

Deer Crossing

A few weeks after their honeymoon in Costa Rica, Amy invited the Coopers and Pierces to dinner. She was eager to share stories about their fabulous time zip-lining across breathtaking canyons, soaking naked in hot springs, and hanging-out in Montezuma, an adorable coastal town populated by Hippies selling beaded bracelets on the streets. Howard agreed. He had nothing against the Coopers, an affable couple, or Jane Pierce for that matter, but more than once he spotted Mitch Pierce's gaze roaming the contours of Amy's body, and well, frankly, it annoyed him. The Coopers and Pierces were Amy's friends from her first marriage to Will, and though Amy swore she was faithful to Will for the twenty years they were married, Howard wondered if there wasn't something more than friendship between Amy and Mitch.

"So, we take this little tour bus with a bunch of kids. Not a single one was over twenty-five, and two local guys who don't speak a word of English bring us to a shack perched atop an enormous mountain and make us sign papers promising, no matter what, we wouldn't dream of suing, and then, they give us these harnesses." Amy slid her hands down her body and shifted her pelvis forward as if clasping a belt between her legs. "Then, they hand us helmets that look like they were bought at a tag sale in the 80s. Finally, they led us up several flights of stairs, really more like a ladder, to a rickety platform built from discarded planks where we were given tattered leather gloves and told to hold onto an ancient cable wire."

"That's when I had my first bout of vertigo," Howard interrupted.

Amy rolled her eyes, silently pleading with Howard not to mention his ailments. "Anyway, as I was saying, the guide explained when we want to slow down, just squeeze some box on the wire, otherwise we'll go crashing into the next platform a half-mile across an enormous chasm. Of course, if you stop early, you end up dangling in mid-air trying to pull yourself to the platform."

"Are you out of your mind? My God, Amy, that sounds terrifying." Jane shook her head disapprovingly, "You know they don't exactly have inspections in these countries." She could not fathom why her middle-aged friends, to be truthful, post middle-aged friends would risk their lives in God-forsaken Costa Rica - Jane's version of a third-world nation. "You're lucky nobody got injured."

"I tell you, I wouldn't do it again," Howard smiled uncertainly. "I mean, I'm happy I tried it, but to be honest, it made me a little uneasy."

"Yeah, you should have seen the expression on Howard's face as he came in for a landing. I was waiting for him to make it to the platform. He strained to pull himself because he stopped too early...terrified doesn't come close to describing it."

"Amy, I wasn't terrified. You've got that wrong. It was simply a pain in the ass to drag myself along, especially so soon after my shoulder pull."

“Okay Howard, right, you weren’t terrified. You were Nervous. Lord knows, not terrified.”

“I would have been very frightened,” Barb Cooper offered.

“Well, anyway, I’ve got a little treat for everyone.” Amy abruptly left the silent room, returning with an over-sized joint and a Bic lighter. Howard stared at his hands, twisting his wedding band while Amy lit up and explained she had a little agricultural experiment taking place in the basement and this was her first harvest.

“What?” Rob Cooper stared at Amy deftly flicking the lighter with her thumb. “When you said “treat” I was thinking Costa Rican coffee or maybe chocolate cake.”

“No way, Amy. You’re growing pot in your basement?” Jane nervously giggled. “Aren’t you concerned? I mean this isn’t exactly legal.”

“It’s just three plants. I read an article in *The New York Times* about Americans growing pot for medicinal purposes. Did you know recent research suggests pot might actually mitigate the effects of Alzheimer’s? I started growing months ago, and tried it for the first time last night. It’s actually pretty amazing. And truthfully, I do have a medicinal purpose – to feel buzzed!”

Amy inhaled and held her breath in preparation for a deep dive. Barb placed her hand on Rob’s knee signaling it was time to leave, but he was fixated on Amy as if trying to recall the mechanism of breathing. Finally, Amy exhaled, filling the room with the aroma of a college dorm, and then passed the joint to Mitch. Howard noticed Mitch held Amy’s hand a little longer than necessary before letting go.

