

BARB HOWARD

Big Fork Campground

“WE’LL BE INCOMMUNICADO for weeks,” Craig said, studying a topo map from his place in the passenger seat. “Several multi-pitch climbs on the agenda.”

Jeanie isn’t bothered that she is neither invited nor involved in the trans-Rockies trek he has planned for later in the summer. After all, she knows that Craig, besides being a legendary outdoorsman, is a bit of an asshole. Her co-worker Marilyn, who got them together, said “You’ll love him—he’s really good-looking” so many times that Jeanie knew there must be something up with his personality. But Jeanie wanted to go camping, she wanted to see what Westitch clients found so enthralling, and when she met Craig she knew he was just the person to initiate her—even if it was only for one night at Big Fork. Craig said that was all the “car camping” he could stand. Jeanie said that was all the time she could afford away from her job and her mother.

As they drive into Big Fork, Craig folds his map, grimaces out the window.

“Look at the yahoos,” he says. “Why don’t they just stay at home if they’re going to plug in a generator and roll out a fake lawn?”

“Maybe it’s the idea of not being home. You know, when you’re home you’ve got a lot of stuff to do.”

“I don’t. Why not stay in a hotel?”

“They couldn’t bring their miniature dogs.”

“Those dogs—they’re an embarrassment to their species. Drive over them.”

“Kill them?” Jeanie asks.

“Absolutely. Do the world a favour.” Craig opens his window, cranes his neck. “Sweet Jeezus, they’ve even got a caretaker here. How badly would that job suck?”

Jeanie, trying to avoid the dogs scampering around the car, doesn't turn to look at the caretaker. At the end of the last loop in the campground, having long outpaced the dogs, she spots the green Volvo. Jeanie's co-worker Marilyn, and Marilyn's partner Wayne, have come out earlier in the day to book the campsite. Jeanie parks beside their Volvo.

Wayne runs to Jeanie's car. He reaches his arm through the open passenger window and pumps Craig's hand.

"Craig!" Wayne says. "Craig," he says again, calming himself. "I bet Marilyn that you'd never come on this hokey trip."

"One night only," Craig says.

"I'm with you there," Wayne says. "Oh hi Jeanie."

Wayne always enrolls in Craig's classes on backcountry skills. Jeanie has met Wayne several times before, but he never acknowledges her unless she is with Craig. That, Jeanie supposes, is because she is not the outdoors type. Craig once called her a cubicle babe. But stockbroker Wayne, at least physically, hardly looks the backcountry type himself.

"Welcome to our backyard," Marilyn calls from the picnic table. She wears her usual: braids, toque, and Westitch clothing. Nobody uses their employee discount to a greater advantage than Marilyn, who works in the retail department.

"May as well be the city," Craig mutters.

"It all seems pretty nice to me," Jeanie says, gesturing to the fir trees, the firepit, the rustic picnic table, and the tent. "Is that your tent? It looks so small."

"There's room to set yours up on the other side of the firepit," Marilyn says.

Craig spreads his map on one end of the picnic table and begins to show Marilyn and Wayne his summer plans. Jeanie unloads the car, making several trips for all Craig's gear. When she picked up Craig earlier in the afternoon, she discovered that true campers pack in little nylon sacks. He must have had ten of them. She, on the other hand, crammed everything in a gym bag, except her duvet, which she carried directly from her bed to her hatchback. Craig was shocked that Jeanie, the comptroller of Westitch Outdoor Co., didn't have a sleeping bag.

But why would she have a sleeping bag? Westitch hired her for her ability with numbers, not to test equipment. She piles Craig's nylon sacks on the other end of the picnic table, and watches for a few moments as Marilyn focuses on re-braiding her hair and Wayne unsuccessfully tries to get himself invited on Craig's trek.

"The tent?" Jeanie says.

“In a minute,” Craig answers, sliding his pinkie finger from the scale bar and across the map to calculate distances.

It helps that Craig is good-looking. Very Craig-y, especially where his cheeks sink in above his jaw. Some people, like Marilyn, find that his looks alone offset his selfishness. But Jeanie finds his selfishness, in and of itself, strangely appealing. Other than a loose pocket of male acquaintances and an intermittent job, he has no bonds. No parents to take care of, definitely no dying mother who combined the self-effacing roles of single mother and palliative care nurse for almost forty years.

Eventually Craig closes the map and pulls retractable poles and nylon fabric from the tiniest sack on the table. He spreads the material across from Marilyn and Wayne’s tent, and inserts the poles. In a few moments he has set up a white, low-profile tent. It looks like a body bag.

“What now?” Jeanie asks, clapping her hands together.

“Jeanie, you are such a micro-manager,” Marilyn says in mock exasperation. “Do you ever relax?”

“I’m relaxing now,” Jeanie says. “I’m camping. How about some wood?” The other three looked confused.

“I saw it stacked up near the entrance. Five bucks a bundle,” Jeanie says.

“We have stoves,” Wayne says. “Craig probably has a really good stove.”

“Campfires are for girl scouts,” Craig adds. “Not to mention bad for the environment.”

