
CULTURE

The Hunter's Wife

A short story

ANTHONY DOERR MAY 2001 ISSUE

It was the hunter's first time outside Montana. He woke, stricken still with the hours-old vision of ascending through rose-lit cumulus, of houses and barns like specks deep in the snowed-in valleys, all the scrolling country below looking December—brown and black hills streaked with snow, flashes of iced-over lakes, the long braids of a river gleaming at the bottom of a canyon. Above the wing the sky had deepened to a blue so pure he knew it would bring tears to his eyes if he looked long enough.

Now it was dark. The airplane descended over Chicago, its galaxy of electric lights, the vast

neighborhoods coming clearer as the plane glided toward the airport—streetlights, headlights, stacks of buildings, ice rinks, a truck turning at a stoplight, scraps of snow atop a warehouse and winking antennae on faraway hills, finally the long converging parallels of blue runway lights, and they were down.

He walked into the airport, past the banks of monitors. Already he felt as if he'd lost something, some beautiful perspective, some lovely dream fallen away. He had come to Chicago to see his wife, whom he had not seen in twenty years. She was there to perform her magic for a higher-up at the state university. Even universities, apparently, were interested in what she could do. Outside the terminal the sky was thick and gray and hurried by wind. Snow was coming. A woman from the university met him and escorted him to her Jeep. He kept his gaze out the window.

They were in the car for forty-five minutes, passing first the tall, lighted architecture of downtown, then naked suburban oaks, heaps of ploughed snow, gas stations, power towers, and telephone wires. The woman said, "So you regularly attend your wife's performances?"

"No," he said. "Never before."

She parked in the driveway of an elaborate modern mansion, with square balconies suspended over two garages, huge triangular windows in the façade, sleek columns, domed lights, a steep shale roof.

Inside the front door about thirty nametags were laid out on a table. His wife was not there yet. No one, apparently, was there yet. He found his tag and pinned it to his sweater. A silent girl in a tuxedo appeared and disappeared with his coat.

The granite foyer was backed with a grand staircase, which spread wide at the bottom and

tapered at the top. A woman came down. She stopped four or five steps from the bottom and said, "Hello, Anne" to the woman who had driven him there and "You must be Mr. Dumas" to him. He took her hand, a pale, bony thing, weightless, like a featherless bird.

Her husband, the university's chancellor, was just knotting his bow tie, she said, and she laughed sadly to herself, as if bow ties were something she disapproved of. The hunter moved to a window, shifted aside the curtain, and peered out.

In the poor light he could see a wooden deck the length of the house, angled and stepped, its width ever changing, with a low rail. Beyond it, in the blue shadows, a small pond lay encircled by hedges, with a marble birdbath at its center. Behind the pond stood leafless trees—oaks, maples, a sycamore as white as bone. A helicopter shuttled past, its green light

winking.

"It's snowing," he said.

"Is it?" the hostess asked, with an air of concern, perhaps false. It was impossible to tell what was sincere and what was not. The woman who had driven him there had moved to the bar, where she cradled a drink and stared into the carpet.

He let the curtain fall back. The chancellor came down the staircase. Other guests fluttered in. A man in gray corduroy, with "Bruce Maples" on his nametag, approached him. "Mr. Dumas," he said, "your wife isn't here yet?"

"You know her?" the hunter asked. "Oh, no," Maples said, and shook his head. "No, I don't." He spread his legs and swiveled his hips as if stretching before a footrace. "But I've read about her."

The hunter watched as a tall, remarkably thin man stepped

through the front door. Hollows behind his jaw and beneath his eyes made him appear ancient and skeletal—as if he were visiting from some other, leaner world. The chancellor approached the thin man, embraced him, and held him for a moment.

"That's President O'Brien," Maples said. "A famous man, actually, to people who follow those sorts of things. So terrible, what happened to his family." Maples stabbed the ice in his drink with his straw.

For the first time the hunter began to think he should not have come.

"Have you read your wife's books?" Maples asked.

The hunter nodded.

"In her poems her husband is a hunter."

"I guide hunters." He was looking out the window to where

snow was settling on the hedges.

"Does that ever bother you?"

"What?"

"Killing animals. For a living, I mean."

The hunter watched snowflakes disappear as they touched the window. Was that what hunting meant to people? Killing animals? He put his fingers to the glass. "No," he said. "It doesn't bother me."

The hunter met his wife in Great Falls, Montana, in the winter of 1972. That winter arrived all at once—you could watch it come. Twin curtains of white appeared in the north, white all the way to the sky, driving south like the end of all things. Cattle galloped the fencelines, bawling. Trees toppled; a barn roof tumbled over the highway. The river changed directions. The wind flung thrushes screaming into the gorse and impaled them on the thorns in grotesque attitudes.

She was a magician's assistant, beautiful, fifteen years old, an orphan. It was not a new story: a glittery red dress, long legs, a traveling magic show performing in the meeting hall at the Central Christian Church. The hunter had been walking past with an armful of groceries when the wind stopped him in his tracks and drove him into the alley behind the church. He had never felt such wind; it had him pinned. His face was pressed against a low window, and through it he could see the show. The magician was a small man in a dirty blue cape. Above him a sagging banner read THE GREAT VESPUCCI. But the hunter watched only the girl; she was graceful, young, smiling. Like a wrestler, the wind held him against the window.

The magician was buckling the girl into a plywood coffin, which was painted garishly with red and blue bolts of lightning. Her neck and head stuck out at one end, her ankles and feet at the other.

