with

Lusa.

A signature was scrawled in blue ink at the bottom of two of

the pages, in a hand that was masculine but childish, like a fifthgrade boy’s, with the name typed underneath. Lusa stared, astonished, then read it aloud. “Garnett Sheldon Walker *the Fourth?*”

“I know,” Jewel said with a dry little laugh. “It sounds like the

name of a king or something, doesn’t it? Anyways not a little old rat

with a blond mustache.”

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“No, but ...” Lusa struggled to put knowledge and words together. “I know that name. I’m friends with his, well, his grandfather, it must be. With that same name. He’s this funny old man who

lives over on Highway Six.” Lusa looked from the signature to

Jewel. “He’s even been over here, to this house. He helps me with

my goat problems.”

“Oh, well, see, Mr. Walker, that’s Shel’s daddy. He was my inlaws, him and his wife, Ellen. He’s come up here, when? Lately?”

“Yeah. Not ten days ago. He came up to diagnose my worm

problem. He didn’t act like he’d ever set foot on this place before.

He wouldn’t even step through the barn door till I’d invited him in,

like it was a living room.”

“Well, that’s just like him. They were funny people, him and

Ellen. Just kindly old-fashioned I guess. And old, period. I think

Shel was a change-of-life baby that came after they’d given up, and

they never got over the shock.”

Lusa realized this was more or less what she’d been to her own

parents. They’d never known what to do with her.

“She died of cancer,” Jewel added.

“Who did, Mr. Walker’s wife? When?”

“Right around when Shel ran off. No, a couple of years before.

Lowell wasn't born yet. She never had a thing to do with Crystal,

either, but I guess she was already right sick by that time.”
Jewel

sighed, too familiar with the lapses caused by illness.

Lusa was amazed. She'd simply pegged the old man for a lifelong bachelor. “He's your father-in-law. I can't believe it. How

come you never told me?”

“Because I had no earthly notion you even knew him, that's

why. We haven't any of us spoken to the old man since her funeral,

as far as I can think. I've got nothing against him. It's more like he

was funny towards us.”

“He's funny toward everybody,” Lusa said. “That's my impression.”

“What it is, I think, is they were embarrassed to death by Shel's

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drinking. Shel Walker has shortchanged about everybody in this

county, one way or another. He used to paint houses and do odd

jobs, and after we got married he got to where he'd take their

money for a deposit, go drink it up, and then never come back and

do the work. I felt like I couldn't hardly show my face in town. His

daddy probably feels worse.”

“I had no idea,” Lusa said.

“Oh, yeah. Shel spent many a year running around wild.
And

see, I was part of the *wild*, to begin with, in high school. Then after Shel left me and ran off, that was just finally the last straw. I think

old Mr. Walker decided to put that whole chapter on the shelf and

pretend me and the kids never happened.”

“But he’s their grandfather, right?”

“That’s sad, isn’t it? They never really got to have any
mammaw

or pappaw. Daddy and Mommy died before they got the chance.

And if Shel’s got no legal tie to them anymore, Mr. Walker’s not

hardly obligated to start being a pappaw now, is he?”

“Not obligated, no. But would you care if I called him up?

Maybe not right now, but sometime. The kids might like to go over

there; he’s got a beautiful farm, he grows trees. And there’s an apple

orchard right nearby, I saw. Wouldn’t it be fun to take the kids over

there to get cider in October?”

Jewel looked pained, and Lusa could have bitten her tongue off

for taking a thing like “October” for granted. “You could call today,

I don’t care,” she told Lusa, “but I wouldn’t get my hopes up. He’s

a sour old pickle.”

Lusa didn't say anything. She wasn't sure where Jewel's heart lay

in all this. Jewel was looking out the window now, miles away.

“They came to our wedding,” she said. “It was here, in this house.

But they left before the reception—that's how they were. They

never approved, they said we were too young. We *were* too young.

But just think.” She looked back at Lusa, intense. “What if I'd been

sensible and waited, instead of marrying Shel? There'd be no

Crystal and Lowell.”

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“That's true,” Lusa said.

Jewel narrowed her eyes. “Remember that. Don't wait around

thinking you've got all the time in the world. Maybe you've just got

this one summer. Will you remember that? Will you tell the kids for

me?”

“I think so,” Lusa said. “Except I'm not sure I understand what

you mean.”

“Just make sure they know that having them, and being their

mother, I would not have traded for anything. Not for a hundred

extra years of living.”

“I will.”

“*Do,*” Jewel said urgently, as if she meant to leave the world this

very afternoon. “Tell them I just got this one season to be down

here on the green grass, and I praise heaven and earth that I did

what I did.”

In the early afternoon Lusa took a deep breath, picked up the heavy

box of vaccine vials she’d bought from the vet, and went down to

face her goats. After some weeks of worry over poor eating and

lethargy, Lusa had figured out that she had worms in the herd—

which according to Mr. Walker was no surprise, given their motley

origins. His advice was to worm the whole herd at once with DSZ,

which he vowed wouldn’t hurt her pregnant mothers, and while

she was at it, to stick every last one of them with a shot of sevenway vaccine. Lusa was daunted, but Little Rickie had promised to

come up and help. He claimed there was no sense letting all those

years of 4-H go to waste.

Lusa found the goats easy to manage most of the time, much

easier to herd than cattle once she got the first ones going where she

wanted them. She already had them corralled into the small calf

pasture by the time Rickie showed up for the rodeo. The idea was

to let them through the gate into the bigger field one at a time.

Rickie could wrestle each victim down as it came through, then

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shove the worm pill down its gullet and sit on its head while Lusa

sat on the rear end and gave the shot. Simple enough in theory, but

it took her a full hour to do the first five animals. Lusa felt like a torturer. The poor things struggled and bleated so, it was hard for her

to keep her eyes open and aim for muscle when she jabbed in the

hypodermic. Once she accidentally hit bone and cried out as loudly

as the goat did.

“I’m a scientist,” she said aloud to slow down her fluttering

heart. “I’ve dissected live frogs and sacrificed rabbits. I can do this.”

She kept hoping Rickie would volunteer to take over the needle, but he seemed as scared of it as she was. And she didn’t think

she’d be any better at *his* task, forcing the huge worm pill down the

hatch, which he seemed to manage comfortably.

“You should see what you have to do to get a cow to take a pill,”

he told her when she remarked on his skill. “Man. Slobber all the

way up to your armpit.” She watched him push the white tablet

deep into the doe’s mouth, then clamp her lips closed and wobble

her head from side to side. He was gentle and competent with animals, as Cole had been. That’d been one of the first things she loved

about Cole, beyond his physical person.

The second hour went better, and by the time they reached number forty or so Lusa was getting almost handy with the needle.

Mr. Walker had showed her how to give the thigh muscle three or

four stout punches with her fist before poking in the needle on the

last one. When a shot was delivered this way, the animal tended to

lie perfectly still.

Rickie was impressed with this technique, once she got it working. “He’s a smarter old guy than he looks, I guess. Mr.

Walker.”

“Yeah, he’s that,” Lusa said, keeping her eyes on the brown pelt

of this girl’s flank. The hard part was getting the plunger pushed all

the way down and then extracting the needle without getting

poked if the goat began to kick. When she was out and clear, Lusa

gave the nod, and she and Rick jumped off at the same time,

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allowing the doe to scramble to her feet. With an offended little toss

of her triangular head, she ran with a slight limp toward the middle

of the pasture, where her friends had already put the humiliation

behind them and were munching thistles in vaccinated, amnesiac

bliss.

“Did you know he was Jewel’s father-in-law? Old Mr. Walker?”

Rickie thought about it. “*Ex*-father-in-law. I don’t think that’s

a real big thing on the family tree. I don’t think he’s said boo to

Aunt Jewel since his outlaw son ran off. And he didn’t say much before, from what I hear.”

“No, I guess not,” Lusa said, looking over her newly medicated

herd with some satisfaction. She was about to turn back to her work

when a quick, pale movement up at the top of the field snagged

her eye.

“My God,” she said. “Look at that.”

They both watched as the animal froze, then lowered its body

close to the ground and walked slowly along the fence back into the

woods.

“That wasn’t a fox, was it?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“What was it, then?”

“Coyote.”

