

IN THE FORGOTTEN CORNER OF THE WORLD

Most nights he just starts screaming. She hears him, his voice hailing from over the trees to where she's sitting on the back porch. He yells out the beautiful words he collects throughout the day and she is too far away to make them out, but they lead her to three guesses about him anyway: whatever they are, the words are important to someone, even if that someone is only him. He finds something, pure pleasure or comfort maybe, in saying them. He likes the way it feels, the vibration of sound, hovering just before leaving his mouth. She imagines the words, plays around with choosing the ones *she* finds pleasing. One day, walking the road that connects their cabins, she might confess the game and ask if any of her guesses were right.

Other nights she hears only coughing, then dry heaving. She pictures him sitting in his driveway by the fire pit, hunched over with a paper bag between his knees. A habit of drinking too much, maybe. The sky darkens in slowly changing shades until reaching dusky light and then bouncing back to brightness. It seems, on these nights, that his voice has left him, that it would still project the words if it could. It tries, with urgency, and fails. What comes out is guttural, impatient, pained. It's a sorrowful, messy language.

On this night, the smoke from the forest fires still lingers over the hills and his voice sounds muffled, as if the air is too full already. And yet it's empty. She is sitting on her back deck with a mason jar half filled with wine. Though it is supposedly still summer, August, she wears a wool hat, either because the temperature continues to drop at night or because the habit makes her feel secure. She thinks she hears the word 'blackberry' and says it too, in her head, over and over, before picking up the jar and taking it inside. She imagines it must be close to midnight, but the sun doesn't go down and trying to guess the time is useless.



The paper prints another story about her missing husband. Each time there is a clue, there is a story. It reminds her of what she already knows. That he may not be coming back. That it probably is hopeless. But there is something new in the writing this time. Something different from the other articles. Something the police had neglected to mention when they spoke, just days ago. Things are not what they seem, the paper suggests. This time, the writer is skeptical, even suspicious.

It has been months since his disappearance, when the smells of nature were still locked under a casing of frost and when morning ice fog still hovered over the pavement. And 'break up' had come and then gone and the world dried out again and here they were, facing a new winter with a sun that flirts with setting but still refuses.

His ice fishing trips occurred yearly. He would go. She would stay in Boston.

This time was different. Once she hadn't heard from him—once enough time had gone by for her to begin worrying—she had impulsively followed him to the arctic. Not knowing exactly what she was getting into or where he was, other than the name of the town where he had started out. Thinking her presence alone might draw him back. Thinking they would find him somewhere. Who knows, maybe even alive. But they hadn't, and the summer had felt compressed and now it dwindles and this woman—this journalist—has the nerve to suggest that just maybe he had *intentionally* gone missing.

Her stomach turns at the thought of him out there somewhere doing God knows what. And if he is, then what has she become? A story? One notecard tacked onto his timeline?



She has seen the name Reed on his mailbox by the main road, and she assumes it is his last name. Early walkers, living at opposite ends of the same road. Hers, the very end of it all.

When they cross paths on the road—always heading in opposite directions—they talk briefly and only about things that don't matter, or things that wouldn't matter anywhere else in the world. She does not tell him about herself, why she is here, or that she is waiting for something.

He says, "I'm going to break an ankle one of these days. Isn't someone supposed to fill in these potholes?"

She shrugs. "Your landlord, maybe. Mine?"

"We're the forgotten corner of the world here. The annex. Anyway, I guess I don't know that I'd want them gone. I could see myself missing them after. And then there wouldn't be the puddles either."

The front pockets of his sweatshirt are full with the bulk of what she imagines are stones or sticks or something else he has picked up along the road. He is a gatherer, a collector of whatever catches his eye.

"That's optimistic," she says, looking straight into his green eyes because they are never focused on hers and that makes it safe. "And insightful. But I'll give up the puddles in favor of my ankles."