She beamed; no one had ever before smiled so broadly at being locked into a coffin. The magician started up an electric saw and brought it noisily down through the center of the box, sawing her in half. Then he wheeled her apart, her legs going one way, her torso another. Her neck fell back, her smile faded, her eyes showed only white. The lights dimmed. A child screamed. Wiggle your toes, the magician ordered, flourishing his magic wand, and she did; her disembodied toes wiggled in glittery high-heeled pumps. The audience squealed with delight.

The hunter watched her pink, fine-boned face, her hanging hair, her outstretched throat. Her eyes caught the spotlight. Was she looking at him? Did she see his face pressed against the window, the wind slashing at his neck, the groceries—onions, a sack of flour—tumbled to the ground around his feet?

She was beautiful to him in a way

that nothing else had ever been beautiful. Snow blew down his collar and drifted around his boots. After some time the magician rejoined the severed box halves, unfastened the buckles, and fluttered his wand, and she was whole again. She climbed out of the box and curtsied in her glittering dress. She smiled as if it were the Resurrection itself.

Then the storm brought down a pine tree in front of the courthouse, and the power winked out, streetlight by streetlight. Before she could move, before the ushers could begin escorting the crowd out with flashlights, the hunter was slinking into the hall, making for the stage, calling for her.

He was thirty years old, twice her age. She smiled at him, leaned over from the dais in the red glow of the emergency exit lights, and shook her head. "Show's over," she said. In his pickup he trailed the magician's van

through the blizzard to her next show, a library fundraiser in Butte. The next night he followed her to Missoula. He rushed to the stage after each performance. "Just eat dinner with me," he'd plead. "Just tell me your name." It was hunting by persistence. She said yes in Bozeman. Her name was plain, Mary Roberts. They had rhubarb pie in a hotel restaurant.

"I know how you do it," he said. "The feet in the box are dummies. You hold your legs against your chest and wiggle the dummy feet with a string."

She laughed. "Is that what you do? Follow a girl from town to town to tell her her magic isn't real?"

"No," he said. "I hunt."

"And when you're not hunting?"

"I dream about hunting."

She laughed again. "It's not funny," he said.

"You're right," she said, and smiled. "It's not funny. I'm that way with magic. I dream about it. Even when I'm not asleep."

He looked into his plate, thrilled. He searched for something he might say. They ate.

"But I dream bigger dreams, you know," she said afterward, after she had eaten two pieces of pie, carefully, with a spoon. Her voice was quiet and serious. "I have magic inside of me. I'm not going to get sawed in half by Tony Vespucci all my life."

"I don't doubt it," the hunter said.

"I knew you'd believe me," she said.

But the next winter Vespucci brought her back to Great Falls and sawed her in half in the same plywood coffin. And the winter after that. Both times, after the performance, the hunter took her to the Bitterroot Diner, where he watched her eat two pieces of pie.

The watching was his favorite part: a hitch in her throat as she swallowed, the way the spoon slid cleanly out from her lips, the way her hair fell over her ear.

Then she was eighteen, and after pie she let him drive her to his cabin, forty miles from Great Falls, up the Missouri and then east into the Smith River valley. She brought only a small vinyl purse. The truck skidded and sheered as he steered it over the unploughed roads, fishtailing in the deep snow, but she didn't seem afraid or worried about where he might be taking her, about the possibility that the truck might sink in a drift, that she might freeze to death in her pea coat and glittery magician's-assistant dress. Her breath plumed out in front of her. It was twenty degrees below zero. Soon the roads would be snowed over, impassable until spring.

At his one-room cabin, with furs and old rifles on the walls, he unbolted the door to the crawl

space and showed her his winter hoard: a hundred smoked trout, plucked pheasants and venison quarters hanging frozen from hooks. "Enough for two of me," he said. She scanned his books over the fireplace—a monograph on grouse habits, a series of journals on upland game birds, a thick tome titled simply *Bear*. "Are you tired?" he asked. "Would you like to see something?" He gave her a snowsuit, strapped her boots into a pair of leather snowshoes, and took her to hear the grizzly. She wasn't bad on snowshoes, a little clumsy. They went creaking over wind-scalloped snow in the nearly unbearable cold.

The bear denned every winter in the same hollow cedar, the top of which had been shorn off by a storm. Black, three-fingered, and huge, in the starlight it resembled a skeletal hand thrust up from the ground, a ghoulish visitor scrabbling its way out of the underworld. They knelt. Above them the stars were knife points,

hard and white. "Put your ear here," he whispered. The breath that carried his words crystallized and blew away. They listened, face-to-face, their ears over woodpecker holes in the trunk. She heard it after a minute, tuning her ears in to something like a drowsy sigh, a long exhalation of slumber. Her eyes widened. A full minute passed. She heard it again.

"We can see him," he whispered, "but we have to be dead quiet. Grizzlies are light hibernators. Sometimes all you do is step on twigs outside their dens and they're up."

He began to dig at the snow. She stood back, her mouth open, eyes wide. Bent at the waist, the hunter bailed the snow back through his legs. He dug down three feet and then encountered a smooth, icy crust covering a large hole in the base of the tree. Gently he dislodged plates of ice and lifted them aside. From the hole the smell of bear came to

her, like wet dog, like wild mushrooms. The hunter removed some leaves. Beneath was a shaggy flank, a patch of brown fur.

"He's on his back," the hunter whispered. "This is his belly. His forelegs must be up here somewhere." He pointed to a place higher on the trunk.

