

Raccoon

Natalie bought a spray bottle of fox urine at a feed and seed not far up the road. “This will keep raccoons away?” she asked, pointing to the silhouette of a raccoon with a red “X” over it.

“It should,” the man at the register said. “Not guaranteed though.” He popped a bubble with his chewing gum and pointed to a sign taped to the counter that said, “No Returns.”

“That’s fine,” she said. She was staying at her cousin’s old house in Harrison, Ohio and a raccoon she had named Daisy was terrorizing the property. Natalie was chasing but was content with the possibility of failure. She wanted to struggle.

The drive back home was short but beautiful. The fields of corn stretched out around her and she couldn’t help but wonder how many raccoons were in them, gnawing on corn and scaring dogs. A kayak rental stand by the river was nearly abandoned even in summer and the air smelled sweet.

At the house she walked carefully around the birdfeeder with the spray bottle focusing on even application and a strong perimeter of fox urine. She sprayed the side of the shed, the trash cans, all around the back porch. Surely it was overkill.

But the fox urine didn’t work. Two nights later after falling asleep in the big, green recliner in the living room she was startled awake by the sound of the entire birdfeeder clattering to the ground. Daisy was crouched in the exact spot Natalie had sprayed the urine, feasting on seeds that spilled out.

The phone rang as she shooed Daisy away. It was Andrew.

“We missed the deadline for the deposit,” he said.

“Deposit for what?” she asked. A family of cardinals picked through the seeds Daisy had left behind. One had no feathers on its head. She’d heard cardinals could get mites and wondered if he would lose all his plumage. He looked like a creature from the illustrated cover of a copy of *Dr. Doolittle* she had as a child. The stylistic renditions had all been a little creepy to her, the monkeys especially, though she had read the book three times.

“For the church, Natalie, for the goddamn church you said you wanted to get married in. If we wanted a spot for the fall or even the winter, which you said you did, the deadline has passed.”

“Oh,” she said.

There was a long pause and finally he asked, “When are you coming home?”

“I really can’t say,” she answered and hung up.

Three months before she came to Ohio they had fought for what seemed like forever over whether or not they would settle in Charleston. She didn’t want to, but Andrew worked in the finance department of MUSC, a fairly good position he thought would turn into something much better. He had stayed at a friend’s house for a few nights and they hadn’t talked much about it since.

Natalie tried to picture him now. He was probably outside working in the yard like he usually did after a fight. He would be sweaty, working in an old t-shirt from Mad River, a bar he frequented in college, yanking at weeds. If she were home she might try to make up with him by cooking a new recipe for dinner. She would use vegetables and herbs from his garden and they would drink white wine and talk about anything except what they were fighting about. Natalie would do the actual cooking. Andrew always enjoyed the prep work. She would sit at the kitchen barstool and watch him cut vegetables. He would prepare the cutting board like a painter

just beginning to infuse the canvas with color. He would be gentle, purposeful as he grated cheese, cored peppers, peeled zucchini. Neutral territory.

The church, Old St. Andrew's, was the oldest functioning church in the South. It was small, made of white washed wood, situated in the middle of a large cemetery. Andrew wanted to take wedding pictures on the black and white bridge that spanned a pond on the grounds surrounded by cypress knees and cattails. He called it "quaint" and "charming." Natalie tried to see it that way. She tried to focus on the wildly blooming azalea bushes. Her mother's put-off look when she found out the church was Episcopalian, a religion she referred to as "lazy Catholicism" came to mind instead. By August she struggled to believe the simple premise of her own life story: Natalie wants to get married.

Natalie got a dog when she was sure the fox urine would not work. She stopped impulsively as she drove down the country highway and saw a sign that simply read "Mutts" at the head of a long, dirt road leading to a farm. She named her mutt, who appeared to have some basset hound in him, Henry, after deliberating between that and Fitzgerald. But Henry Miller dispatched of his Daisy so deftly, while Fitzgerald's Daisy simply scampered away.

Henry, an able, if young farm dog, left a chipmunk on the back stoop the day after Natalie brought him home. He was adventurous in his explorations of the woods out back, but wary of the area where she had sprayed the fox urine. For two consecutive mornings Natalie woke from a restful night, no scratching at the screen door, birdfeeder intact, trash cans still standing. Henry dozed on the porch, birds sang and splashed as they ate breakfast and Natalie felt like Snow White. She had somehow connected getting rid of Daisy with going back to

Charleston and Andrew and though she didn't want to, she thought, "This is it. I have to go home."

Three nights after spraying the yard, Natalie woke up, her leg asleep. Henry pawed at the screen and whined. Her leg tingled as she opened the door and stumbled back to let Henry dash inside. In the gray light of pre-dawn she saw the feeder knocked and crooked, the bottom bent. Daisy hissed, teeth bared and found Henry unwilling to fight. The trashcans too were knocked over: the bungee cords holding the tops on had been chewed through.

