

CANARY CALAMITY

When the rain started to fall, Gabe set the traps and huddled beside the campfire and ate his dinner from a can. With the rain he wouldn't have to wade through the swamp with his net and flashlight. In the rain they would come to him, like night crawlers to the surface. He stared into the flames watching the burn change the form of the wood and listened for the sound of the traps.

The solitude of this assignment appealed to him. He didn't have to report back to the university until the end of the year. He wasn't expected to carry a cell, which he feared could be tracked by the satellites that passed overhead in the night. He recorded his findings on a spreadsheet stored in a manila envelope. There was no electronic signal emanating from his camp, no easy way for the hired hands from the chemical plant situated on the convenient waterway with their concealed weapons to find him. His footprint was as negligible as his Indian grandfather's and his habits as austere as a Capuchin monk's—an old Army jeep he'd rescued from a National Guard storage yard was his only means of transportation and his tent and campstove were left over from another generation's lost war—though he wasn't old enough to remember a world without satellites and cell phones or any war that hadn't been lost.

The funding to continue his research came from an anonymous source, and while he questioned the intentions of anonymity, he took the money.

The traps were going off in the dark, and he took a swig from his flask and lit up a smoke. The combination licked heat through him like a tongue escaped from the fire. Yes, he took the money.

If what he suspected to be happening was, it would manifest itself first in the susceptible amphibian population, in the frogs that didn't sing the night away anymore. He didn't know why they'd stopped singing, but the surrounding ponds and creeks of the Lake District lay silent in the night. And that was more frightening than something falling out of the sky, more frightening than light pollution to the north where the only light should be the cascading colors of the aurora borealis. More frightening than the men with microphones in their lapels who paid a visit to his cramped office after his editorial piece appeared in the local newspaper. He wasn't an idiot. He could tell when someone was packing, and weapons weren't allowed on campus, and with that for leverage he'd found the balls to refuse their demanded retraction. If he could just get the wealthy Yacht Club behind him, they just might get the Ro plant closed. Or at least get it out of the Great Lakes watershed.

Gabe put his empty ravioli can in his knapsack to store in the tent. Raccoons and coyotes would destroy his camp if they caught the slightest whiff of food. He stubbed out his cigarette butt and put it in his pocket, then adjusted himself and realized he had an inconvenient hard-on. Get a little food in the stomach and other things activated. He was a lightning rod of connectivity. Sometimes the need hit him like a sledge hammer at the oddest times—as if the thought of lurking coyotes should give a guy a boner. There was something to be said for the comfort of masturbation, but once in a while it'd be nice to have something other than frenzied

sex with someone you didn't want to spend the night with. Sex with someone you could share a cup of coffee and a donut with in the morning. But it wasn't easy to find a woman who would put up with his lifestyle, even for one night. They always had a problem with sleeping on the ground next to his amphibious roommates, or with his unfamiliarity with a bar of soap, though he would on occasion take a dip in whatever pond or creek he was working, and that was good enough for him. He wasn't that involved in personal grooming.

It was after midnight when he banked the fire and collected his traps. He unzipped the canvas tent and aimed his mag light around the interior for the mosquitoes that were on the upswing and then eased himself in on his knees, kicking his rubber boots off on the rug he'd placed at the door to trap dirt. With the door zipped tight, he lit his lantern and killed the flashlight. He hung his rain gear on the collapsible wooden clothesline and put on a dry shirt.

He separated the night's catch into the adjacent aquariums, one for the disfigured, and one for those with the fungal disease that was attacking amphibians throughout the bay area. With their permeable skins, frogs and toads were more sensitive to water pollution, feeling the effects before other forms of life, including human. Gabe thought of them as "the canaries in the coal mine" and they were sounding an alarm with their skin disorders and missing parts. An alarm he was trying to translate into statistics that would move officials to act. Officials who weren't toggled to Ro, officials who wouldn't put off action until the morning they woke to a kink in their knuckles and lesions on their elbows or a clump of hair on their pillow.

Okay, that was an exaggeration. But he couldn't resist alluding to the butterfly effect to set a fire at the government level.

He numbered the night's catch in his notebook and made note of their calamities on the spreadsheet cross-referenced to his water samples. They watched him work, ignorant of his findings.

