

SUSPICION

He sits at the keyboard and types. “I was very disturbed by your e-mail. Who is this hiker anyway?” No, no. He hits DELETE. “It was good hearing from you. I was interested to hear about the hiker who’s been staying with you at the cabin. Tell me more about him. Missing you. –Mark.” He reads it over, his hand hovering over the keyboard like a kestrel over a meadow, then hits DELETE again. “Good to hear from you. Nothing much going on here.” He hits SEND. Almost immediately he thinks he should have said something about the hiker. Now he would never know. But what if he had said something and she said nothing? Then he would have no answer and it would be even worse. Not asking left him some wiggle room. There were so many ways he would have no answer, but this was better.

Unless it wasn’t.

It had been several weeks now since she’d moved from Virginia to the Colorado Rockies for the summer, living in a friend’s cabin while she was in Europe. She said she hoped to get her act together and finish some stories she’d been working on, maybe even work some more on a long-dormant novel idea. He’d heard nothing from her after she’d left. Gotten no responses to his e-mails, and he must have sent two or three. He sits there and laughs to himself. Of course he knew exactly how many he’d sent: seven. Seven e-mails without response. And how many text messages? He couldn’t remember. Then, finally, came her brief message: “Hi, Mark—Hope you’re doing well. Sorry to have temporarily fallen off the edge of the word. Just trying to get my bearings out here. I’m sending along a story I’ve been working on.”

It was the story about the hiker.

This was the gist of it. A young woman moves to the mountains for the summer to meditate and write, but finds herself distracted by an itinerant hiker who stops at her cabin for a drink of water, then 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. That was one of the things she always told him she admired about him, right? That he was smart. So the hiker would have to be smart. And funny. Verbal funny. Have to be. Again, he knows this, although it's not clear from the story. But, really, why did the hiker have to be like him at all? It's not clear from the story is whether she has any feeling for him. Maybe he's just pleasant to have around but, you know, no more. But maybe there is more. They could be lovers. The story implies this, it seems, at least on a first reading. On rereading, he's not sure.

Finally, he asks.

Finally she writes: "It was just a story. Did you think it was real? Well, I guess I'm flattered. I'm just holed up here writing. Beautiful weather. A sky so blue it hurts. Breathtaking mountain views. Icy streams. And the wildflowers. They're fading a bit now but they've been spectacular. Hope you're well. –Jen." He's reassured. At least at first. Then he begins to think, to dissect her words. If she's been holed up in the cabin, how does she know about the mountain views, the blue skies, the icy streams, the wildflowers? Well, of course, she could see the mountain views and skies through the cabin windows, but the wildflowers wouldn't amount to much from inside, would they? And how did she know the streams were icy if she hadn't been outside dipping her fingers in them? She was never an outdoors type. She preferred sitting inside, even on

the most beautiful days, and sipping coffee or tea and reading or writing. Her pale skin didn't take to the sun or the wind. She'd get pink in minutes, red in an hour. What was she doing out looking at wildflowers and dipping her fingers in streams? Unless someone had lured her out, seduced her into the outdoors.

He begins a story of his own.

There's a man in it, it doesn't matter where or when. 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. She leaves, goes away for a while. He doesn't say where. It doesn't matter where. Details are murky. What's important is that she goes away for a while and the reason she goes. Oh, she says it's to get her life in order, get some projects that have been on hold finished or at least underway. But it's clear the real reason is the man. She says, "You're just coming on too strong. You're suffocating me. I need some time to think." Then, while she's away, Michelle enters his life. When the words are all right, or at least as far from wrong as he can make them, he hits SEND.

Then he goes to make a sandwich.

She sits before her computer, her hands poised over the keyboard like those of a concert pianist concentrating before tackling a difficult sonata. "Wow!" she finally writes. "Michelle is such a vividly imagined character. She reminds me a little of Martha. She . . ." No, no, no. DELETE, DELETE, DELETE. Okay, it was unnecessary to hit the DELETE key three times, but those thoughts deserved triple oblivion. The last thing she wanted to do was bring up Martha. "It was good to hear from you. I enjoyed your story. Is there an inspiration for Michelle? She seems very . . ." DELETE. DELETE. "Hi, Mark—Enjoyed your story. Michelle seems a little trampy, don't you

think? Very real though.” She looks at what she has written. A little in your face, isn’t it? She smiles. Yes, it is. But he deserves it, Michelle’s too real to be wholly imagined. There has to be some inspiration. She starts to hit SEND, then pauses.

She will send him a revision of her story too.

Trampy! He hadn’t meant for Michelle to be trampy! How could she get Michelle so wrong? Then there was the revised version of her story and that damned hiker again! The story has gotten more overt. Where before it 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 was more fully described too. She appeared to bear a striking resemblance to Jen, not in appearance so much, which was not that fully fleshed out, but in interests. The woman in the story was even reading a book that Jen had been reading before she’d left for the cabin. 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 lunk. 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 that again. But how could he believe her? He’d read many of her stories and never encountered a character like the hiker. Everything pointed to the fact that she was out there carrying on with some dim-witted Adonis and wouldn’t come clean. He thinks that there is only one thing that he can do.

He must fall into Michelle’s arms.

She sits 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 the ticking of the small

quartz clock off to the side of her computer screen and her mumbled stray phrases as her fingers race over the keyboard. “Who does he think . . . ?” “Where in the world . . . ?” “Some sexpot.” “Can’t even leave town for a few weeks . . .” As this flotsam and jetsam floats out into the sun-rich air she writes: “Liked your story. It was incredibly intense and richly imagined. My goodness, how do you think of such things? I mean this Michelle has gone from being a little trampy to being a real siren, hasn’t she? She reminds me a little of someone I met at one of the parties we went to. Or maybe it’s Martha.” She’s about to hit SEND. Then she thinks maybe another story would help.

