

## STORIES

*No live organism can continue for long to exist  
sanely under conditions of absolute reality;  
even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream.*

*--Shirley Jackson,  
"The Haunting of Hill House"*

He had fallen in love with many women but none of them had been real. They had been creations of his fiction and, while not perfect—he did aspire to write credible stories—they had exhibited his favored eccentricities and physical attributes. He had never met anyone quite like any of them. Then there was Jen.

Jen was one of his wholly imagined blondes with edge, by turns demure and cracking wise, as deeply into stories—her own and those set spinning by the pens of others—as he; seductively cryptic, with her finest moments of allure so natural as to seem unassumed; so guileless as to be imbued with every element of guile. Her fine bones tapered off into impossibly delicate fingers that flew about through her speech like spooked quail and her cheeks arched into high ridges beneath her large luminous eyes. Her unimagined fascinations ran so deeply in his subconscious that he had not known they were there. She walked so perfectly from the casting room of his mind, and spoke so unerringly the high-flown, allusive banter of his dreams, that it was beyond cruel when she went two thousand miles cross country before their relationship had even begun to jell. Was she afraid that it would? Part of him thought so. Artemis had to be in charge of the hunt. He had been dealing with all this, managing it, until the hiker came along. The hiker had thrown him for a loop.

\* \* \* \* \*

## STORIES

Sitting at the keyboard, he types the question: “So who is this hiker?” Then, after a pause: “And why did you have to go out there anyway?” He hits DELETE. “It was good hearing from you. This hiker sounds interesting. Tell me about him. Missing you.” He reads it over, his hand hovering over the keyboard like a hawk over a meadow, then deletes the last two words. He pauses again. He can’t decide whether to say anything about the hiker. Finally, he hits SEND. Almost immediately he thinks he should have omitted any reference to the hiker. Did she expect him to bring it up, to ask? Would she have been bothered if he hadn’t? Now he would never know. But what if he had said nothing and so had she? Then he would have no answer. But what if, his now having brought it up, his now having asked, she still said nothing? My how his women did sore perplex him!

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been several weeks now since she had moved from Virginia to the Colorado Rockies for the summer. She was living in a friend’s cabin while the friend, a professional photographer named Amy Grevilius whom he vaguely knew, was on a job in Europe. She hoped to get her act together and finish some stories she’d been working on, she said; maybe even work some more on a long-dormant novel project. For a long time after she’d left he’d heard nothing from her. He must have sent three or four e-mails. He had to laugh to himself even as he thought this. He knew exactly how many he’d sent: eight. Eight e-mails without any response! Then, finally, this: “Hi, Mark—Hope you’re doing well. Sorry to have temporarily fallen off the edge of the world. I’ve just been trying to get used to things out here. I’ve been working on some things, including several

## STORIES

stories. I'm sending along one I've been rewriting and revising a bit. What do you think?"

And there he was. The hiker.

\* \* \* \* \*

So here's how it went. A young woman moves to the mountains for the summer to meditate and write. Then this hiker stops at her cabin for a drink of water and stays on. The woman is ambivalent about his staying, but he beguiles her, insinuates himself into her affection. He's smart of course. She wouldn't have anything to do with a man who wasn't smart. It's not clear from the story he's smart, but he knows he'd have to be, knows the point doesn't have to be made. And funny. Verbal funny. Like she'd told him he was. Again, he knows this, although it's not made clear in the story. It doesn't need to be spelled out. She wouldn't let him stay otherwise. Also not clear from the story is whether she has any feelings for him. Maybe he's just pleasant to have around. But maybe there is more. They could even be lovers. The story implies this, at least on a first reading. On rereading, he's not sure.

So he writes his e-mail and hopes she'll say something to reassure him.