“Are you sure? Have you ever seen one before?”

“Nope,” Rickie said.

“Me either. But I could swear I heard some a couple of nights

ago. It was amazing, like singing. Dog singing.”

“That’s what that bastard was, then. Got to be. You want me to

go home and get my rifle? I could get up there after it right now.”

“No.” She put her hand on his forearm. “Do me a favor. Don’t

turn into your uncles.”

He looked at her. “Do you know what those things eat?”

“Not really. I imagine it could kill a goat, or a kid, at least. But

it didn’t look that big. Don’t you think it’s more likely to kill a rabbit or something?”

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“You’re going to wait around and find out?”

She nodded. "I think I am. Yeah."

"You're crazy."

"Maybe. We'll see." She stood for a while longer, staring into

the edge of the woods where it had vanished. Then she turned back

to the goats in her paddock. "OK, let's get this over with. How

many have we got to go?"

Rickie moved reluctantly to the gate, preparing to let in another goat. He counted heads. "A dozen, maybe. We're near 'bout

done."

"Good, because I'm near 'bout dead," she said, moving up quickly behind the doe to help shove down with all her weight on

its haunches. Once they had it down, Lusa pushed the sweat and

unruly hair out of her eyes with the back of one hand before filling

the next syringe.

He watched. "Want to swap heads and tails? My part's way easier than yours."

Now he asks, she thought. "No, you're working twice as hard as

I am," Lusa said, steeling her sore biceps for the next punch and

poke. "I'm just a wimp."

He waited respectfully while the needle went in, then spoke.

"No way, you're doing great. I've never seen a woman sit on so

many animals in one day.”

At Lusa’s nod they got up and let the doe saunter off.

“Know

what I’m dying for?”

“A cold beer?” he asked.

“A *bath*. Pew!” She sniffed her forearms and made a face.

“These girls don’t smell pretty.”

“They don’t,” Rickie agreed. “And they are the *girls*.”

By the time they’d finished all the does and the buck,
which

they saved for last, Lusa could hardly tolerate the smell of
her own

body. She turned on the hose bib by the barn for Rickie
and walked

around to get the big square bar of soap that was down
below in the

milking parlor. Her mind drifted back to the coyote. It had
been so

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beautiful and strange, almost ghostly. Like a little golden
dog, but

much wilder in its bearing. If she could find just one other
person

in this county who didn’t feel the need to shoot a coyote on
sight,

that would be something. Then she’d have a friend.

When she came back around the corner of the barn she
walked

straight into a spray of cold water that caused her to shriek.
A direct

hit by Rickie.

“I’m going to kill you,” she said, laughing, wiping her eyes.

“It feels good,” he said, running the water over his head.

“OK, then, here. You go first.” She tossed him the soap and

they took turns lathering themselves up and hosing each other

down, enjoying a gleeful, chaste, slightly hysterical bath in their

clothes. Some of the goats came over and put their noses through

the fence to watch this peculiar human rite.

“I can’t get over their *eyes*,” Lisa said as Rickie turned off the

hose. She bent over and shook her head like a wet dog, sending water drops flying into the golden light of late afternoon.

“Who, the goats?” He’d thought to strip off his dark-red T-shirt

before hosing down, to keep it dry, and now he used it as a towel to

dry his face. Lisa wondered if the display of his body was as ingenuous as it seemed. He was seventeen. It was hard to say.

“They have those weird pupils,” she said. “Little slits, like a cat’s,

only sideways instead of up and down.”

He rubbed his head violently with the shirt. “Yep. Funny eyes.”

He combed his dark hair back on the sides with his hands. “Kindly

like they’re from another planet.”

Lusa studied the faces of her girls at the fence. “Kind of cute,
though. Don’t you think? They grow on you.”
“Oh, boy, she’s getting sentimental about goats.” He tossed
Lusa
his shirt. “You need to get out more.”
She dried her face and arms with the frankly male-scented
shirt,
suddenly recalling Rickie’s description of her dancing
through the
pasture waving a buck-scented rag in front of the does.
This world
was one big sexual circus, or so it seemed to the deprived.
She

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balled up his shirt and threw it back. “For this I owe you
big-time,
Rick. If I’d known how hard today was going to be, I
might have
chickened out, but you stuck with me to the bitter end. Can
I write
you a check for some gas money, for your trouble?”
“No, ma’am, you don’t owe me a thing,” he said, polite as
a
schoolboy. “Neighbors and family don’t take money.”
“Well, your neighbor and aunt thanks you kindly. I don’t
have
the cold beer you’re thirsty for, but I could give you some
lemonade or iced tea before you go home.”
“Sweet tea would hit the spot,” he said.

A bird called loudly from up in her fallow pasture behind the

house—a dramatic “Wow- *wheet!* ” in a voice as powerful and selfimportant as an opera singer’s.

“I’ll swan, listen to that,” Rickie said, struck motionless where

he stood toweling his shoulders. “That was a bobwhite.”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t hardly hear them anymore. I don’t think I’ve heard

one since I was a little kid.”

“Well, that’s good,” Lusa said, impressed that Rickie had noticed a bird, had even declared its name. “Welcome back, Mr. Bob

White. I can always use another man on the place.” She picked up

the box of empty glass vials and walked slowly to the house, feeling

the extent of exhaustion not only in her arms but also in her thighs

and lower back. She was getting acquainted with these sensations in

her body, to the point where she almost enjoyed the tingling, achy

release of lactic acid in her muscles. It was the closest thing to sex in

her life, she thought, and gave in to a sad little laugh.

When she came back outside with the cold jar of tea and a glass,

Rickie had put on his shirt and was sitting on the lawn, barefoot

among the dandelions with his long legs stretched straight out in

front of him. He'd taken off his shoes and for some reason set them

on top of the cab of his pickup truck.

"Here you go," she said, collapsing on the grass beside him, but

facing him, to hand him the jar and glass. She'd considered chang**410**

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ing out of her wet clothes, but the contrast of cool dampness and

warm sun felt wonderful on her limbs. She probably looked like a

drowned rat, but she didn't care. She felt a friendly intimacy with

Rickie after their long afternoon of sitting on goats together. She

stretched her legs beside his, in the opposite direction, so her feet

were next to his hipbones. Sitting this way gave her a childhood

feeling, as if they were on a seesaw together, or inside an invisible

fort. He poured a glass of tea, handed it to her, then turned up the

jar and drained it in one long, awe-inspiring draft. Watching his

Adam's apple bob made her think of all those huge pills going down

all those goat gullets. Teenaged boys were just a loose aggregation of

appetites.

He produced a pack of smokes from somewhere—he must have

gotten them out of his truck while she was inside, Lusa guessed,

since he was entirely wet and they were not. He tipped the pack at

her, but she held up her hand.

“You stay away from me, you devil. I’ve kicked that nasty habit.”

He lit up, nodding enthusiastically. “ ’At’s good. I should, too.”

He snapped his wrist to extinguish the match. “I was thinking

about what you said, that you didn’t care if you saw thirty or not.

Thing is, I really do. I figure it all gets better after high school.”

“It does,” Lusa said. “Trust me. Barring a few rocks in the road,

it’s all uphill from high school.” She thought about this, surprised by

the truth of it. “I can vouch for that. Even depressed and widowed

and a long way from home, I like my life right now better than I

liked it in high school.”

“Is that so?”

“I think so.”

“You like the country, then. You like farming. You were meant

for it.”

“I guess that’s true. It’s weird, though. I was born into such a

different life, with these scholarly parents, and I did the best I could

with it. I raised caterpillars in shoeboxes and I studied bugs and

agriculture in school for as many years as they'll let you. And then

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one day Cole Widener walked into my little house and blew the

roof off, and here I am.”

Rickie nodded, brushing a fly away from his eyebrow. She had

her back to the low-slung sun, but he was looking into it. His skin

was the color of caramelized sugar against his red shirt, and his dark

eyes glowed in the slanted light. She picked a dandelion and

smoothed its furry yellow face. White sap bled from its stem onto

her fingers. She tossed it away. “I was mad at him for dying and

leaving me here, at first. Pissed off like you wouldn't believe. But

now I'm starting to think he wasn't supposed to be my whole life,

he was just this doorway to *me*. I'm so grateful to him for that.”

