

Wreck



IN THE SUMMER, I SIT UP IN MY HUNTING STAND AND WATCH THE children get thin. There's a camp for obese youth just down the road from my house—a fat farm—and from the stand, perched high up in a basswood tree, I have a clear view of the whole facility. I can see the different buildings scattered around the grounds: the cafeteria, the gymnasium, the rows of cabins. I can see the playing fields. I can even see the campers themselves, lumbering about, half-nude and shameful.

The place is called a camp, but to watch the campers is to know that it's a farm. There are all kinds of camp activities: the children go swimming, barging around in a small pond; they play soccer and tennis, even basketball. But they do everything dressed in uniforms, shorts and T-shirts made of a black, rubbery material. The uniforms are designed to absorb the sunlight, to suck it right up and make the kids run with sweat. They have strips of mesh around the belly and down the thighs to let things funnel, and with my rifleman's binoculars, complete with adjustable crosshairs, I can see the sweat draining down the children's stomachs and thick legs, leaving shiny, slug-like trails across the playing courts.

All summer I watch the children run and jump and heave under that fat, watch them struggle to shake it off. Occasionally, they manage it, too. They peel off their uniforms and emerge pale and slender, looking slightly bewildered, blinking into the bright August sunshine. But more often than not they simply achieve weird, uneven forms of fat. One girl last summer lost only the rings of lard around her neck, and another, just the turkey flaps beneath her arms. I once saw a boy who was bony from the waist up, but mammoth around the ass and legs, like his guts had been stuffed down to make room for something that had never arrived. Always, though, before I'm ready for it, winter charges in from the east, hammering everything flat with cold, and the children scatter, having emptied all they could of themselves into the ground.

Now and then one gets loose. Sometimes a boy, but usually a girl. I'll be outside with my metal detector, sweeping it through the woods by the road, and she'll barrel through in a flurry of snapping twigs. Once, a black boy, about eleven years old, got into my house. When I came home from work I found him standing in my kitchen, cooking popcorn in a pan. He was tremendous, probably twice my weight even though I stood at least a foot taller. He could have carried the stove out on one shoulder.

He didn't see me at first. My cat was crouched beside the refrigerator, trembling. The boy had flung off the top of his uniform and his titanic, black breasts were slick with sweat. A veil of cobwebs clung to his hair. I was amazed and terrified by him, by his need; I could have watched him for hours. He mumbled frantically at the kernels to pop. He talked right into that furious, sizzling pan.

"Come on and pop, motherfuckers!" he said to the kernels, rattling them over the flame. Sparks of butter shot from the pan. "Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!"

But they wouldn't; he'd doused them with too much salt. At the camp, the children weren't allowed to have salty foods because salt made them retain water. So this boy had poured salt all along the floor of the pan, smothering the kernels in it, cooking salt into them until they looked like tiny white baby-teeth burning on the stove.

"Pop!" he yelled again. "Pop up!"

Then he saw me.

I suddenly realized I was caked in salt—dried sweat from being out all day in the July heat.

He stared at me, his mouth hanging open.

“Easy there,” I said.

He put down the pan and raised his hands toward me.

“Let’s just calm it down, okay? Calm. *Calm!*”

He trudged around from beside the stove. My cat hissed hysterically. I backed into the wall, knocking off a pilot’s medal I’d dug up the day before.

He kept coming, those horrible breasts of his swinging from side to side.

“Wait a second!” I said, huddled in the corner. “Stop!” But then he moved past me, out the door, and was gone.

Certain nights, even now, I have nightmares about him, nightmares that instead of leaving the house, he descends on me, clamping down with his hands and mouth. Before I can stop him, he’s licking the salt off my body with his giant, monstrous tongue, licking it off my face and my chest; he’s sucking it off my arms, off my fingers; and then he’s biting at me, eating me; he’s tearing strips of flesh from my back with his teeth as I scream and struggle to escape, he’s ripping chunks out of my thighs. He eats and eats and eats, in a wild effort to get back the very thing he just spent three hot months trying to lose.

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Not long ago, I met a woman who was very famous. I never found out what, exactly, she was famous for, but it seemed everyone knew who she was except for me. I worked in Glens Creek at the time. I sold hunting equipment in the back of a cavernous sporting goods store: rifles and shotguns, but also oddities such as turkey decoys and shrunken plastic flutes that would turn your voice into the call of a lusty mule deer.

She came into the store at the very start of summer. An enormous man walked in behind her. Even in his shorts and flip-flops he reminded me of one of those heroic, iron statues you see in front of museums or military tombs.

When I first saw him I thought that maybe he was the one who’d done that to her face.

She wore a baseball cap pulled down low on her head and huge sunglasses over her eyes. But still, there was no hiding the damage. Her cheeks were puffy and swollen, and her eyes lay in deep black-and-yellow webs of bruising. Trails of stitching crossed the skin beneath her eyelids, and her nose had bulged to a shiny mound with one stringy blue vein running down the spine like a river on a map. Beneath her chin hung a rubbery yellow bag, into which some kind of fluid was draining.

“Excuse me,” she said to me. “Do you sell archery equipment?” She seemed nervous, jittery. Her eyes kept shifting around behind the lenses of her sunglasses, which were blue at the top, fading to a sparkling gold at the bottom. How wonderful to look out and see the world through those lenses, I thought. Like having a glass image of dawn over each eye.

