

The funny business comes later, when both men are back at camp. Sean arrives first, carrying a dead rabbit, which he skins and puts on a stick and rotates over the fire. Sean is in a fine mood and he drinks beer and he holds hands with Marianne. They kiss. Then Tom shows up. And he is not so agreeable. Tom says he got lost on the other side of the creek and it took a long time to figure his way back. Tom looks at me as if it is my fault he went off course in the far woods.

He eyes the cooking carcass. "What the hell?"

Sean does an Elmer Fudd, "B-bugs B-b-bunny."

Marianne laughs. She is a much better person when Sean is in a good mood.

Tom says, "Fuck."

All of this is pretty amazing. None of us are camping people. Tom wears his new outdoor clothes like he stole them from a country store. Marianne looks like she can't live without a mirror. And Sean. Who in their right mind would ever think Sean could skin a rabbit? Here is this paunchy, pale-faced salesman, who's only physical skill, as far as I know, is between the sheets, and now there is this Daniel Boone who can take a knife and remove the innards from a Peter Cottontail. It boggles the imagination.

Marianne brings Sean another beer from the cooler. She pours me and Tom more wine, filling our glasses to the rim. Marianne likes to play the hostess. I've learned that about her. The time we had dinner at their house she had china and crystal and napkin rings and she made a production about the French casserole in the oven. Provence, she said. And everything went by schedule. Drinks in the living room, dinner by candle light, brandy on the patio. It was an exhausting night.

"Do you like this wine? It's our favorite. Sean chose it. I always trust his judgment."

She has long legs. Her skirt shows them off well. At least I know enough to wear pants to go camping. Marianne leans against Sean to kiss his cheek.

Sean makes a toast, To new friends. Tom nods, Yes, new friends, saying it as if he almost means it. Tom is a wary man, wary and careful and prone to too much patience. We are working on that.

We are out here in the middle of nowhere because of Sean and his memories. It was at their dinner and we were talking about what we were like when we were teenagers. Marianne won a beauty pageant. Tom worked after school at a hardware store. And Sean said he and his dad went camping all the time and he got on a long story describing the wonders of the great outdoors, hiking the Blue Ridge and sleeping under the Milky Way. It was, he said, like heaven.

So here we are, and it's really not too bad. The woods, the clearing, the fire, the view off into the distance. I can see the appeal.

Now that we have everything set up. Tom and I had big problems with our tent, the poles going this way and that, until Sean came over to give us a hand. He made a joke about it, saying Tom didn't know how to treat a woman, that if Tom didn't watch out I might get away. Tom got an odd look on his face and I told him it was just salesman talk. That it didn't mean anything.

"It sure is something," Sean says, gazing over the landscape.

"Wait until you see the stars. We'll have rabbit under the heavens."

I doubt any of us actually expects to eat the rabbit, except maybe Sean, and he'll do it just to show he can. Sean is like that. He's a guy who has to prove he is that much better than anyone else.

Sean says, "We were here last year. Remember?" Marianne nods. "We had a time. We had a time, didn't we?"

She smiles, a private smile that means they had a lot of sex. I wonder if she makes much noise. I imagine so. What with Sean and all.

When Tom gets uncomfortable he gets quiet. He is quiet now. The drive up here seemed to take forever and Sean and Marianne talked the whole time. Sean does fundraising for the university, keeps the big donations coming in, makes sure the patrons stay happy, and Marianne is in the admissions department, where she plans events like freshman orientation and graduation weekend, and they love talking about what they do, and on the drive they just wouldn't shut up. Tom stared out the window as if he had something heavy on his mind. He does that when he is bored.

Tom works at the university too, but he's a professor, a physics professor, tenure said soon. Tom, I know, doesn't think much of Sean. He sees him as a nuisance, an obligation. Donations are as important to the physics department as anywhere else. And Sean has the power to guide the money.

We rode in Sean's Escalade, a big thing, like traveling in a living room. Sean showed us everything, the gadgets, the screens, the sound system. We don't know them that well. We're just beginning as couples, and this trip is a huge step. It took me forever to get Tom to agree. He hasn't said more than twenty words the whole time.

So here we are. Night is near. A sharp breeze comes up and falls away, comes up and falls away. We sit on the ground and stare at our dinner smoking over the fire.

