

SARA MANG
HER WILD

IDA SEES JACOB HOBBLING DOWN THE HILL on the walking trail. Favoured his left leg, he limps with drama. She hustles to him and tucks herself beneath his arm. Blood drools and clots over raw, peeled skin on his shin, his elbows have scrapes embedded with gravel, and there is a skid of a grass stain across the front of his skin-tight, white-with-red lettering *Boh's Cycle and Sport* jersey. She lowers him to a bench.

“I was just mauled by a goose,” he explains. “They were sitting peacefully, and then one just launched like ‘*hissssss!*’ Fucking green shit! Savages!”

This is the first time Ida has heard him swear. They met on this very trail a year ago, and they have only ever met here. Ida walks to and from the Happy Earth, Healthy We preschool every day and takes a breather on this bench, admiring the horse ranch across the water and the ruins of the bridge that collapsed in 1922, crushing three workers. A great blue heron often perches on the ruins, and Ida is certain that she and the heron possess a kindred connection because they stare at each other, sometimes for seven or eight minutes.

Ida waits for Jacob here every day. She brings a book, pretends to read, and minds her posture while peeking at the other walkers and joggers. Jacob encounters happen once or twice a week, whenever he takes a break from an epic run or bike ride to stretch his quads and iliotibial bands. Ida has only ever seen him in spandex shorts or tights. She prefers the shorts that graze his kneecaps, which are sand-dune-like in their rounds and crevices. Jacob is bone, sinew, and muscle fibre, ever-coated with an earth-smelling sweat that she inhales as though it might nourish her at her core.

“Perhaps your running startled them,” she offers as she kneels and produces a first-aid kit from her backpack.

Jacob examines his mottled elbow. “They saw me.” He clenches his teeth, which have zero millimetres of overbite. Ida commented once on his perfect bite, and he said that he’d never had braces, which confirmed to her

that he was made to bring beauty and symmetry to the flawed world around him.

“It’s the goslings,” Ida says. “Okay, a burning.” With a cotton swab she dabs his raw skin with antiseptic solution. Jacob shoots his body back, whips out his leg, and wallops her in the vagina.

“I . . . I’m so sorry,” he says as he braces his hands around his thigh. He squeezes his eyes shut and inhales through his nose.

“It’s okay, I’m okay.” Ida blows gently on his open wound, applies a pea-sized dollop of ointment to her index finger, and rubs it into the exposed epidermal layer. She places a mesh dressing and fixes it to his shin with tape she tears with her teeth, her vagina pulsing electric.

Jacob’s left shin is so swollen that he is unable to bear his own weight, so Ida orders an Uber to Dawson soccer field just up the hill.

“24-7 Ephyra Street,” he says. Ida walks with him to the field, her arm pinned around his ribcage. His entire core is dense and muscular from the consistent athletic conditioning. She considers giving him her number but resists. She wants their relationship to evolve organically. Ahead of them on the trail, a small group of geese nestle on the grass sunning themselves.

“I can’t . . . the geese, they . . .” Jacob’s angst provokes a giddy vibration in her throat.

“I’ll get a stick. Just a sec.” Ida darts to the nearby bushes while Jacob balances on his good leg, pointing the other foot to the earth like a ballerina, pre-pirouette. She returns with a stick and whips it a few times in the air, *schwa schwa*, to show Jacob that she can protect him. The geese stand and waddle into the water, maintaining eye contact with them and honking.

“I love this trail, but I don’t know if I can come back,” he says, gazing in the direction of the geese as they paddle upstream.

She thinks about the way he places one hand on his hip as he pulls his ankle to his ass for a deep tissue quadricep stretch, his mound protruding like a pear under a layer of sweaty spandex. The prospect of no more Jacob is too much for her to endure.

“I heard on the radio that they’ll be gone in a few weeks,” she invents at light speed. “So many have complained. The city is getting rid of them.”

“I guess I’ll just have to wait until they’re gone.”

“Your Uber.” Ida slowly unwraps herself from him. “Decoys? I don’t know. They’ll be gone. Please don’t worry.”

Ida drives by Jacob's house on Ephyra Street three times, slowing her car as she passes number 24-7—a pale blue bungalow with a covered front deck, a small front lawn, and a white picket fence. There is a white swing on the deck and empty flower boxes beneath two front windows. She thinks about knocking on the door to ask how he is feeling but stops herself in her tracks. The last thing she wants is to alarm him with her desire.

Ida doesn't mind living alone. Lexi, her friend and coworker, sometimes visits with beer and chips, and together they watch *House of Cards*. When Ida first got her own place (a basement apartment with an abundance of natural light), her dad insisted that she keep his shotgun in her closet in case some whacko tried to break in. He used to boast about her—so sensible and focused, no interest in boys—but after a few years, he worried that she was alone and lonesome.

"If it's women you're into, that's alright too, you know," he said during Thanksgiving dinner, provoking full fury from her mother that, for Jesus' sake, Ida did not need a mate.

Ida did not require a mate, it was true, but neither did she desire to be left alone. Over the years, there had been interests, but nothing gained traction. Ida is not a peacock. Her shoulders are broader than her hips, her skin is dull and acne prone, and her hair is short, thick, and mousy. She does not turn heads, nor does she sustain attention. What she craves, though, is not fleeting admiration but usefulness. She needs to be needed.