I took her to the store’s archery section, her man following us. As we made our way through the aisles, I became aware that people were looking in our direction, but I assumed this was because of her injuries.

I showed her the different kinds of bows—the longbows, the recurves, the compounds—and I recommended what I thought would be best for a beginner.

“And you find that archery is fun?” she said, looking at me a little intensely. “I mean, it’s something you can really get into?”

“If you take to it, I guess,” I said.

“But you don’t find it fun?” she said, biting her thumbnail.

I shrugged. “Me? Not so much.”

She gave a tired little laugh and clasped her hands behind her head, causing her nipples to press at the fabric of her shirt in a way that sent a warm tremble through my stomach. “Okay, here’s the thing,” she said. “I’m a lady with a lot of time on her hands and I want to find something to do that’s private and fun. What do you do for fun around here? By yourself.”

“Me? I collect things,” I said. “If you’re staying nearby, you should get yourself a metal detector and see what you can find in the ground. The woods up the road from town used to be a kind of dumping area.”

A man carrying a Big Wheels box stared at us as he slowly passed the entrance to our aisle. The woman shot a nervous glance over her shoulder. “Go looking for things in the ground,” she said.

“It’s what I do alone,” I said.

She looked down the aisle again, but it was empty except for the two of us and her man. “All right, you’ve sold me,” she said. “Where are your metal detectors?”

I suddenly realized we didn’t sell them. I told her so, but offered to lend her one of my own. “I have two,” I said. “Just tell me your address and I’ll drop it off.”

“My address?” she said. She looked at me for a moment. Behind her, her man took a canteen from the rack, unscrewed the cap, and peered into the empty calfskin pouch.

“Listen,” she said, “you seem like a nice guy, but let me just emphasize what an evil person it would make you to put me through anything while I was in this kind of condition, okay?”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed. “What I mean is, I wouldn’t even have come to town, but I feel like I’m going stir-crazy sitting in my house all day,” she said. “What I mean is, look at my face.”

She lifted her sunglasses to give me a better view of her injuries, but all I saw were her eyes. They were the lightest blue, almost white. Tiny blue rafts in that storm of a face.

“Your eyes are pretty,” I said, before I could help it. As soon as the words were out, I felt my face go red. I’d never said anything like that to a woman I didn’t know well.

“My eyes are pretty?” she said, staring at me. For an awful moment I thought she was about to call her man over to destroy me. Instead, she laughed, causing the bag beneath her jaw to jump around in an oddly pleasant, girlish kind of way. Then she took a pen from her pocket and wrote down her address. “It’s Saturday tomorrow. If you’re off, come by in the morning, around ten, and you can show me how to use the metal detector.”

I told her ten would be fine.

“I’m Grace, by the way,” she said, and put her hand out.

I shook it. “Wade,” I said.

“This scavenging better be fun, Wade,” she said, smiling and pointing her finger at me in a playful way. “Don’t let me down, now.” Then she turned and left, her man trailing after her.

As soon as she’d gone, Haymont, my supervisor, hurried over from behind a rack of animal urines. “That was her, wasn’t it?” he said, breathing fast. “I’d heard she was staying somewhere nearby, but I never thought she’d come in here. I can’t believe she talked to you of all people!” He laughed. “You’re probably the one person on earth who hasn’t heard of her.”

“Who?” I said.

“Christ, Wade,” he said, already rushing to the window. “If you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you.”

My cat is blind. There’s nothing wrong with his eyes—his eyes are perfect—but they’ve been disconnected from his brain. I found him through an ad in the paper. The university used him in a lab test, is why he’s blind. As soon as he was born, the people in the lab sewed his eyes shut and kept him like that for three weeks. Finally, after all that time meowing in the dark, they plucked out the stitches and pried open his little eyelids. And what they found was that although there was nothing wrong with his eyes anatomically, they didn’t work anymore. The doctors tried it again and again with other kittens, and every time the same thing happened. What they proved was that if a cat doesn’t learn how to use something during that first, critical period—not just its eyes, but its ears or even its voice—it never will. The critical periods for some kittens are very short. They only last a matter of days, a matter of hours.

My cat’s name is Sonny. He’s gray with orange stripes and I try to take him everywhere with me. The morning I set out for Grace’s house, Sonny lay curled up beside me on the passenger seat of my truck, his face resting on his paws.

The address proved difficult to find. The house was set back from the main road, at the end of a long, rutted dirt path that wound deep into the woods. When I finally arrived, the size of the house surprised me. It looked like an old hunting lodge, with log walls and high chimneys of piled gray stone at either end of its mountainous roof.

Grace emerged from the lodge's front door wearing a tank top and shorts made of a pink towel-like material. Her whole body was tanned a rich, buttery brown and streamlined in a way I'd never encountered in real life.

"So, this is your weapon of choice, huh?" she said as I pulled the metal detector from the truck. The bag beneath her chin was empty today. It looked like a yellow rubber bib.

I showed Grace how to work the detector, how to hold the neck close to her stomach so as not to hurt her back, how to wave the pan over the ground in slow, wide arcs. I explained that fast clicks meant precious metal, and that lesser kinds like nickel or steel caused more of a low, static sound. I tossed some coins on the ground so she could hear the chatter.

"I don't know, Wade. I lost something at the beach once when I was a kid and they looked for it with one of these things...to *no* avail," she said, smiling at me with exaggerated skepticism as she slowly moved the detector over the coins.

