

## Squirrels in Galapagos

Ingrid slows and pulls onto School Street, relieved to see there are no schools in the near vicinity. There's nothing, really, that she would label as much of anything close by except the skulk of the mountains. Toward the end of the street, Ingrid sees the house, knowing it's his without checking for a number. She's almost there, to her guy; or as her boyfriend Julian would say, her *bad* guy.

Julian isn't supportive of her job as a public defense investigator, arguing that as a *good* guy Ingrid has no obligations to the other side, which inevitably leads to her tiredly reminding Julian she's not a *guy*.

"It just doesn't fit," Julian persisted.

"Everything doesn't always fit," she sighed. "Just look around you, Julian." It was a not-so-subtle jab at the state of his house, one he'd ignore in favor of prodding her to change professions.

"I understand the history of these bad guys may be why they do what they do...I'm fully aware of the psychology." At this point Julian would inevitably get excited, not in a way Ingrid found flattering. "And while I don't dispute the whole circle of violence thing, I think it's bullshit. And to think otherwise is just an excuse for more of it. A circle of b.s., if you will."

And then it would end because while Ingrid didn't disagree with him, she couldn't find it in herself to agree either. Which left her in the same place she always finds herself; here, with a stomachache, reaching for a dose of Tums and Diet Dr. Pepper.

The house appears like most in Peru, Vermont, small yet given the luxury of outdoor space that somewhat makes up for the rest. Inside, according to the records, is Dane Gage, ex-sex offender who's not in the same league as her client and technically too old to cause harm. Yet Ingrid has seen enough to understand that patterns and expectations don't always apply to the people she works for.

Ingrid gets out and approaches, vigilant for signs of life. The interior feels dead to her, as if the occupants are long gone. Outside is more dynamic, creatures scurrying into her radar even though she can't see any. She knows it's ridiculous, her fear of wildlife, given the people she encounters— not to mention her choice to live in rural Vermont— yet even her awareness of this irrationality does nothing to ease it.

She spots it as she's getting close to the porch. Sitting on sparse haunches by the door, the squirrel reminds Ingrid of an old man, trapped in a body that's no longer useful. Ingrid freezes, caught in the squirrel's gaze, as signs of fall creep by; leaves passing her feet, the tip of cold in the air, that rust she feels each year casing her skin at the temperature change. When the door opens, the squirrel hops off the porch, and it takes Ingrid a moment to shift her vision.

The sight of a girl at first only registers as a slight shiver in Ingrid's chest. She is Asian, petite, dressed in a long skirt and what looks like a man's button down, the outfit reminiscent of a kimono. Although not disparate in size physically from her, Ingrid has never been this small. When the girl bows, the shine of her head provides an atypical coveting in Ingrid, a moment of wondering what her life would be like with different hair, another face. Ingrid forces herself to move, approaching the steps and climbing. The squirrel has disappeared and she's able to regain focus.

“I’m looking for Dane Gage.” Up close, she sees that the girl is not a girl but a woman.

“Yes, Dane.” Behind the screen she nods. “What is your message?”

“I don’t have a message.” Ingrid considers revealing her private investigator badge then chooses not to wield power unnecessarily. “I’d like to speak with him.”

There had been nothing in the records about a woman in Dane Gage’s residence. Certainly nothing about a wife, a mail order bride as her male colleagues would certainly crack. Ingrid finds herself off track, the woman stirring an instinct she hasn’t felt in a long time. She has to remind herself that Dane, and whatever his personal business is, is not the focus of her investigation.

“Are you friend of Dane?” The woman asks.

“It’s business.” Ingrid answers, more sternly than she intended. “Is he in?”

“Business, yes.” The woman pushes open the screen door and Ingrid is again halted in her tracks. The woman’s nails are painted a moonglow purple, giving the illusion they don’t belong to her. The color is so out of place Ingrid doesn’t know what to make of it.

She steps in, grass and vinegar hitting her nose simultaneously. It’s neater than she expected, the formulation of belongings not matching the exterior. It strikes her that it’s nothing like Julian’s; in fact it’s the opposite of Julian’s, where the compactness on the outside masks the mass of dysfunction within. Although Ingrid has never allowed herself to say it out loud, or barely acknowledge it in her mind, the fact is that her boyfriend is a hoarder.

The thing that allows Ingrid to justify it is Julian’s intelligence, how his absorption in the topic of the moment leaves no room for things like organization. She thinks of it as dedication in

its sincerest, yet one of those charming initial qualities that has the habit of swinging like a hammer to hit hard with the weight of time. Julian's current obsession is the Galapagos. While she enjoys hearing about it to a certain extent, what Ingrid finds unnerving is that Julian has no desire to go there, the disparate pairing of passion and remoteness jarring to her linear thinking.

Finishing her scan of Gage's living area, Ingrid lands on the man himself in the kitchen doorway; not unlike the squirrel outside, Ingrid feels she's been given a preview of what to expect. He's old and semi-bald, disappointed to find himself in the body he was given. He doesn't look surprised to see her, something Ingrid has come to expect with these guys, how in their minds there's always someone standing at the door waiting to take them down.