Marianne asks, "Are you doing it right?"

"Yeah," Sean says, "I was an eagle scout. You know that."

Sean tells us about scouting, the various levels, how hard it is to reach the top. He says only four percent of boy scouts become eagle scouts. It takes a lot of hard work. Scouting, he says, teaches a boy how to be a man. He tells us about an eagle trip to the Rockies, two weeks hiking and camping in the wilderness, and they were on a mountain when a sudden storm came in and they hid under a crevice, huddling against the rain and sleet and hail, and that was just the beginning. Though I am not sure I believe him. The story sounds too perfect. Sean, by nature, exaggerates a lot. He is, after all, a salesman. But he did know

how to skin a rabbit. I will give him that. He took the knife and sliced the stomach open and grabbed all the inside stuff out. He cut off the head. That took a while. Marianne had to look away. The skin didn't come off too easy either.

Thank goodness we have steaks.

Marianne sits as close as she can to Sean. He runs his hand up and down inside her bare leg. Marianne reminds me of Natalie Wood, the easy sensuality, the tender beauty of the actress. She has a nice grace with a big hint of vulnerability. She plays on that, of course. Anyone would. And tonight her conversation bounces from sports to religion to restaurants, somehow leading to her hatred of lies and deceptions.

"It's a Ten Commandment."

"No, it isn't," I say, though I could be wrong. I am not an Old Testament kind of girl. I like forgiveness. A whole bunch of it.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness."

"Maybe."

"Thou shalt not commit adultery." She pauses. "It's a lie until you find out."

Sean laughs. It's a short, halting laugh, with a mean edge at the end. Marianne is the wife he married three years ago. After Greta. And there was certainly a great amount of adultery going on then. Marianne took a lot of grief from a lot of people. The resentment still lingers. Greta is a popular administrator at the university.

"I recommend," Sean says, "a second marriage."

This is the first for Tom and I, though that doesn't mean we haven't both made our romantic mistakes. Mine are legion. Tom not as much. He is such a careful man. He is my rock. I am his wild flower.

Sean says, "Greta is a first class bitch, and that makes for a bad marriage." He looks at me. "You're not a bitch, are you?"

I laugh. "Sometimes."

"Yeah," Tom says, "sometimes."

"But you're not a bastard." Sean says to Tom.

"No, he's not," I say, and I touch his arm, and he pulls away.

"I'm a bastard." Sean says it like it's a badge of honor. "You got to be a bastard to get ahead in this world. The scouts taught me that."

"I'm not a bitch," Marianne says. "I'm not a bitch, am I?"

"No, dear, you are not. You are perfect in every way. Look at that smile. Smile again. Show them."

Along with the legs, she has a full set upstairs. She is also quite nice. When she isn't trying to look pretty, she really is very pretty. The fake smile she gives now does nothing for her.

"I figure the rabbit another half hour," Tom stands by the fire, "then we let it rest for fifteen. That's when we do the vegetables on the grill."

Tom looks at the meat over the fire. "Maybe we should just do the steaks."

I say I agree. Fresh rabbit is not on my bucket list.

“Ye of little faith.”

Tom likes things a certain way. He wants a pattern, a path.

Getting lost in the woods must have made him nuts. This trip is not his idea of a good time. Tom is more of a cabin by the lake, house at the beach, kind of man. A wild rabbit would be the last thing on his list. He is better with a book in a chair. One of those books full of long numbers. If we were alone at a house on the beach this would be the time of day he would put his book down and call to me and I would walk in and come to his lap.

Sean says, “This is camping.”

Tom says, “I’m not eating that thing.”

“Yes, you are. It’s what’s for dinner.”

Tom lowers his head. “I’m having steak.”

Sean and I are alone for a bit. Marianne is at the table, cutting up vegetables for the portable grill. She is big into eggplant. Tom has wondered over to the trees, finding something to piss behind. I see him trying to pick out the best one.

“This is good,” Sean touches my shoulder, his hand nearing the nape of my neck. “This is going okay. You doing okay? I’m doing okay. I told Marianne. I told Marianne this morning, when we were driving over to pick you up. She got me mad about something, so I told her. You couldn’t tell?”