"If you don't like it, I'll bring over the archery equipment tomorrow," I said, and then started back to my truck.

I was about to tell her good-bye, when she said, "Hey, Wade, why don't you come along today?"

I hadn't considered this. I tried to imagine spending the afternoon with someone. The last time I had real company was months ago.

She glanced at her man. "No offense to Petyr, but I could use a fresh face around here. And you're not a weirdo, right?" she said.

I told her I wasn't a weirdo.

"Good. It's settled. Let's start scavenging."

And so we did. I let Sonny out so he could rest in the shade beside the truck, and then the three of us set off into the woods behind the house, Petyr walking

behind Grace and me.

At first I felt nervous, being around someone new, but the day was ideal, warm and sunny, and soon enough I began to relax. The metal detector gave off gentle, bird-like clucking noises as we walked. A soft breeze blew up from town, causing the Indian grass along the forest floor to sway back and forth and tickle our bare legs.

As we made our way deeper into the woods, I explained to Grace about the surrounding land, about why it was so rich with collectibles. I told her about the air force base that used to exist ten miles west of town many years ago, back during the two World Wars. And about how the air force men of those days believed that, upon returning from combat in foreign lands, it was good luck to throw something out of the plane just before it touched down, some token of your time overseas. "If you did," I explained to Grace, "according to the superstition, you wouldn't be haunted by anything you'd seen or done while you were away. The person you'd been couldn't follow you home."

"What kinds of stuff have you found?" Grace asked. A jay flapped up behind us and I remembered Petyr. Despite his size, Petyr was unusually stealthy.

"All sorts of things. Locketts, watches, bullet casings. Last month I found a toy train, a little windup engine. There's an antique store in town that takes almost all of it."

"You don't get lonely living out here all by yourself?" she said. "Alone in the woods? No people to talk to?"

"I talk to people at work," I said, helping Grace over a log. "And I talk to the old man who runs the antique store when I bring things in. Mr. Gourd."

"Mr. Gourd?" Grace said, and chuckled. "What are you, Wade, twenty-eight? Twenty-nine? Don't you have a girlfriend? Some friends our age?"

People were always asking me things like this.

"I like my own company," I said. "I'm not lonely."

And it was true: I wasn't lonely. I had never been lonely. I had no real friends, no family, but I didn't long for any of that. Alison, the last woman I'd dated, had left me because she felt that I acted like I didn't need her, like I didn't need anyone at all.

“You don’t relate to people, Wade,” she’d said the day she left. It had been scorchingly hot. We were sitting naked on the kitchen floor with the refrigerator open behind us, its vapor cooling our backs. Behind Allison’s head were bags and jars of uneaten food. “It’s like you don’t know how and you don’t care to learn. What happened to you? Who fucked you up?”

But nothing had happened. No one had done this to me. I had never been any other way. If anything, it was living here, in this place, that made it hard to become attached to other people. No one stayed around very long. It seemed that, eventually, everyone moved away. In their old age, residents left for warmer weather, as my parents had done. And most young people took off for big cities to start careers and families as soon as they finished high school. Over time I’d come to think of this area, my home, as a kind of port that people stopped at for a little while, a port in which to do a bit of maintenance before piloting off.

I understood why no one stayed, too. The land here is unattractive. It’s frozen and bare nearly ten months out of the year. The frenzied parade of summer comes and goes before anyone can really enjoy it. Flowers huddle in frightened little bunches. The trunks of too many trees are knotty with tumorous black burls. Even Alison herself wanted to leave. The whole time we were dating she kept talking about getting out, going somewhere exciting.

But there are things to like around here. It’s quiet and peaceful. In the winter the ice is so thick it glows blue. You can hear it slowly rolling forward at night, splitting and pushing on, making noises like grinding teeth.

The metal detector gave off a burst of sharp clicks. “Yay!” Grace said, and laughed. She laid the detector on the ground and took a garden shovel out of the pack around her waist. Petyr came over and offered to dig for her, but she said she wanted to do it herself.

I sat beside Grace as she dug. Whenever she hit a rock, I scooped it out and tossed it to the side. As she worked, she passed in and out of a patch of sun that caused her hair to change color. In the light it shined up to a brilliant red, in the shade it became a dull brown. Seeing it shift back and forth like that, I felt as though she were sharing something special with me, letting me get a glimpse of some secret part of herself. It was noon by now, and after a few minutes of digging, she took a break and we sat back on the grass. The sun felt wonderful on my face and chest. High above us, the pine trees creaked back and forth in the breeze like the masts of ancient ships.

“What was it you lost at the beach?” I said. “When you were a kid. The thing the metal detector couldn’t find.”

“What? Oh, it was nothing,” Grace said. “Just a piece of metal.”

I waited for her to go on.

She laughed, but it was a sad hiccup of a laugh. “It’s dumb. It was the latch to the mailbox of my mom and dad’s house. This little tin ladybug you flipped down to keep the mailbox door from falling open. I took it with me when we first left for California. I know. It’s stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid,” I said.

Grace pulled her knees to her chest and smiled at me. “Thanks, Wade,” she said. “I was pretty hysterical about losing it at the time.” She took off her sunglasses and wiped them on her shorts and there were those eyes of hers again. The stitches beneath them looked like extra sets of curling eyelashes. I felt myself staring, so I glanced at Petyr, who was lying beneath a tree with his eyes closed. A bright green leaf had landed on his giant chest and rose and fell with his breath.