"It was just a story," she writes. "Did you think the hiker was real? You know me. I'm just holed up here writing. Beautiful weather. A sky so blue it hurts. Breathtaking mountain views. Precipitate mountain paths. Icy streams. And the wildflowers. They're fading a bit now but they've been spectacular. Hope you're well. -Jen." So he's reassured. Then he begins to think. If she's been holed up in the cabin, how does she know about the precipitate mountain paths and the icy streams? The only way to know that paths are precipitate is to walk on them or that streams are icy is to dip your

## STORIES

hands in them. She was never an outdoors type. *You know me.* Yes, he did. Of course he did! When he'd suggest a walk on a nice day she'd say she'd rather stay inside and have a nice cup of tea and read. Her pale skin didn't take to the sun or the wind. She'd get pink in minutes, red in an hour. *A lobster, I'll be a lobster.* That's what she'd say. What was she doing out on precipitate mountain paths and dipping her fingers in icy streams? That wasn't her. Unless someone had seduced her into the outdoors.

\* \* \* \* \*

His story came out of her story. As his fingers played across the keyboard, a man took shape on the screen. His relationship with a woman simultaneously attracts and frightens her. At least this is what he means to portray, though it's difficult, the old slip between the cup and the lip, between the vibrant imagination and the dry written page. Besides, he wants to be subtle. He knows what he's doing, after all, doesn't he? The woman goes away for a while. He doesn't say where. It doesn't matter where. Details are murky. Details aren't important. What's important is that she leaves and the reason she leaves. She says it's to get a break from her routine, get some projects that have been on hold finished or at least substantially underway. But it's clear the real reason is the man. At least he hopes it's clear. To make sure it is he even has her say, "You're just coming on too strong. I need some time to think." Then, he thinks that's too explicit. And surely she didn't say that, wouldn't say that. So he deletes that line. It isn't necessary anyway, is it?

Then he meets Michelle. She's vibrant and alluring and smart. And funny. Verbal funny. He loves Michelle. Who wouldn't love Michelle? He sits there in Michelle's warm embrace and dreams. He reads over the story. When the words are

## STORIES

right, or at least as far from wrong as he thinks he can make them, he saves the story, then sends it to her. Then he goes to make a sandwich. And to wait, reflecting on what impatient creatures we have become in this electronic age when we are already hoping for a response as soon as we send something into cyberspace.

\* \* \* \* \*

He holds the sandwich before him unseeing. It was as if it had just materialized in his hand. Jen comes to him. He sees her sitting before her computer, her hands poised over the keyboard like those of a concert pianist concentrating before tackling a difficult sonata. “Michelle is a vividly imagined character,” she writes. “She reminds me a little of Martha.” No, no, no. DELETE, DELETE, DELETE. He laughs quietly to himself. Three times. Ah, yes, that was rich. Of course Michelle was like Martha, at least in the sense that Martha had evoked a jealous response in Jen at that party. What would she really write? “It was good to hear from you. I enjoyed your story. Is there an inspiration for Michelle? She reminds me of someone.” No, probably not even that. DELETE. DELETE. “Hi, Mark—Enjoyed your story. Michelle seems a little vapid, don’t you think? Very real though.” Michelle isn’t vapid, he thinks; Martha was vapid. With those enormous blue eyes that never seemed to blink and never seemed to look away and that you could look into and see, well, nothing. Michelle’s eyes weren’t even described. But the point was made, apparently. Good. It would be like that. He knew it would be like that.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the sandwich he saw her e-mail vividly: “I’m sending a revised version of my story about the hiker.—Jen.” Opening the attachment, he reads. Where before the

## STORIES

story had inferred that the woman and the hiker may have been lovers, it was now clear that they were. And the hiker was more fully described. Tall, blond, athletic. Nothing like him. The woman appeared to bear a striking resemblance to Jen, not in appearance so much because she wasn't that fully described, but in interests. She was even reading a book that Jen had been reading. And the hiker wasn't smart or funny, let alone verbal funny. He just seemed like some sort of physical presence, some sort of mindless stud, some leering lunk. He was, well, vapid. What could she have been thinking? "So who is this guy?" he writes, and almost as he writes it hits DELETE. She's already told him that the hiker isn't real. She'd just tell him again.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's only one thing he can do.