She is learning—this is Alaska. But it is not the Alaska she expected, the one of postcards and brochures, sparkling with glaciers and purple sunsets. This is the interior. There is burning spruce. The sky is orange, as if aflame. It doesn't feel like a vacation destination, the way she had always thought of it. It is not pretty. It is not what she thought she was coming to when she stuffed what she could, on a whim, in a backpack and hopped a plane. A twenty-four hour trip that left her weary enough to not care about the ramshackle state of the cabin she'd rented over the phone. Or the fact that her eyes had skipped over the key word—"dry"—which meant that she'd be peeing outside and boiling dish water and finding somewhere else to shower.

Here, the common has become extraordinary; the fantastic, boring.

He tucks his hands into his jeans and looks off to the side of the road. She's okay with the moments of distraction now and then. When they talk, his eyes trace the top of her head, her straight

bangs, long brown hair, bony shoulders. The eyes always stop at her hands as if not knowing where to go once reaching her fingertips. She wonders about the line between her face and the trees behind her, how often his eyes wander back and forth over it, from one territory to the other. If the image he sees before him is two-dimensional. If he knows the meaning of boundaries.

The yellow butterflies linger. The swallowtails. *Papilio glaucus*. They gather around the patchy water on the road, rubbing wings. A jittery and absentminded congregation.

There is a great expanse of land here. An abundance that outweighs them. The space stretching between people is—or should be—by definition, much greater than anywhere else she has known. But still, it is too easy sometimes, to get too close. She brushes up against the rough edges of others more often than she is comfortable with.

“That thing they do,” she says, pointing to the butterflies. “It’s called ‘puddling’ I guess.”

“No shit,” he says, drawing out the words. A statement, not a question, as if it seems impossible. He smiles, delighted.

“No shit,” she answers.

He whispers the word twice, cataloguing it, and then says, “That’s so appropriate. I’m floored. Here’s one: eudaimonia.”

“Sounds like a disease.”

“And yet it means almost the opposite. This entire road is currently in a sweet state of eudaimonia. Think about it.” Then he hands her a rock from his pocket, nothing particularly special, and she nods in response. His fingers are dirty. He turns to go.

She says, “Let’s keep the puddles. Boots next time.”

He doesn’t look back, just raises a fist high above his head and shakes it like he’s routing for her team. She repeats *eudaimonia* to herself four or five times and decides it is still not a beautiful word. The rock stays hidden in her hand until she is standing in her own driveway. Home. Quiet. She looks at it—oval and dark and speckled with bits of mica, the kind of rock that probably looks

much more glamorous underwater but loses its shine when it dries—and brings it inside for the windowsill.



She sits outside on these nights and rests her feet on the dog's back and watches the woods and there is nothing else she is responsible for. She doesn't owe anything to anyone. There are no cabins behind hers, only bog and spruce and a rusting sled-dog kennel. Twisted chicken wire and trampled circles of dirt where the dogs must have run themselves ragged in a frenzy once upon a time. More than a few abandoned trucks. The road leading away is at her back, a desolate mile. Only three other cabins, and she rarely sees anyone unless she makes the effort. The only sound, besides the trumpets of the migrating sandhill cranes, is his voice snaking through the trees.

Her husband had tried to get her to jog with him every morning. He would get up before the sun and put on his shorts and sneakers before she even had time to brush her teeth. He'd plead with her from the other room where he was already stretching his calves, but she only ever stood in the doorway, mouth full of toothpaste, and shook her head. She had always been a walker.

And now, finally, she is here running after him, but she remains a walker.

This is a place to be taken in slowly and quietly. A place that lets you settle on your own pace and length of stride.

That morning she had taken the dog out earlier than usual, craving a bit of silence. Her coffee went with her on the road and she spent her time thinking about simple things—her slow feet moving and the intentional tromping through of puddles. It was just before Reed's driveway that she saw him perched on his toes at the edge of the road, peering up into a tree. One hand rested on the trunk. His heels touched the ground and he spoke as if they were already mid-conversation.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you this,” he’d said. “Sounds weird. I don’t know. But are you into swamps?”

She had looked at him, perplexed. “That’s something you’ve been meaning to ask me?”

“Let me try again. How much would you say you like swamps? Would you call yourself a swamp-walker? How likely is one to find you knee-deep in the mud?”

She had shrugged. “Well. I’m not adverse to the squishiness.”

“What about whiskey in your coffee? How much would you say you like that?” He took a flask from his back pocket.