“Alzheimer’s? Ok, well...so... you guys really did have a great honeymoon.” Barb waved her hand to decline. “Sounds wonderful. We’ve never been, but sounds quite exotic.”

“Mitch, what are you doing? We’re not twenty-year-olds anymore. That stuff can make you sick.” Jane reached to grab the joint from Mitch before he placed it between his lips. He exhaled, followed by a coughing fit. “See, what did I tell you? You old fool.”

Amy smiled warmly at Mitch, “He’s fine, we’re just having a little fun, aren’t we Mitch?”

Mitch held the joint for Jane, “Here, Jane, why don’t you try? It might be good for you – you know... loosen you up.”

“No, thanks, I pass. I’m really tired. Mitch, we have to get going. It’s past eleven.”

“Anyway, as I was saying,” Amy interjected, ignoring Jane. “Costa Rica was paradise. I wholly recommend it. It was as if the clock turned back. I never felt so young, so alive – hot springs, Yoga, naps on the hammock, dazzling weather every day – I can’t wait to return.”

Deer Crossing

Howard watched Amy work the room. One minute she refilled wine glasses and giggled like a teenager, the next she referenced the latest National Geo article on indigenous people of the Amazon. That was the thing— what Howard found alluring and irritating — the way she entertained her audience with outlandish behavior and sharp-witted observations. It was one thing when she lavished attention on him, but he felt reduced to a child when she poured herself into everyone’s glass so they could enjoy her full-bodied intensity.

He had enough. It was time to usher her guests to the door so he could be alone with Amy before she passed out on the living room sofa like she’d been doing most nights since their return. Howard stood and stretched his arms over his head, making a big show of yawning, “Hey guys, I’m beat, hate to bring this party to a close but...”

“Howard, they can’t leave yet. Everyone just got high. If you’re tired, why don’t you go upstairs and lie down?”

“No, that’s fine Howard,” assured Mitch. “Jane can drive.” Barb stood and motioned to Rob to head out the door.

When the house quieted, Howard carried plates to the kitchen, turned off the lights and noticing Amy sprawled on the couch in front of the TV, cell phone in hand, asked if she was ready to come to bed. She didn’t bother to look up. “I’ll be there in a minute.” Howard sighed and slogged his way to their bedroom to read before turning out the light and settling into a deep sleep, oblivious to Amy, alone in the living room, texting Mitch, *had so much fun tonight*. Mitch replied with a smiley face and Amy sent him one with hearts for eyes. After checking Facebook, she dozed on the couch and sometime around four, slid into bed beside Howard to wake with him a short time later as sunlight filtered through their slatted shades.

“We’re too young to die Howard!” Amy shouted when she spotted him nodding off in his chair, one late summer afternoon, a little more than a year after their wedding.

“I hate to be the first to tell you this Amy, but we’re dying every day.” Howard picked up the crossword puzzle and asked Amy if she knew a five letter word for a coffee sweetener.

“Sugar,” Amy snapped.

“Of course, *sugar*, just like you.”

It annoyed Amy when she spotted Howard relaxing, signaling imminent decay. When they started dating ten years earlier, Howard worked long hours as a financial analyst, and spent his free time skiing in the winters and hiking those same northern New England mountains in the summertime. He was dynamic and sexy. She remembered their first date when he prepared roasted duck and served it with a carefully selected wine. When it was time to leave, she stood in

the doorway and he surprised her when he knelt and slowly lifted her skirt, softly gliding his tongue along the inside of her thighs. For weeks afterward, he arrived at her doorstep before she awakened and left a long stemmed rose to greet her when she left for work.

Amy couldn't be sure if it was marriage or age that deflated him, but lately he spent hours rereading classics and working on *Sudoku*. She pleaded with him to get out, visit clients, go to the gym, volunteer, anything to resurrect his withering spirit. When she bothered to ask what he was feeling, he admitted to finding comfort in the predictability of daily life. He enjoyed mornings neatly stacked one upon the other. He took pleasure in quiet walks through their pre-war neighborhood of streets lined with leafy maples and pattering around the garage, free from the pressure of managing others' finances. It was Amy who struggled like a butterfly caught within a net.