He sees her sitting before her computer as the sun beams in through the window to form a bright box of light across her desk. The only sound in the room is of the ticking of the small quartz clock off to the side of her computer screen like the one by his computer and of her mumbled stray phrases that form and reform themselves into variants of the numerous ponderous animate and inanimate objects that she could throw further than she could trust him. Ha, he thinks. *Touché!* "I liked your story," she writes. "It was incredibly intense and richly imagined. How do you think of such things? I mean this Michelle has become a real siren, hasn't she? She reminds me a little of someone I met at one of your parties. What was her name? Help me remember." What did she expect him to say? *Remember Martha? I'm seeing her again. Maybe she's the one you see in Michelle. Michelle—Martha; Martha—Michelle. Get it? Yes, my dear, I get it and so do you.*

## STORIES

He goes off to make coffee and think about that.

\* \* \* \* \*

He sits motionless before the screen. He's just finished her latest story. In it a woman is holed up writing in a cabin in the Colorado Rockies. She's left her home back east for the summer, left behind a man whose attentions flatter but frighten her. So she's moved away from him for a while. One evening she sits looking out the window of the cabin into a gentle rain falling through the trees thinking about what will happen when she goes back. Will things pick up where they left off and, if so, where will they lead? As she thinks about this she gradually becomes aware of movement outside. She sees someone, sees the man she'd left behind moving slowly through the trees in the dusk. She can't really recognize him but she knows it's him. And as she has this realization, the sudden revelation of how much she had been missing him stabs into her like a knife. As he approaches the door, her excitement to see him again mounts. Finally, the soft susurrous sounds of the rain are punctuated by a sharp knock on the door. She goes to the door, overwhelmed by the fact that he's followed her and found her so far away when she'd never sent him directions to the cabin, moved that he has come all this way to be with her. She opens the door flooded with the emotion of seeing him again and there he is. The hiker. In a rain-slick poncho with water dripping off his nose and his big blue eyes looking so childish and abashed she can't resist when he says, "Could I come in for a bit and dry off? I think I'm about to develop gills."

\* \* \* \* \*

He doesn't tell her what he thinks of her story. Instead, he writes one of his own. Just like that. In it this guy goes on a TV quiz show and answers every question with a

## STORIES

woman's name. *Jennifer*. Each time he gives the name in response to a question he's told he's right. *Jennifer*. Correct. *Jennifer*. Yes. With each correct answer he becomes more excited and the questions and answers come more quickly. *Jennifer*. Yes. *Jennifer*. Correct. The name spills from him in torrents of breath, shoots from him like water from a hose, until at the big blockbuster crescendo finale of the show he receives the final question and again answers with the name that had been nailing every question and the emcee says, after a leaden pause and in the dolorous tones of a hound at his master's grave, "Oh, no. I'm so sorry. The correct answer is—" Drumroll of doom. *Martha*. He grins at the screen as he finishes. He holds his finger posed to hit SEND, still grinning, grinning like a crazed conscript in the bowels of a bunker holding his finger over the button that will unleash thermonuclear war.

His finger descends onto the key.

\* \* \* \* \*

She knew, she just knew, and of course he knew that she would know. How could he not? She just couldn't leave town for a little while and trust him. There was no Michelle. There was just Martha again, Martha with the big, unblinking eyes and the vacant expression and the . . . her eyes weren't the only things that were big. Suddenly her hiker seemed like very small change. What should she do? She couldn't just go back. She'd promised Amy she would house sit until her return. He sees her walking around the room opening and closing her hands. She picks up a ballpoint pen and clicks the refill in and out, in and out. *Sometimes I think you're sexually ambivalent*. When had he said that? Why had he said that? She wasn't always in the mood. That's all. That didn't mean she was sexually ambivalent. That's what she'd said. Then, when



## STORIES

she'd said she was going out there: *So Amy's not going to be there?* When she'd just told him that she was going to be house sitting while Amy was away, why did he say that?

