

POLARIS

JACK HOSTRAWSER

THE DAY BEGAN QUIET and still, punctuated by a sharpness of the air. He scraped his way out of the sleeping bag and stood. He picked up the rifle, stepping over her, and walked to the window, leaning carefully on the sill to avoid the racoon scat. Leaning back on his elbows he looked out at the yard. The rear wall of the house lay broken on the ground behind her, making the ruins into a stage. Like a sitcom.

When she woke they ate some of the Cheerios he had and drank from his water bottle and then they packed and left. She brushed her hair as she walked, picking out the greys. He thought of making small talk but they had said it all last night. The road was quiet but for birdsong.

It might have been ten o'clock when she spoke again. She commented on the vibrant colour of a maple tree.

“Yeah,” he said. “I always liked fall.”

“But not anymore.”

He thought for a moment. “No,” he said. “I still do.”

She picked a leaf from a low-hanging branch as they passed, turning it in her fingers. It danced for her as they walked, but she grew bored and began tearing it along its veins. He watched and wondered about her name, probably a fake. He often used a fake name when he met people.

They stopped at noon and sat on a picnic bench in a wide front yard. The windows were unboarded and the back door left unlocked. The wilting grass was waist-deep. Cirrus clouds had moved in from the west and mottled the sky. A breeze came with them, full of moisture. It would rain tonight. He told her this and she looked to see.

“Mind if I stay with you for a while?” she asked.

He looked at her. “Sure.”

She seemed embarrassed. He pulled out the Cheerios and they ate the last of them. After a while he spoke again.

“How long do you think it'll take to get to Mexico?”

“Two months, by the interstate.”

“You don’t have any closer relatives?”

“A woman my age doesn’t walk to Mexico for the exercise.” She smiled a little.

He tried to share her smirk, but she was distracted. The rest of the meal passed in silence and he listened to the breeze. You could set your breath to it, in and out. Meditation was a technique used to induce a dream state from a waking one—directly, like sublimation. Somehow the body fell asleep and grew numb while the mind stayed, imagining new limbs to fill the void. He had wondered long ago if heaven were a lucid dream, formed in a wash of endorphins by the dying brain. Perhaps everyone met their own judgment.

She scratched her nose, stretched and asked to see the map. He asked why and she said it was to make sure that at least one of them knew the way. He put away the bag and smoothed a mapbook across the table. It would get them to the border. Then it would only show them an approximation of interstates. Mexico was barren.

Their path would shadow those highways and the interstates mostly, keeping from cities and towns. Today they expected to take a section of railroad because it seemed more direct. Sometimes they saw others walking, but neither party ever acknowledged the other. He would have kept his distance from her, too, had he been more aware. She had jumped out at him. He’d managed to stay the blade and they had declared a truce. Neither was sick, that much was clear. She kept the knife inside the sleeve of her old coat, in a makeshift canvas sheath.

Sometimes there was food, occasionally bullets. Sometimes he found a barn full of carcasses. But even when stock had been set free they were dead. Dairy cattle couldn’t live without their farmers; they produced too much milk, mastitis progressing slowly to ulcers and septicaemia. Other animals did better. Once, a mottled brown horse had watched him from a ledge as he passed below. It had shied when he approached and he gave up. It watched from the cliff as he walked away, motionless until he passed from sight.

The railroad intersection was two lanes of salt-and-pepper tarmac bisected and signed with lights. They turned onto it with little ceremony. The side roads became a pattern as they walked, strips of civilization breaking into alternating fields and forests.

In the evening it started to rain. He rubbed his stomach under his

coat, thinking they should stop and make camp. Soon the track broke free of the trees and set off in a gentle sweep around a small farm. In the adjacent field, a man and two horses were trudging, turning the earth by the light of lanterns. She was climbing over the fence before he could argue.

The horses noticed the strangers first and stopped ploughing. When the farmer looked up he pulled out a break-action hunting rifle and levelled it at them. He stood like old wood. She raised her palms and declared them both friends, naming herself anew: She was now Jennifer; he was Matt.

The farmer lowered his gun slowly and motioned them forward. "I have nothing to give you," he said.

"We don't want anything," Jennifer replied. "We're just looking for a place to spend the night."

The farmer deliberated. "Go up to the house," he said at last, "and say Jakob sent you. My wife's name is Mary. She'll give you a bed."

They thanked him and he dismissed them curtly. He watched until they were nearly at the house.

The farmstead was higher than the surrounding land. As they reached the edge of the field he noted that no power lines had ever climbed the hill, and he knew the people they had found.

The house was white and brown, clad in siding that reminded him of his parents' second home, after his dad lost his job. Jennifer climbed the steps and rapped on the door, which sounded loose. A woman opened it, holding a .22.

"We're just looking for a place to stay," Jennifer explained. "We don't need your food."