Rickie smoked in silence, squinting into the distance. Lusa

didn't mind whether he spoke or not, or whether he even understood. Rickie would just let her talk, anytime, about anything. It

made him seem older than he was.

“Did I tell you my parents are coming to visit?” she asked brightly. “Right before classes start in the fall, when my dad has a week off.”

He looked at her. “That’s good. You don’t see much of your folks, do you?”

“I really don’t. It’s like a state occasion; my mother doesn’t travel

very well since she had her stroke. She gets confused. But Dad says

she’s doing better—she’s started on a new medicine, and she’s walking better. If she can do the stairs, I’m going to try to talk him into

leaving her here for a while. For a real visit. I miss my mother.”

He nodded absently. He had no earthly understanding of what

it would feel like, Lusa realized, to be anything but completely surrounded and smothered by family.

They heard the bobwhite again, declaring his name from the

hillside. Lusa heard it not so much as “Bob White” but more like a

confident “All *right*, ” with a rising inflection at the end, as if this

were just the beginning of a long sentence he meant to say. She

loved that he was there on her fallow pasture: he was not himself

her property but rather a sort of tenant, depending on her for con412

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tinued goodwill. In all her troubles she had never yet stopped to

consider her new position: landholder. Not just a mortgage holder,

not just burdened, but also blessed with a piece of the world's trust.

The condition forbidden to her zayda's people for more than a

thousand years.

After a decent interval, long enough to permit a change of subject, Rickie asked, "You're not worried about that coyote?"

"Am I?" She drank half her glass of tea before answering.

"You'll just think this is crazy, but no, I'm not. I mean *maybe*, at the

worst, it could get one kid, and that wouldn't break me. I can't see

killing a thing that beautiful just on suspicion. I'll go with innocent

until proven guilty."

"You may change your tune when you see it running off into

the woods with that poor little kid squalling bloody murder."

Lusa smiled, struck by his language. "Listen, can I tell you a

story? In Palestine, where my people came from, about a million

years ago, they had this tradition of sacrificing goats. To God, theoretically, but I think probably they ate them after the ceremony."

She set her glass down, twisting it into the grass. "So, here's the

thing. They'd always let one goat escape and run off into the desert.

The scapegoat. It was supposed to be carrying off all their sins and

mistakes from that year.”

Rickie looked amused. “And the moral of the story is what?”

She laughed. “I’m not sure. What do you think?”

“It’s OK to let one get away?”

“Yeah, something like that. I’m not such a perfect farmer that I

can kill a coyote for the one kid it might take from me. There are

ten other ways I could lose a goat through my own stupidity. And

I’m not about to kill *myself*. So. Does that make sense?”

He nodded thoughtfully. “If you say it does, I reckon it does.”

He went quiet, smiling to himself, admiring something off in the

distance behind her back. Lusa hoped it was the butterflies in her

weed patch down below the yard, though she knew enough of

young men’s minds to know that wasn’t likely. She bent her knees,

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took hold of her clammy feet, and pulled off her shoes, realizing

suddenly that wet sneakers were a wretched proposition. That

would explain his sneakers on top of his truck.

“You’ve got pretty feet,” he observed.

She stretched her legs out straight again and looked at her water-wrinkled toes, then up at him. “Oh, boy. You should get out

more.”

He laughed. “Yeah, well. I have a confession to make. I think

you look pretty sitting on the rear end of a goat, too. I’ve had the

biggest crush on you all summer.”

Lusa bit her lips to keep from smiling. “I kind of gathered that.”

“I know. You think it’s stupid.”

“What’s stupid?”

He reached over and brushed the damp hair out of her eyes,

softly grazing the side of her face with his knuckles. “This. Me

thinking about you this way. You don’t know how much I think

about it, either.”

“I think I may,” she said. “It’s not stupid. It scares me, though.”

He kept his hand against the side of her neck and said quietly,

“I wouldn’t hurt you for anything,” and Lusa was terrified, feeling

suddenly every nerve ending in her breasts and her lips. It would be

so easy to invite him into the house, upstairs, to the huge, soft bed

in which his grandparents had probably conceived his mother. How

comforting it would be to be taken away from her solitary self and

held against his solid, lovely body. His hands would become Cole's.

Just for an hour the starvation that dogged her through every night

and day could feast on real sensation instead of memory. Real taste,

real touch, the pressure of skin on nipple and tongue. She shivered.

"I can't even talk about this."

"Why not?" he asked, dropping his hand to her knees. He ran

his fingers down the inseam of her wet jeans from knee to hem,

then clasped his whole hand gently around her bare ankle. She remembered, with acute pain, the sense of small, compact perfection

she'd known inside her husband's large-limbed embrace. She looked

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at his hand on her ankle, then back at his face, trying to forge pain

into anger.

"Do I really have to tell you why not?"

He held her eye. "Tell me you don't want me to make love to

you."

"God," she gasped, turning her head to the side with her

speechless mouth open wide, scarcely able to breathe.
Where had

he learned to talk like that, the movies? She shook her
head slowly

from side to side, unable to keep her open mouth from
smiling because of his face, his earnest determination to have
her. She remembered how that felt, obsessive desire. Oh, God,
those days in

her Euclid apartment. There was no engine on earth whose
power

compared with the want of one body for another.

“That’s not a fair question,” she said finally. “I would want
you

to, yes, if that were possible. I think I’d like it a lot. That’s
the truth,

may lightning strike me dead, but now you know. Does it
make

anything better?”

“To me it does. *Damn!*” He grinned a crooked smile she’d
never

seen except on the face of Cole Widener, in bed. “To me
it’s sweet.

It’s like getting an A on a test.”

She took his hand from her ankle, kissed his knuckles
briskly

like a mother repairing a child’s hurt, then let the hand
drop into

the grass. “OK, good. You made the grade. Can we move
on to another subject now?”

“Like what? Like throwing a mattress in the back of my
truck

and heading for the river tonight?”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Which means what, exactly?”

“Which means you’re seventeen going on eighteen and you’ve

got hormones between your ears.”

“I might be that,” he said. “I might be a lot of fun, too. You’ll

never know till you try.”

She sat with her arms tightly crossed, wishing she had bothered

to change her clothes. “Drowned rat” was not the impression she

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was making in this wet shirt, evidently. He would be so *appreciative*,

she thought miserably. It would be so easy to startle him with pleasures he’d remember for the rest of his life. But then again, maybe

not, if he’d already set his standards by the magazines under his bed.

Boys never knew what they lost on those magazine girlfriends.

“I’ll never know, then,” she said, feeling a change in herself, a

permanent shift onto safer ground. “I’m not denying it would be

fun, maybe even more than fun. But it’s completely out of the question, and if it comes up again I’ll have to stop being your friend. I’m

sorry I confessed I was attracted to you. You should just try to forget that.”

He looked at her with a neutral expression and nodded slowly.

“Right,” he said. “Fat chance.”

“Look. Don’t take this the wrong way, Rickie, I like you for

you, but also sometimes you remind me of Cole in ways that make

me lose my bearings. But you’re *not* Cole. You’re my nephew. We’re

relatives.”

“We’re not blood kin,” he argued.

“But we’re family, and you know it. *And*, you’re a minor. Just

technically, for another few months maybe, but you are. I’m pretty

sure what you’re proposing would be a crime. Committed by me,

against you. If they have capital punishment in this state, your

mother and your aunts would probably see that I got the chair.”

He closed his eyes and said nothing. He seemed chastened, finally, by all of it: her tone, her words, the truth. Lusa felt both relieved and sad.

“I’m sorry to be so blunt,” she said. “I don’t think of you as a

child. You know that, right? If we were both two years older and

you were somebody I’d just met, I’d probably go out with you.”

He lit another cigarette and gave his full attention to the business of smoking and staring off into the distance. At length he said,

“I’ll be sure to remind you of that two years from now when you’re

burning heavy with some guy around here.”

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Lusa worked a small stone out of the ground and tossed it past

her feet. “I can’t even picture that, you know? From where I stand,

it looks like a real dry county.”