He walks around the room opening and closing his hands. He picks up a ballpoint pen and clicks the refill in and out, in and out. He should never have let her go out there. He thought it would be all right. Quiet, bookish Jen house sitting for a friend. Getting her thoughts together and coming back refreshed and newly engaged in their relationship. How was he to know that some sex-crazed outdoorsman was going to appear on her doorstep? Were the woods full of such people out there wandering around leaving their cloven footprints in the loam until they lighted on some guileless young woman trying to sort out her personal feelings to take advantage of? As these thoughts bedevil him, the screen of his computer lights up announcing a new message. "Hello. Here's a new story. It's a rather daring new departure for me. I wanted to see if I could write with feeling and understanding about such a thing. What do you think?—Jen."

He reads the story and afterwards sits there quietly for a very long time. Now he understood why she blew hot and cold, was so damned moody, kept him so confused. It wasn't just that she was fickle and indecisive. He knew, of course, that Amy was a lesbian. She was open about it and was always with women when she came within his sphere. But who would have thought that Jen . . . ? But those love scenes were just too real. But what about the hiker? Clearly, the hiker was just a subterfuge, a story, an imaginative flight between fevered embraces by Amy. The truth was that Amy hadn't gone anywhere and Jen had gone out there to be with her. That was no story. That was the truth. It was everything else that was a story.

## STORIES

\* \* \* \* \*

*“So, did we go too far?” Amy smiles as she brushes the long red hair from her eyes. The light glints from that well-remembered ring of hammered silver on her middle finger, the ring she’d brought back from Mexico. “What do you think?”*

*“I don’t know what to think. Why hasn’t he responded? After all my e-mails, sometimes several a day—nothing. Now for almost a week.”*

*Amy is cryptic, silent, non-committal. She restrains her catlike smile.*

*The hiker speaks up.*

*“You should have stuck with me,” he says. “Getting all kinky has turned him off.”*

*“But I told him it was just a story.”*

*“Yeah, sure. Just like we were a story.”*

Was that the way it was, the way it should be? He sends her a text message: “I think I understand.” That’s it. Let her sort out the rest of it.

She, immediately: “Understand what?”

“Your story. About the lesbian lovers.”

“So you liked it?”

“It surprised me.”

“How?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t. But you liked it?”

“Yes, I liked it.”

## STORIES

“Here’s the thing. Amy wrote it and sent it to me. She’s been doing some writing on the side. She asked me what I thought of it. I thought your perspective would be valuable. But I also knew that you didn’t like Amy much. So, I thought, the only way to get you to read it objectively was to tell you I’d written it.”

“Amy wrote it?”

“That’s what I said.”

“You’re kidding me.”

There is a long pause without response. Then: “Yeah, well—”

“Who really wrote it?”

“The hiker.”

He could almost hear her laughter floating out from the computer screen. That was his Jen! Damn her anyway!

\* \* \* \* \*

A week later he gets this: “Amy’s photo shoot in the Czech Republic has concluded earlier than she thought. She’ll be back at the cabin Monday and I’ll be flying back home the next morning. Can you meet me at the airport? My flight gets in at 3:45? United flight 457.”

“Yes, absolutely.” He pauses, thinks, then types: “Are you bringing the hiker?”

“I thought I would. I’d like to introduce him to Michelle. The two seem to have a lot in common.”

He laughs, relieved. But then, he thinks, should he be?

He watches through the airport window as she gets off the plane. He notices that she’s more tanned than he’s ever seen her and her hair is lighter than he remembers.

## STORIES

Coming down the ramp directly behind her is a tall athletic-looking man with light hair.

They're both smiling. He can't tell if they're together.

*"You know what this means?" Michelle asks softly in his ear. "That she's not half the writer you are."*

He closes his eyes for a moment and when he opens them the man on the ramp is gone.

*"Now look what you've done," Michelle says. "Better not do that again."*