

## **Hemlock**

There was hemlock growing in the backyard for weeks. Today I stopped and knelt down so close my face touched the leaves. Smelled like rusted pennies. I ran my index finger from the leaves to the soil, following the thick white stem all the way down through the snow to the red spots at the base of the roots. Cold but the sun pressed hot on my back like a fever.

I decided this would be a good way to go. I picked a thick stem, pulling it from the ground and brushed the snow off. Peanut butter toast. I'll cut this up and put it on some peanut butter toast; same thing I did as a teenager, when we took mushrooms and hiked through the woods. Hide the sewer flavor with peanut butter.

I put a piece of wheat bread in the toaster and take the jar of peanut butter out of the cabinet. As it toasts, I place the hemlock on the cutting board and chop the leaves first. The stem is tough and my knife isn't sharp enough to make perfect cuts but it breaks into chunky strips and I figure it'll work just fine.

Palmer comes home, walks into the kitchen and kisses me on the cheek. He says, "Yum, peanut butter toast, huh?" And leans in for a bite.

I pull the toast back and say, "No, no, get your own."

He raises his eyebrows at me but smiles and gets a slice of bread and pops it in the toaster. He sits on the stool across from me and talks about work. How great it is when students are interested in the book, how he regretfully agreed to be a judge for a fiction writing contest, how he's excited for this Thanksgiving break, he really needs it. Now he's spreading peanut butter from the jar onto his toast while I'm working on the last couple bites of mine.

He stops talking and puts down his knife.

“What’s going on with you?” He asks, his eyes narrow and I can see them getting wet.

“What do you mean?” I ask and swallow.

“You’re all sweaty.” He’s feeling my forehead and grabs the last bite from my hand. His eyes glance at the leftover stem on the counter, wine colored spots against the white tile and parsley shaped leaves in the sink.

“Oh, Annie...”

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When I open my eyes the white walls and mounted television bring me back and I know exactly where I am. I’ve spent a lot of time in this hospital. Palmer is asleep in the chair next to me; head cocked sideways, mouth slightly open. I reach over to touch him. He wakes with a jump and asks me how I’m feeling.

“I feel better,” I say, “Can we go home?” He smiles but his eyes are swollen.

It’s the day before Thanksgiving. We are hosting this year and I can see the regret in Palmer’s movements but he keeps a smile. He asks me to help him prep and sets me up chopping celery for the stuffing. I sit on the stool at the kitchen island and think about the hemlock. How pretty it was against the fence next to the dandelion weeds that we used to pick and blow. I think about the red spots at the bottom of the stems, how they were the color of hummingbird food; the leafy greens towards the top and how they stuck to the back of my throat when I ate it.

Hemlock grows wild here. It thrives next to fences, in ditches, on construction sites, near past used railroads. It is often mistaken for an edible plant and every part of it is highly poisonous. If digested, it will kill you by paralysis starting with the legs and working up into the respiratory system, stopping oxygen to the lungs and heart. When it blooms it grows soft, flat white flowers that look an awful lot like snowflakes, each one different, clean in color.

Palmer is gutting the turkey. The bare bird sits defrosted on the cutting board, wet and pink. He washes his hands and then dives in, taking out the bag with the giblets and heart. He says, "We could boil these and give them to Charlie, he'd probably love it, wouldn't you Charlie?" The cat purrs and rubs his furry head on Palmer's ankles. He looks over his shoulder at me and asks what I think.

"Sure," I say.

"We could cancel, Annie, I could call and cancel this, if it's too much."

Without another word he's on the phone, explaining in so many words that I am not feeling well and no, it's not anything serious, no, it's not *that*. I continue chopping the celery in even chunks.

Palmer has eyes the color of espresso beans. His hair is coarse and dark. His fingernails are always clean. Sometimes he paints for me when he's bored. My favorite thing he has painted is a rainbow colored bird. It hangs from our bedroom wall, wings flopped downwards to the floor, head cocked to the right, and black eyes stare at the carpet. I like it sometimes, when Palmer is home but often when he is away it scares me, the resemblance.

We take a bath. I fill the tub until it's almost overflowing and watch the steam from the water escape towards the ceiling. It burns at first. Palmer gets in and I put my feet up on his shoulders and he holds my right foot. The bubbles feel nice, pressed in pops against my chest. I'm looking at his tattoo, a grizzly bear with its paws up on his left forearm. I tell Palmer that it moved. He tells me it does that sometimes but not to be scared, it's just a bear and you can tame these things. Then he laughs and splashes a weightless handful of bubbles. We sit in the tub for a long time until Palmer falls asleep with his head tilted backwards; his Adam's apple looks like it might cut through his skin.