“Well, you’re not the Lone Ranger. All the girls at my school are

hot to get pregnant and married so they can play house, but they

seem like little girls. After I graduate I want to *do* something, like

hitchhike to Florida and get a job on a fishing boat or something, you

know? See what those palm-tree islands look like. And these girls

with their big hair are all down at Kmart looking at the baby shoes

going, ‘Aren’t these *cute*?’ They’re like cheerleaders for boringness.”

Lusa laughed. “And you and me, we’re different, right? Two noble souls cast together in dubious circumstances till we can find

somebody halfway appropriate to go out with.”

He nodded, grinning that damned lopsided grin. “That sounds

about right.”

“Frankly, your prospects are better than mine. By the time my

goats up here drop their kids, I predict you'll have met the girl of

your dreams, and I'll be toast."

"Don't bet on it."

"I'll dance at your wedding, Rick. I'm betting on it."

"I didn't get to dance at yours," he said. "You didn't invite me."

"Next time I will," she said. "I promise. That was a big mistake,

you know? Don't ever elope. The relatives never forgive you."

"Relatives," he agreed. "What a pain."

"Thank you." She looked at him then, hit by a sudden inspiration. "You know what we need to do, you and me? We need to go

dancing. Do you like to dance?"

He nodded. "Yeah. As a matter of fact, I do."

"That's *exactly* what we need to do. Is there someplace around

here where they have music on a Saturday night?"

"Oh, sure, there's the college bar over in Franklin, Skid Row.

Or we could drive over to Leesport. Cotton-Eye Joe's, they get

good country bands in there." He was taking this proposal seriously.

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"Do you think we'd scandalize the family if we went out dancing?"

"*Oh* yeah. My mom and aunts think dancing's basically just the

warm-up act. Aunt Mary Edna gives this lecture in Sunday school

about how dancing always leads to sexual intercourse.”

“Well, she’s right, that’s probably true for most animals. Insects

do that, birds do, even some mammals. But we’ve got great big

brains, you and me. I think we could distinguish a courtship ritual

from the act itself. Don’t you?”

Rickie fell backward on the ground and lay there for some time

with his cigarette sticking up like a chimney. Eventually he removed

it so he could speak. “You know what drives me crazy about you,

Lusa? Half the time I don’t know what in the hell you’re discussing.”

She looked down at him, her beautiful nephew in the grass.

“Drives you crazy and that’s a bad thing? Or a good thing?”

He thought about it. “It doesn’t have to be good or bad. It’s just

you. My favorite aunt, Miss Lusa Landowski.”

“Wow. You actually know my name. And here I am just about

to change it.”

“Yeah? To what?”

“Widener.”

Rickie raised his dark eyebrows and looked at her from his prone position. “*Really*. What for?”

“For Cole, the kids, all of you. The family. I don’t know.”
She

shrugged, feeling a little embarrassed. “It just seems like
the thing to

do. So this farm will stay where it is on our little map of
the world.

It’s an animal thing, I guess. Marking a territory.”

“Huh,” he said.

“So, let’s go dancing, OK? Absolutely no funny business,
we’ll

just dance till we drop, shake hands, and say good night. I
need the

exercise. You free this Saturday?”

“I am free as a bird this Saturday,” he said, still flat on his
back,

smiling grandly at the sky.

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“Good. Because you know, I’m going to be a mother pretty
soon. I’d better get out and paint the town red a time or
two while

I’ve still got the chance.”

Rickie sat up and stubbed out his cigarette pensively in the
grass. “That’s really nice that you’re taking those kids. I
mean, *nice*,

hell—it’s more than that.”

Lusa shrugged. “I’m doing it for me as much as for them.”

“Well, my mom and Aunt Mary Edna think it’s like this
gift

from God, that you’re doing it. They said you’re a saint.”

“Oh, come on.”

“No, I swear to God that’s what they said. I heard ’em say it.”

“Wow,” she said. “What a trip. From devil-worshiper to saint in

one short summer.”

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[Old Chestnuts](#)

Nannie Rawley was as trusting as a child. She didn’t
T his world was full of perils, thought Garnett, and
even realize this man was up to no good. Hanging
on to her like a cocklebur, but fifty times more dangerous.
Garnett

had heard of things as strange as a younger man’s buttering
up some

pitiful, sweet old woman and marrying her for her money.
Now, on

that score Nannie was safe, because she probably didn’t
have two

dimes to rub together until harvest season was done and
her crop

sold, but she did have the best-producing orchard in five
counties,

and no living descendants, and everybody around here
knew it.

There was no telling what this sneaky snake had on his
mind.

Garnett couldn't swear he knew, either, but he knew this much:

for two days now, every time he'd happened to catch a glimpse of

Nannie out in her garden, there he'd been, leaning on the fence. He

hadn't even lifted a finger to help her carry her bushel baskets of

squash and corn into the house. If that fellow set foot inside her

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house, Garnett was prepared to call up Timmy Boyer on the telephone and get him over here. He would have to. She didn't know

enough to protect herself.

He finished folding the shirts he'd washed yesterday in the washing machine and dried in the dryer. He held the last one up by

the peaks of its shoulders and stared at it. It looked as wrinkled and

worn as he felt himself. Ellen had had some way of getting them to

come out nice and smooth, even without the ironing board. On

cool winter mornings before he went to school she'd hand him a

shirt to put on that felt as warm as a wife's embrace, and he'd carry

that little extra measure of affection on his shoulders all day long.

No matter what affronts of youthful insolence he had to face in his

day, he'd still have that: he was a man taken care of by a woman.

He piled the folded shirts into a stack as neatly as he could, put

the balled-together socks on top, and carried the whole thing upstairs. He paused by the window at the landing, balancing the

folded clothes on one hand and drawing the sheer curtain aside

with the other.

Almighty stars, there he still was, like a wolf waiting for the

lamb. She was not even anywhere in sight. What kind of nerve

would it take to just stand there waiting for her like that, with his

elbows up on the fence? Garnett squinted hard, trying to bring the

details of the man's appearance into focus. By gosh, he wasn't even

that good-looking. On the portly side, if the truth be told. Portly,

going to lumpy. Garnett felt so irritated he dropped a pair of socks.

Never mind, he'd pick them up later. He peered as far as he could

into the shadows of Nannie's backyard, but she didn't seem to be

around there, either.

Well, then, he thought suddenly, wildly—this was his chance.

He could go over there this minute and give that fellow his walking

papers. That garden fence was not ten feet from Garnett's line, and

he had as much right as anybody to chase off no-goods and vagrants

from the neighborhood.

Garnett went on up to the bedroom first, to put his shirts in the

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bureau drawer. Yes, by gosh, he thought, he was going to do it. He

briefly considered fetching his shotgun but then decided against it.

He hadn't fired a gun in many a year, since the days when he could

claim a better eye and a steadier hand, though he was sure he could

still shoot in a pinch, if he had to. The thought gave him courage.

Maybe just holding the shotgun would steady him. He wouldn't

load it; there wasn't any need. He would just carry it out there with

him, to give him the air of a man who meant business.

He walked around to the closet on Ellen's side of the bed, where he tended to keep things he never planned on needing again.

The door had gone off its frame a little and scraped the floor as he

dragged it open. He batted at the darkness like a blind man, trying

to find the pull string to switch the light on, and nearly jumped out

of his shirt when something big plummeted down off the shelf,

bouncing off his shoulder as it fell. Ellen's old round hatbox. It

landed on its side, and out rolled Ellen's navy-blue church hat on its

brim, describing a small half-circle on the floor before sitting down

flat beside the bed.

"Ellen," he said aloud, staring at the hat.

The hat, of course, made no reply. It merely sat there, flat on its

proper little brim, adorned with its little bunch of artificial cherries.

If it could have folded its hands in its lap, it would have.

"Well, don't scare me like that, woman. I'm doing the best I

can."

He grabbed his shotgun with both hands and hurried out of the

bedroom, reaching around behind him to pull the door shut. She

didn't need to see this.

"Man, state your business," Garnett called out from the clump of

wild cherries in the fencerow, a hundred feet from where the fellow

still stood. He gave no sign of having seen or heard Garnett—ha!—

who still had it in him to be stealthy as a good deer hunter.
The

thought gave him some satisfaction, and perhaps a little
daring.

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He cleared his throat, since his last words had come out
sounding a little wobbly, and called out again. "Hello there!"

Nothing.