Natalie dialed Andrew's phone number before she remembered how early it was. She hit cancel until the line went dead. She was a modern woman in a new dark age where she would not admit to being in love, afraid of losing something she refused to feel. Late night text messages and abbreviated conversations had created a generation of unloved, cagey women, Natalie thought, reluctant to admit what they wanted for the future.

"Henry," she called and he jumped up from the recliner where he had settled and begun to doze as soon as he came inside. "We're going for a walk."

The walk cleared her head and gave her a sense of purpose. She looked up the number of a local pest control agency. The man on the phone sounded bored as she explained her raccoon problem. She was careful not to say "Daisy."

"No problem," the man said. "I'll be out with some traps in a few hours."

The man in the pest control truck introduced himself as Steve. He pulled a trap, a simple, square metal frame with large, tightly wound springs, from the back of the truck.

“Now, this is a body-gripping trap. It’s designed to kill the pest and since you’ve got a dog, I’d recommend springing for this.” He chuckled at his own joke and Natalie tried to smile. He pulled a large wooden box out. “It goes over the trap to ensure other animals besides the raccoon won’t get in there. The hole at the bottom here is where the raccoon will go in all curious and hungry, then BAM!” He clapped his hands and Natalie jumped.

“I don’t know if we need to kill her...it. Can’t you just trap it and take it somewhere else? I could buy more fox urine or something.”

Steve laughed; Natalie realized he thought she was being stupid. “Ma’am, that stuff doesn’t really work and there are so many cornfields around here, no one’s going to let me dump a raccoon on their property. We use these all the time and there are still plenty of the critters running around. I’d install some electric fencing, but that doesn’t seem like a great idea with the dog.”

“I don’t know,” Natalie said. “I’ll pay you for your time, but I’m not ready to have one of these traps out here. Seems pretty extreme.”

Steve just shrugged. “What city are you from?” he asked as he loaded everything back in the truck.

A family reunion for her mother’s side, very few of whom she knew, took place the next weekend. Natalie arrived at the large suburban house after a forty minute drive, waved to her grandma who had invited her, but saw right away she was an outsider here where long separated hugs and smiles were given freely. She could hear great aunts and second cousins whispering, “Now, whose girl is that?”

At first she stopped to introduce herself, but as the day passed she felt less guilty and more frustrated and exhausted. She began to feign deafness when she heard people asking about her.

She was on her way outside to call Andrew when an obese woman cornered her. The woman had brown, stringy hair and walked with a cane though her face didn't look more than fifty.

"Did you know I was at your parents' wedding?" she said to Natalie.

"I didn't," Natalie shook her head and grasped her cell phone in the pocket of her dress, still thinking about Andrew. She could picture her mother's perfectly waxed eyebrows raised at this woman's appearance and wondered how she had dressed to attend her parents' wedding. Had she been thin then, maybe even a lovely, fresh bridesmaid before years of marriage, child rearing, and a corn-syrup diet?

"You might have heard my son just got married. The oldest one, I mean, Dave Jr." The woman sat down in a porch chair and hooked her cane to the side of it. A Diet Coke was on the table next to her and she grabbed it, sipped, and waited for Natalie's reaction. There were no more empty seats so Natalie stood, awkward and in the way of foot traffic. Twice someone bumped drinks into her back and she felt the cold imprint of condensation on her bare skin.

"I hadn't heard," she said. "Dave Jr.? Have I met him?" How was this woman related to her? She rubbed her fingers across the keys of her phone.

"He and his wife, Sandy, she's a sweet girl, got married at King's Island. Did you know they did weddings there?" The woman didn't seem interested in Natalie's response. Natalie couldn't help but think of her college nickname, "Natty Light" and wondered if Sandy preferred Sandra.

“I didn’t,” Natalie answered again. She rode the Viking ship at King’s Island with her dad when she was six, the first amusement park ride she had ever been on. She had been so excited when the ship began to move, pulling backwards over the man-made lake, her dad smiling and asking, “Ready?”

She rubbed the smooth wooden handlebars and looked out over the water. She imagined pulling closer to a shoreline, still in the distance and wished she had sunglasses so she didn’t have to squint over the bright water. She felt invincible, like the Viking, ready to conquer. She wondered if she could convince her mom to buy her the red sunglasses she had seen in the gift shop. They were the exact shade of the painted beard at the bow of the ship. Then the ride swung forward and her stomach tightened into itself, shrinking into a heavy ball; her grandiose thoughts were pushed from her mind. She sobbed the entire length of the ride, gripping the handle with white knuckles, elbows locked.