"Howard, what's wrong with you? Are you depressed?"

"No, I'm not depressed Amy. I'm just tired."

"I have an idea. Let's take a ride. I read there's a bluegrass festival taking place near Goshen. We could head over, listen to some music and maybe have a late night dinner in one of those sweet towns near Litchfield."

Howard shrugged, "Okay. If that's what you'd like."

"How about you, Howard? Is this something you would enjoy? I want you to enjoy things with me."

Howard lifted his voice, "Yes, yes of course. I'd enjoy that."

"Well, that's good news."

On her way to get dressed, Amy paused to examine photos carefully arranged on the wall outside their bedroom. She focused on a shot of Howard poised on the deck of a sailboat, taken when his lanky body was athletic. The camera captured his mischievous smile as wisps of dark hair blew about his face. Amy wished she had known him then; wished she was his first crush, the one he took sailing on a midnight cruise under the light of a full moon.

"Hey, I thought you were getting ready?" Howard gently placed his hand on the small of her back.

"Hi, you startled me. Sure, I'm getting ready. I was admiring you."

"Yeah, there's a lot to admire." He pointed at the picture of Amy, taken at a wedding when she was twenty-five. "You look beautiful in that one; almost as pretty as you do now."

"That's nice Howard, but I don't feel so pretty!"

Deer Crossing

Amy retreated to their bedroom, pulling her skin taut across her cheekbones and reaching for her skin cream - “visibly reduces the signs of aging.” *I’m looking for more than just a visible reduction. What I really want is a permanent, deeply rooted retraction of age.*

Howard finished buttoning, “How do I look?”

“You look like you need to change your shirt. Remember, it’s a hot day? And those pants don’t really fit. You need to buy new clothes - something decent to wear when we go out; maybe something a little more youthful?”

“Honestly, I’m not worried about looking youthful, though I’m happy to change my shirt if you think I’ll be hot,” Howard muttered as he returned to his closet.

He didn’t like to think about looking younger or older – not that it escaped his attention. After all, his hair or what was left looked like scattered strands of dandelion fuzz, and his hip ached most times he walked up steps. He tried to ignore these pesky annoyances, where Amy seemed consumed with what neither could control. “Aerobic exercise Howard! You need to get your heart rate up, get that blood circulating to your brain.” Just the thought of exercise made Howard want to settle into his weathered arm chair.

Howard patiently waited in the car while Amy texted Mitch, *he can’t dress himself for God’s sake i feel like i’m taking care of my father!* Mitch responded, *haha, i can’t dress myself either, can you come help me?* When Amy opened the car door, she smiled radiantly at Howard, “Hi”

“Hi to you. Let’s start Amy and Howard’s Excellent Adventure.” Howard adjusted the mirror and began backing up. As he approached end of the driveway, the car jolted from the impact of a tree stump positioned off to the left.

“What was that?”

“That damn tree trunk. I can’t see it from my rear window. I’ve almost hit that thing a thousand times.”

“How about if I drive? It’ll be more relaxing. You know I get tense when you drive and I...”

Before she could finish, Howard jerked the car into park. “Fine with me – give me a chance to rest for a while.”

Amy gripped the wheel and turned onto their street. She began unraveling one of her common thought threads, descending into anxious ruminations of missing Will, questioning her decision to remarry, worrying Howard seemed remote or declining with age and recently, dwelling on her own mortality both abstract and immediate as she considered her mother who died from cancer two years earlier.

Deer Crossing

Howard quietly took in the stone walls and deep pine forests bordering Route 202, pointing to sights as Amy picked up speed.

“Did you see that?” he asked.

“Nope”

“Up there, on the right, hidden among the trees, I just saw a huge pheasant or it could have been a turkey. That thing was enormous.”

“No, Howard,” Amy sighed, “I didn’t see it. I’m looking at the road.”

“Right, you’re looking at the road, but that thing was hard to miss. I can’t believe you didn’t see it.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see it. I was concentrating on other things.”