Jeanie looks at the firepit. She never was a girl scout. But her mother, forever patient, forever smiling, taught her how to make a fire when they went on picnics. Jeanie knows how to prop the kindling into the shape of a hermit’s cabin. Then stick a match through the door-hole and watch the empty house go up in flames.

“Isn’t the firepit for fires?” Jeanie asks.

“Do what you like,” Craig says, shrugging. “But I’m not cooking on it.”

Jeanie walks back to the entrance of the camp ground. The bundles of wood are flanked by several meters of plastic lawn, leading to a trailer. Directly in front of the trailer there is a man sprawled on an old car seat that serves as a couch. Under the protection of a huge tarped canopy, he’s watching a football game on television.

When Jeanie nears the wood the man hops off the car seat and approaches her. He is sixty-ish, potty, wearing baggy jeans. The name tag pinned to his checked shirt reads: “Caretaker.”

“Wood?” Jeanie says, pulling a ten dollar bill from her pocket.

"Why doesn't that fella you drove in with come and carry the wood himself?" the caretaker asks.

"He doesn't want a fire."

"He's a backcountry prick. I knew it. The rangers tell me it costs more to rescue a backcountry prick than it does to maintain a full-service campground for the season."

"I think he knows what he's doing."

"Let 'em die, I say. Here, borrow my wheelbarrow. May as well take my hatchet for the night, too. Can't split wood with lover boy's fruit leather."



Back at the campsite, Jeanie makes a hermit's house in the firepit, while Craig works on unfolding and lighting his compact stove. He sets a lightweight pot of water on to boil.

"Thanks for taking on dinner, Craig," Marilyn says. "What's cooking?"

"Succotash stew," Craig answers, waving a foil bag at them. "I'm test driving it for my summer trek."

"Perfect," Wayne says.

Jeanie has been hoping for hotdogs and marshmallows. Maybe only Girl Scouts eat those things. And beans. What about a can of baked beans? That's what she and her mother would cook on a fire. And her mother would tell stories about her work on the palliative ward. The stories, Jeanie knew from a young age, were meant to inspire her towards a life of compassionate duty.



Jeanie decides to contribute to the dinner by hosting cocktail hour. She returns to the car and zips open the gym bag. Snuggled inside her long underwear and a spare oversized sweater, she has packed several bottles of wine. More wine than she imagined they'd ever drink, but she wasn't sure who liked red or white or, now that she thought about it, which would go better with freeze-dried succotash.

"Booze?" Craig looks incredulously at the bottles in her arms.

"Wine."

"You brought booze?" Wayne echoes.

"Bring it on," Marilyn laughs.

Jeanie uncorks a bottle. Three mugs, including Craig's, appear on the table.

"Anybody got a mug for me?" Jeanie asks. Craig hands her a plastic measuring cup.



Craig's stove continues to fail, and by the time the third bottle is opened, cocktail hour has stretched from an hour to an endurance event. Jeanie takes breaks from the wine while she tends the fire and chops wood.

"Just sit still," Marilyn says when Jeanie pulls another log from the wheelbarrow. "Tell us about yourself. Chat."

"Myself?" Jeanie asks.

"Okay, tell us about your mother," Marilyn prompts. "You're always leaving work to go and see her. How's she doing?"

Jeanie fusses with the log, trying to get it to stand on its end and ready for chopping, wondering if Marilyn's question is actually a dig at how often she leaves work. Probably not. Nobody could criticize Jeanie for not working hard enough. Especially Marilyn. But it is true that every day, sometimes twice a day, she leaves Westitch to drive to the nursing home to help her mother eat. The nurses say that her mother won't eat the pureed servings unless Jeanie does the feeding. Craig says the nurses are just trying to make Jeanie feel good about herself, and that her mother probably doesn't know or care who is spooning in the gruel.

Jeanie begins, "My mother has an inoperable brain tumour. At this stage, she can't speak. Or move, really."

"Why doesn't she just die?" Craig interrupts. He is lying on the bench beside the picnic table, frequently propping himself up to check the feeble stove flame.

"No kidding," Wayne says.

"That's an awful way to talk," Marilyn reprimands, then refills her mug with wine. "No wonder Jeanie looks so pale and harassed. Good wine, by the way."

Jeanie takes a swing at the log.

"Nursing homes make me gag," Craig says.



Eventually Craig distributes parsimonious servings of lukewarm stew. “Succotash,” Marilyn giggles, having had her fair share of wine. “Sufferin’ shuckatosh.”

“Brilliant,” Wayne says after a quick taste.

Craig has moved from the picnic table to the fire. He squats, holding his plastic dish of succotash between his knees.

“This is shitty,” he decides after a few spoonfuls. “I’m not taking it on my trip.”

Jeanie sniffs her bowl, disappointed because she is so hungry. The yellow stew smells like formaldehyde. She stirs the stew around, gaining courage to eat. It’s not like a crummy dinner will kill her. Her mother has to eat meals that look like this all the time and, for whatever reason, she’s still alive.