“Please, stop the ride,” she managed to shout, as her dad kept saying things like “Lean into it” and “Let go.” She worried even in her panic if she didn’t say “please” the ride would never stop.

When it was over the ride operator gave her a Minnie Mouse sticker and her dad got her a frozen chocolate covered banana. Natalie was impressed now at the person in charge of the ride, a teenager probably, who knelt down, stuck Minnie on her t-shirt, and smiled. Crisis managed. Natalie eyed the kids playing out in the yard as the woman continued Dave Jr.’s wedding story.

“The actual vows were said right at the start of the Beastie, where the line finally goes inside. There were about forty of us in there all dressed up in the middle of King’s Island! When they said ‘I do’ Dave Jr. and Sandy waltzed right up to the gates and rode the roller coaster. It was too cute.”

She was a little out of breath. “Well,” the woman wheezed, a little miffed Natalie was not reduced to a simpering mess by her story, “Are you married yet?”

“I’m engaged,” she said without thinking. The woman smiled, a question forming on her lips. “Excuse me,” Natalie said and walked back inside before she had to explain where her ring and fiancé were.

“Did you get enough?” asked her grandma helping to put away the food. Natalie glanced at the spread, variations on the same mayonnaise-based salads and casseroles. One pasta salad was dressed in Italian instead of mayo and she had tried it eagerly only to find it completely tasteless. Natalie rubbed her stomach as if full. She picked a chocolate chip cookie that looked store bought off the dessert table.

On the porch she avoided Dave Jr.’s mother who had already reeled in a new audience for the wedding story.

“They had the carts pull up before the Reverend started so we’d all be able to hear. Wasn’t that nice?”

Natalie didn’t want to call Andrew anymore. She leaned against a tree in the backyard, one of the few not surrounded by chairs, and closed her eyes. Sunlight and shadows pounced back and forth across her face. Cicadas chirped, insistent as the afternoon wore on. This was her adventure, her attempt to escape conventional ideas.

Her cousin, Thomas, who she was renting the house from attempted to play Cornhole across the lawn while holding his two month old baby. No one was playing with him and he talked to the baby as she walked up.

“Need a partner?” she asked.

He looked up, perhaps curious as to how much of his chatter she had heard.

“Sure,” he said. “This one doesn’t have much of an arm.” He raised the sleeping baby slightly.

“I’m sure you’ll pass it on soon enough. Don’t you play baseball?” Natalie moved away from the topic of the baby as she moved to the other side of the Cornhole game.

“Yup, well I did, until the wedding. I’m not taking enough credit hours to play for the school anymore. Evening classes mostly.”

He was only twenty-one. His wife’s parents had helped them pay for the new place when the old place was taking too long to sublet. “What are you studying?” she asked.

“Architecture.”

They began throwing the beanbags back and forth at the holes cut in plywood. Even holding the baby he was much better than she was.

“You really are good,” she said after Thomas won two games. The baby was waking up and beginning to fuss.

“I should find my wife,” he said. “Time for this one to eat. Isn’t it, big guy?” directing the last part to his tiny son. Natalie hadn’t noticed the gender of the baby.

“You’re brave.” The words slid out before she had completed the thought.

Thomas laughed. “You scared of babies or something?” He pretended he was going to toss the baby to her.

“No,” said Natalie. “Of course not.”

“Want to hold him?” Thomas asked, again gesturing with his son.

“I’m actually really thirsty. I’m going to grab a drink.” It was not a graceful exit. She just wanted to walk away before he could call her out. She was overwhelmed by the fact he couldn’t just walk away from the baby. He couldn’t get bored. He couldn’t quit.

Thomas grabbed her sleeve and said, "I know what you think, but I'm happy."

"I know," she said because she saw it in his eyes and his smile and the way he talked about his wife. He was happy.

The next morning as Natalie rinsed blueberries in the sink for breakfast, and talked to Henry about Daisy who had visited the night before, Andrew called.

"I want to buy a condo with the money we've been saving for the wedding," he said.

"Are you moving out of our place?" she asked.

"Do you care? You already have."

Natalie said nothing and watched a mourning dove make a messy, splashing landing in the birdbath.

"Anyway, the money is half yours. I want you to be okay with this. We'll keep the apartment. The condo I'm looking at needs some work, which we could do together. If we can't work things out when you come back, we'll have two places and we can go our separate ways."

He talked fast and Natalie started to feel that indigestion which was what missing him felt like, but the blueberries were fresh from the garden and Daisy had yet to be stopped.

"I'm not coming back," she said, clinging now to the adventure that wasn't quite an adventure.

"Then I'm coming to you," he said.

The words hung between them. She tried to picture him, maybe sitting on the worn down, cheap couch they bought together two years ago. It was collapsing in on itself and he would be leaning back, sinking into the cushions, legs spread wide in front of him.