He was almost done with the paperwork when the crack of a branch echoed inside the tent like gunshot. Gabe dropped his pencil and reached for his Bowie knife and stared at the zippered door. Conventional wisdom said you didn't take a knife to a gunfight. Modern wisdom said you packed a firearm at the waist, or on the hip, or around the ankle. (Behind the seat and under the bed.) But conventional wisdom didn't take into account a man raised by a Native American with a knack for knives and no respect for weapons that made noise. Gabe didn't carry a gun.

He doused the light to put himself on equal footing with whatever was out there and slipped to the door. He listened with his ear to the zipper and heard the shuffle of a step on the forest floor. He held the knife loosely with one hand and eased the zipper down with his other. There was no point in hiding.

The clearing was softly lit by his dying campfire. He shouldered his way out and straightened his back. The rain had stopped but droplets continued to fall off the leaves overhead. He made out the tree line against the sky and the break in the undergrowth that pinpointed the opening to the path he'd broken through the woods to the *No Trespassing* signs posted on the high voltage fence, beyond which large water ducts dumped foul-smelling water into the lake.

A shadow separated itself from the forest wall, and Gabe clenched the knife and widened his stance. He heard a snort and saw, or, rather, felt the creature move towards him through the dark. He swore under his breath but stood his ground. The elk came into view and towered over him. The animal likewise froze and they stared at each other. Water droplets glistened on his

hide and shimmered on the velvet of his antlers, like rain on a pussy willow. Gabe could feel the steam rising off him and smelled the wet foliage on his breath. He mentally measured the animal's height and rack with disbelief. The animal lowered his head and pawed the earth, and Gabe tried to remember what he knew of elk. Would they charge? Would he see Gabe as a rival? He hoped he hadn't been living alone in the woods so long that a rutting elk would see him as a rival.

He took a step back and a sudden full-bellied croak came from inside the tent. The animal lifted his head and his nostrils flared like a bellows. A whole chorus of unexpected singing rose on the night air, like a stalled car catching throttle. He swung his rack from side to side and Gabe wondered what it would be like to walk through the woods with that bracket strapped to your head. How would you keep a low profile and hide during the day? How would you grow to be old?

The singing stopped abruptly, as if swept aside by a conductor's baton, and the elk turned, and with a lunge of his haunches, crashed through the underbrush and disappeared into the gathering mist that was beginning to look like snow. Gabe blinked and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. It was as though the animal had been transported from the wilds to his camp via a time warp that just as quickly reversed itself. If he'd had more than a couple of swigs from his flask he would've questioned his ability to correctly interpret the scene.

He fingered the dog chains around his neck engraved with his father's name and blood type and listened to the night. Elk hadn't been seen in the state since Ro took up residence, having gone the way of the wolverine and the loon, but he'd just seen the grandfather of them all, lost and looking for a mate.

His buddies at the ranger station told him he was a cynic, but he would never again discount their stories, the things they claimed to have seen while perched above the forest floor with night goggles and binoculars. It was in their manual—never discount what you see in the woods at night. Maybe they were right about other things. Maybe he shouldn't discount nature's ability to cleanse herself of them.

He went back in his tent and zipped the door shut and turned the lantern on. The frogs were quiet. The stillness of the surrounding woods suddenly seemed ominous. He threw a blanket over the aquariums then peeled off his jeans and crawled into his sleeping bag. If he'd had a radio he would have turned it on whisper. The quiet had turned into something he wasn't sure he could take.

With the light at his elbow and his knife within reach he started to write. If he wrote it down he might be able to sleep, and in the morning he would look for tracks, see what he could find. Then he would go into town and develop his pictures and make an extra copy of everything and put one in the safe in his office and the other in a safety deposit box off campus. He was like a writer with a prized manuscript leaving copies in remote locations to guard against disaster. He would present his findings to the DNR before the snow fell and then let the political process percolate. He would stay away from Ro property.

Unless the tracks led him in the wrong direction.

He was spending too much time alone. He needed someone to put a clean shirt on for. Someone to take his mind off skin diseases and throat lesions and the foul brew stewing on private property like mash at a brewer's club. If he stayed out here much longer he was going to forget his resolve to let the DNR take care of things. He thought of the roll of old claymore wire coiled in the back of his jeep like a sleeping snake, of the garbage left over from another

generation's lost war remastered by a poor academic who was dependent on grants and anonymous benefactors to get the job done but who'd learned from tribal elders that a smart man had fallback and used what was at hand. A smart man recognized the death throes of the canary while there was still time to escape.