She put one hand on his shoulder and knelt in the snow beside the den. Her eyes were wide and unblinking. Her jaw hung open. Above her shoulder a star separated itself from a galaxy and melted through the sky. "I want to touch him," she said. Her voice sounded loud and out of place in that wood, under the naked cedars.

"Hush," he whispered. He shook his head no.

"Just for a minute."

"No," he hissed. "You're crazy." He tugged at her arm. She removed the mitten from her

other hand with her teeth and reached down. He pulled at her again but lost his footing and fell back, clutching an empty mitten. As he watched, horrified, she turned and placed both hands, spread-fingered, in the thick shag of the bear's chest. Then she lowered her face, as if drinking from the snowy hollow, and pressed her lips to the bear's chest. Her entire head was inside the tree. She felt the soft silver tips of fur brush her cheeks. Against her nose one huge rib flexed slightly. She heard the lungs fill and then empty. She heard blood slug through veins.

"Want to know what he dreams?" she asked. Her voice echoed up through the tree and poured from the shorn ends of its hollowed branches. The hunter took his knife from his coat. "Summer," her voice echoed. "Blackberries. Trout. Dredging his flanks across river pebbles."

"I'd have liked," she said later,

back in the cabin as he built up the fire, "to crawl all the way down there with him. Get into his arms. I'd grab him by the ears and kiss him on the eyes."

The hunter watched the fire, the flames cutting and sawing, each log a burning bridge. Three years he had waited for this. Three years he had dreamed this girl by his fire. But somehow it had ended up different from what he had imagined. He had thought it would be like a hunt—like waiting hours beside a wallow with his rifle barrel on his pack to see the huge antlered head of a bull elk loom up against the sky, to hear the whole herd behind him inhale and then scatter down the hill. If you had your opening you shot and walked the animal down and that was it. But this felt different. It was exactly as if he were still three years younger, stopped outside the Central Christian Church and driven against a low window by the wind or some other, greater force.

"Stay with me," he whispered to her, to the fire. "Stay the winter."

Bruce Maples stood beside him, jabbing the ice in his drink with his straw. "I'm in athletics," he offered. "I run the athletic department here."

"You mentioned that."

"Did I? I don't remember. I used to coach track. Hurdles."

The hunter was watching the thin, stricken man, President O'Brien, as he stood in the corner of the reception room. Every few minutes a couple of guests made their way to him and took O'Brien's hands in their own.

"You probably know," the hunter told Maples, "that wolves are hurdlers. Sometimes the people who track them will come to a snag and the prints will disappear. As if the entire pack just leaped into a tree and vanished. Eventually they'll find the tracks again, thirty or forty

feet away. People used to think it was magic—flying wolves. But all they did was jump. One great coordinated leap."

Maples was looking around the room. "Huh," he said. "I wouldn't know about that."

She stayed. The first time they made love, she shouted so loudly that coyotes climbed onto the roof and howled down the chimney. He rolled off her, sweating. The coyotes coughed and chuckled all night, like children chattering in the yard, and he had nightmares. "Last night you had three dreams, and you dreamed you were a wolf each time," she whispered. "You were mad with hunger and running under the moon."

Had he dreamed that? He couldn't remember. Maybe he talked in his sleep.

In December it never got warmer than fifteen below. The river froze—something he'd never seen. On Christmas Eve he drove all the

way to Helena to buy her figure skates. In the morning they wrapped themselves head-to-toe in furs and went out to skate the river. She held him by the hips and they glided through the blue dawn, skating up the frozen coils and shoals, beneath the leafless alders and cottonwoods, only the bare tips of creek willows showing above the snow. Ahead of them vast white stretches of river faded into darkness.

In a wind-polished bend they came upon a dead heron, frozen by its ankles into the ice. It had tried to hack itself out, hammering with its beak first at the ice entombing its feet and then at its own thin and scaly legs. When it finally died, it died upright, wings folded back, beak parted in some final, desperate cry, legs like twin reeds rooted in the ice.

She fell to her knees beside the bird. In its eye she saw her face flatly reflected. "It's dead," the hunter said. "Come on. You'll

freeze too."

"No," she said. She slipped off her mitten and closed the heron's beak in her fist. Almost immediately her eyes rolled back in her head. "Oh, wow," she moaned. "I can *feel* her." She stayed like that for whole minutes, the hunter standing over her, feeling the cold come up his legs, afraid to touch her as she knelt before the bird. Her hand turned white and then blue in the wind. Finally she stood. "We have to bury it," she said.

That night she lay stiff and would not sleep. "It was just a bird," he said, unsure of what was bothering her but bothered by it himself. "We can't do anything for a dead bird. It was good that we buried it, but tomorrow something will find it and dig it out."

She turned to him. Her eyes were wide. He remembered how they had looked when she put her hands on the bear. "When I

touched her," she said, "I saw where she went."

"What?"

I saw where she went when she died. She was on the shore of a lake with other herons, a hundred others, all facing the same direction, and they were wading among stones. It was dawn, and they watched the sun come up over the trees on the other side of the lake. I saw it as clearly as if I were there."

He rolled onto his back and watched shadows shift across the ceiling. "Winter is getting to you," he said. He resolved to make sure she went out every day. It was something he'd long believed: go out every day in winter, or your mind will slip. Every winter the paper was full of stories about ranchers' wives, snowed in and crazed with cabin fever, who had dispatched their husbands with cleavers or awls.