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I didn't know it was cancer; not at first. At first it was just white noise behind my left eyelid. There were patches of white, small, like television static. I was scared when Palmer spoke to me, afraid I wouldn't remember the words he was saying. One day he asked me to pass him the ketchup and staring into the refrigerator, I couldn't pick it up; I didn't know what that was. He laughed when he saw me reading the labels on every jar.

"It's right there Annie, on the left, no, no you're *other* left," He said, laughing, thinking I was joking with him, and I pretended that I was.

Most days I couldn't keep my eyes open. Palmer came home to find me unconscious in the garage. We went to the hospital and saw it. On the screen it looked like a hole in my brain, but in fact, it wasn't something missing, but something heavy and white that had moved in.

There were dates arranged for appointments, consultations and surgery. Palmer brought home a poster sized calendar one evening and tacked it up in the kitchen. Green was for the hospital, blue was for the clinic, red was for surgery, and yellow was for support group. There were emergency phone numbers and emergency notes on medications written in the margins and a little wallet sized picture of Charlie on the top corner.

The night we got the results I heard Palmer on the phone with his mother. In a hushed voice he told her that he wasn't worried, that I was the strongest person he knew. I spent that night painting the garage. It had needed new paint since we moved in three years prior. I sat and stared at the walls, imagining myself, under fluorescent lights, my skull cut open, something leaking onto the doctor's shoe. There was something growing inside of my brain. I thought, if it won't leave, then everything else must go first. I stared, concentrating on the blank, fresh paint and eventually I was able to empty myself completely.

Hemlock

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I find a sponge deep under the bathtub water and squeeze it over my head.

"I love you Palmer," I say to his sleeping face. Then I splash a handful of bubbles in his direction. He wakes up with a gasp and then he smiles at me but his eyes don't blink.

"How long was I asleep?" He asks.

I tell him long enough for his feet to look like raisins. A piece of wet, white skin is peeling off of his big toe. I have an urge to pick it but don't because it would tickle him and I can't stand his laugh anymore. It's horrible, like the screeching of bus brakes. He knows what I'm thinking and gets out of the tub. The bear on his arm smirks at me and I drop under the water which is now tepid, and stay under until I have to come up gasping.

Palmer is in bed when I come into the room. I unwrap the towel and we lay in silence for a while, under the covers, watching the moonlight make its way across the ceiling. It's clear and cold outside, frost clings to the window. He holds my hand under the blankets and I look again at the bear. The bear raises one claw in an attempt to scratch my hand away. I look at Palmer and his eyes are open, he's looking out the window. He turns his head so he is looking at me and he asks what I'm thinking about. I tell him I need a cigarette so I get out of bed and put on my pajamas, rain boots and leather coat.

Outside the air freezes my eyelashes and it's hard to blink. The smoke gets stuck in the cold and wafts, stagnant in the frost, a constant cloud in front of my eyes, but I appreciate the consistency of it. Frank O'Hara's "Morning" is on repeat: *The parking lot is crowded and I stand rattling my keys.* I can still feel the hemlock, I think it's stuck somewhere behind my lungs. I think I can taste it in the back of my throat, the taste of raw meat and sugar. I need to get it out. I walk to the yard, sit in the snow and think about nothing but oxygen.

Hemlock

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By dawn I'm still in the yard. I can see my femur bone lying camouflaged in the snow. My ear drum bounces off the sidewalk, playing hopscotch.

Palmer comes out screaming, holding my liver in his palm, it's dripping sticky red and he throws it at me. He tells me I'm crazy as he grabs me up by the jacket collar, frozen leather creaks under his grip. I stand when he pulls me up but I can't feel my feet. Today I am so light. He throws me in the house, screaming about not knowing where I was, hypothermia, act-your-age.

He holds me and he's shaking,

"Annie, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Tell me what to do for you? Just tell me what to do for you."

"You have to get my ear drum, it's almost down the block," I say, watching the thing bounce through the slush in the gutter.

"What?" And he looks at me with eyes wide.

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We met in college. Or maybe I should say we met at work. He is a professor of American Literature and I worked for the landscaping company that mowed the lawn and trimmed back the ivy on the old brick buildings.

I stuck the note in his mailbox, giving him three choices: azalea, rhododendron, yellow daisy. He marked the box for yellow daisies and I planted three bushes outside his classroom window.