"I said, hello. I'm Garnett Walker, I own this land here,
and I'd

like to know your business, if you don't mind."

The man didn't speak, did not so much as turn his head.

Garnett had never seen such a display of rudeness. Even
the boy

who drove the UPS truck would nod a reluctant hello when
pressed.

Garnett squinted. This man looked so slack he could be
dead.

He didn't look young, though. Young people, Garnett had
observed, often gave the impression of having too little
gumption to

hold up their heads. But this fellow didn't even seem to
have a head.

He was hunkered down with his arms crossed in front of
him on

the fence and an old, dusty-looking fedora pulled down
over his

ears. His whole body leaned against his arms in an
unnatural way,

like a pole leaning against a fence. Everything about him
appeared

unnatural, in fact, from the way his arms in the blue work shirt bent

in curves, as if his elbows were rubber instead of hinges, to the

trunklike aspect of his big lumpy legs in those jeans. Garnett got the

strangest feeling, as if he'd turned up in somebody else's dream

wearing no clothes. He felt a blush creep down the front of his

neck, though there was no one here to witness it. Thanks be to the

Lord for that, no witnesses. He set his gun down gently on its butt

end, with its bore against the trunk of the cherry, and stepped

through the gate, a few paces onto Nannie's side, to get a better

look at the face.

But of course there was no face. There was just a stuffed pillowcase with a hat on it, stuck down into a stuffed shirt and pants.

Garnett recalled the locust rail and crossbeam Nannie had been

nailing together in her garage. He nearly fell to his knees. For the

last two days he'd been burning up with suspicion and ire and jealousy. Yes, even that. He'd been jealous of a scarecrow.

He turned to leave before things got worse.

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"Garnett Walker!" she cried, coming around the corner of her

house in a hurry.

He sighed. Between Garnett and Nannie, things always did get

worse. He should know that by now. He should just give in. There

was no paddling upstream against this river. “Hello, Miss Rawley.”

She stopped short, with her hands on her hips. She was wearing

a skirt, probably getting ready to go to the market. She always prettied herself up a little for market day, in her calico skirt and her

braids. She looked quizzical as a little bird, with her head cocked to

the side. “I thought I heard somebody over here calling me,” she

said.

Garnett looked at his hands. Empty. “I was coming over to see

if you needed help. Any help loading up your truck for the Amish

market. I know how it is for you this time of year. When the winesaps start to come in.”

He could have laughed, for how surprised she looked.

“With winesaps,” he added emphatically, “when it rains, it pours.”

She shook her head. “Well, will wonders never cease.”

“I’ve lived next door to an orchard for the better part of eighty

years,” he prattled on, sounding foolish even to himself. “I have

eyes. I can see it’s enough work to break a donkey’s back.”

She looked at him sideways. “Are you angling for another pie?”

“Now, look here, I don’t think that’s fair. Just because I’ve offered to help you out, you don’t have to act like the sky’s falling. It’s

not the first time.”

“No,” she said. “You gave me the shingles, too. Those were a

godsend.”

“I think it would be fair to say I’ve been a good neighbor lately.”

“You have,” she agreed. “You’ll have to forgive me if it all takes

a while to sink in. I’m just blessed off my rocker these days. I’ve

come into an embarrassment of riches.”

He wondered what that could possibly mean, and whether it

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was polite to ask. “I didn’t know you had relatives anywhere,” he

tried. “To inherit from.”

She laughed, laying her hands flat on the front of her skirt

“That’s just what I’ve done,” she said, “I’ve inherited a relative. Two

of them, in fact.”

Garnett became a little confused, thinking briefly of the man

hanging around on the fence, who of course was no man at all,

with no interest in anyone's inheritance. He waited for Nannie to

explain—which she always did, if you waited long enough.

“Deanna Wolfe,” she said simply. “She’s coming to live with me.”

Garnett thought about this. “Ray Dean’s girl?” he asked, feeling

briefly, nonsensically jealous of the young Ray Dean Wolfe, who’d

courted Nannie for more years than most people now stayed married. Nannie had been so happy in those days, you could hear her

singing on any day but a rainy one. But Ray Dean Wolfe was buried

in the cemetery now.

“That’s right, his girl Deanna. She’s like a daughter to me. You

knew that.”

“I thought she’d gone to live up in the mountains here somewhere, working for the government.”

“She did. She’s been up there in a cabin living all by herself for

two years. But now she’s taking a leave from her job and coming

back down. And here’s the part you have to sit down for: she’s going to have a baby.”

“Well, that is a shock.” He squinted up toward the mountains.

“How did that happen, do you think?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care. I don’t care if the daddy’s a

mountain lion, I’m going to have a grandbaby!”

Garnett shook his head, clucking his tongue. Nannie looked

like the cat that'd swallowed the canary. Women and grandbabies,

there was nothing on this earth to beat it. Like Ellen fretting on her

deathbed over that child of Shel's. And now there were two of

them, a boy and the girl. That Lexington gal with her goats had

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called him up on the telephone, plumb out of the blue, and announced that she wanted to bring those kids over to see his farm.

They wanted to see the chestnut trees. His *trees*.

"I've got grandchildren, too," he told Nannie.

"You always did," she said. "You're just too high-handed to

bother learning their names."

"The girl's name is Crystal, and the boy's Lowell. They're coming over here on Saturday." How Garnett had plucked those names

from the mossy crevices of his memory, even he would never know.

"I was thinking I might be able to teach them how to bag flowers

and make crosses," he added. "On my chestnut trees. To help me

keep it all going."

To his great satisfaction, Nannie looked stunned. "How did *that*

happen?” she asked finally.

“Well, I don’t think a mountain lion had much to do with it.”

She stood looking at Garnett with her mouth open. If she wasn’t careful, he thought, she’d get a bee in there. Then her eye

caught on something behind him, and she frowned.
“What’s that

over yonder leaning on the tree in the fencerow?”

He turned and looked. “Oh. That’s my shotgun.”

“I see. And might I ask what it’s doing over there?”

Garnett studied it. “Not very much. Just leaning up against the

tree, it looks to me like.”

“All right, how did it get there, then?”

“It came out to have words with this fellow who’s been leaning

up against your fence for the last couple of days.”

She laughed. “Oh, this is Buddy. I don’t believe you’ve met.”

“Well, Buddy gave us a little bit of a worry.”

She narrowed her eyes at Garnett. “Is that right?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“And you came over to make sure I was all right, is that what

you’re telling me? You came over here with your shotgun to protect

me from my scarecrow?”

“I had to,” Garnett said, spreading his hands, throwing himself

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on her mercy. “I didn’t care for the way Buddy was looking at you

in your short pants.”

Now Nannie looked more than stunned; she looked lightningstruck. She stared at him until a smile broke out and spread over her

face like the sun coming out after a storm. She walked to him with

her arms out like a sleepwalker’s, put those arms around his waist,

and hugged him tightly with her head resting against his chest. It

took him a minute and a half before he thought to put his arms

around her shoulders and keep them there. He felt as stiff as old

Buddy—as if he, too, had nothing inside his shirt and pants but

newspaper and straw. But then, by and by, his limbs relaxed. And she

just stayed there like a calm little bird inside the circle of his arms.

It was astonishing. Holding her this way felt like a hard day’s rest. It

felt like the main thing he’d been needing to do.

“Mr. Walker. Garnett. Will wonders never cease,” she said once

again, and to be certain they did not, Garnett held her there. She

turned her face up and looked at him. “And here I’m finally going

to have a grandbaby in my house, and you're going to have
two.

You've always got to have the last word, don't you?"

"Now, Nannie. You're a difficult woman."

She laid the side of her face against his frail old heart,
where the

pink shell of her ear could capture whatever song it had
left.

"Garnett. You're a sanctimonious old fart."

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roof, was loud enough to drive a mind to madness.

The roar of rain, pounding rain on the cabin's tin

It occurred to Deanna that if she screamed, she

probably wouldn't hear herself. She opened her mouth and
tried it.

She was right.