The farmer's wife led them into the kitchen, orange and walnut in the firelight. They sat at a heavy table and were brought small bowls and thin soup as their coats steamed on the hearth. He raised the spoon to his lips before she could stop him. Mary shook her head with a smile and returned the pot to the stove. She took a seat across the table and clasped her hands in prayer, reciting without flair. When she finished she winked at him and he busied himself with the broth.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Barrie." He motioned to Jennifer. "She's from Brampton."

Mary seemed to know these places. "That's a long way to walk."

"We've got a long way to go."

"Florida?"

“Mexico.”

The farmer’s wife was impressed. “How will you eat?”

“We eat what we find.”

“You must be hungry then.”

He smiled. “Usually.”

“And are you heading to the same place?”

Jennifer answered. “No—I don’t know.”

“You should stay together. It’s safer.” Mary turned in her chair and plucked a bauble from the table behind her, handing it to Jennifer. “I have a brother who went to Mexico. He brought this home.”

Jennifer held it up and saw it was a shell, spiralling like a pinwheel.

“This is beautiful.”

“Take it. Last time I heard from him he was still living down there.” She chuckled to herself. “Maybe you could give it back.”

“Don’t you want it?”

The woman shook her head and began to tell a story. “When he left they would have called it Rumspringa. Do you know what that is?”

Both nodded.

“He always wanted to leave. This wasn’t for him. I thought for years it wasn’t for me either, but things change. He’s a priest now, working with kids. He tries to keep them clean and show them the Word. How is the soup?”

“It’s good,” Jennifer said. Matt nodded, swallowing.

“It was always funny when Peter, that’s my brother, when he came home because he always brought these shells. Bags of them, all the colours you could dream. My father would never dare keep them—he thought it was vanity—but my brother kept bringing them. This was the only one my father kept. Temptation, I guess”

At this she paused and stared at the wall, biting her lip. “It’s funny,” she said at last, “How things work like that. Anyway, if you’re going that way maybe you could take it to him.” She inhaled. “He doesn’t know about his father.”

Jennifer looked at the shell. “How could we find him?”

“He’s in Tampico. If it’s out of your way, don’t worry. I’d never know.”

Matt thought he saw something in Mary’s eyes when she smiled, but her husband’s knock at the side door—a code, he noticed—whisked the thought away. She rose and took their bowls to the sink before hurrying to open the door. Jakob nodded at them as he entered and shed his sodden clothes. Mary took some candles and a lantern and led them outside around

the puddles to another, smaller house. She opened the door quickly to escape the rain.

“This was Jakob’s parents’ house,” she explained. Then, with a smile: “Don’t worry, they didn’t die in here. The bedroom is on the left.”

They thanked her and were left alone in the flickering dark.

The bedroom held only a bed, a dresser and a small stove. He found some wood to start a fire and she sat down on the edge of the bed to rub her feet. He took the other side of the mattress, giddy to be between warm sheets again. He imagined staying here for the winter. The patter of rain on the roof grew stronger with bouts of wind, and then waned into silence, as if listening. She lay facing the wall, spinning the shell in her fingers.

“We have to do it,” she said.

“Eh?”

The bed creaked. “We have to take the shell back.”

He yawned. “Come on, even if he’s still alive the odds of finding him And if we keep running up to people, eventually we’ll get killed. You’ve seen it.”

“It’s that kind of thinking that got us where we are.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean as a species.” She propped herself up on her elbow. “What do you expect people to do when you carry a gun all the time?”

“You tried to shank me.”

She was quiet.

He smiled. “It’s natural. We’re all scared.”

“It is not natural! Coping is natural. This crap you’re giving me is learned. How are we ever going to fix things if we kill each other on sight because we’re scared? What if I had killed you?”

“You’d have more Cheerios.”

She shook her head at him and faced the wall again, spinning the little shell.

“Look,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m being a dick. I’ll come if you want.”

“I’m not some fucking damsel for you to protect,” she said.

He mulled over possible answers. The stove popped and cracked. The quiet grew uncomfortably large. There seemed a place in it from which there was no return. He said some inconsequential thing and then he told her how he killed his daughter. She turned and stared at him and once or twice moved her mouth, but he couldn’t stop. Then he turned over to hide his face.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean”

She was quiet, trying to order her words. “We all had children.”

He brushed at his face and coughed. Guided by a candle, he went into the kitchen, where he worked the hand pump until it sprayed clear water into the concrete basin. He put his head under the tap and rinsed his hair and face with the stinging, frigid water.

When he went back to the bedroom her eyes were closed. He put a new log into the stove and climbed into bed, first brushing off his feet.

After a while he felt her hand touch his shoulder and he let it rest there.

The morning brought a hint of frost and bitter wind. They accepted some cakes from the farmer’s wife and a nod from Jakob. Their farewell was brief.

The wind eased as the sun rose higher, but still they clutched at their coats and hunched their shoulders as they navigated the shadows of racing clouds. She stopped when the track emerged from a balding spread of deciduous trees and ran across a pasture laid over a drumlin. They climbed the fence and stood at the summit, and she breathed in the scene. He wanted to move on.