We were married three years ago in the spring on the shore of the Chesapeake Bay. The reception on the sand, candles and flowers and our friends played music and I sang “Bring it on home to me” by Sam Cooke while wearing a beautiful white dress but who knew that in the midst of the loveliest evening, there was something else, white and glowing in the back of my brain.

Frank O’Hara’s poem “Morning” became our nightly ritual. When I was feeling particularly awful, Palmer recited it to me in bed, my favorite line being “the car is empty as a bicycle” and his being, “it is difficult to think of you without me in the sentence.”

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I’m lying on the carpet in the bedroom. The rainbow painted bird is staring at me. I watch the bird blink and lick its beak. The bear is anxious, wiggling on his arm. Palmer lies down next to me and holds my hand while he stares into the backyard. He tells me he loves me but that he hates me in the mornings when I’m like this, empty. I ask him what we should do and he says that first things first, the hemlock has to go. Rolling over on his side, he props himself up off the carpet and I hear him run to the garage. I smile and wink at the bird and as I jump up off of the carpet she winks back. Palmer is running towards the hemlock, chainsaw in hand. I yell at him not to run with a saw. He stops and pulls the chain; it clicks twice and then roars.

The leafy tops are tossed up and float down like bizarre green snowflakes. When he’s finished and the chainsaw is turned off, he turns around and sees me watching on the back porch. He’s standing in the snow, sweat dripping, green and red pieces of the plant scattered all across the lawn, stuck in his hair and on his clothes.

“Is this good enough for you?” He yells at me, “Is this how this ends?”

Hemlock

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Palmer comes out of the shower, naked. His dark eyes on my face. I'm standing in the living room, still. But then I see the bear, dancing on his forearm and it makes me smile.

Palmer smacks his tattoo with his right hand, "Damnit, Annie! It's like we should have just let you die."

He pauses for a moment after he says this. He's worked himself up to tears and takes a breath. Then he tells me I have to let it go. He tells me that it's gone now, that I can't still be scared of the tumor that has been gone for a year and a half.

But it's not that it's gone; it's that it ever was in the first place. My eyes, like marbles.

There was someone inside of my brain and something grey and sticky dropped from my head onto the surgeon's covered shoe. He stopped and cursed and the nurses laughed. The room was white. Their scrubs were mint green. I saw it. I want to tell Palmer this. I want to tell him how satisfying it is to feel *absolutely nothing*.

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Palmer goes to bed and I go into the bathroom to wash my face. When I look in the mirror I notice the length of my hair. In a year and a half it has grown back to the exact length it was in middle school: just above the shoulders, but now it falls in flat chunks of mousy-ginger.

With a clenched fist I break the glass. It is disappointing and I am left with bloody knuckles. The mirror doesn't shatter but splits into stream lines, thick and glowing against the overhead light.

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I spent the night in the garage and when he sees me with my glass eyes and bloody fist he only has to shake his head for me to know that he is and I am not.

Palmer gets the tweezers and sits me on the stool in the kitchen. He pulls out tiny shards of shiny glass and puts them in a paper cup. He gets a large bowl from the cupboard and fills it with warm water and soap, comes back to where I'm sitting and places my hand in the water. When it's clean he wraps it tightly in an Ace bandage and tells me I'll need to go to the ER later, he thinks it's broken and he's probably right. My fist is swollen and lovely purple. He points to the window facing the yard.

"See?" He asks, "It's all gone now."

The yard and our backs are framed by the edges of the window. The yard is white with snow and rimmed with the dark brown wooden fence. The sky is gray and low and tiny petals of snow flurry and fall. On the left side, pressed against the fence, I can see the hemlock starting to grow back.

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When he leaves I ask him to take the bird. The bear and the bird each mouth "goodbye" but I don't wave back. I stand in the doorway and watch him struggle through the snow to the taxi that is waiting at the curb. He comes back and puts his hands on my face. Then he hugs me, kisses my left temple and says,

"Go back to sleep now

Frank, and I may leave a tiny poem

in that brain of yours as my farewell."<sup>[1]</sup>

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I left when the tumor did. And that's what they told me when it was finally out. The nurse, leaning over the railing of my hospital bed, her voice liquid, the smell of her coconut shampoo, "It's all gone; congratulations. Now you can get on with your life," she said, smiling, her blue eyes blinked once and, grabbing my file with one slender left hand, she left, a wave of blonde hair floating behind her.

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[i] "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" by Frank O'Hara, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1958