“Look at him,” Grace said. “I should probably just let him go, now that I scare everyone away myself.” She pointed to her face and laughed, but then she looked away, at the pit she’d dug in the ground.

“I find you very beautiful,” I said, which I knew then to be true.

She blushed. “You know, I didn’t do this to look younger or anything like that. I was in an accident. I don’t want to talk about it,” she said, touching the bag under her chin, which now had some liquid in it. “I’ll tell you a secret, though, since I was so nosy before.” She leaned closer and I could feel the warmth coming off her body. “I poke at it sometimes, at my face. I know I’m not supposed to, that I’ll scar it, but I do it anyway.”

“Why?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I’m just not ready to go back home yet.”

“Everyone around here leaves sooner or later,” I said.

“Well, who knows? Maybe I’ll be a ‘later,’” she said.



Grace and I started spending time together regularly after that. Sometimes she'd meet me at the store and Haymont would let me go—would, in fact, nearly push me out the door after her. Other days I'd drive out to her house after work. I'd pull up with Sonny and find her waiting for me on her porch swing, or on her stomach reading in the tall grass, the sunlight fanning over the backs of her long legs. Petyr hardly ever joined us. Grace told me that his sister was having problems with her husband, who coincidentally was also a bodyguard. Petyr had a high, soft voice, a soothing voice, and he spent long hours walking around the lawn with his tiny silver phone, talking patiently to one of them, then the other. At night he retired to the guesthouse, a cabin at the edge of the yard with vines strangling it.

Grace and I spent most of our time loafing around that cavernous house of hers. She had movie players that could hold up to two hundred movies at once, and a huge flat-panel TV that hung on the wall like an antique mirror, but we never used any of that. Grace left it all unplugged. She made a bed for Sonny on the movie player out of an old, glittery dress, and he took to lying there nearly all the time. We drank beer and played board games. We built an intricate model of a French church that I had bought in town. At night we lit fires in the massive stone fireplaces—fires nearly as big as me, fires that sounded like war and lit the whole house with smoky orange light. There was a pool in Grace's basement—or rather, her basement was a pool. You walked down the basement steps right into a long, tiled alleyway of water. The pool was rich in minerals and smelled like clay, and when Grace lit the porthole lights along the walls, the water glowed a luminescent, milky green, like the color of a potion from a children's book.

As the summer wore on, Grace's manners relaxed. She started teasing and joking with me, ribbing me about how out of touch with things I was, but in a way that let me know how much she liked this about me. I set up a hammock on the balcony and we often lay in it reading or talking or napping together. We cooked meals out of a glossy cookbook. Sometimes we went to my place and watched the children down at the fat farm. We picked one out and followed her progress through my binoculars. She was pretty in an exotic sort of way, with olive skin and soft black down on her arms. We named her Patty.

She kept her hair in two braided loops that hung from either side of her head like giant earrings. Patty's favorite activity was tennis, and Grace and I would sit up in my stand and watch her clomping back and forth along the baseline. It felt so calming, observing Patty from high in the trees, so fulfilling. It was like we were her parents and she was our daughter, and I felt proud of her for working so hard to achieve her goals.

On days that were cool or overcast, Grace and I went scavenging. She held the metal detector and I walked out in front, scouting, wearing those sunglasses of hers, my head angled so that the horizon always stayed balanced along that narrow band of clarity between the darkening planes of gold and blue.

As we walked, Grace told me things about herself. She rarely talked about California or her life out there. Now and then, though, a certain worried look would appear on her face and I understood that she was thinking about having to go back. Petyr knew not to put calls through to Grace, but I often spied little sticky notes that he left for her clinging to things around the house like insects. They always had names on them, with messages written beneath, like *Again* or *Twice today*.

Sometimes, as we walked, I wondered about Grace's life before the accident; I wondered what it was that she did out in California—was she a singer? An athlete? A businesswoman? What had made her so famous? More than that, though, I wondered about the little things that made up her life out there, the details. I wanted to see the view from her front door. I wanted to know what the inside of her car looked like. To see the magnets she kept stuck to her refrigerator.

We never talked about her accident. Over time, though, I came to understand that whatever had happened to her had involved glass. Because every now and then—no more than once every couple of days—a piece of glass would emerge from her head. These weren't big shards that came out of her; they were tiny specks of glass, just particles. Apparently, when she had her accident, some glass had gotten lodged between the two layers of muscle tissue around her head, and now they were slowly working their way out of her. Mostly the glass came out through her hair follicles. But on a couple of occasions, pieces of glass exited right through her face. Once I saw one come out of the corner of her eye, a tiny shard, no bigger than a snowflake. I watched as she calmly plucked it from beneath her lid as though it were a stray eyelash.

Even though Grace didn't talk about her current life during our walks, or about her accident, she still managed to tell me all kinds of intimate things about herself. She told me about her parents, her childhood. She told me about how, as a little girl, she'd wanted to be a policewoman, then an acrobat, then a deep-sea fisherman. She told me about her mother, about how she'd made Grace beg for change when they first moved out west, beg everywhere from the boardwalk to the bus station, where a man had once thrown a penny right into Grace's mouth.