“I’d say they go hand in hand pretty well,” she said, smiling and holding out her mug.

He had repeated the series—swamps, whiskey, coffee, the perfect combination—and told her he was on his way to the bog to pick blueberries. It sounded something like an invitation, but she ignored it and he didn’t say anything more forward other than to mention a bonfire at his cabin later that evening.

“I don’t know if I have time,” she’d said. “But I’ll do my utmost.”



The dog is her husband’s, but she is growing used to his reliance on her. He follows at her heels, while she carries three things awkwardly: a pan of cornbread, the same album she brings whenever she is invited somewhere, and a bottle of Wild Turkey. The sky is waves of intense orange that bleed upward into yellow and then dark blue directly overhead.

She is walking alone again, as she had in her first weeks, before they met. Before they exchanged daily greetings and before she began to notice his voice each night. Before she put two and two together.

Something moves off to her right, but by the time her eyes focus it has disappeared. There are only the gaps between trees, tall grass, and a towering piece of heavy machinery—its purpose unknown—left to rust. It has been sitting there all summer, a great mess of greasy pipes and cords strangling it. As if they are against it, instead of part of its being and vital to its movement. Without any doubt, she knows it was a moose she saw and doesn't feel as if she has missed out on a moment bonding with nature, with this place. She sees them everywhere now—common as crows—roaming streets and yards as free as people do.

His fire pit is already blazing when she gets there and he has trampled through the brush around his cabin and dragged out piles of wood to burn. Reed is poking a piece of fish around a frying pan with one hand, using the shaky other to pour whiskey into a coffee mug. It trickles down the side when he sees her and his aim falters.

They fry halibut in beer batter and drink whiskey sours. It never gets dark but the moon is clear and the air begins to cool. He gets a flannel blanket for them and spreads it on the rocky driveway in front of the fire pit. To keep herself from pulling obsessively at the fabric, she gets up to put on some music.

The number of plants inside his cabin surprises her. He seems so scattered most of the time, she has never imagined him responsibly caring for another being. She turns on *The Last Waltz* and turns the speakers toward the window screen. She crouches and watches him adjust the blanket and poke at the fire a few times. He tilts her mug of whiskey and peers into it, but it is still almost full so he puts it back in place and stretches his legs out and waits.

They lie on their backs and listen to The Band and sit up now and again to sip their whiskeys.

“That is my favorite name in the world,” he says, when “Evangeline” comes on. “It’s a perfect name. A perfect word.”

“I’ve never met a single person with that name,” she says, picking bits of ash from her sweater and tossing them to the ground.

“Well of course not,” he says. “Neither have I. But fiction’s a damned fine thing isn’t it?”

“It has to be. Why would anyone ever *create* something ugly on purpose?”

“That orange color in the sky. I don’t know what to call it. I’ve never been able to describe it, but it really deserves some describing.”

She scans the horizon and knows exactly which shade he is referring to. It is a Creamsicle. It is the outer edges of a sunflower petal. “I don’t know either,” she says. “And I’m generally alright with words. When I got here last winter, just before ‘break up’, the world seemed tilted. That’s something I don’t know how to describe either. That feeling.”

He nods slowly. She feels him absorbing everything. “Yes. When it’s forty below and nothing seems quite right. Everything is perfectly clear—it’s so goddamn cold it’s clear—but you feel hypnotized and dazed. And dizzy.”

“There’s a man who went missing last winter.”

“I read that,” he says.

“I think maybe he was feeling that too. Like the world was slanted somehow. Not quite making sense.”

“It’s a common feeling. A common situation. Overestimating yourself, underestimating this vast place that could swallow you whole without even a hiccup. We really need to be more in awe. This song reminds me of my childhood,” he tells her. “We’d go on these excruciating road trips to Nova Scotia and my parents would always make us sing along with this old music. It wasn’t so old back then I guess. Now I sing all the time. In my house, in the woods, in bars.”

She is not as interested as she thinks she should be, and she wonders why she lied and said she didn’t know if she had the time for this, when the only thing she has is time. Why she couldn’t just admit the truth and say it out loud—the fact that they both have time is no reason they should have to spend it talking to one another.