I shrug. Sean is probably full of shit. He is always full of shit. But if did tell her about us? She hid it well. Maybe Marianne is better than I think she is.

“Have you told him? I think he knows. He acts like he knows. You don’t see it?”

“He doesn’t know, and he’s not going to know.” I hold his stare. “You and I are done. You do know that.”

“He’s not good enough for you. I’m what you want. I’m good enough for you.”

“I love Tom.” Why am I saying this? We went through this last week, when I told Sean no more, that what we were doing we wouldn’t be doing anymore. That there was no we, no us, no this.

“Who said anything about love? I’m talking you and me. Nobody fucks you like I fuck you.”

“Don’t be crude.”

“You like it crude.”

I watch Tom walking through the meadow towards us and I see how he looks at me.

I say, “I married a man.”

“Hey!” Sean grabs my wrist hard. “We’re not finished yet.”

“Oh, we are done, so done.”

He grip tightens. “We’re done when I say we’re done. Maybe I need to tell him. That would get things going.”



This is far too dangerous. I am not about to ruin my marriage for a guy like Sean. I thought he understood last week was our last time. We are adults. We should act like adults. What we did has no bearing on what we do. Just because we did what we did doesn't mean we can't still be friends as couples. And Sean should understand that. But now he is a risk. I've had enough risk in my life. Every time, for me, it becomes a funeral pyre.

Tom stands by us.

"Your rabbit," he says, "is burning."

And so it is. The rabbit has small flames bouncing off its body. Sean jumps up and grabs a beer and pours it over the flames and the rabbit begins to steam and smoke. Stepping away, Sean glares at the smoldering carcass, his jaw set hard and rigid.

Marianne kisses him. She is that nervous that he might lose his temper and Sean losing his temper is never a good thing and when she kisses him I can see she is kissing him to make sure everything is going to be all right.

And I think: If Sean told the truth, and she knows, then she really is an interesting woman.

Tom says, "I think I'll have a drink. Where is that whiskey?"

Tom doesn't drink much, and never whiskey.

I stand and join the others and we pass the bottle around like we are teenagers in high school. Every so often Sean sticks his knife into

the rabbit to see if it is done. Blood drips out and sizzles on the burning logs. I hear Tom sigh.

“We should do the steaks,” he says.

“Give it twenty more,” Sean says.

It is almost dark now. A quiet floats on the breeze and I can hear the warm hum of night crickets far off in the distance. It feels like we are just another part of the landscape. The bottle goes around.

“I could have been an eagle scout,” Tom says, “but my parents didn’t have the money.”

Marianne asks him what he means.

“Scouting, you get so high, starts costing money. You have camps, you have jamborees. Those don’t come cheap. My dad, he worked for a living, so did my mom, and there were four of us they had to feed. Nothing left over for badges and uniforms.”

“I was a girl scout,” Marianne says. “I sold more cookies than anybody.”

We are sitting again. We pass the bottle. Sean has some cocaine and we do a little bit of that too. He makes a production of laying out the lines. He passes the mirror around. I’ve never seen Tom do cocaine. He snorts the powder like it is a necessary evil. Then he does a funny thing with his mouth when he is done. His lips go back and the tip of his tongue comes out.

Marianne makes a little giggle when she does her line.

Tom says, "I didn't think about it, missing the scouts, summer camp, it just wasn't possible. We had enough. We did have enough. One time these people came by, they were reporters, I'd won a state science fair award, and we lived in a small town and it was a big deal, someone from town winning a state competition, and the newspaper wanted to take a picture of me and my family at home and once they saw what our home looked like we had to go to the school to take the photographs. I was supposed to go to National, it was all arranged, the paper would raise the money to get me there, but that night I took my project and I burned it in the fireplace."

"I had a sash." Marianne is buzzed now. "I had all the badges. Art, Citizenship, Cookies, First Aid, Fair Play. I remember them all."

She keeps on naming her badges.

It is completely dark now and the stars are out and we can hear the bugs and the birds and the crickets and Marianne going on about her damned badges. Finally, she finishes.

Sean looks at me. "You were never a girl scout."

The coke and whiskey are on him. I've seen it before.

"No," he says. "When you were good, you were very good, and when you were bad, you were marvelous."

"Stop it, Sean." I try to grab the bottle from him.

"Tom," he says, "did she tell you?"