“Wait,” she said, shivering. “it’s nice up here.”

He made himself appreciate the patchwork fields and the rustic barns. To the north and west the horizon ran smooth and forever. He looked at her to see her thoughts, but her eyes said nothing. He caught a glimpse of cotton white as a deer leapt the far fence and vanished into the trees. It was still too early for lunch so they moved on, talking little.

They rejoined a highway south of London. The road led through a small hamlet that wasn’t on the map, and then up a hill past a rust-coloured farmyard that overflowed with junk. He stopped her and went up the drive. There were mounds of scrap peppering the long grass between dilapidated outbuildings. The house was no better, black with grime. In the kitchen they found a vintage gasoline pump and various car parts in soggy boxes. Rats fled into the deeper shadows. There were cupboards filled with plates and crumbs and a single dusty can of tuna.

The barn sheltered vending machines and record collections and furniture and bicycles. He contemplated a complete V8 engine resting on a skid. He had hoped to buy a muscle car and restore it, but other things had got in the way.

“Check this out,” she called.

“What?”

She held up a tacky figurine of an angel. “There’s a million of these,” she said. “What a weirdo.”

He smiled and pointed to the stairs behind her. She looked up.

“Oh yeah, there’s lots more stuff up here.” She started climbing and he was alone in the pale light beneath the hayloft. He hurried to follow her.

The hoard upstairs dwarfed everything below. She was making her way through to the other side of the loft to peer into what once was a granary. He picked up a Beatles record: 1970, their last album. From across the mow she cried out, and he looked up to see a man throwing her to the floor. A sound caught in his throat and he ripped the gun from his shoulder. He fixed the man in his sight. She was losing the struggle and he saw that her assailant had a knife. He was yelling. She had her thumb plunged between his sclera and skull and his yell became a shriek. He fired the gun and the man fell away, scraping himself backwards with one hand clutching his stomach. Cycle the action, fire again. Cycle the action, fire again. The man’s movements slowed to twitches.

He ran to her and saw blood drooling from her breast. She coughed and murmured something. He asked her what she’d said, but she frowned and started to cry without noise, heaving slightly. The sound in his own throat escaped at last, and he punched the wall before turning and kicking at the dead man’s ribs. He stopped and paced and began to speak, but didn’t know the words. Eventually he crouched against an ancient washing machine, cradling his bleeding hand, and said nothing.

When he left the barn he took her body. He wanted to dig a grave in the long grass, but could not find a shovel. He settled with laying a sheet of corrugated tin over her to keep the coyotes away. Then he dumped her kit into a little pile on the grass and poked at it. She carried a wooden cross with a symbol that he didn’t recognize. A worn-out toothbrush. Flint and steel. A tattered picture of people smiling awkwardly in front of a small suburban home. The shell.

The wind was stuttering on the razor edge of her tin shroud. He picked up the shell and rolled it between his hands, unable to make out the hidden fault lines along which it would crack if he crushed it in his fingers. Then he placed it gently on the sheet of corrugated tin.

He lit a fire nearby, feeding it with wooden furniture from the barn, and kept a quiet vigil as the evening came on in oranges and silver and bruised purple. He warmed the can of tuna on the embers and bent the tearaway lid into a spoon. The wind kept blowing the shell off its resting place, skipping it down the metal ridges into the long grass, where he had to fish about to find it. Finally he just put it into his pocket. She had once almost eaten human meat—she'd said that.

What's life worth? she had asked him in the dark on that first night. Does a corpse have rights? He didn't have an answer then. Her decision had been to starve. I felt, she'd said, like choosing to die was the most ... alive thing I could do. He'd looked at her and said nothing.

When the last of the daylight faded he kicked the embers. He looked once more at the sheet of corrugated metal before going into the barn and laying down on a bed of straw bales. His dreams, when they came, were full of horror.

He rose without eating and continued up the road. The temperature had dropped significantly and the air smelled of pine and cold water. That evening he camped in the shell of someone's home. His shoes crunched glass as he entered. The doors were gone and the windows were spilled onto worn floorboards. The wind delighted in the shape of it all. He went upstairs and found a girl's room. Posters of horses had peeled like paint and lay damp and curling. He pulled the sticker-covered closet doors from their hinges and took them downstairs to dam up the wind. Then he made an open fire on a sheet of metal in the living room and ate the farmer's cakes.

Just before dawn he woke up, shivering in the darkness. The fire had gone out. He reached out to stoke it with more wood then lay back, trying to remember what woke him.

The wind had died, but the air was biting cold. He watched the firelight cast elaborate shadows on the ceiling, then slid out of his sleeping bag and put on his shoes. He walked outside and stood on the step, looking up at the sky as he rubbed his arms. On the horizon the gibbous moon was settling into the trees. He told himself that the footprints were still there, even if he couldn't see them.

Somewhere, deep in the past, the zodiac danced soundlessly around the pole star, predicting entropy.