Chickadees madly flit in and out of the trees above them. Collecting and storing—in caches all over the place—the food they’ll need to make it through the approaching winter. Their constant state of acrobatics is overwhelming. Their energy exhausting.

It is two in the morning when she wakes up, the fire out, remembering only that the chickadees had made her feel nauseous and that she had tilted her head back, then eased herself to the ground. Another blanket is draped over her, the hood of her sweatshirt covering her face. Her eyes itch and the color of the sky is disorienting. She moves and finds that he is right beside her, also half covered by a blanket. His hand is on her hip. He says she should lie back down, that he would like her to lie back down.

“I need to go home,” she says, pushing her hood back.

“I’ll go with you.”

She insists there is no need, she lives half a mile away, he should go back to sleep. He insists there doesn’t need to be a need but says he doesn’t blame her for wanting to walk home alone under such a magnificently eerie light.

The dog follows her down the driveway, swaying almost drunkenly. When she looks back she sees Reed has laid back down exactly as he was, not even bothering to pull the blanket over him.

When she gets home, the door is propped half open, but the dog still squeezes through the place where the screen has been pulled away from the frame—an entryway that makes her cabin a welcome retreat for other dogs in the neighborhood.

Everything is saturated with wildfire smoke. She knows he is sleeping, and for once, the night is entirely silent.



In the morning she sees there is a message on her machine. An apologetic voice tells her that they've located him, living down in Juneau with a woman named Gladis. The man—not any of the officers she's spoken to before—says he's sorry repeatedly, in between sentences: "I'm sorry. We just managed to reach him. I'm sorry. Do you know this woman? I'm sorry, I shouldn't ask questions to your machine." Before he hangs up he says, "My name is Lang, by the way. Please call me if you need to."

He sounds as if he genuinely wants her to call him. He sounds as sorry as if he has committed the offense himself.

Something in her wrestles to be reckless. Knock on Reed's door and tell him everything about her life and her purpose here. How that purpose no longer exists. Cry or scream or seduce him passively. That is what people do in these situations.

Her husband, the perpetual runner, the incessant mover, liked to use the word *ora*. A word his Italian grandmother taught him when he was young, a word that meant "now." He'd zip by the living room while she was reading in an armchair and insist they go out and do something. Anything at all, as long as there was action involved. A swim, a skiing lesson, a county fair. *Come on, let's go out. Time is too short. Ora, ora!*

This is how she remembers it. And this is what she remembers now, in the moment she learns she had not moved quickly enough.

She goes back to bed and stays there until evening.

When she goes outside she finds that Reed has been there and left a bird's nest sitting on the tree stump at the end of her driveway. It is threaded with wild roses that are already drooping. She drives to the bar to do her laundry—as mundane a thing as she can think to do—intending to have a beer while her clothes swirl in the almost clean water next door. She has two, along with a steak sandwich and potatoes, while the dog sleeps at her feet. She passes him peanuts from time to time and he licks her fingers. Other dogs are snoring on the floor or the porch. The dim light—the only light in the place—comes from the open door.

With the last of her cash, she buys a lottery ticket and when she begins scratching at it with her fingernails, the man next to her slides a quarter across the counter. He doesn't turn from watching the baseball game on the television hanging above the bar.

"Nothing?" he asks when she taps his shoulder to return the coin.

"Not surprising," she says, dropping the quarter into his thick hand. He leans forward over the bar and asks the bartender for another ticket. He slaps it on the counter in front of her, along with the quarter, and says, "You can keep that." Then he turns back to the game.

Photos wallpaper the walls. Women in frayed jeans standing by rivers and men in dirty Carhartts holding up game. Moose strippings and fish guttings. Dog teams panting in the packed snow, their mouths wide open—some caught by the camera mid-leap. She tucks the card into her pocket and waits until she is outside to scratch it.

She pushes the bag of clean laundry into the narrow back seat of the cab. When she starts the truck, the dog smears his nose on the windshield in anticipation. Leaning back in the seat, she holds the card against the steering wheel and scrapes off the greasy film. The radio plays a bluegrass band. She holds the card up to make sure she hasn't won, then slips it through the barely-open window onto the pavement.