No one had ever talked to me in such a way before, never so openly. It was weirdly arousing. It felt like watching someone undress right in front of me; it felt like standing next to them and being handed layer after layer of clothing. And the more she talked, the harder it became for me to ignore the need for her I felt building in me. I tried, though, because I understood that she was here with me only for the summer, just until her face healed. And it was healing all the time.

By the second week I knew her, a kind of settling process had already begun. Her features, the ones that were swollen and bulged out of place, had rapidly started taking shape, gathering ominously toward the center of her face. But part of me refused to see these changes. Part of me already believed that something would happen to stop her from leaving. Something miraculous, or even terrible.

Here's what Grace told me on one of our walks: one morning, while she and her mother were wandering on the beach, they found a dollhouse washed up on the sand.

"It was so creepy," she said. "I'd been asking for a dollhouse—it was like the one thing I wanted for my birthday that year, my eighth birthday—and suddenly here one was. Just sitting there on the sand in perfect condition. Even the tiny windowpanes were intact."

We were walking along the edge of a brook that had long ago dried to chalk. It was three weeks to the day since I'd met her. The wind blew strongly. The shadows of clouds kept skating over us before we saw them coming.

"My mom and I had this game," said Grace. "Whenever we found something washed up on the beach, we would try to guess whether it was flotsam or jetsam. Flotsam is what gets washed overboard in storms—it's things swept away by the sea. Jetsam is what's thrown overboard if a ship is in distress. What people get rid of to make the ship lighter so it won't sink. There's really

no way to tell which is which after the fact. I mean, if the ship wrecks, everything gets mixed up together, the stuff people wanted to keep and the stuff they got rid of. It all becomes the same thing."

The metal detector gave a few clicks around a patch of scrub. I rooted around for a moment but couldn't feel anything substantial, so we went on.

"So my mom wanted me to guess which the dollhouse was," said Grace, "flotsam or jetsam, but I didn't want to. The idea of some girl my own age on a ship about to sink was really scary to me, you know? And then, right as I was looking at it, the whole house just fell in on itself. It collapsed in a heap on the sand."

Grace's calves moved up and down in gentle swallowing motions as we walked. "Keep talking to me," I said. "I love listening to you."

She smiled at me over her shoulder. The light that afternoon was kind, and her cheek looked like a smooth, snow-covered field broken only by the wiry black fencing of her stitches. "It's easy to talk to you," she said. "I like who I am with you. I love her, actually."

"Can I try kissing you again?" I said. We'd kissed a few times before, but it had always hurt her face too much.

"Stay still and let me kiss you," she said, and then she leaned over and brushed her lips against mine, first the top one, then the bottom. Next I felt her tongue tracing my lips, gently sliding between them. Before I knew it she was kissing me harder, really pressing her mouth against mine. I kissed her back. Our teeth kept clicking together. I felt the bag beneath her chin bulge as it was squeezed between our necks—the liquid inside felt warm and viscous—and I worried that it might pop, but she kept at it, pushing harder now, hardly kissing so much as driving her mouth into mine, wedging and ramming. When she finally stopped and pulled away I saw blood inside her mouth.

"I'm sorry," she said, and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No," I said.

"I just don't want to go back yet," she said. She tugged on the collar of my shirt. "And I like you."

“Kiss me again,” I said. And she did.

To this day, I remember everything she told me. I even remember exactly what we found scavenging each day. The afternoon Grace told me about the dollhouse, we discovered a bottle cap, a green stone she thought was pretty, and the horn from a phonograph, smashed so badly you wouldn't believe music had ever passed through.

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By July we'd started making love, but rarely, only once every few days. Grace wanted to more often: she asked me to, but I had to be careful; it would have been too much. Already I couldn't sleep without her. When she wasn't with me, my house seemed to buzz with silence. I tried to keep some distance between us, but she began talking about driving with me back to California. We didn't have to stay out there, she said. We wouldn't. We'd just hang around long enough for her to settle some things, some business matters, and then we could go anywhere we wanted—we could even come back here. She said she loved me. I couldn't stop myself from being hopeful, from expecting things. I bought a book on driving across the country and drew little stars next to all the places I wanted to take her.

But her face was taking shape. The drainage bag had vanished, along with the stitches beneath her eyes, inside her mouth. All that was left of the face I'd known was a ghostly blueprint of white scars, and even that was quickly melting into the fresh pink skin underneath. At certain moments she looked like someone else entirely, someone strangely familiar whom I'd seen or met many times over, but somehow managed to forget. At first she acted as frightened about all this as I was. Not just frightened of what was happening, but also of what I'd think about her. The day the last of the stitches came out, I had to convince her to come out of her bedroom.

“It doesn't matter what you look like,” I said into the keyhole.

“You'll see why I don't want to go back,” she said, crying. “You'll know what I used to be like.”

“I know what you're like now,” I said. “That's all that matters.”

When she finally opened the door and I saw those flawless crescents of flesh beneath her eyes, I felt my blood drain. She'd become beautiful to a degree

that felt difficult for me to understand. Her face didn't look like a face anymore. It was like a sail she'd raised between me and her real face, a tall white sail that could carry her anywhere she wanted to go. And as much as I didn't want it to matter what she looked like, as much as I told her so, it *did* matter, and I wanted the healing to stop, to slow down at least.

