

Bandits

Once, in the darkest part of night, my younger brother appeared at my bedside. He'd heard a sound outside. It was winter, our cabin was remote, and the woods after dark were menace and mystery. Perhaps I was ten. He wanted to investigate, and although I was afraid, I followed him downstairs to silently put on our snowsuits and boots and grab a flashlight.

We walked along the driveway's plowed berm and entered the path that led into the trees where during the days we ran and threw snowballs and pretended. Matted snow squeaked under our boots. The cold air hurt our eyes and lungs. Something scurried not far from the trail, a rabbit or porcupine, and I cast the light toward the sound. Earlier that week there was news that men in masks had robbed a bank and fled into the forest, and Ernie and I had been on the lookout for the bandits. We made up scenarios where we smoked them out of a cave hideout and led them into the waiting arms of the authorities. Or we dug a pit and covered it with branches and snow and they fell into it. Now, of course, I desperately hoped we would not run into them.

But then I saw a glinting apparition in the trees ahead. I turned off the flashlight. We froze. "Do you see that?" Ernie whispered. But then it was obscured. I squinted into the darkness. A campfire flickered into view, illuminating the figure.

"It's a man," I said.

"Yeah." Ernie watched it from under the hood of his red sweatshirt. "We better check it out."

"What?" I whispered.

Already he was walking up the trail—no flashlight, navigating by feel, by memory. I caught up to him. "We can't go up there," I said, grabbing his shoulder.

He put his finger to his lips and crept onward. I could feel my pupils widening. The wind squeaked the bare branches overhead, and fairytale wolves prowled the perimeter of my vision. They bared their teeth and snickered silently. Again the fire was obscured by trees, and we walked as quietly as we could, we were climbing a rise, and then it reemerged. We were close. Now it appeared there were three men gathered there, perhaps more. They showed no signs of noticing us. Their fire wriggled and made no sound.

We understood that they were camped in a small clearing where we often played. The trail rose up to it and widened; they would see us approaching. So we left the trail, our boots plunging into the snow, to circle around them. I labored over the soft terrain with its hidden logs and depressions. A branch poked my face. Snow fell into the top of my boot. Ernie kept moving quickly, and soon he was well ahead. I followed the bobbing red shape of his head. I put my feet into the footsteps he made.

I caught up to him at a rocky outcropping. It was often “base” for tag games. It was often our own hideout. In the games that Ernie liked best, a story unspooled in which he was a hero who made intrepid decisions—face the monster, defuse the bomb. Check the sound. He was lying prone, peering over the edge, and I did the same. A bar of snow was disturbed from its branch and fell onto our backs. We looked down.

It was not bandits at all. It was a choir. Eight or ten people standing around the campfire with bare heads and bare hands, which they held out in front of them in passionate gesture, singing in a foreign language or perhaps simply in sounds, a version of fah-so-la. They were men and women, they were dressed in dark clothes. They looked across the flames at one another and smiled. At once they looked up, their eyes following the delirious sparks up into the opening in the canopy above, up into the cold, starry sky. Their voices rose too.

Ernie's gloved hand landed on my arm as if to hold me in place, and together we listened and watched. Aside from the trail and the clearing, the woods were the same as they had been for centuries. Bald, knobby branches glowed in the firelight. The fairytale wolves slinked away. The singing evoked all the world's loneliness, and I was happy to be there with my brother.

At last Ernie's hand on my arm tugged, and we backed away from the edge and retreated in our same footsteps through the snow, to the trail, to the driveway. He said, "I bet those bandits are long gone anyway." We walked back into the warm cabin and pulled off our boots, laying them with a soft thud on the floor. Our snowsuits *shushed* as we slid them off and hung them on our two pegs by the door, and we crept upstairs in our pajamas to the loft we shared and returned to bed.

That was long ago. Today I am sitting on the floor across from a boy about the age Ernie was then, a boy I love very much. My girlfriend's son, soon to be my stepson. We are far from the woods and wolves of my youth, and we were playing a complicated board game of war when he asked me about my brother and the bandits. I've told him the story before; he loves to hear it.

He says, "How come you didn't hear them before you got up there?"

"The singers?"

"Yeah. How come you didn't hear all those people singing with *their hands held out in front of them in passionate gesture?*"

"It's a good question," I say.

"And also, were they on your family's land?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Bold," he says, and I laugh. I want to grab him up and hold him, but he would stiffen and pull away. His mother, my fiancée, lays sleeping in another room. It's early on a summer

Saturday, and last night she and I made love after the boy was in bed and then played cards and drank juicy rum drinks until late, and I have a headache like a hurricane, but I am only too happy to be up now with him. My brother disappeared a few years after that night in the woods, and I have spent my life searching for him. Now, finally, I feel as if I own my soul. And so I can give it away.

The boy plays with a travel hairbrush, folding it so the bristles disappear into the base, unfolding it so they emerge again and the handle clicks. He loves things that work and that have a purpose and a place. It's a neat trick. He says, "I just don't get it."

"I know."

"It doesn't make any sense. Who were they? Did you go up there the next day and see their firepit?"

"I know," I say. I sip my coffee. "It's all so weird."

"Did you make this up?"

"No," I say. "I mean, I don't think so."

"Uh!" He shakes his head in frustration.

"I know," I say. That he loves me too is a miracle.

The sun warms the windows, and outside the city slowly heats up. Soon the boy's dad will pick him up for their weekend together, and his mother will come downstairs and kiss him goodbye, and kiss me good morning. Her hair will be matted in a funny way on the side of her head. I'll make a fresh pot of coffee and scramble some eggs, and after we eat we'll stain the back steps, a chore that we have been meaning to do since the spring. Or we won't, and we'll go walk by the lake instead.

"Was your brother brave?" the boy asks.

“Yes, he was.”

“Am I brave?”

“I think so.”

Once, maybe ten years ago, I wrote a letter to Ernie. I told him everything I could think of to tell him. I asked where he was. I wrote his name on the envelope and dropped it with no address into the blue box near where I lived. Right away I thought of someone getting that letter, somebody who worked at the post office, and just throwing it away, or reading it and *then* throwing it away, and I regretted what I’d done.

“I don’t think we’ll have time to finish this game,” I say.

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Will you ever?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “No.”

There’s a knock at the door and he stands up. The floorboards creak overhead as his mom comes down.

Ernie and I did go back to that spot the next day, of course, but there was no sign of the fire. Maybe we’d imagined it, like we did so many things. Imagined it together. Ernie said, “Those sneaky fuckers obscured their footprints.” Every step I ever took, I trailed breadcrumbs behind me.