Winter threw itself at the cabin. He took her out every day. He

showed her a thousand ladybugs hibernating in an orange ball hung in a riverbank hollow; a pair of dormant frogs buried in frozen mud, their blood crystallized until spring. He pried a globe of honeybees from its hive, slow-buzzing, stunned from the sudden exposure, tightly packed around the queen, each bee shimmying for warmth. When he placed the globe in her hands, she fainted, her eyes rolled back. Lying there, she saw all their dreams at once, the winter reveries of scores of worker bees, each one fiercely vivid: bright trails through thorns to a clutch of wild roses, honey tidily brimming a hundred combs.

With each day she learned more about what she could do. She felt a foreign and keen sensitivity bubbling in her blood, as if a seed planted long ago were just now sprouting. The larger the animal, the more powerfully it could shake her. The recently dead were virtual mines of visions, casting them off with a

slow-fading strength as if cutting a long series of tethers one by one. She pulled off her mittens and touched everything she could: bats, salamanders, a cardinal chick tumbled from its nest, still warm. Ten hibernating garter snakes coiled beneath a rock, eyelids sealed, tongues stilled. Each time she touched a frozen insect, a slumbering amphibian, anything just dead, her eyes rolled back and its visions, its heaven, went shivering through her body.

Their first winter passed like that. When he looked out the cabin window, he saw wolf tracks crossing the river, owls hunting from the trees, six feet of snow like a quilt ready to be thrown off. She saw burrowed dreamers nestled under roots against the long twilight, their dreams rippling into the sky like auroras.

With love still lodged in his heart like a splinter, he married her in the first muds of spring.

Bruce Maples gasped when the hunter's wife finally arrived. She moved through the door like a show horse, demure in the way she kept her eyes down, but assured in her step; she brought each tapered heel down and struck it against the granite. The hunter had not seen his wife for twenty years, and she had changed—become refined, less wild, and somehow, to the hunter, worse for it. Her face had wrinkled around the eyes, and she moved as if avoiding contact with anything near her, as if the hall table or the closet door might suddenly lunge forward to snatch at her lapels. She wore no jewelry, no wedding ring, only a plain black suit, double-breasted.

She found her nametag on the table and pinned it to her lapel. Everyone in the reception room looked at her and then looked away. The hunter realized that she, not President O'Brien, was the guest of honor. In a sense they were courting her. This was their way, the chancellor's way—

a silent bartender, tuxedoed coat girls, big icy drinks. Give her pie, the hunter thought. Rhubarb pie. Show her a sleeping grizzly.

They sat for dinner at a narrow and very long table, fifteen or so high-backed chairs down each side and one at each end. The hunter was seated several places away from his wife. She looked over at him finally, a look of recognition, of warmth, and then looked away again. He must have seemed old to her—he must always have seemed old to her. She did not look at him again.

The kitchen staff, in starched whites, brought onion soup, scampi, poached salmon. Around the hunter guests spoke in half whispers about people he did not know. He kept his eyes on the windows and the blowing snow beyond.

The river thawed and drove huge saucers of ice toward the Missouri. The hunter felt that old stirring, that quickening in his

soul, and would rise in the wide pink dawns, grab his fly rod, and hurry down to the river. Already trout were rising through the chill brown water to take the first insects of spring. Soon the telephone in the cabin was ringing with calls from clients, and his guiding season was on.

In April an occasional client wanted a mountain lion or a trip with dogs for birds, but late spring and summer were for trout. He was out every morning before dawn, driving with a thermos of coffee to pick up a lawyer, a widower, a politician with a penchant for wild cutthroat. He came home stinking of fish guts and woke her with eager stories—native trout leaping fifteen-foot cataracts, a stubborn rainbow wedged under a snag.

By June she was bored and lonely. She wandered through the forest, but never very far. The summer woods were dense and busy, not like the quiet graveyard

feel of winter. Nothing slept for very long; everything was emerging from cocoons, winging about, buzzing, multiplying, having litters, gaining weight. Bear cubs splashed in the river. Chicks screamed for worms. She longed for the stillness of winter, the long slumber, the bare sky, the bone-on-bone sound of bull elk knocking their antlers against trees.

In September the big-game hunters came. Each client wanted something different: elk, antelope, a bull moose, a doe. They wanted to see grizzlies, track a wolverine, shoot sandhill cranes. They wanted the heads of seven-by-seven royal bulls for their dens. Every few days he came home smelling of blood, with stories of stupid clients, of the Texan who sat, wheezing, too out of shape to get to the top of a hill for his shot. A bloodthirsty New Yorker claimed he wanted only to photograph black bears; then he pulled a pistol from his boot and fired wildly at two cubs

and their mother. Nightly she scrubbed blood out of the hunter's coveralls, watched it fade from rust to red to rose in a basin filled with river water.

She began to sleep, taking long afternoon naps, three hours or more. Sleep, she learned, was a skill like any other, like getting sawed in half and reassembled, or like divining visions from a dead robin. She taught herself to sleep despite heat, despite noise.

Insects flung themselves at the screens, hornets sped down the chimney, the sun angled hot and urgent through the southern windows; still she slept. When he came home each autumn night, exhausted, forearms stained with blood, she was hours into sleep. Outside, the wind was already stripping leaves from the cottonwoods—too soon, he thought. He'd take her sleeping hand. Both of them lived in the grip of forces they had no control over—the October wind, the revolutions of the earth.