She sat on the bed, hugging her knees to her chest. Trying
not

to think of it as the bed, she'd pulled up the blankets and
propped

pillows against the wall to make it into a couch or
something—

someplace to get comfortable that wasn't *bed*. Inside this
white roar

she felt as cabin-fevered and trapped as she'd been in the dark of last winter. She plucked at a hole in the toe of her sock, picked up a book, put it down again. For hours she'd tried to read, but the noise had reached a point of drowning out all hope of concentration. She covered her ears with her hands for some relief, and listened to the different roar created by her cupped hands. A throbbing whoosh, the sea in a seashell—she remembered hearing it for the first time

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on a beach. She and Dad and Nannie had gone to Virginia Beach two summers in a row. A hundred and ten years ago, and a hundred and nine.

It wasn't the ocean, of course, but the tide of her own circulation pulsing inside her, sound carried through bone to her eardrums. Deanna shut her eyes and listened harder, trying to hear some small difference now that her heart was pumping her blood through an extra set of arteries. She'd been craving some proof, but the change so far seemed to inhabit her body only ethereally, like a thought or a magic charm. For now she would have to live with magic.

When she dropped her hands from her ears, the rain
seemed

even louder. Flashes of lightning brightened the window in
an irregular but steady way, like fireworks. The thunder she
couldn't

hear, but its vibrations reached her through the floor,
shuddering up

the legs of the iron bed. She considered climbing under the
blankets and covering her head with the pillows, but that
would be *bed*,

alone, and the awful trembling would still reach her. There
was no

escape, and this storm was growing closer. It was only four
o'clock

in the afternoon, but the sky was dark as dusk, and
darkening

deeper by the minute. An hour ago Deanna had decided
she'd never

seen a storm like this in these mountains in all her life.
And that was

an hour ago.

Surprised, she remembered her radio. It offered no
practical assistance, but it would be company. She jumped up
and crossed to

the desk to retrieve the little radio from the bottom drawer.
She

turned it on, held it next to her ear, heard nothing. She
studied the

thing, located the dial that controlled the volume, and
turned it all

the way up, but still not a crackle. Batteries, she thought:
they'd go

dead over time just sitting around. She ransacked the drawer for

more batteries, knowing perfectly well she always forgot to put

these on her list. Finally she scavenged the ones from her little flashlight, the spare she kept on the shelf by the door.

Lightning hit then, so close to the cabin that she could actually

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hear its crack above the rain's roar. The sound and light were simultaneous; that was *here*. Probably one of the tall poplars on the hill

above the cabin. Just what she needed now, a tree falling on her. Her

fingers trembled as she turned over the radio and pried open its

back to fish out the old batteries and pop in new ones. "Plus, minus," she said aloud, lining up the poles, her voice completely inaudible to her ears. Even that was terrifying, like a darkness so dark

it looked the same with eyes open or shut. She'd had moments of

panic in that kind of darkness, wondering whether she'd gone

blind, and now it occurred to her that this might be what deafness

was like. People assumed it was silence, but maybe it was this, a solid

white roar.

She tried the radio again. If she held the little holes against one

ear and covered the other, she could hear sounds. Just static at first.

It was a tedious business to adjust the tuning, listen, and adjust

again, trying to find the Knoxville station, but at last she heard a

faint, tinny music of a type she couldn't categorize. She waited

awhile to let her ear adjust to this kind of sound. It had been a long

time since she'd heard anything other than bird music. Music was

something she'd have to relearn, she decided, like learning to speak

again after a stroke. There were so many things to bewilder her lying ahead. Electricity, with all those little noises it made inside a

house. And people, too, with all the noises *they* made. Labor and

childbirth would be the least of her worries.

She tried to think about Nannie. No worries there; she knew

how that would be. To take her mind from this frightening high

isolation, she pictured herself within the genuine shelter of Nannie

Rawley's place, the kindness of that leafy orchard. Longing for

comfort and rest, she forced her thoughts through the rooms of

Nannie's house, out into the familiar trees and even up into the long

grass of Nannie's wilding field, where she'd first learned about the

connection between sex and God's Creation.

She'd been half listening to the tinny music for longer than she

realized when a different, louder sound brought her attention back

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to the radio: the long, discordant drone of a weather-service warning. She shifted on the bed and listened as hard as she could for what

came next. Tornado watch. *Oga County, Ing County*, names she

couldn't make sense of—Bin, Din, Fin, *Hinman*, that was it: Logan

and Hinman counties, heading northwest. She dropped the radio to

her lap. This was it, then, a real end-of-summer hellbender, the tail

of the season's first hurricane coming this way. She sent out one

small, final hope for Eddie Bondo, the last she would ever allow

herself: that he'd had time to get out of these mountains before this

storm came down.

She got up and walked around the room, trying to find spots

where the reception improved. She discovered it was better in the

doorway, even better out on the porch. The roar on the roof wasn't

as bad out there, either. She stayed close in under the eave
to avoid

getting drenched and settled cautiously into the old green
chair

with her head held stiffly, just so, like a patient in a neck
brace, to

keep the sound of human speech in her ear. She'd gone
two years

without news but now couldn't bear another minute
without it. It

was music now, though. Yes, that was right, that was how
they did

it: "Emergency, urgent, all life must stop!" and then back
to the

commercials and corny love songs. The world was coming
back to

her. She put the radio on her lap and shut it off to save the
batteries, which she might need later. Then jumped up and
went inside

to make sure she had candles where she could find them
and the

kerosene lamp trimmed and ready to light. Why? She
stopped herself, trying to reason a way out of this panic. It was
going to be dark,

storm or no storm, like every night of the year. Why did
she suddenly need four candles laid out side by side with
matches at the

ready? She wished she could laugh at herself; it would be
so much

better than this bleak knot of panic in her stomach. What
had

changed, when she used to be so fearless? But she knew
what had

changed. This was what it cost to commit oneself to the living.

There was so much to lose. She went back outside to the green

chair and put the radio to her ear again, leaned her head back, tried

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to listen. Still music. She turned off the radio, then leaned forward,

opened her mouth, and screamed a long, fulfilling howl she could

hear pretty well:

“DAMN YOU, EDDIE BONDO!”

Why today, of all the days there were? Did he have a built-in

barometer that told him when the weather ahead was getting

stormy? She put her arms around herself and leaned back, letting

herself be embraced by this dear old broken-down chair. Today or

tomorrow or yesterday, it was all the same, she had to believe that

was true. She had weathered storms on her own before and could

weather this one. She considerably retracted the damnation. Truly,

she had needed for him to go before the air got any denser between

them. Her secret was getting hard to keep, and keep it she must,

there had never been any question about that. Better for
this child,

better for everybody, that he not know what he'd left
behind—and

so he never would. She would tell people in Egg Fork,
because they

sure would ask, that the father of her child was a coyote.

Deanna smiled. She really would. And Nannie would stand
by

her story.

He'd left with his mind unchanged. If anything hurt
Deanna, it

was that she'd made no dent, had never altered his heart to
make

room in it for a coyote.

She'd gone out this morning before dawn for one of her
restless

walks and had come home at last to the startling absence
she'd been

waiting for. His pack, his hat, his gun, everything gone this
time,

she knew in an instant. He'd touched nothing of hers, had
left the

cabin exactly as it had been three months ago—yet it
seemed it

must have enlarged, to hold such significant emptiness.

It was several hours later when she opened her field
notebook

and found his note inside, her only memento of Eddie
Bondo—or

so he would always believe. A farewell with just enough
sting to let

her know she needn't wait for his return. On the empty page she'd

marked with this date, he had recorded his own observation:

It's hard for a man to admit he has met his match. E.B.

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She'd wondered for most of the day whether he meant her, Deanna, or the untouchable coyotes. Which one of them had been

too much for Eddie Bondo?

Finally she decided it didn't matter. She tore the page out of her

book so she wouldn't have to see it again, then ripped it into tiny

pieces that she piled in a corner of her sock drawer for the mice to

use when they lined their winter nests. Only then, closing the

drawer, did she understand. In his young man's way, he was offering

up his leaving as a gift. *Meeting his match* was a considerable concession. He was leaving them both alone, Deanna and the coyotes. No

harm would come to anything on this mountain because of him.