"You live in Peru?" The woman asks Ingrid, startling her.

"No, I don't." She answers, her eyes still on Dane. "I don't know anything about Peru. Other than the fact it was originally called Bromley but the English associated the name with poverty and asked the legislature to change it to Peru, which at the time was synonymous with South American wealth."

Dane takes a step toward Ingrid and she resists the urge to move back.

"This is Kame." He bows in a manner similar to the woman, yet the aggressiveness is undeniable. "I don't think you got her name before. It means long life."

"Beautiful." Ingrid doesn't take her eyes off Dane. "I have some questions I'd like to ask you Mr. Gage."

"I know all about questions."

"I will get tea," Kame says.

There is a scurry above, which instantly chases Ingrid's urge to laugh away. It reminds her not only of the squirrel outside but the creatures in Julian's walls and attic. How sometimes at night as he's crunched in his books, she sweats over the complex city of animals around them, the large ones above and the microscopic ones that undoubtedly live in the crevasses of Julian's endless belongings.

Kame leaves and Ingrid shifts her body to a stance well practiced in the mirror.

"Does she know?" She meets Dane's gaze straight on.

Dane shakes his head and there is a moment of deciphering, how each should proceed.

"What do you want?" He asks.

"I'm here about Albert Cillian."

Dane raises his eyebrows, the first indication of expression from him. "What about him?"

"I'm representing him." Ingrid says. "I know you two were incarcerated together for a period."

"What are you looking for?"

Ingrid pauses at the intensity of his question and she is momentarily unsure how to answer. What *is* she looking for?

Kame steps in with the tea then and it's not on a tray as imagined but in two disparate mugs. The liquid inside is light and when the scent of Jasmine reaches Ingrid the thought is redirected to Kame. What is *she* looking for?

“I’m looking for information that will help the case.” She says to Dane.

“You’re trying to help Albert Cillian?” Dane takes the tea from Kame with another nod, this one void of hostility.

“It’s what I do.”

“Why?” Dane asks and there it is again, the question Ingrid can’t ever seem to answer correctly. But right now she feels she needs to try.

“My boyfriend is teaching me about the Galapagos,” she blurts. “Have you ever been there?”

Dane raises his eyebrows but before he can say anything she plows on.

“It’s fascinating really, even though I’m not a big fan of wildlife, I don’t trust animals is what it comes down to, I guess. But listening to him talk about the seals and frigates and swallow-tail gulls and the land iguanas...do you know about them? In the 1940’s some scientists moved seventy of them off the main island, Baltra if I remember correctly, to North Seymour to increase the population but what ended up happening was they became extinct on Baltra. So they attempted to bring them back in the eighties, but by 1997 there were still only ninety seven. Ninety seven! Those are not good odds if you’re an iguana.” Ingrid takes a breath, wanting to drink some of the tea, but not trusting her throat.

“Oh, and I forgot the Nazca boobies!” Her laugh peels through the small space. “Who could forget the boobies.”

Kame steps toward her and gently taking her elbow steers her toward the kitchen. “I make you sushi,” she says simply.

The kitchen is unexpectedly bright and Ingrid's eyes water briefly at the change. Kame leads her to the table, nodding to sit.

"I'm not really hungry," she says.

"Eating is not always for hungry." Kame opens the refrigerator and pulls out a bowl of rice and rice wine vinegar. As she begins the process of making the sushi Ingrid is struck with her concentration, the ease of her fingers as she rolls and slices. Then the thought of fish flesh rolls up through it, wet and pungent in her mouth.

"I appreciate your effort." Ingrid stutters. "But I don't eat raw fish."

"No worry." Kame answers without breaking her rhythm. "The meat is cooked."

The thought of cooked fish, or worse imitation crab, is no more appetizing but Ingrid resigns herself and sits at the table. Once down, she is relieved at the break, able to take her first breath since getting here. Kame is silent as she works and Ingrid is able to study her back, the way she moves sparely, fitting herself into the limited space.

When she's done, Kame presents the plate to Ingrid as a gift. The rolls winking up at her, Ingrid sees that what Kame meant by meat is in actuality meat and not fish; ham to be exact. At this juncture, Ingrid feels she's lost the choice to protest, to say anything about how she's a vegetarian and hasn't eaten meat for ten years.

"Thank you," she says instead and picks up the chopsticks. Ingrid lifts a roll to her mouth and closes her eyes. The taste reminds her of Dane, whose presence she's managed to forget in the last few minutes. There is something sad in it, nostalgic, and Ingrid feels her throat closing again. Putting down the chopsticks, she stands up.

“This is very good, Kame,” she says. “But I’m afraid I’m really not hungry.”

“Afraid?” Kame echoes and Ingrid feels like she is asking something beyond the food.

“Are you OK?” Ingrid asks.

“You do not think the sushi is OK?”