That winter was the worst he could remember: from Thanksgiving on they were snowed in, the truck buried under six-foot drifts. The phone line went down in December and stayed down until April. January began with a chinook followed by a terrible freeze. The next morning a three-inch crust of ice covered the snow. On the ranches to the south cattle crashed through and bled to death kicking their way out. Deer punched through with their tiny hooves and suffocated in the deep snow beneath. Trails of blood veined the hills.

In the mornings he would find coyote tracks written in the snow around the door to the crawl space, two inches of hardwood between them and all his winter hoard hanging frozen beneath the floorboards. He reinforced the door with baking sheets, nailing them up against the wood and over the hinges. Twice he woke to the sound of claws scabbling against the metal and

charged outside to shout the coyotes away.

Everywhere he looked something was dying: an elk keeling over, an emaciated doe clattering onto ice like a drunken skeleton. The radio reported huge cattle losses on the southern ranches. Each night he dreamt of wolves, of running with them, soaring over fences and tearing into the steaming carcasses of cattle.

In February he woke to coyotes under the cabin. He grabbed his bow and knife and dashed out into the snow barefoot, his feet going numb. They had gone in under the door, chewing and digging the frozen earth under the foundation. He unbolted what was left of the door and swung it free.

Elk arrows were all he had, aluminum shafts tipped with broadheads. He squatted in the dark entrance—their only exit—with his bow at full draw and an arrow nocked. Above him he

could hear his wife's feet pad quietly over the floorboards. A coyote made a coughing sound. Others shifted and panted. Maybe there were ten. He began to fire arrows steadily into the dark. He heard some bite into the foundation blocks at the back of the crawl space, others sink into flesh. He spent his whole quiver: a dozen arrows. The yelps of speared coyotes went up. A few charged him, and he lashed at them with his knife. He felt teeth go to the bone of his arm, felt hot breath on his cheeks. He lashed with his knife at ribs, tails, skulls. His muscles screamed. The coyotes were in a frenzy. Blood bloomed from his wrist, his thigh.

She heard the otherworldly screams of wounded coyotes come up through the floorboards, his grunts and curses as he fought. It sounded as if an exit had been tunneled all the way from hell to open under their house, and what was now pouring out was the worst

violence that place could send up. She knelt in front of the fireplace and felt the souls of coyotes as they came through the boards on their way skyward.

He was blood-soaked and hungry, and his thigh had been badly bitten, but he worked all day digging out the truck. If he did not get food, they would starve, and he tried to hold the thought of the truck in his mind. He lugged slate and tree bark to wedge under the tires, excavated a mountain of snow from the truck bed. Finally, after dark, he got the engine turned over and ramped the truck up onto the frozen, wind-crusted snow. For a brief, wonderful moment he had it careening over the icy crust, starlight washing through the windows, tires spinning, pistons churning, what looked to be the road unspooling in the headlights. Then he crashed through. Slowly, painfully, he began digging it out again.

It was hopeless. He would get it

up, and then it would break through a few miles later. Hardly anywhere was the sheet of ice atop the snow thick enough to support the truck's weight. For twenty hours he dug and then revved and slid the truck over eight-foot drifts. Three more times it crashed through and sank to the windows. Finally he left it. He was ten miles from home, thirty miles from town.

He made a weak and smoky fire with cut boughs and lay beside it and tried to sleep, but he couldn't. The heat from the fire melted snow, and trickles ran slowly toward him but froze solid before they reached him. The stars twisting in their constellations above had never seemed farther or colder. In a state that was neither fully sleep nor fully waking, he watched wolves lope around his fire, just outside the reaches of light, slaving and lean. He thought for the first time that he might die if he did not get warmer. He

managed to kneel and turn and crawl for home. Around him he could feel the wolves, smell blood on them, hear their nailed feet scrape across the ice.

He traveled all that night and all the next day, near catatonia, sometimes on his feet, more often on his elbows and knees. At times he thought he was a wolf, and at times he thought he was dead. When he finally made it to the cabin, there were no tracks on the porch, no sign that she had gone out. The crawl-space door was still flung open, and shreds of the siding and the doorframe lay scattered about.

She was kneeling on the floor, ice in her hair, lost in some kind of hypothermic torpor. With his last dregs of energy he constructed a fire and poured a mug of hot water down her throat. As he fell into sleep, he watched himself as from a distance, weeping and clutching his near-frozen wife.

They had only flour and a few

crackers in the cupboards. When she could speak, her voice was quiet and far away. "I have dreamt the most amazing things," she murmured. "I have seen the places where coyotes go when they are gone. I know where spiders go, and geese ... "

Snow fell incessantly. Night was abiding; daylight passed in a breath. The hunter was beyond hungry. Whenever he stood up, his eyesight fled in slow, nauseating streaks of color. He went out with lanterns to fish, shoveled down to the river ice, chopped through it with a maul, and shivered over the hole jigging a ball of dough on a hook. Sometimes he brought back a trout; other times they ate a squirrel, a hare, once a famished deer whose bones he cracked and boiled, or only a few handfuls of rose hips. In the worst parts of March he dug out cattails to peel and steam the tubers.

She hardly ate, sleeping eighteen, twenty hours a day. When she

woke, it was to scribble on notebook paper before plummeting back into sleep, clutching at the blankets as if they gave her sustenance. There was, she was learning, strength hidden at the center of weakness, ground at the bottom of the deepest pit. With her stomach empty and her body quieted, without the daily demands of living, she felt she was making important discoveries. She was only nineteen and had lost twenty pounds since marrying him. Naked, she was all rib cage and pelvis.

He read her scribbled dreams, but they seemed to be senseless poems and gave him no clues to her.