A fierce crack of lightning shot her eyes through with a momentary electric blindness. "Oh God, oh God," she sang, withdrawing further into her chair, blinking the rain-blurred landscape

back into focus. That was close. That was fifty feet away, or less. She

could smell its aftermath in the ionized air. Now it was time to pray that there would be something left of this mountain after the storm passed over. She turned the radio back on and listened. It wasn't music now; it was the names of counties being repeated over and over. They'd gone to full-time emergency mode, listing counties, all of which she knew well. Franklin, Zebulon. The eye of the storm was here. She flipped the radio over and eviscerated it, slipping the batteries into her pocket. Better to save them for her flashlight. She would have laughed at herself if she could. If ever there was a piece of news she did not need a radio to receive, this was it. The eye of the storm was here. She got up and tried to look through the sheet of water that flowed over the eave like a translucent shower curtain. She walked to the end of the porch and found she could see better out the gable end, where less water came off the roof. The rain seemed a little less dense now. An hour ago the air had been so solidly full of water it looked as if fish could jump the stream banks and swim into the

treetops. She'd never seen rain like that. There was less of it now,

but an ominous wind was rising. While she watched, in the space of

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just a few minutes, the rain died back drastically and the lightning

seemed to have moved past the ridge top, but a wind came howling

like the cold breath of some approaching beast. It blew the rain horizontal, straight into her face. Now frightened to her bones, she

went inside and put on her boots and raincoat, and walked a few

more circles around the room while she was at it. Every instinct told

her to make a run for it, but there was nowhere to go. She felt vulnerable and trapped in the cabin. Standing on the porch seemed a

little better, but once outside again, she was shocked by a wind that

blew her backward against the cabin wall so hard she felt the humps

of its logs against her back. The cold wind hurt her teeth and her

eyes. She held both hands over her face and looked out through the

small space between them, transfixed by the impossible menace of

this storm dancing on her forest. The solid trees she'd believed in

were bending unbelievably, breaking and losing limbs.
Trunks
cracked like gunshots, one after another. Up where the
forest met
the sky she watched the poplars' black silhouettes perform
a slow,
ghostly tango with the wind. They moved in synchrony, all
the way
around the top of the ridge surrounding the hollow. *There
is no*
safety here, they seemed to be saying, and her panic rose
into pure,
dry nausea. The trees were falling. This forest was the one
thing
she'd always been sure of, and it was ripping apart like a
haystack.
Any of these massive trunks could crush her between one
heartbeat
and the next. She turned her face against the wall of the
cabin, unaware that she was holding her braid in her teeth and
both hands
protectively over her abdomen. Unaware that she would
never
again be herself alone—that *solitude* was the faultiest of
human presumptions. She knew only that she was standing
with her back to
the storm in a sheer blind panic, trying to think what to do.
It was dark as night now, but she could make out the
alternating dark and light stripes of the horizontal logs and the
pale chinkmortar in between. She counted logs, starting at the
bottom, to give
herself a task she might be able to complete. Surprisingly,
she'd

never counted the logs before. Eleven, there were in this wall, an

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odd number. That meant either twelve or ten in the end walls. She

ran her eye down the knobby length of one to its end, where all the

logs of this wall articulated with those of the next, like fingers of a

person's clasped hands. She attached her terrified gaze to that corner, a stack of twenty-one stout tree trunks neatly interlocked.

Shelter, was what dawned on her as she stared. This was the very

principle of genuine shelter, these twenty-one interlocked logs. No

single falling oak or poplar could ever crush this cabin. This cabin

was made of fallen trees. She closed her eyes, pressed her forehead

to the rounded trunk of an old, quiet chestnut, and prepared to wait

out the storm.

When the rain and thunder died and the wind had gone quiet,

coyotes began to howl from the ridge top. With voices that rose and

broke and trembled with clean, astonished joy, they raised up their

long blue harmony against the dark sky. Not a single voice in the

darkness, but two: a mated pair in the new world, having
the last

laugh.

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[Moth Love](#)

*T mouths and cannot feed. Their adult lives, poignantly
brief,*

*he males of the giant Saturniid moths have imperfect,
closed*

*are devoted fully to the pursuits of locating and coupling
with a mate.*

That was the passage she'd been thinking of vaguely for a
long

time before finding it last night, paging with desperate
distraction in

the middle of the storm through the same book she'd been
reading

on the night of Cole's death. It was under the bed; the book
hadn't

moved at all. Lusa wasn't even sure why she'd wanted to
read it

again, but when she came across that passage she
recognized something in it that explained her life.

People outside the family had begun to ask about her
plans. It

had happened just lately. Some change in the weather or in
Lusa

herself had signaled to them that it was now safe to speak,
and they

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always said the same thing: It was a shame about Cole, and
had she

made up her mind what she meant to do now?

There was no *shame* about it, she wanted to tell them. She
imagined quoting that passage from Darwin at them,
explaining that

there was room in this world even for certain beings who
could not

eat or speak, whose only purpose was to find and call out
the other

side of their kind. She had been called here. There was no
plan to

speak of.

Of course, she said no such thing. It was always in bright,
normal places like the cereal aisle at the Kroger's or in Little
Brothers'

Hardware that people asked her about her plans, and so she
always

said only this: "I've made up my mind to finish what I
started."

And this was what she had started: in the absence of Cole,
in the

house where he'd grown up, she was learning to cohabit
with

the whole of his life. It was Cole who'd broken out the top
rail of the

banister as a rambunctious child, Cole who'd built the dry
sink in the

pantry for his mother the first year he took shop in school.
He'd

planted every one of the lilacs in the yard, though that seemed impossible because they were thirty feet tall now. His father had made

him plant them for his mother the summer he was nine, as reparation

for cursing in front of her. Lusa was making progress toward understanding. Cole was not to be a husband for whom one cooked, with

whom one sat down to meals. He would be a second childhood to

carry alongside her own, the child becoming the man for all the years

that had led up to their meeting. She could coax stories about Cole

even from people outside the family: women in town, strangers, Mr.

Walker. Country people seemed to have many unwritten codes about

death, more of them than city people, and one was that after a given

amount of time you could speak freely of the dead man again. You

could tell tales on him, even laugh at his mild expense, as if he had

rejoined your ranks. It seemed to Lusa that all these scattered accounts

were really parts of one long story, the history of a family that had

stayed on its land. And that story was hers now as well.

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In the afternoon she'd learned she was going to get a dollar

eighty a pound for her goats, if everything went according to plan.

It was a price unheard of in the county, apparently, for any animal.

She considered this now, happily taking a minute to let her success

sink in while she rested on her ladder in the darkness and rubbed

the tired muscles in the back of her neck. This was like winning the

blue ribbon. By her wits she had made something succeed here,

where there seemed to be no hope. It didn't even matter that no

one would ever properly admire her canny ingenuity. Nobody

would realize that the major holidays of three of the world's major

religions coincided in the week she sold her goats, like stars aligning for a spectacular horoscope. Only a religious mongrel like Lusa

could have seen it coming and hitched her fortunes to it. Probably

the real facts of her coup would be transformed into the sort of

wild rumor that ran barefoot through Oda Black's and the hardware

store, and that nobody believed: Lusa had a cousin with connections to rich Italian gangsters. Lusa had illegally gotten her goats

sold to the king of Egypt. In a place like this, some secrets kept

themselves, out of a failure to stand up to the competing rumors.

She knew her goat success wasn't any kind of permanent answer; there was no cure-all for the predicament known as farming.

She'd have to be resourceful for the rest of her life. At Southern

States she'd noticed the native bluestem grasses the government was

now paying people to plant in place of fescue, and had been

shocked to see what the seed went for. Twenty-eight dollars a

pound. That seed had to be grown somewhere; a *grass farm*, imagine the gossip that would generate. Next year she might raise no

goats at all, depending on the calendar, though many other people

surely would, after they heard what she got for hers. And they

would discover they couldn't give their goat meat away. Lusa was

beginning to see how she would live out her life in Zebulon

County. She was going to be a woman men talked about.

This morning after her terrible night Lusa had awakened feeling shucked out and changed altogether, shaken but sound. As if

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{ *Prodigal Summer* }

she'd passed through some door into a place where she could walk

surely on the ground of her life. The storm had washed the world

clean and snuffed out the electricity in the whole county. Here, it

shattered the windows on the north side of the house and rattled

every ghost out of the rafters, from both sides of the family. She'd

spent the night saying prayers in the languages she knew, feeling

sure some kind of end was near, before finally falling asleep curled

up on Cole's side of the bed with Charles Darwin in her arms and

a candle burning on the night table.