Before she brings the spoon to her mouth, Jeanie feels a shadow move over her. She glances up and sees a fast-moving black blanket of cloud taking over the sky.

“Mountain weather rolling in,” Craig announces. The effort of tilting his head back makes him lose his balance and topple. He spills the remainder of his stew on his polypropylene shirt.

Jeanie has never seen such a quick turn in the sky, although she has heard about the unpredictability of mountain weather. Craig lies on the ground, apparently in no hurry to move. Marilyn and Wayne are playing kissyface and spooning succotash into each other’s mouths.

Jeanie picks up the empty wine bottles and carries them to a recycling bin in the parking lot. She closes Craig’s stove and seals the fuel bottle. Then she does a quick rinse of everyone’s dishes before telescoping them together and putting them in her car.

From there she spots the outhouse and hurries for a quick visit before the hail starts. While she pees, the outhouse darkens as though someone has dimmed the lights. By the time she returns to the campsite, she almost needs a flashlight even though it is only early evening. Marilyn, Wayne and Craig have gone into the tents for cover.

Jeanie crawls into Craig’s tent. She stops to let her eyes, and nasal passages, adjust to the darkness and to the reek of succotash farts. Craig is sprawled across his sleeping bag and her duvet. Jeanie starts to crawl into the narrow space on one side of the tent. As she moves forward, Craig pulls her on top of him. He exhales wine and succotash and formaldehyde. She turns her head to one side.

They roll awkwardly over, hitting the wall of the tent. Craig kisses Jeanie’s cheek, her chin, her neck and then stalls near her collarbone. Jeanie

gives him an encouraging peck on the top of his head. After all, he's moving in the right direction. He kisses her collarbone, sinks his face into her chest. At first she thinks he is sniffing her, perhaps some sort of inhalation thing that might be sexy, but then she realizes, by his deep steady breathing and lack of progress, that Craig has passed out.

Jeanie pushes him away and listens as the first burst of hail begins outside. It smacks against the tent like a drumroll. Once in a while there is a pinging sound as a ball of hail hits the tent poles and ricochets into the campsite.



When the hail lightens to a soft rain, Jeanie can hear Marilyn and Wayne arguing in their tent. Wayne wants children. He says he will do more than his share of parenting. Their voices rise.

"Which part of 'no' are you not understanding?" Marilyn asks.

"Just one kid," Wayne says. "Someone to take care of us in our old age."

"That's stupid," Marilyn scoffs. "Look at poor Jeanie."

Jeanie lies back, studies the water droplets and tree silhouettes on the other side of the thin nylon fabric. The ground is probably soaked. No sense trying to restart the fire now. Nothing else to do but go back to bed. No mother. No job. No duty. Car camping, Jeanie decides as she yanks her duvet from underneath Craig, is lovely.



In the morning, everyone except Jeanie is grumpy.

"Don't bother with the stove," Craig snaps. "Let's just get a move on."

"Breakfast?" Jeanie asks.

"I'm not running a restaurant. There are protein bars in the car," Craig answers.

"What's the rush?"

"The sooner I'm out of here, the better," Craig says.

"Go ahead," Jeanie urges. "Go back with Wayne and Marilyn."

By the way they are punching their sleeping bags into stuff sacks beside the tent, Jeanie can tell that Wayne and Marilyn have a fight to finish at home.

"You wouldn't mind?" Craig asks, perking up considerably.

"Not at all. I'll hang around and take the tents down after they've had a chance to dry." Jeanie hopes sounds as though she is driven by kindness and martyrdom. Really, she just wants to be rid of them all.

"You're a saint," Craig says.

Craig, Marilyn and Wayne load their belongings into the Volvo. Wayne starts the car and begins to back away from the campsite. The car stops abruptly. Craig hops out carrying a nylon stuff sack in his hand.

"Here, protein bars in case you get hungry," he says.

"Thanks," Jeanie says. There must be sixty bars in the bag. How long does he think she is going to stay here by herself? A month? Now there's a thought.

Craig fishes around in the bag. He pulls out a Frontier Fudge bar, his favourite flavour, and tosses the bag on the picnic table. Maybe Craig's not just an asshole with a tent, thinks Jeanie as she watches him jog back to the Volvo. Maybe he's got everything figured out.

Before she can pick out a bar for herself, she hears a clinking of bottles and then another engine, not the Volvo's, revving. Jeanie turns to see the caretaker, in his checked shirt and jeans, riding a quad. Behind the quad he tows a small trailer containing Jeanie's empty wine bottles. He drives into the campsite and right up to Jeanie.

"Just picked up your recyclables. That's a lot of dead soldiers. Must've been quite a party last night. Are you staying on alone?"

"Thinking about it."

Jeanie looks at the tents and the bag of power bars.

"I'll bring you up a load of wood after I dump these bottles," the caretaker says, revving his engine. He pops the front tires in the air and wheelies back to the main road, leaving her alone.

That settles it, Jeanie thinks as she watches the caretaker drive away. Food, shelter and a caretaker. What more could she need?