Snail: sleds down stones in the rain.

Owl: fixes his eyes on hare, drops as if from the moon.

Horse: rides across the plains with his brothers ...

In April the temperature rose above zero and then above twenty. He strapped an extra battery to his pack and went to dig out the truck. Its excavation took all day. He drove it slowly back up the slushy road in the moonlight and asked if she'd like to go to town the next morning. To his surprise, she said yes. They heated water for baths and dressed in clothes they hadn't worn in six months. She threaded twine through her belt loops to keep her trousers up.

Behind the wheel his chest filled to have her with him, to be moving out into the country, to see the sun above the trees. Spring was coming; the valley was dressing up. Look there, he wanted to say, those geese streaming over the road. The valley lives. Even after a winter like that.

She asked him to drop her off at the library. He bought food—a dozen frozen pizzas, potatoes, eggs, carrots. He nearly wept at

seeing bananas. In the parking lot he drank a half gallon of milk. When he picked her up at the library, she had applied for a library card and borrowed twenty books. They stopped at the Bitterroot for hamburgers and rhubarb pie. She ate three pieces. He watched her eat, the spoon sliding out of her mouth. This was better. This was more like his dreams.

"Well, Mary," he said, "I think we made it."

"I love pie," she said.

As soon as the line was repaired, the phone began to ring. He took his fishing clients down the river. She sat on the porch, reading, reading.

Soon her sudden and ravenous appetite for books could not be met by the Great Falls Public Library. She wanted other books—essays about sorcery, primers on magic-working and conjury that had to be mail-ordered from New Hampshire, New Orleans,

even Italy. Once a week the hunter drove to town to collect a parcel of books from the post office: *Arcana Mundi*, *The Seer's Dictionary*, *Paragon of Wizardry*, *Occult Science Among the Ancients*. He opened one to a random page and read "Bring water, tie a soft fillet around your altar, burn it on fresh twigs and frankincense ..."

She regained her health, took on energy, no longer lay under furs dreaming all day. She was out of bed before he was, brewing coffee, her nose already between pages. With a steady diet of meat and vegetables her body bloomed, her hair shone, her eyes and cheeks glowed. How beautiful she seemed to him in those few hours he was home. After supper he would watch her read in the firelight, blackbird feathers tied all through her hair, a heron's beak hanging between her breasts.

In November he took a Sunday off and they cross-country skied.

They came across a bull elk frozen to death in a draw. Ravens shrieked at them as they skied to it. She knelt and put her palm on the leathered skull. "There," she moaned. "I feel him."

"What do you feel?" he asked, standing behind her. "What is it?"

She stood, trembling. "I feel his life flowing out," she said. "I see where he goes, what he sees."

"But that's impossible," he said. "It's like saying you know what I dream."

"I do," she said. "You dream about wolves."

"But that elk's been dead at least a day. It doesn't go anywhere. It goes into the crops of those ravens."

How could she tell him? How could she ask him to understand such a thing? How could anyone understand? More clearly than ever she could see that there was

a fine line between dreams and wakefulness, between living and dying, a line so tenuous it sometimes didn't exist. It was always clearest for her in winter. In winter, in that valley, life and death were not so different. The heart of a hibernating newt was frozen solid, but she could warm and wake it in her palm. For the newt there was no line at all, no fence, no River Styx, only an area between living and dying, like a snowfield between two lakes: a place where dreams and wakefulness met, where death was only a possibility and visions rose shimmering to the stars like smoke. All that was needed was a hand, the heat of a palm, the touch of fingers.

That February the sun shone during the days and ice formed at night—slick sheets glazing the wheat fields, the roofs and roads. One day he dropped her off at the library, the chains on the tires rattling as he pulled away, heading back up the Missouri toward Fort Benton.

Around noon Marlin Spokes, a snowplough driver the hunter knew from grade school, slid off the Sun River Bridge in his plough and dropped forty feet into the river. He was dead before they could get him out of the truck. She was reading in the library, a block away, and heard the plough crash into the riverbed like a thousand dropped girders. When she got to the bridge, sprinting in her jeans and T-shirt, men were already in the water—a telephone man from Helena, a jeweler, a butcher in his apron, all of them had scrambled down the banks and were wading in the rapids, prying the door open. The men lifted Marlin from the cab, stumbling as they carried him. Steam rose from their shoulders and from the crushed hood of the plough. She careened down the snow-covered slope and splashed to them. Her hand on the jeweler's arm, her leg against the butcher's leg, she reached for Marlin's ankle.

When her finger touched Marlin's body, her eyes rolled back and a single vision leaped to her: Marlin Spokes pedaling a bicycle, a child's seat mounted over the rear tire with a helmeted boy—Marlin's own son—strapped into it. Spangles of light drifted over the riders as they rolled down a lane beneath giant, sprawling maples. The boy reached for Marlin's hair with one small fist. In the glass of a storefront window their reflection flashed past. Fallen leaves turned over in their wake. This quiet vision—like a ribbon of rich silk—ran out slowly and fluidly, with great power, and she shook beneath it. It was she who pedaled the bike. The boy's fingers pulled through her hair.

The men who were touching her or touching Marlin saw what she saw, felt what she felt. At first they spoke of it only in their basements, at night, but Great Falls was not a big town, and this was not something one could

keep locked in a basement. Soon they discussed it everywhere—in the supermarket, at the gasoline pumps. People who didn't know Marlin Spokes or his son or the hunter's wife or any of the men in the river that morning soon spoke of the event like experts.