But of course it didn't slow down: her skin tightened, her cheekbones surfaced. Streaks of copper appeared in her hair. I tried to ignore it, but sometimes looking at her made me so sad that I could barely speak. Grace began to make arrangements. She started taking calls from Petyr. At first she spoke in a brief, clipped manner, but soon she began to really *talk* into the phone. She joked and laughed and wound the cord around her finger. Occasionally she used a miniature phone hooked up to her ear by a cord, a phone that left her hands free and made it look like she was talking to an invisible stranger in the room with us.

I began to think of California as a weak but constant force pulling on Grace, a growing undertow. I was certain that if I didn't go with her, I would lose her altogether, that she would just vanish behind its long curtains of sunshine. Sometimes, at night, watching her sleep, I wished for her face to go back to how it had looked when I met her. I actually fantasized about changing it back myself.

All of this happened in a matter of weeks, not months. It felt like it happened as fast as I'm telling it to you.

Near the end of July, just a couple of days before we were supposed to leave, I took her to the yearly picnic to celebrate the end of the tourist season. I warned her that a lot of the town would be there, that people would probably come up to her, but she insisted. We could bring Petyr, she said. It would be like our first real date. Food. Dancing. Romance.

I went out and bought a new pair of shoes and a tie with tiny downhill skiers on it. I asked a woman in town to make me a little ladybug out of tin, which she did, cherry red and covered with shiny black dots.

On the day of the picnic, Grace, Petyr, and I drove down the hill and into town in my truck. Before we even got within five blocks of the picnic, though, it became evident that everyone in town was attending. Parked cars lined the avenue, some up on the sidewalk and others left right in the middle of the street with the keys on the driver's seat.

Voodoo Heart

The picnic took place on the lawn behind the mayor's house. He'd set up tables on the grass, which were already filled by the time we arrived. There must have been five hundred people crowded on the lawn, not counting the many children threading their way between the knots of adults, giggling and swatting at one another.

I felt Grace tense up at the sight of all those people—the joints in her arm locked—and I grew nervous too.

"We don't have to do this," I said.

She gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I want to show you off," she said.

A band from Canada played country songs in French beneath a tent at the edge of the lawn; couples had already begun to dance in a loose ring. As we crossed the lawn to the food, I felt Grace beginning to relax, but my own anxiousness only grew worse. People were staring. Most of them tried not to be obvious about it, but I could feel them looking at us, at Grace.

"Wade, are you all right?" said Grace.

I told her that I was.

"Hey, they're all staring at me, not you, okay?" She took my hand. "They're wondering how I landed the hottest stud in town."

"Grace..."

"Come on, let's dance," she said. Before I could refuse, she kissed my hand and led me toward the tent.

We stopped at the edge of the moving ring of couples. I put my hands on Grace's waist and pulled her close as we entered the flow of people and began to dance across the grass. Her skin was a deep brown and smooth as the underside of a shell. I felt my heart relaxing. I caught sight of Petyr standing by the edge of the tent, and I watched over Grace's shoulder as he tapped one foot in time to the music. Every few moments he'd let himself be swept along with the couples; he'd post his arm as though he'd found a partner and take a few graceful steps in the direction of the dance before hurrying off the floor and returning to the spot where he'd begun.

"I want to fly away with you in a blimp," I said to Grace. Everywhere, hoppers leapt out of the yellow grass. The feeling was like dancing across the

Voodoo Heart

surface of a fizzing glass of champagne.

She laughed. "A blimp? Like a zeppelin?"

"A blimp. I want to fly across the country with you in a blimp. Just coast, the two of us weightless up there."

She put her head on my shoulder and we kept dancing like that, swaying back and forth, while the other couples moved around us in unison, spinning, rising and falling like the working parts of a carousel. I kissed her neck and closed my eyes.

"Wade!" said Haymont, dancing next to us with his little daughter standing on his toes. "I didn't think you'd come today. You two about make the cutest couple here."

"I don't know how that's possible when you've got the prettiest girl around," said Grace. She winked at Haymont's daughter, who pressed her face into his belly.

Haymont laughed. "She's a shy one tonight. She's actually a big fan of yours."

Grace thanked him, though I could tell that, as always, he was making her uncomfortable.

"So, a little birdie told me you're taking Wade away from us. I get such a kick out of picturing him out in California," he said, and gave a big coughing laugh that nearly shook his daughter off him. "Wade driving down Hollywood Boulevard with the palm trees whizzing by. Waving to the stars." He laughed again, staring too hard at Grace.

"Let's go, Daddy," whined Haymont's daughter.

"Bailey, don't be rude, now," Haymont said to her. "Daddy's having a conversation here." But when he turned back to us, Grace had already put her head on my shoulder.

Haymont waited a moment. "You two have a good night, now," he said, finally.

We thanked him and he waddled off, maneuvering his daughter like a marionette.

“Not all of California’s like that,” Grace said into my neck. “That’s just a small part. Besides, we’re not going to stay.”

