

HAZARD LIGHTS

It jumped out of the dark, an orange triangle reflected in our headlights. Then it and the Amish buggy were gone in a gasp, pulled into the drizzle of the thick summer night.

I suddenly became aware of the thrumming truck tires beneath as they scooped water from the asphalt and spit it against the wheel wells. Mom had said her night vision wasn't what it used to be, but her fingers looked tight around the steering wheel.

I was just 16 and hadn't yet driven enough to think I knew better, enough to ask her to slow down, so I turned my attention back to my new knife, fresh off the shelf at Walmart. I imagined cutting rope to hang bear bags on Adirondack hikes and scraping dry bark off dead wood for kindling.

"You'll be careful with that," Mom said. It wasn't a question.

In the glow of the console indicators her eyes looked like hollowed tree stumps. I was sure her hair was thinner. Maybe there was more than she let on. After all, Mom was a master spy. She snuck chronic pain under the cover of darkness past her sleeping children to find secret relief in the medicine cabinet. She devised codes to disguise her discomfort. But there were no euphemisms for "stage 3" and "metastasis," and in the unfriendly light of the truck interior she couldn't craft her usual espionage. I saw both types of venom inside her, the disease and its treatment, and the skin of my palms broke out in a boiling sweat.

There were surgeries and radiation and more than once a specialist down in Buffalo used a giant electric needle to burn off parts of her liver where the cancer had spread. But it was the chemo that wrought the most damage. I went with her to the first appointment and

watched the nurse hook up a tube to the catheter implanted in her chest. I held her hand and the skin was so hot and I was scared shitless that she was burning up inside and the liquid poison wouldn't work. She squeezed my hand and told me I could sit in the waiting room. But I remembered the time I jumped from the big sugar maple and sprained my ankle so bad it blew up like a purple balloon. When I got to the porch, Mom looked at it and said nothing, just helped me to the sofa and made up a bucket of ice water and opened a bottle of my favorite root beer. So I squeezed her hand back and told her I wasn't going anywhere.

In the truck, she looked so tired, her eyes straining to process the murk and everything it held.

"Are you okay?" I asked. But before she answered there was a *THUD* and I jolted forward against the seat belt as the tires squealed on the wet pavement.

We stopped.

The windshield wipers shuttled back and forth. Back and forth.

"Oh god," Mom said and slid the gear shift to P and punched the button for the hazard lights.

"What was that?" I said.

"Stay here." She opened her door and slid out. I turned and looked through the rear windshield. Beyond the smear of wet was a shape in the road and Mom walking toward it.

I dropped the knife to the floorboards and opened my door and trailed behind her.

She threw up for hours after the first treatment. Before the worst of it came, she told me to take our dog Daisy and play in the yard. Moles had burrowed in the soft spring soil and deposited mounds of mud, so I sat on the swing that hung from the sugar maple while

Daisy sniffed around the holes. I waited for her to realize the moles were beyond her reach, but her nose wouldn't let go. That's how she had known Mom was sick. She had been the first to know. Sometime around winter's last snow she moved from my bed to Mom's. She pooled herself at Mom's heels each morning and howled when Mom left for work. Then on that spring day as Daisy sniffed for moles, the cool, still air carried the sounds of Mom's intense heaving from the open bathroom window.

"It came out of nowhere," Mom said to herself. "I couldn't stop." I heard a quiver in her voice as I approached, like her words were balanced on a rubber band pulled taut. She turned to shield me, but I saw.

It was a dog. A golden retriever. Lifeless on the wet road.

I reached the body before Mom could intercept me. I fell to my knees and laid a hand on his damp fur. Why was he in the road? I thought of Daisy and wanted more than anything to wrap my arms around the thick fur of her neck. *If this ever happened to her...* I shook off the thought.

"What the . . ." A man walked down a short gravel driveway in our direction. Behind him, in the open door, stood the shadow of a woman.

He tossed a cigarette butt as he reached the road's shoulder. In the dark he was just a shape.

"You kill my dog?" He said, and I was shocked at how calm he sounded.

"He came out of nowhere," Mom said. "There was nothing I could do."

"Well, fuck." He didn't lean down to ensure the animal was dead. He just stood there in the damp and tried to light another cigarette.

I felt the blood pound its way up the arteries along the sides of my neck to my cheeks and my temples. My fists tightened like the knot of a noose rope. I stood and started to walk back to the truck in big steps. Behind me, I heard Mom repeat that she was sorry. But this wasn't her fault.

The drugs took Mom's scent and turned it sour. By the third week of treatments, Daisy whimpered and cowered at a distance. Her heart knew the woman, but her nose was hardwired to reject what coursed through Mom's veins. Mom said *I'm sorry, girl, I'm so sorry*, and I could see how Daisy's rejection shattered something inside her. But that wasn't her fault either.

I opened the passenger door and pawed at the plastic Wal-Mart bags and their contents until my hand found the wood of the knife handle.

I turned and started back. Mom was there, and I stopped.

"What are you going to do?" She stepped toward me, and I felt the pounding in my head subside a notch.

"I'm going to teach that asshole a lesson. He just let his dog loose on this busy road!"

She took another step toward me.

"I know. I know." She was calm, but the quiver in her voice was still there.

"He doesn't even *CARE* that he's dead! He doesn't even care." She took another step and wrapped her arms around me.

"I know. He's a real piece of shit." She never swore, and she knew that it would distract me long enough that I'd come to my senses.

I slipped the knife inside my pocket.

Behind her, the man was walking back to his house. Mom followed my gaze and turned.

She reached in behind my seat and pulled out an emergency poncho.

“Put the tailgate down,” she said and began to walk back to the spot in the road where the night had taken such an awful turn. I did as she instructed while she moved through the veil of falling mist and unfurled the poncho like some sort of compassionate matador.

When she reached the dog, she didn’t hesitate. She knelt and placed the poncho over him and slid her hand under and shifted his weight until she had wrapped the poncho around his torso and head and legs. She even reached to her left and tucked his tail into the makeshift shroud.

I should have walked to her and helped. I was stronger than her. But I knew she would refuse my offer.

She slipped her arms between the dog and the asphalt and began to stand. At first, I was sure she wouldn’t be able to lift him. I took two steps toward her but stopped when she reached her feet.

She walked back to the truck more easily than I expected considering the weight she carried. She laid the dog on the tailgate and slid him slowly into the truck bed. Then she reached in and placed her hand on the wet poncho and his side beneath it.

“We’ll bury him in the woods out back,” she said. “Don’t let Daisy know.” She lifted the tailgate and pushed it until the metal clasps caught inside.

The truck’s flashing hazard lights gave glimpses of a red world. One moment, Mom stood before me bathed in crimson. The next, she was just a shape in the dark, like an aura

burned on a TV screen that had just been switched off. Then she was there again, long enough for me to see the dark spot.

At first I thought it was the dog's blood. But she had been careful when wrapping him. Then the lights flashed again and I was sure.

Amid the paisley blue of her blouse was a maroon splotch over the right side of her chest, the place where the chemo port exposed her veins to the outside world. I understood then why the truck was going so fast.

In the next flash of red light, I looked at her eyes. They were damp and shiny. But they were full of strength, and I regretted thinking they had looked any other way.

I decided then that she'd survive this.