“No, no, the sushi is fine, it’s good. I meant here. Are you OK here?” Ingrid lowers her voice to a whisper. “What do you want to do with your life?”

“I do not understand,” Kame answers, but Ingrid she can see she does, that behind Kame’s gaze is something she’d failed to recognize opening the door, something that has to do with the color of her nails.

“I should go talk to Mr. Gage,” Ingrid sighs.

“Yes, talk.” Kame nods in dismissal.

Once Ingrid’s eyes adjust to the living room light the first thing she sees is Dane on the couch. Then the cage at his feet comes into focus. Inside is a squirrel, not the gray fat kind from the porch but a small reddish version, its stillness deceiving Ingrid into thinking it’s a prop for a moment.

“I can’t tell you anything about Cillian,” Dane says. “He’s not right.”

The squirrel shivers then and Ingrid is surprised that it doesn’t affect her in the usual way. She’s unsure if it’s the cage, or the way Dane is clearly using the animal as a threat—threats being something she butts up against like a stubborn toddler when it comes to her job.



“There’s nothing that you learned inside about him that would be useful?”

“Contrary to popular belief, there is nothing to be learned *inside*, as you call it.” Dane shifts in his seat but doesn’t rise.

“What about out here?” Ingrid asks, sweeping her hands across the room.

“What about it?”

“I’m asking if you’ve learned anything out here?” She persists.

“You were asking about Cillian.” His foot reaches for the cage as he talks, giving it a slight tap. “Last I heard he’s not out here.”

“So you haven’t learned anything.” Ingrid is surprised at the flurry of her words, accompanied with the aftertaste of ham. She nods toward the kitchen. “What about her? Hasn’t she taught you anything? Hasn’t she given you anything you didn’t have before?”

Dane stands at her outburst, matching her stance.

“She has nothing to do with any of it. Not this,” he jerks his head at the squirrel in the cage. “And not this.” This time he points to himself and Ingrid sees a shadow of something she’d like to label regret but knows it’s only her hope for it that she sees.

Dane moves to the desk in the corner and pulls open the drawer, inciting her first real moment of panic; like this could finally be it, that he’ll pull out something to end it. In all honesty, Ingrid believes she’s been asking for it since she pulled around the bend and onto School Street. But what he brings out is two cigars and a lighter in a silver case. He holds out a cigar to her and Ingrid doesn’t hesitate in taking it, not driven by fear but a genuine desire for it.

The gesture on his part does nothing to soften her toward him, nor stop Ingrid from what is still a desperate desire to get the woman in the kitchen away from him.

But it feels good in her mouth, her lips momentarily detained from their ordinary urges. After a few inhalations Dane speaks again.

“I think it’s time to move on,” he says gruffly.

“From what?” She asks, thinking maybe he’ll give her something about Cillian, or maybe himself.

“Charles Darwin.”

“What?”

“Your boyfriend.” He smiles for the first time and she’s surprised that his teeth are not only intact but nice. “Evolution by selection. It’s the only way.”

It reminds Ingrid of her conversations with Julian about children, how she doesn’t want them and he does.

“How can you not want children?” Julian would ask, taking on the tone reserved for their job conversations.

“How can you not want order?” She wanted to scream back but never did. It’s all she wants, this order. It’s what she’s attempting with her job, with Julian, and knowing the futility doesn’t lessen the desire for it in either case.

Taking her cigar with her, Ingrid turns away from Dane and steps back into the kitchen. Kame is sitting at the table.

“I’m sorry about the sushi,” she says. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Question?” Kame nods. “Yes.”

“How do you feel about the squirrels?”

“Squirrels?” Kame scrunches her face, making her look like the girl Ingrid initially thought she was.

“Yes, the animals, the ones outside.” Ingrid persists, feeling this answer will give her something necessary. “And the one inside.”

“I feel they are misunderstanding,” Kame says and stands up, facing Ingrid full on for the first time. “My English, it is not so good. Do you understand?”

But Ingrid sees that Kame doesn’t need the language to say what she means, a skill more valuable than anything Ingrid has learned.

“I do understand,” Ingrid says.

“You should go,” Kame says and Ingrid is momentarily startled by the directness.

“Yes, I should go. I’m going now.”

Kame shakes her head, hands fluttering. “No, not here, I mean the islands you say. It sound like a place that is for you to go.”

“The Galapagos?”

“Yes, there.” Kame nods.

“Maybe I will,” Ingrid answers. “Unless there are squirrels there.”

Kame smiles fully for the first time, revealing a missing incisor, the space setting something in Ingrid's head spinning. Ingrid turns and steps into the living room. Dane isn't there but the cage remains. Walking by it, Ingrid sees it's empty. As she reaches the front door, Kame calls out.

“People do not need to know everything,” she says. “It is mistake.”

Ingrid pushes the front door open, hands shaking. On the front walk, she flicks her cigar to the ground, the butt making a definitive whiff as it hits the stones. Stepping over it, Ingrid gets in the car and makes her way back down School Street, this time keeping her gaze straight ahead as she drives away.