"Tell me what?" Tom asks, looking at me.

“Tell you how I taught her. She knew plenty, but I gave her more.”

“She’s my wife, Sean.” His eyes won’t leave me.

“Yeah? And?”

“Honey,” Marianne touches his cheek. “Please stop.”

“Don’t touch my face.” He slaps her hand away. “I’m talking here. I’m explaining something here. I’m telling Tom about his wife.”

“What are you telling me, Sean?” In the firelight his eyes are pin needles.

“What she does to you she did to me and some of what she does to you I taught her how to do. Like, like—“

“Sean, she’s my wife.” Now he takes his stare from me.

“Did she tell you she loved me, she begged me, she would do anything for me, and I mean anything. This one too,” he points to Marianne. “Come on, tell them what you do for me?”

“No.” She shakes her head.

“No? Do you want me to tell?” And he does want to tell.

“No.” She keeps shaking her head.

“Stop,” I say.

“Sean.” A hint of threat in Tom’s voice.

“What are you going to do, Tom? A fact is a fact.”

“Please,” Marianne pleads, and I hear in her voice my voice a week ago.

I say we should just pack up.

“Pack up?” Sean is surprised.

“Yes, honey,” Marianne whispers.

“It’s my car,” Sean shows his fist. “I got the keys. We’ll eat my rabbit and then we can go.”

Then silence.

I watch Marianne. She has been through something like this before. Her slumped shoulders tell all. I watch Sean whisper to himself. I watch Tom. He sits erect, as if nothing has happened, and I wonder if he will say anything when we get home. It is possible we will go upstairs and get in bed and he won’t say a word before he goes to sleep. It would be typical, his way of punishing me.

It is then I realize that Tom has known all along, known about me and Sean. I can now read the signs throughout the day. His sullen morning mood, his silent treatment, his anger flickering on and off below the surface.

Twenty minutes pass and another twenty and the rabbit just won’t finish. Sean is now digging in his knife all the time.

Tom has the steaks out. Sean tells him to wait. The steaks are beautiful. In the firelight they look like marble. Sean says, “Wait.” Tom layers charcoal in the portable grill and sprays lighter fluid on the briquettes.

I take the lighter fluid bottle from him and hold the top to my nose. It has an almost innocent chemical smell that reminds me of childhood cookouts.

Here comes the funny part.

Sean stands over Tom and leans down real close and says, "I told you to wait."

Tom lights a match and Sean blows it out. Tom lights another match and Sean blows it out.

"I told you to wait!"

And I lift the lighter fluid bottle and I give it a hard squeeze and the lighter fluid shoots out and it goes into Sean's eyes. Sean jumps back and screams and his hands are grabbing at his eyes like a million fire ants are stinging him at once.

"My eyes! My eyes!"

His fingers are scratching at his eyes and he turns and he stumbles. He's blind and he's in pain and he can't see where he's going and he stumbles some more and then he stumbles over a rock by the fire and he falls face first into the fire and the lighter fluid ignites and his face is on fire.

It all happens in maybe three seconds. It is almost comical, like a silent movie, except for the screaming.

We are pretty remote and the drive to the hospital takes a long time. Tom is behind the wheel and I am next to him. Marianne is in the back with Sean's head in her lap. He won't stop screaming. So I have to turn the radio up.

Marianne is screaming too. Sometimes she reaches up to hit me in the back of my head. I yell at her to stop hitting me.

The road curves around the mountain and Tom drives carefully. I catch glimpses of town lights every now and then. It is a beautiful evening out, stars shining, moon low on the horizon.

Putting his face out took some time. Marianne panicked and grabbed the whiskey bottle and tossed the liquor on him and that just made the flames worse. Tom had to pick him up and carry him over to the side and roll his face in the grass and weeds.

The car stinks of roasted meat and I roll my window down.

At the hospital they wheel out the gurney and take Sean inside. He won't stop screaming. I've never heard anyone scream so much. Marianne follows him through the doors. Tom trembles. We sit on the curb outside the emergency room and I hold him in my arms. Tom trembles like there are a thousand earthquakes shaking inside his body.

I tell him I did the right thing.

He pulls from me. "The right thing?"

"Oh, not that. Not that."

Though I am not sure what I mean.