She goes off to make coffee and think about that.

He sits motionless before the screen. In her latest story 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—far away—for a while at least. 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 moving slowly through the trees, through the rain, through the dusk. She can’t really recognize him but she knows it’s him. The man she’s left behind. He approaches the door and knocks. She goes to the door and opens it, excited that he’s followed her and found her so far away when she’d never sent him directions. How had he done it? It was a transformational moment, a grand gesture of commitment. But when she opens the door it’s a hiker in a rain-slick poncho, water dripping from his nose. “I’m getting pretty wet out here. Could I come in and dry off for a bit?”

That damned hiker again! Didn't she know how to say, "No, you can't come in"? He writes a story about a guy who goes on a TV quiz show and answers every question with a woman's name. Jennifer. Each time he gives the name in response to a question he's told he's right, and with each correct answer he becomes more excited until the name comes from him in excited gusts of breath in response to questions that keep coming more and more quickly, "Yes," "Correct," Yes," "Correct." Bang, bang, bang, bang until at the big final blockbuster question, the one with the orchestral crescendo and the drumroll, he again answers with the name that had been nailing every question and the emcee says, after a leaden pause, "Oh, no. I'm so sorry. The correct answer is Martha." He holds his finger poised to hit SEND, 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 button.

She knew, she just knew. She just couldn't leave town for a little while and trust him. Oh, no, he'd be back in Martha's arms. Martha was Michelle. That was clear. She'd always known Martha had that trampy, vampy side. There was no Michelle, there was just Martha again and that was worse. Here she was stuck with her hiker and he was back there with Martha, the Martha he'd assured her it was all over with but now it appeared that he was just all over. What to do, what to do? She couldn't just go back. She'd promised Amy she would house sit until her return. She walks around the room opening and closing her hands. She picks up a ballpoint pen and clicks the refill in and out, in and out. Then she sits back down at her computer. The shadow a young woman falls across the screen of her monitor. She smooths back her long red hair with a deft hand. They chuckle together.

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. 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 about over the arboreal slopes until they lighted on some naïve young woman trying to sort out her personal feelings? As these thoughts perplex him, the screen of his computer lights up announcing a new message. “Hello—Here’s a new story. It’s a rather daring departure for me. What do you think?”

He reads the story, then sits depressed, despondent, more completely bummed than he can ever remember. So that was it. That was why Jen kept putting him off, telling him he was coming on too strong, suffocating her. She was a lesbian! Well, no, she couldn’t be a flat-out lesbian but she was sexually ambivalent, bisexual. How else could she have written that story that still had him wiping the steam off his glasses? And then it dawned on him. The cabin in Colorado was owned by Amy Grevilius, the freelance photographer and full-time, overt, unabashed lesbian who had a house here too and he’d met. The hiker was just a subterfuge, a story. The truth was that Amy had gone nowhere and Jen had gone out there to luxuriate in her embrace. Well, two could play at this game. Quietly, diligently, he goes to work, his fingers darting over the keyboard. Then they pause and finally come to a total stop. He simply can’t do it. He can’t write a convincing love scene between two men. It’s not that he’s intolerant or homophobic. What goes on behind closed doors is of no concern to him. But his heterosexuality, and his utter lack of curiosity or knowledge about homosexual behavior, leave his every

attempt at creating a gay love scene dead on the screen of his computer. So what does that tell you, he thinks.

“So,” she asks Amy, “did we go too far?”

Amy smiles her well-remembered smile. She brushes back her hair again. The light glints from that ring of hammered silver on her middle finger, the one Amy said was the most important finger, the only one that deserved a ring.

What do you think?

“I don’t know what to think. Why hasn’t he responded? After all the e-mails and text messages—nothing. Now for almost a week.”

Amy is cryptic, silent, non-committal, so the hiker speaks up.

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

“But I told him it was just a story.”

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

“Well,” she says, drawing out the monosyllable, then saying no more.

Why had she come out here anyway? To find out if she was sure about him? To find out if he’d really broken up with Martha? Or was it really just such a good opportunity for seclusion and possible productivity that she couldn’t turn it down no matter what concerns she might have had about them or about Martha? What did it mean that everything she wrote seemed to be some vehicle to leverage their relationship? Well, she might be dumb but she wasn’t stupid. She knew what it meant.

Then her cellphone bleats its little signal of a new text message.

“I think I understand.” That’s it. That’s all he says. “I think I understand.”

She, immediately: “Understand what?”

“Your story. About the lesbian lovers. It was so real.”

“So you liked it?”

“It surprised me.”

“How so?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t. Tell me.”

“You know.”

She thinks for a minute.

“Here’s the thing. Amy wrote it. She’s been doing some writing. 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. 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.”

“Are you shitting me?”

She sends him a smiling emoji.

A week later he gets this: “Amy’s photo shoot in the Czech Republic has concluded earlier than she’d 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.”

He tells her, yes, absolutely. Then, as an afterthought: “Are you bringing the hiker?”

“I thought I would,” she replies. “I’d like to introduce him to Michelle.”

As the people come in sporadic bursts from the gangway he thinks how silly all his suspicions had been. Then, finally, there she is. He notices that she’s more tanned

than he's ever seen her and her light brown hair is streaked with highlights that are almost blond. She's obviously been in the sun a lot. Directly behind her is a tall, blond, athletic-looking fellow in a denim jacket. They're both smiling.