"All you had to do was *touch* her," a barber said, "and you saw it too." "The most beautiful lane you've ever dreamed," a deli owner raved. "You didn't just pedal his son around," movie ushers whispered, "you *loved* him."

He could have heard anywhere. In the cabin he built up the fire, flipped idly through a stack of her books. He couldn't understand them—one of them wasn't even in English.

After dinner she took the plates to the sink.

"You read Spanish now?" he asked.

Her hands in the sink stilled. "It's Portuguese," she said. "I

understand only a little."

He turned his fork in his hands.

"Were you there when Marlin Spokes was killed?"

"I helped pull him out of the truck. I don't think I was much good."

He looked at the back of her head. He felt like driving his fork through the table. "What tricks did you play? Did you hypnotize people?"

Her shoulders tightened. Her voice came out furious. "Why can't you—" she began, but her voice fell off. "It wasn't tricks," she muttered. "I helped carry him."

When she started to get phone calls, he hung up on the callers. But they were relentless: a grieving widow, an orphan's lawyer, a reporter from the *Great Falls Tribune*. A blubbering father drove all the way to the cabin to beg her to come to the funeral parlor, and finally she went. The

hunter insisted on driving her. It wasn't right, he declared, for her to go alone. He waited in the truck in the parking lot, engine rattling, radio moaning.

"I feel so alive," she said afterward, as he helped her into the cab. Her clothes were soaked through with sweat. "Like my blood is fizzing through my body." At home she lay awake, far away, all night.

She got called back and called back, and each time he drove her. He would take her after a whole day of duck hunting and pass out from exhaustion while he waited in the truck. When he woke, she would be beside him, holding his hand, her hair damp, her eyes wild. "You dreamt you were with the wolves and eating salmon," she said. "They were washed up and dying on the shoals."

He drove them home over the dark fields. He tried to soften his voice. "What do you do in there? What really?"

"I give them solace. I let them say good-bye to their loved ones. I help them know something they'd never otherwise know."

"No," he said. "I mean what kind of tricks? How do you do it?"

She turned her hands palms up. "As long as they're touching me, they see what I see. Come in with me next time. Go in there and hold hands. Then you'll know."

He said nothing. The stars above the windshield seemed fixed in their places.

Families wanted to pay her; most wouldn't let her leave until they did. She would come out to the truck with fifty, a hundred—once four hundred—dollars folded into her pocket. She began to go off for weekends, disappearing in the truck before he was up, a fearless driver. She knelt by roadkill—a crumpled porcupine, a shattered deer. She pressed her palm to the truck's grille, where the husks of insects smoked. Seasons came and went.

She was gone half the winter. Each of them was alone. They never spoke. On longer drives she was sometimes tempted to keep the truck pointed away and never return.

In the first thaws he would go out to the river and try to lose himself in the rhythm of casting, in the sound of pebbles driven downstream, clacking together. But even fishing had become lonely for him. Everything, it seemed, was out of his hands—his truck, his wife, the course of his own life.

As hunting season came on, his mind wandered. He was botching kills—getting upwind of elk, or telling a client to unload and call it quits thirty seconds before a pheasant burst from cover. When a client missed his mark and pegged an antelope in the neck, the hunter berated him for being careless, knelt over its tracks, and clutched at the bloody snow. "Do you understand what you've done?"

he shouted. "How the arrow shaft will knock against the trees, how the animal will run and run, how the wolves will trot behind it to keep it from resting?"

The client was red-faced, huffing. "Wolves don't hunt here," the client said. "There haven't been wolves here for twenty years."

She was in Butte or Missoula when he discovered her money in a boot: six thousand dollars and change. He canceled his trips and stewed for two days, pacing the porch, sifting through her things, rehearsing his arguments. When she saw him, the sheaf of bills jutting from his shirt pocket, she stopped halfway to the door, her bag over her shoulder, her hair pulled back.

"It's not right," he said.

She walked past him into the cabin. "I'm helping people. I'm doing what I love. Can't you see how good I feel afterward?"

"You take advantage of them.

They're grieving, and you take their money."

"They *want* to pay me," she shrieked. "I help them see something they desperately want to see."

"It's a grift. A con."

She came back out on the porch. "No," she said. Her voice was quiet and strong. "This is real. As real as anything: the valley, the river, your trout hanging in the crawl space. I have a talent. A gift."

He snorted. "A gift for hocus-pocus. For swindling widows out of their savings." He lobbed the money into the yard. The wind caught the bills and scattered them over the snow.

She hit him, once, hard across the mouth. "How dare you?" she cried. "You, of all people, should understand. You who dreams of wolves every night."

In the months that followed, she

left the cabin more frequently and for longer durations, visiting homes, accident sites, and funeral parlors all over central Montana. Finally she pointed the truck south and didn't turn back. They had been married five years.

Twenty years later, in the Bitterroot Diner, he looked up at the ceiling-mounted television and there she was, being interviewed. She lived in Manhattan, had traveled the world, had written two books. She was in demand all over the country.

"Do you commune with the dead?" the interviewer asked.

"No," she said, "I help people. I commune with the living. I give people peace."

"Well," the interviewer said, turning to speak into the camera, "I believe it."