And awoke resurrected. She walked out into the yard, astonished by the downed catalpa branches everywhere and the twinkling constellations of broken glass. Those windows had been the

antique, wavy glass original to this house. It was amazing. After all

the years this place had known, something new could still happen.

In the first confident act of her new life, she called up Little

Rickie and hired him to be her part-time assistant farm manager.

Over the phone they agreed on ten dollars an hour (the rule of

neighbors and family notwithstanding) and a starting date as soon as

he could get the parts from Dink Little to fix the baler. He would

mow her hay and help her get it in the barn, then take on the task

of clearing the multiflora roses out of any field edges her goats

couldn't reach. She would not let him spray any weed killer. They'd

argued about it briefly, but she'd won, because this wasn't a marital

feud as it had been with Cole. It was a condition of employment.

Rickie could clear with the bush hog and a hand scythe or not at

all, and he was not to touch the woods, not to hunt squirrel or deer

or coyote or ginseng. It would be Rickie's job, too, to find tactful

ways of keeping the other men in the family from hunting up in the

hollow. This was still the Widener farm, but the woods were no

longer the Widener woods, Lusa explained. They were nobody's.

The yard she could take care of herself. He'd offered, but she'd

said she wanted to do it. She'd awakened today with a deep desire

to put the place in order. Not just to drag the downed branches out

of the yard, but to cut back the brambles she'd allowed to creep in

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over the course of the summer. She couldn't explain why,
but she

felt closed in and needed to strike out, to take up her Weed
Eater

and pruners like weapons against the encroachment. She'd
been

working at it fiercely all day, taking a break only briefly in
the afternoon, when the call came from her cousin in New
York. Then

she'd gone right back to it and continued working long
into the

evening, with the mountain's breath on the back of her
neck and

moth wings looping circles in the porch light.

She knew, from Rickie and Crystal, that the family had
begun

to talk about how hard she worked with her hands. They
seemed to

respect her use of tools. Earlier in the day she'd showed
Rickie how

to use a sharpened spade instead of Roundup to cut out the
fieldapple saplings planted by accident in the lawn. After he
left, she'd

taken a pruning saw to the creeper vines that were trailing
up the

sides of the house and over into the boxwoods, getting into
everything, the way creeper vines did. Then she ripped out
every climbing vine from the row of old lilacs so they could
bloom again.

Now, in the gathering darkness, she turned finally to
tearing

out the honeysuckle that had overgrown the garage. There
was

enough moon reflected off the white clapboards that she could see

what she needed to see. It was only honeysuckle, an invasive exotic,

nothing sacred. She saw it now for what it was, an introduced garden vine coiling itself tightly around all the green places where humans and wilder creatures conceded to share their lives.

She ripped the vine down from the walls in long strands, letting

them fall in coils like rope on the ground at the foot of her ladder.

Wherever she ripped the long tendrils from the flank of the building, dark tracks of root hairs remained in place, trailing upward like

faint lines of animal tracks traveling silently uphill. Or like long,

curving spines left standing after their bodies were stripped suddenly away. She worked steadily in the cool night, tearing herself

free, knowing this honeysuckle would persist beyond anything she

could ever devise or imagine. It would be back here again, as soon

as next summer.

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S scent of honeysuckle. It seemed odd for someone to

he paused at the top of the field, inhaling the faint
be out down there, this late at night. She kept up
her pace, walking quickly through the field at the forest's
edge,
where the moon found the long, silver part in the grass that
had led
hundreds of other animals along this field edge ahead of
her. She
was following a trail she couldn't be sure of, and she was
used to being sure. But there was no threat here. She lowered
her nose and
picked up speed, skirting the top of the long field that lined
this
whole valley, ducking easily through the barbed wires of
fences,
one after another. She never strayed far out into those
fiercely open
places, with their dumb clots of moonlit animals, but was
careful
instead to keep to the edge of the woods with its reassuring
scents
of leaf mold and rotted fruit. She loved the air after a hard
rain, and
a solo expedition on which her body was free to run in a
gait too
fast for companionship. She could stop in the path
wherever she
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needed to take time with a tempting cluster of blackberries
or
the fascinating news contained in a scent that hadn't been
here yesterday.
She was growing a little uneasy, though, this far down the

mountain. She had never been able to reconcile herself to the cacophony of sensations that hung in the air around these farms: the

restless bickering of hounds penned behind the houses, howling

across one valley to another, and the whine of the perilous freeway

in the distance, and above all the sharp, outlandish scents of human

enterprise. Now, here, where this row of fields turned back up into

the next long hollow, there was gasoline wafting up from the road,

and something else, a crop dust of some kind that burned her nose,

drowning out even the memorable pungency of pregnant livestock

in the field below.

She had reached the place where the trail descended into a field

of wild apple trees, and she hesitated there. She wouldn't have

minded nosing through the hummocks of tall grass and briars for a

few sweet, sun-softened apples. That whole field and the orchard

below it had a welcoming scent, a noticeable absence of chemical

burn in the air, that always made it attractive to birds and field mice,

just as surely as it was drawing her right now. But she felt restless and

distracted to be this far from her sister and the children.
She turned

uphill, back toward safer ground where she could
disappear inside

slicks and shadows if she needed to. The rest of them
would be

coming up onto the ridge from the next valley over. The
easiest way

to find them from here would be to follow the crest of this
ridge

straight up and call for them when she got closer.

She skirted a steep, rocky bank that was fetid with damp
moss

and hoarded little muddy pools along its base—a good
place to let

the little ones nose around for crayfish in the daylight, but
not

now—and then she climbed into the older, more familiar
woods.

Here was a nutty-scented clearing where years of acorns
and hickory nuts had been left buried under the soil by the
squirrels that

particularly favored this place, for reasons she couldn't
fathom.

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She'd had meals of squirrel here before, many times, but
now it was

dark, and they were nervous things, reluctant to leave
shelter after a

storm like that one. Still, she could hear the much bolder,
needly

nocturnal banter of flying squirrels high up in the hickory.
She

crossed back into the woods and then stopped again to put
her nose

against a giant, ragged old stump that had a garden of acid-
scented

fungus sprouting permanently from its base. Usually this
stump

smelled of cat. But she found he had not been here lately.

She paused several more times as she climbed the ridge,
once

picking up the scent she'd followed for a while earlier
tonight but

then had lost again, because a rain like that erased nearly
everything.

It was a male, and particularly interesting because he
wasn't part of

her clan; he was no one they knew. Another family had
been coming down from the north, they knew that; they'd
heard them sing at

night and known them to be nearby, though never right
here before. She paused again, sniffing, but that trail wasn't
going to reveal

itself to her now, no matter how hard she tried to find it.
And on

this sweet, damp night at the beginning of the world, that
was fine

with her. She could be a patient tracker. By the time cold
weather

came on hard, and then began to soften into mating season,
they

would all know each other's whereabouts.

She stopped to listen, briefly, for the sound of anything here

that might be unexpected. Nothing. It was a still, good night full of

customary things. Flying squirrels in every oak within hearing distance; a skunk halfway down the mountainside; a group of turkeys

roosting closer by, in the tangled branches of a huge oak that had

fallen in the storm; and up ahead somewhere, one of the little owls

that barked when the moon was half dark. She trotted quickly on

up the ridge, leaving behind the delicate, sinuous trail of her footprints and her own particular scent.

If someone in this forest had been watching her—a man with a

gun, for instance, hiding inside a copse of leafy beech trees—he

would have noticed how quickly she moved up the path, attending

the ground ahead of her feet, so preoccupied with her solitary

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search that she appeared unaware of his presence. He might have

watched her for a long time, until he believed himself and this other

restless life in his sight to be the only two creatures left here in this

forest of dripping leaves, breathing in some separate atmosphere

that was somehow more rarefied and important than the world of

air silently exhaled by the leaves all around them.

But he would have been wrong. Solitude is a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot, a tug of

impalpable thread on the web pulling mate to mate and predator to

prey, a beginning or an end. Every choice is a world made new for

the chosen.

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{ A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S }

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BARBARA KINGSOLVER's nine published books include novels, collections of short stories,

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