“I know,” I said, but as we made our way around the ring, Haymont’s words stayed with me. I could feel him watching us, feel other people watching too. Making no bones about it now, just staring from their tables. And I knew so few of them. I could hardly pick out a familiar face. I saw a young girl whisper something to her mother and point at us. I saw her mother laugh into her napkin. I realized that this was what California was going to be like. People I didn’t know gawking at us, laughing. Laughing because it was funny to see someone like me with someone like Grace. I caught sight of Petyr again, dancing alone by the edge of the tent, and a series of images flashed through my mind, images of myself alone in California, alone at all the places I’d read about in my guidebook. On the beach. On the pier beneath a swarm of seagulls. At the aerospace fictitious museum, standing before an enormous, dangling model of the moon. I held Grace tighter against me, but even as I did I grew angry. It seemed like too long ago that I’d been happy alone, that I’d preferred it that way, and now I was suddenly following someone to the other side of the country. Someone I’d only known a matter of months. Someone who was just vacationing in my life. Someone who would leave me; who, in her own mind, had probably already left.

“Grace,” I said, “I need to talk to you about California.”

“I know. God, we’re leaving so soon and we haven’t ever really discussed my life out there, have we?”

“No,” I said.

“It’ll be difficult. But I’ll only need a couple of weeks. I promise.”

“I think you should go without me,” I said.

Grace pulled back. “What are you talking about?”

“I think you should go to California without me. You could fly out and get done what you need to get done and I could stay here until you get back. I’d just be in your way out there.”

“In my way? The whole fun was going to be driving out together. I thought you wanted to go with me.”

“I did. I do. It’s just that hunting season is about to start and Haymont needs me at the store. He’d never say so, but I know he does. I can tell.”

The song ended and everyone bowed and curtsied. When the music began again, we continued around the ring.

“I don’t want to go without you, Wade,” Grace said, and laid her head on my shoulder again. As soon as her face touched my shirt, the sudden, overwhelming feeling shot through me that I was making a tremendous mistake. I had a stinging urge to tell her that I loved her, that I *needed* her, but I couldn’t do it. In my mind, I begged her to ask me to come with her. I pleaded with her to ask me just once.

“I guess it would be easier if I went alone. It’d make things simpler to deal with,” she said. And then, as though she *could* hear my thoughts: “Wade, you know I’ll come back, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said, already trying to memorize the sound of her voice, the feeling of her back against my hands.

“I mean, I’ll only stay out there as long as I have to.”

“I know,” I said.

Grace’s eyes searched mine. “Wade. I will. I’ll come back.”

I kissed her. “You’ll come back,” I said.

Later, while Grace danced with Petyr, I walked to the edge of the lawn and tossed the tin ladybug into the woods, where it was quickly swallowed by the ferns.

Grace called three times from California. The first call came just after she’d landed. I got home from work and found the light blinking on the machine. I could hear the slowing whine of the plane’s engines in the background of her message. “Well, the eagle has landed,” she said, “and all she wants to do is take

off again and fly straight back there. Ugh, Wade. Get me out of here. I wish you'd come with me. I miss your tummy. I'm going home to take a nap, so don't bother calling. I'll try you tonight. Kiss Sonny for me."

I went to work and tried to keep busy, but I couldn't keep my mind on anything. Twice I almost gave equipment away for free.

I told myself she wasn't going to call. I told myself I didn't want her to.

But that night, when no call came, I couldn't sleep. I stayed up and watched the fireflies waste themselves against my window.

She didn't call the next morning either. I assumed she would call sometime that day, but instead of waiting around, I went scavenging with Sonny. I took him with me in a small pouch I'd bought, a pouch I could strap onto my back. We walked for hours, just the two of us. We hiked deep into the woods, deeper than I usually went, and late in the afternoon I found an amazing thing. A baby shoe dipped in copper. But I wasn't as excited as I knew I should be. I wasn't excited at all. Instead, the whole idea of being out in the woods, hunting for buried junk, suddenly felt ridiculous. It felt like a waste of time.

When I got home that night there was still no message from Grace. I felt a bubble of anger rise in my stomach.

I called the number she'd left, but all I got was a recording telling me that she was out of range. I called again, but the same thing happened. I called the office number she'd given me.

"Hello, Wade," said the office woman before I even opened my mouth. Her voice was hoarse and grating. "Grace gave me your number. My phone has it memorized. I'll tell her you called, okay?"

Again that night I couldn't sleep. The air crackled with her absence. I tried Grace's personal phone number again and again, into the early morning hours, but each time I got that same recording. Sometime around noon, I fell asleep by the window. I woke with a throbbing sunburn on half my face. The light on my machine was blinking.

"Wade, I'm so, so sorry I didn't call earlier," said Grace. "I know you've been trying to reach me. Don't worry, though, all right? Nobody's going to kidnap me or steal me away. You don't have to keep calling. We'll be all right. I just have a million things to do. Miss you. I'll try you tomorrow."

Three days passed with no word from her. I thought about flying out there. I thought about tracking her down.

Finally, the phone rang.

"Hello?" said Grace. I could hear car horns and voices in the background. "Hello, Wade?"

"Grace?" I said.

"Wade, are you there? Hello?"

"Yes! I'm here!" I said, both furious at her and panicked she'd hang up.

"Jesus. Hang on a second."

A rustling sound came from the other end, then things quieted down.

"Yikes. Sorry about that," said Grace. "I had to get away from the tables."

"I miss you," I said angrily.

"I miss you too. I'm sorry things have been so crazy here. The web is more tangled than I remembered."

"Grace, I want to come out there."

"Hon, that's not a good idea. I'm running around like a chicken with my head cut off and I—"

"Please, Grace. Just let me."

"Wade, I can't talk about this right now. I'm at a restaurant and the person I'm meeting just walked in."

"Who are you meeting? What's going on?"