The hunter bought her books at the bookstore and read them in one night. She had written

poems about the valley, written them to the animals: you rampant coyote, you glorious buck. She had traveled to Sudan to touch the backbone of a fossilized stegosaur, and wrote of her frustration when she divined nothing from it. A TV network flew her to Kamchatka to embrace the huge, shaggy neck of a mammoth as it was air-lifted from a glacier. She'd had better luck with that one, describing an entire herd slogging big-footed through a slushy tide, tearing at sea grass and flaring their ears to catch the sun. In a handful of poems there were even vague allusions to him—a brooding, blood-soaked presence that hovered outside the margins like a storm on its way, like a killer hiding in the basement.

The hunter was fifty-eight years old. Twenty years was a long time. The valley had diminished slowly but perceptibly: roads came in, and the grizzlies left, seeking higher country. Loggers had thinned nearly every

accessible stand of trees. Every spring runoff from logging roads turned the river chocolate-brown, and the soil from the old forests was being washed into the Missouri. In his cabin, bent over the table, he set aside her books, took a pencil, and wrote her a letter.

A week later a Federal Express truck drove all the way to the cabin. Inside the envelope was her response, on embossed stationery. The handwriting was hurried and efficient. *I will be in Chicago, it said, day after tomorrow. Enclosed is a plane ticket. Feel free to come. Thank you for writing.*

After sherbet the chancellor called his guests into the reception room. Burning candles had been distributed around the room: on the sills, the banister, the mantel, the bookshelves. The bar had been taken down; in its place three caskets had been set on the carpet. A bit of snow that had fallen on the lids—they must

have been kept outside—was melting, and drops ran onto the carpet, where they left dark circles. Around the caskets cushions had been placed on the floor. The hunter leaned against the entryway and watched guests drift uncomfortably into the room, some cradling coffee cups, others gulping at gin or vodka in deep tumblers. Eventually everyone settled on the floor in a circle.

The hunter's wife came in then, elegant in her dark suit. She knelt and motioned for O'Brien to sit beside her. His face was pinched and inscrutable. Again the hunter had the impression that he was not of this world but of a slightly leaner one.

"President O'Brien," his wife said, "I know this is difficult for you. Death can seem so final, like a blade dropped through the neck. But the nature of death is not at all final. It is not some dark cliff off which we leap. I hope to show you it is merely a

fog, something we can peer into and out of, something we can know and face and not necessarily fear. By each life taken from our collective lives we are diminished. But even in death we have much to celebrate. It is only a transition, like so many others."

She moved into the circle and unfastened the lids of the caskets. From where he sat the hunter could not see inside. His wife's hands fluttered around her waist like birds. "Think," she said. "Think hard about something you would like resolved, some matter, gone now, in the grips of the past, which you wish you could take back—perhaps with your daughters, a moment, a lost feeling, a desperate wish."

The hunter closed his eyes. "Think now," his wife was saying, "of some wonderful moment, some fine and sunny minute you shared, your wife and daughters, all of you together." Her voice was lulling. Behind his eyelids the glow of the candles made an

even orange wash. He knew her hands were reaching for whatever—whoever—lay in those caskets. Somewhere inside him he felt her extend across the room.

His wife said more about beauty and loss being the same thing, about how they ordered the world, and he felt something happening—a strange warmth, a flitting presence, something dim and unsettling, like a feather brushed across the back of his neck. Hands on both sides of him reached for his hands. Fingers locked around his fingers. He wondered if she was hypnotizing him, but it didn't matter. He had nothing to fight off or snap out of. She was inside him now; she had reached across and was poking about.

Her voice faded, and he felt himself swept up as if rising toward the ceiling. Air washed lightly in and out of his lungs; warmth pulsed in the hands that held his. In his mind he saw a sea emerging from fog. The water

was broad and flat and glittered like polished metal. He could feel dune grass moving against his shins, and wind coming over his shoulders. All around him bees shuttled over the dunes. Far out a shorebird was diving for crabs. He knew that a few hundred yards away two girls were building castles in the sand; he could hear their song, soft and lilting. Their mother was with them, reclining under an umbrella, one leg bent, the other straight. She was drinking iced tea, and he could taste it in his mouth, sweet and bitter with a trace of mint. Each cell in his body seemed to breathe. He became the girls, the diving bird, the shuttling bees; he was the mother of the girls and the father; he could feel himself flowing outward, richly dissolving, paddling into the world like the very first cell into the great blue sea ...

When he opened his eyes, he saw linen curtains, women in gowns

kneeling. Tears were visible on many people's cheeks—O'Brien's and the chancellor's and Bruce Maples's. His wife's head was bowed. The hunter gently released the hands that held his, stood, and walked out into the kitchen, past the sudsy sinks, the stacks of dishes. He let himself out a side door and found himself on the wooden deck that ran the length of the house, a couple of inches of snow already settled on it.

He felt drawn toward the pond, the birdbath, the hedges. He walked to the pond and stood at its rim. The snow fell steadily, and the undersides of the clouds glowed with reflected light from the city.

Before long his wife stepped onto the deck and came down to join him. There were things he had been preparing to say: something about a final belief, an expression of gratitude for providing a reason to leave the valley, if only for a night. He wanted to tell her

that although the wolves were gone, may always have been gone, they still came to him in dreams. That they could run there, fierce and unfettered, was surely enough. She would understand. She had understood long before he did.

But he was afraid to speak. He could see that speaking would be like dashing some very fragile bond to pieces, like kicking a dandelion gone to seed; the wispy, tenuous sphere of its body would scatter in the wind. So instead they stood together, the snow fluttering down from the clouds to melt into the water, where their reflected images trembled like two people trapped against the glass of a parallel world, and he reached, finally, to take her hand.

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