What other things, Howard wondered. Was she thinking of Mitch? Did Amy believe he didn’t notice her childish flirting, her craving for attention. He tried, but his efforts never seemed to bring her back to him, or soothe her restlessness. Did she not understand that he too yearned to grab the elusive ring of youth; reliving memories of years spent in southern California, alternating between sailing and working odd jobs. In those days, he walked barefoot with hair grown past his shoulders. He rarely considered the future, lived day to day, and savored every second of it. He lived in the moment before anyone knew what the moment was. When he tried to share these longings with Amy, his words were hopelessly inadequate, causing him to pause and stammer. Amy told him his tentative speech signaled a language processing disorder, causing him to further retreat into the wilderness of his mind.

Howard was mulling over these thoughts, peering into the tangled forest when he was thrust forward by the sudden pressure of Amy breaking, followed by a thud. A deer was framed in the windshield and then toppled from view.

“Howard, my God, what *was* that? Did I hit a deer?”

“Sure looks that way.” Howard rushed to inspect the animal’s condition. Amy sat unmoving, holding tight to the steering wheel. Her teeth began to chatter despite the August heat pressing through the door Harold left open. The windshield glistened with dots of crimson. She wanted to help, but she couldn’t stop staring at the kaleidoscope pattern the glinting sunlight and blood formed on the glass. Amy felt a wave of nausea but forced herself to get up, to go to Howard, and witness the damage she had done. She grasped the handle and tentatively stepped onto the burning asphalt.

Howard was kneeling beside the deer, his ear close to its muzzle, listening for faint sounds of breath. Amy watched as he cautiously extended his hand and tenderly stroked the doe’s graceful neck, caressing her chestnut fur. The deer wasn’t dead but its rear leg twitched

Deer Crossing

and there was blood trickling from the injured animal's hip. Amy could see a small tear laid her flesh open just above the wide almond eye that had appeared in the windshield just minutes before.

"Howard, is she dying?"

"I don't know...she might be."

"I didn't have time to react. I didn't see her coming. She came out of nowhere and jumped in front of the car. I can't believe I hit her."

"It's okay Amy."

"I am so sorry, Howard. I can't believe I did this."

"It's not your fault. It happens, especially in the hills."

"I almost killed her. She might die because of me. Oh God, Howard." Amy swallowed what was rising in her throat and moved towards the road's edge, away from the deer, away from the bloody front fender and away from the possibility of death.

"It's okay Amy," Howard repeated. "Really, I've got this. You don't have to look right now. I understand."

Amy stood on the dry, yellowed grass, her arms rigid and her hands balled into tight fists while Howard calmly coaxed the animal to life. He leaned close, close enough to kiss the animal's brow. Amy could hear his kind, fervent whisper, "Come on girl, you can do it. I know you can. You can get up. Please girl. Come on; try...just a little try." The deer's head rested on the pavement, her nostrils flaring, and her massive chest moved rapidly with the labor of breathing. After several minutes, the doe's body settled. In the next instant, she lifted her head and with surprising strength, turned and raised herself to a wobbly stand. The deer, who moments before appeared near death, now stood staring at Howard before turning and disappearing into the woods.

"What just happened? That is absolutely incredible – Howard, you brought her back from death. You saved that deer."

"She wasn't ready to die."

"She looked like she was dying. She was...almost dead. You are like Jesus Christ, Howard. You brought the dead back to life."

"Amy, the deer was injured and will probably die in the forest. I didn't resurrect her. I don't have that kind of power, and neither do you. The best we can hope is that she won't suffer – either she'll heal or she'll die. That's the way it is."

Deer Crossing

“Howard, you are amazing. Thank you, thank you for saving that deer. Thank you for saving me.” Amy reached for Howard’s hand; the one used to stroke the deer’s neck and brought it close to her face. Her lips brushed his fingers. “Let’s go home.”

“Are you sure? What about the music festival? Isn’t that what you want to do?”

“No, Howard, no. I don’t care about the music festival. I’m tired and I just want to go home, home with you.”