That evening she buys a solar-powered flashing light called the Go Away Goose, which is scarcely noticeable to humans but disruptive to the sleep cycle of geese, thus forcing them to seek another habitat. According to the package, it is 98.3% effective.

She sets it up on the edge of the soccer field before heading to work, and the preschool is quiet when she arrives. After the previous day's letter about head lice, most of the children were kept home and the other teachers were dismissed. As Ida sits on the floor, planting sunflower seeds in tiny pots with four-year-old Eugene, he folds over his pot of soil and starts to whimper.

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

Ida lifts him into her arms and feels his wet bottom. The official Happy Earth, Healthy We policy is that "ALL CHILDREN MUST BE POTTY TRAINED." Regardless, she swiftly changes him into spare pants, rinses the wet ones, and throws them in the dryer on ultra-high heat.

On her way home, she notices that the geese are all over the trail and soccer field. 98.3% effective my ass, she thinks.

Ida approaches a group of geese. “Nice goosey, goosey.” Two of them stand and waddle slowly into the water. She thinks of her heron and their kindred connection. She must have a way with birds. One goose stands and stares as she approaches slowly, offering her empty hand. The goose yawns its beak wide and hastens toward her, wings outstretching in slow motion.

“*Hissssss!*”

Ida backs up, her pulse racing, and the goose slows its advance and tucks its wings as she retreats. Jesus, this will not do.

That evening she buys three life-sized, resin coyote decoys with realistic fur tails. They don’t have legs, but they look deadly, their stance crouched, prowling, head down, ears back, and mouth gaped.

It is early morning when she plants the decoys, and she notices that the solar-powered flashing light device is like a beacon or magnet around which the geese have gathered. Goose shit is everywhere, and she can’t avoid stepping in it. A goose approaches, beak open, but before it can hiss she screeches with a rawness that shocks even her. The scream causes a burning sensation in her throat. Embracing one of the plastic coyotes, she lunges toward the goose, her left foot forward, thrusting the coyote as if it were a sword. The goose retreats, and she plants the ravenous plastic coyote trifecta.

At work, Ida feels conflicted and woeful. For the umpteenth time, Lexi has suggested that she join Tinder, Bumble, or Match.com. Ida has no interest in such contrived methods of connection, not to mention the way photographs draw attention to the dark crescents beneath her eyes and the thickness of her neck and knees. She imagines a first date that includes Sunday football or, worse, a wax museum. No thank you. Lexi asks her what’s so special about Jacob anyway. He’s just an athletic guy. Who cares if she never sees him again? Ida does not even satisfy her with a response. Lexi doesn’t get it. She doesn’t connect with people the way Ida does. Lexi doesn’t even love these children; Happy Earth, Healthy We is just a job for her. She would have reported that Eugene pissed his pants, and he would have been sent home. Lexi cannot fathom the idea of a mind-altering, all-consuming, exhausting love—a love that vibrates through your bone marrow and makes you volunteer your soul without an iota of misgiving.

The plastic coyotes are good for nothing. One of them is knocked down

on its side, its tail mangled in mud and goose shit. The other two are perched on the field, floating legless and ignored. The geese gather around the solar-powered flashing light device, as if in worship.

Ida parks her car near the field at three in the morning. She pops the trunk and removes a wheelbarrow and her father's shotgun. She walks to the flashing light, where the geese are collected, and fires. As the gun recoils, its butt smacks her cheekbone, and a crack of pain shoots behind her ear and around her right eyebrow to her forehead. The side of her face heats and swells instantly. Her ears start to ring as the geese scurry and take flight, and the field fills with a chorus of honking. One goose is hit and drags its wing as it attempts to flee, hopping and landing, hopping and landing. She pities the poor creature but thinks of nestling into the cradle of Jacob's bicep as he applies an ice pack to her cheek, where the pain now splinters to the back of her skull. She reloads and shoots the lame goose and three others. She heaves the bodies into the wheelbarrow, their necks slithering and flopping snake-like, rolls them down the hill, and dumps them into the river. It is at this moment that she notices the lukewarm breeze. Feathers swarm around her like confetti, flitting near the water and the floating geese. Mangled webbed feet stick straight up or at an angle like tiny sailboat masts and sails, carefully changing tack.

"The geese are gone, Jacob. They are gone forever." Ida is certain that Jacob will receive this message. The breeze, her faithful friend, will transport it to him. She stumbles to their bench and sits. The right side of her face is darting between acute, needling pain and numbing, warm vibrations, and inside her broken skull she can hear a high-pitched drone. Her vision tunnels and is blurred. Could she be dying? She rests her cheek on the seat.

Jacob, relaxed and at ease, is staring at the ruins of the bridge where the great blue heron perches on one leg. Striking in a navy blue peacoat, he walks toward her without a limp and nestles her head in his lap. There is warmth now, as if her body is cocooned in wool. The heron turns its head in Ida's direction.

"I was thinking dinner?"

Ida had painted her nails a glossy shade of charcoal. "Yes, I'd love that."