

Shannon

Shannon tottered naked through the doorway of the primitive cabin onto the gray plank porch. She leaned against one of the cedar posts holding up the tin awning and watched him watching her.

“Please, Wallace, don’t let it end this way.”

She was not crying yet, but that would come next. He didn’t want to see it, hear the manipulative whine. With long resolute strides, he marched across the clearing in front of the cabin and into the woods.

“Don’t hate me, Wallace.”

In morning’s half-light, he followed a barely discernable sand path in the kicked-aside leaf clutter through an arbor of thick undergrowth. He walked head-down, only vaguely aware of anything but the competing voices plaguing his mind. *Go back—end it now—don’t be mean—the only way.*

A pair of doves flushed from their roost startled him back to the present. Ahead, a gap in the tree canopy and a faint gurgle indicated where the Enid would be. Pushing through a cane break, he walked into an ankle-deep rapid tumbling down into a pool. On the far side, the stream sluiced between two lichen-splotched boulders and continued its cascade to the Hiawassee a mile further down the gorge.

Wallace sloshed to a dry sandstone slab in the midst of the torrent and sat to assemble the two halves of his bamboo flyrod. As he played out the line, the current took it into the pool. He studied the water, planning his first cast. The still surface mirrored the yellow-green willows at

the shoreline with the blue-green spruce on the slope behind. Circles radiated on the water like pings of raindrops. Feeding trout—why he had come. No need to rush, he thought, and sucked in a deep breath to clear his head, still woozy from the night before.

He and Shannon had been at that tipping point—just before drunk, when everything is funny. As they reminisced, the reflection of the candle flame danced in her eyes when she laughed. He added ice from the cooler, a little Crown Royal, and a lot of Coke to their glasses, wanting to nurse this feeling until that perfect moment when she would lead him to bed.

“I didn’t know what you were doing,” she said between snickers. “It was my first orgasm. I thought you were killing me.”

“Me too. You growled like a wolf. Scared the crap out of me, but I couldn’t make myself stop.” They leaned across the dinette table grinning, reliving ecstasy in each other’s eyes.

She threw her head back, “gr-a-a-ah,” and then cackled open-mouthed. “I thought you were magic; only you could cast that spell.” She took a sip and swirled the ice in her glass, her face turning thoughtful. “You know, you ruined me—I mean for other men. The flame never burns white-hot like with us.”

“I spoiled you.”

“Bighead,” she scoffed. “Not really, but you were the first. And it felt innocent and natural. For some women, their first experience is like rape and they hate sex after that. I’m the opposite. I’m ruined because I want every time to be like that first time.”

He offered up his glass for a toast. “To killing you.”

She clicked his glass. “To my assassin.”

She got up, walked behind his chair, and draped her arms over his chest. When she kissed his ear, the universe leaped and he swayed to retain balance. She tuned him like a fiddle to play their song.

He pinched the candle flame.

Willow tendrils rained down from an outcrop overhanging the left bank of the pool. The big one would be in that shade waiting for breakfast to float by. Wallace lifted the rod to ten o'clock and the green fly line lifted off the water in a curl. When a slight bump of the rod indicated the line had straightened behind him, he smoothly brought the rod forward to three o'clock, the tip pointed ten yards upstream of the overhang. The line rolled out quietly on the water, the fly at the end of the tippet landing like a down feather. A perfect cast. He had waited months to make that cast, driven a hundred miles, bushwhacked a mile through wilderness.

She slept in the crook of his arm; cheek snuggled against his chest, bonded to him with swelter. When he tried to roll away, she grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

“It’s too hot.”

“Hold me,” she implored. “The after is important. Not for you, I know, but do it for me. I want this time to be perfect.”

The line slouched back to the rod in S-curves as it drifted downstream. He pulled in just enough so that it would go taut when he lifted the rod to two o'clock. His wet fly would be two feet deep when it reached the rock shelf and drifted under the willow tips. He felt giddy and tried

to calm himself. If he jerked when the strike occurred and the trout weighed more than a pound, the thin tippet would break. It had happened before.

Shannon had roused when he got up at dawn and watched from bed as he dressed and prepared his gear.

“Sleep in,” he told her. “I’ll bring back breakfast.”

“You’re a gentleman, Wallace. Anybody ever tell you?”

“Only you. My wife never mentioned it.”

“We bring out the best in each other, don’t you think?”

He laughed under his breath.

She smiled back. “Guess if we asked your wife and my husband, they wouldn’t think so.”

Wallace sat on the corner of the bed and struggled into his waders.