"Just calm down, Wade, all right? You're acting silly."

"Don't tell me to fucking calm down! I want to come out there."

"Stop it, okay? Stop! Take some time and cool off. I'll call you when I get a moment."

The line went dead.

I tried to call her back but all I got was that recording. I called her office but no one picked up. I called twice more, and on the third try, a recording told me that my phone had been blocked by the number I was trying to reach. My face and hands pulsed with a painful heat.

I looked around my house at all the things I'd collected over the years. The trinkets and baubles and junk. I ran my arm along a shelf, knocking everything to the ground. I tore the shelf off the wall and threw it across the room. I smashed another shelf, and another. Soon the room was littered with broken things. I got in my truck and gunned it into town.

It was dark by the time I arrived at the store. Haymont was just locking up. I pushed past him and made my way to the counter, where the phone was kept. I dialed Grace's office.

That same woman picked up. "Put me through to Grace," I said.

"It doesn't work that way," she said, and hung up.

I called again and a recording told me that all phones in my area code had been blocked by the number I was trying to reach. I was about to slam the phone to the ground, when I remembered the one other number I had. I dialed.

"Hello?" said Petyr.

"Petyr, it's me, Wade," I said, overcome with gratitude. "Please. I need to talk to Grace."

"Grace asked me not to accept any calls from you, Wade," Petyr said in that quiet, soothing voice of his. "I have to go now. I'm hanging up. I'm sorry."

The line cut off.

"Are you all right?" said Haymont.

I looked up at him standing by the counter with his tie slung over his shoulder. I was about to yell at him to call Petyr for me, but something about the way he was looking at me caused me to stop. His eyes were fearful and he was shying away, almost cringing. I stepped forward to hand him the phone and he actually flinched. It reminded me of how frightened I'd been of that

boy, the one who'd appeared in my kitchen long ago, so ravenous. I thought of how I'd recoiled as the dimpled black meat of his arms came toward me.

"How about we relax, Wade, all right?" said Haymont. "Please."

I put the phone down and drove home.

—

Eventually, as the weeks passed with no word from her, I came to understand that I would never see Grace again. This knowledge left me feeling both empty and strangely calm. The days grew quiet and dry. The August heat finally broke, causing leaves to crack and fall to the ground in brown particles. I decided to build a new hunting stand. I placed it farther up the trunk than the old one, up in the highest branches. I went scavenging with Sonny until late in the day, until it was nearly dark and our shadows stretched deep into the woods.

One morning, I woke to the sounds of going home. I realized, as I climbed from bed, that this was the day all the children were leaving for the winter. I fixed myself a coffee and headed out onto the porch to watch the buses take them away.

The day was very bright. I had to put on Grace's old sunglasses to be able to look at the camp without my eyes hurting. So many of the children were slim this year. There was hardly a fat one among them. I watched as they scurried around, hugging each other good-bye and exchanging numbers and addresses, loading their bags and duffels onto the buses. I went up to my stand to get a better view.

As I made my way up the rungs, though, I became aware of a creaking above me. I glanced up at the stand and saw that someone was already up there.

I froze halfway up the tree. Grace. She'd come back.

A breeze washed over me. I began climbing again, my hands almost trembling. What would I say to her when I reached the stand? Part of me wanted to hug her. Another part wanted to hurl her to her death. When I

neared the top of the trunk, though, I saw that the person in my stand wasn't Grace at all.

I pulled myself up onto the platform.

"You can see the whole camp from up here," said Patty. She was sitting cross-legged at the platform's edge. Her hair was finally loose. It hung down her back in a shimmering black fan. She was much smaller than she had been at the start of the summer, but she was by no means thin.

"You're going to miss your bus," I said.

She glanced over her shoulder and studied me a moment. "I pictured you different," she said. She spoke with a slight, lovely accent. "I thought you'd be older. Scarier."

"You should go. You're going to be left behind."

But she didn't move, just sat and stared at the camp, where the buses were already loading up. I sat down beside her. How strange she looked, part fat, part thin, like someone caught between two versions of herself. Her legs were almost slender, but there were crushed black veins in her ankles. Her neck was thin but her face was puffy and shiny with sweat.

Down at the camp, the buses began shuddering to life.

I noticed a chunk of something resembling a moon rock in Patty's lap. "What's that?" I said.

She glanced at the rock, turning it over in her hands. "It's salt. Rock salt."

She brought the rock to her mouth and bit off a piece. She sucked and chewed it. "See?" she said, and handed me the rock.

I took it and bit off a hunk. Immediately my tongue began to burn. Chewing it, I felt as though my teeth were cracking and shattering against its surface. My mouth filled with liquid.

Patty smiled at me. "Stings!" she said. Her eyes were bloodred from tearing. Drool leaked from her mouth.

Wiping her chin, she inched closer to me, and together we sat and watched the buses pull out of the lot. Counselors stood in the grass, waving good-bye.

I wished that Grace was there, that she was sitting beside me in my stand, watching the children leave for home. I could almost see her next to me instead of Patty, sitting at the platform's edge in her jeans and T-shirt, her hair pulled back from her spoiled face. I could practically feel her there, pressing against me. Her head was on my shoulder now, her hair soft against my neck. I smiled, staring out at the sloping woods through her old sunglasses. Because everything was all right. She was back with me. The sky was the bluest of blues, and the land was rich with gold.