"Okay," she said.

“Okay,” he said. “Talk to you soon.”

The next afternoon there was an email waiting from Andrew with a link to the condo. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine how it would smell with new paint and area rugs. She would put a bouquet of sunflowers on the kitchen counter. She probably should have asked when he was coming. She had no idea how many days of adventure she had left.

The night after Andrew proposed she slept on the porch. She didn't mean to, but he had fallen asleep in their bed, happy, tired from the evening. She felt so stifled listening to the heat click on and off. She had wrapped herself in a blanket, made tea, and went to sit on the porch. In the cool night air of November in Charleston, she had fallen asleep right on the concrete, looking through the slated railing at the trees on the other side of the parking lot.

But here she was armed with her birds and berries and her raccoon problem and distance. They felt like cool concrete against her cheek.

The phone was ringing, but she didn't answer. When her phone beeped she checked the voicemail.

“Did you get the link?” Andrew asked. She called him back and over the next two weeks they sent packets back and forth with paint color cards, carpet samples, pages of wallpaper books.

Natalie closely examined a few paint chips that had come in the mail when he knocked on the door. She watched him shift his weight back and forth through the peephole. He raised his hand to knock again and she opened the door.

“Peach is circled,” she said in place of a greeting. “Do you really like peach?”

“I don’t know. It caught my eye at the time,” he said without pause.

“I would have pegged you as a forest green type.”

He looked so familiar standing there in running shorts and a t-shirt. She liked him in casual clothes, not dressed for work. When he hugged her she didn’t try to back away. She wanted to hold him.

“Natalie, this place is wrecked,” he said, walking into the living room. “What have you been doing?”

She looked around, seeing the place as he must see it. Daisy may as well have come inside and ransacked the house. Dirty clothes were in small, random piles. She hadn’t done the dishes in a week and there were two bags of trash next to the trashcan.

“I didn’t want to take the trash out,” she said as if that were the only thing out of place, “Daisy has been getting into the cans and scattering stuff all over the driveway.”

Andrew didn’t say anything about the rest of the place.

“I can take it all up to the dumpster,” he said.

“Don’t help,” she said. He was already moving dishes around, rinsing plates.

“What do you want to make for dinner tonight?” he asked without stopping. “I was thinking that chicken recipe with the quinoa and chickpeas and avocado.”

“Ok,” she said and sat down at the dining room table.

“The new place looks great,” he said, taking list paper off the refrigerator and writing down ingredients.

He listed the repairs he had already made. “The faucets and handles will have to be replaced, but they don’t drip anymore. I brought an Ikea catalogue with me if you want to look through it after dinner.”

“Sure,” she said and began straightening the living room without really thinking about it. Andrew’s movement made her feel stagnant and unproductive. “Though we probably don’t need to put a ton of money into it. What if we don’t even stay there?”

Andrew looked at her for a minute and said, “I don’t really want to make decisions based on your whim.”

Just like that the neutral territory of the kitchen was necessary. “I just remembered I bought stuff to make fish tacos. Do you want to just do that? We can cook quinoa tomorrow.” Natalie started pulling things out of the refrigerator. “Want a glass of wine?” she added.

Andrew’s pen dangled above the list he was writing. “Fine. And yes, some wine would be great.” He chopped cilantro and took the conversation elsewhere. He played with Henry while she baked the fish. Two glasses of wine and the kitchen atmosphere restored them. Natalie caught herself watching him, wanting him.

“How are things going with the raccoon?” he asked biting into his third taco.

“Well, I don’t take the trash out because she decimates it. The birdfeeder has been on the ground for a week now, and I’ve left it because she just knocks it over again. Henry is afraid to stay outside after dark and I couldn’t bring myself to have the mega-jaw killing trap installed. She’s obviously won.”

As if on cue Henry growled at the back door and the sound of the birdfeeder rolling around the bricks of the back porch. Andrew and Natalie went to the window. The motion-

sense light went on and they watched Daisy paw around in the remaining seeds. They did not touch but stood close and watched her for a while. Neither one chased her away.

In college after a night downtown, Andrew and Natalie would lay in bed, too drunk for sex and play word association games. After cleaning up the kitchen and finishing another bottle of wine, they sat on the couch together with paint chips, the catalogue and carpet samples.

“Word associations?” Natalie asked.

“Go,” Andrew said.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, we can’t just argue,” she said. “Let’s start over. I’ll start...seeds.”

“Sunflower,” he said.

“Poland,” she said. *Fields and fields of them.*

“Market,” he said. *One in Krakow, one downtown in Charleston.*

“Sweetgrass baskets.” *Women wading, gathering stalks of stiff grass.*

“Ocean,” he said. *The salt, the sand, the shrimp boats, the grits.*

“Home,” she said.

“Really?”