“Do you ever wonder if we would have made it? I mean, if we had gotten married, would we still be together?”

“Sure we would. If Carolyn hadn’t gotten pregnant—”

“Bet you would be tired of me by now. Stepping out. Inviting some old flame to meet you on fishing trips. Might even be Carolyn.”

Wallace stopped lacing his boots and glanced at her. “What happened to me being a gentleman?”

“And I’d be as bad. We just never grew up—like Peter Pan and Tinker Bell.”

“What are you getting at?”

She sat up smiling and patted the bed. “Sit a minute. I’ve got an announcement.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him down to face her, patting her mouth with her fingers trying not to giggle. “I’m pregnant.”

Wallace jumped to his feet and glared at her. “Not funny.”

“Not with you, silly. My husband. I’m ecstatic. I never thought I would be. Please be happy for me.”

“You should have told me before—”

“If I had, last night wouldn’t have happened. Would it?”

“Why did you even come?”

“I shouldn’t have, I know. I wanted us one more time, to be kids again before the rest of life happens.”

Wallace imagined being the trout, a native Brown, or a big Rainbow that had escaped the gantlet of anglers at the accessible areas upstream. Several years old and savvy, he would have run the small trout out of his private abode. He would hover just off the bottom, facing upstream, waiting for the mosquito outline of newly hatched midges against the surface glare. He wouldn’t doubt the bait, a perfect replica of a midge, and strike before it whisked by him.

The floating line jerked. Wallace dismissed it as an extension of his fantasy, but then the end of the line slowly dipped underwater. He caught himself just before instinct snatched the rod end up. Instead, he eased the rod back until he felt the weight and then flicked the rod to set the hook. It felt big.

The fish darted into the strong current at the center of the pool, swimming hard directly away. Wallace let the line play out against the drag as he slogged to the bank to turn it. The reel

quit clicking just in front of the twin boulders at the end of the pool. From there he inched the fish back, gently lifting his rod to twelve o'clock and then reeling in line when he lowered it. Wallace and the trout became one, feeling each other's struggle through the taut line. With each lift of the rod, the fish felt weaker.

He had walked to the window above the galvanized sink, pushed aside the curtain, and looked out at the clearing in front of the cabin. In first light, the morning haze swirled like smoke.

"Wallace, it's time for us to grow up—move on," she said. "We can't sneak around like this forever."

"So, this is the last time?"

When she didn't answer, he turned and looked back into the shadowy room. He could barely make out her form sitting on the bed, the light from the window glistened her eyes like tiny mirrors.

"If you ask me, you know I'll come. Please don't. And if I ask you, tell me no. Can you do that Wallace? I'm not as strong as you."

His text messages read, *I want to kill you*, and a date. Her reply was either the same date, or if she had a conflict, a different date. She had never refused him. Sometimes after months, he might receive a message from her, *I need to die*. His excuse, a weekend fishing trip; hers, a sick aunt who lives off the grid in the mountains. That aunt had died years before and left her this cabin.

Wallace held the rod tip high and the exhausted trout glided in on its side. He trailed the fish up the purling shallows to a foot-deep washout behind the flat rock where he had assembled the rod. Adrenaline subsided leaving him exhausted like the fish. He sat, rod in his lap and lit a cigarette while watching the Rainbow glint iridescent crimson, blue, then green as it lapped around the sink. A hen, he could tell, by the shape of her head; sixteen inches at least. He wished Shannon could see her.

In years past, he would have brought his prize to the cabin and displayed it on the Formica table for her to admire. She would squeal delight, congratulating him with kisses. He would build a fire in the pot-bellied stove. While she melted butter in a cast-iron skillet, he would cut two filets on a stump out back.

The hook was in the lip, no real damage. He took forceps from his vest pocket and held the trout against the pebble bottom while he worked it loose. Tiny tangerine eggs dribbled from her belly onto the gravel.

Shannon had seen this fish before, or ones just like it. Her excitement exaggerated to pump his ego. He thought of her at the cabin, suitcase open on the bed. If she had started packing right after he left, she would be driving out already. It was the last time he would see her. He had fought away that thought until now.

He cupped his hands under the fish and flicked it out of the sink. She hovered in an eddy getting her bearings; and then with a flip of the tail, slithered down through the rocks into the

pool. A breeze roughed the surface into the sparkle of crushed ice. He lay back on the flat rock, rod balanced across his chest. The sun, diffused by morning mist, hung close like a dandelion pod waiting to be poofed away. Wallace closed his eyes and let the rapid burble through him.