The puddles on the road have dried, leaving divots of cracked dirt. She walks to his cabin—using her under-exercised dog as an excuse—but he is not home. His driveway has not been cleaned up. Blankets lying crumpled in the dirt, cigarette butts and empty beer cans thrown into the fire pit.

The door is unlocked. There are worn books and letters and photographs placed indiscriminately on his shelves and tacked to his walls. There is one of a girl, wearing a scarf around her black hair and a skirt that looks made of mesh, tutu-like. She is holding a paint roller and the wall behind her is half white, half blue. An uneven streak of a line between the two colors.

She peaks into a box on the floor, full of letters. They have all come from the same person, someone named Mo. She wonders if Mo is the girl in the photo or his brother or a friend from another time.

On the kitchen counter there are liquor bottles and boxes of pasta and a ceramic bowl overflowing with gray ash, a graveyard of cigarettes butts. The sink is full of dishes and his blue five-gallon jug of water is dripping evenly. One trickle every three seconds. Wasteful. She turns the nozzle as far as it will go to stop it.

On the shelf by the door, as she turns the handle to leave, she notices a scattered pile of sticky notes. Each poses some variation of the question, “Do you like swamps?” She tears a note from the blank pad and scribbles the word *ora* on it and leaves it stuck to the front of his door.

Long before he is near, she hears his motorcycle coming down the road. His headlights—unnecessary as they are—eventually shine on the road and trees alternately, bouncing in time with the bike as he rounds a corner and slows to a stop.

“Let’s take a ride,” he says. “Just to your end of the road. Not because you need one. Just because it’s especially nice right now.”

“I was gone today,” she says, feeling it is important to have an excuse, but not sure for what.

“Hmm. Me too. Was thinking of playing an open mic in town. Changed my mind. But hey, you’re back.”

“Yeah. I’m back. Why’d you change your mind? Souls may have been in need of your voice.”

“That is unlikely,” he says, clasping his hands and stretching his arms above his head. He yawns. “Not really feeling up to it. Too much on my mind.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

“Well, hop on and we won’t talk. Get our heads blank.” He taps his temple.

He doesn’t mention the bird’s nest. He doesn’t mention the note left on his door.

“In there,” he says, pointing to the saddlebags strapped to the bike. “I’ve got beers, if you’re interested.” The two bottles clink as she pulls them out and hands one to him, then swings her leg over the seat and climbs on behind him. He holds a lighter over his shoulder for opening the beer, and she tries several times before succeeding.

It’s hard to sense time passing here. It seems late, but what things seem isn’t always what they are. Not here. Everything is changing. The sky is a little darker a little earlier than the day before. And it’s going to get colder soon. Much, much colder. It’s going to come on without any warning, though they will nonetheless be expecting it. It will feel like being warned a sucker punch is coming, but not knowing the moment when. And, holding their breath, the only option will be to adapt and learn how to make the hardness of living here as much a joy as the bright, burning summers.

“Listen,” she says. “I want to tell you something. The man that went missing. He’s my husband. He was my husband.”

The wind blows his hair into her face. She sips her beer and tries to read expression in the parts of his face she can see. Ears, cheeks, jaw. She isn’t sure if he heard her. Looking back at the dog chasing them, she opens her mouth to call its name and pretends she said nothing.

But suddenly he’s yelling over the sound of the engine, and at first she doesn’t know what he is saying. He screams it again and again, gaining volume each time, like he’s forgotten she is there behind him. And then it’s clear: *ora*. He shouts at the sky, over and over until hoarse. *Ora, ora, ora*. Until the word is no longer delicate but painful, as if searching for something even more beautiful.

She understands now, this is a word like every other word. He keeps going on like this, night after night, because he searches and is defeated. Because he knows there will always be something more beautiful than whatever exists now and that these failed beautiful things are perfect too, in their isolation.

She's glad she never hears her name being called into the night. Glad for the burning spruce and the smell of smoke and the constant light of now. Glad her name is not Evangeline or some other beautiful word. It's Jordana.

He shuts off the bike when a moose emerges from the woods to their right and stands directly in their path. They glide silently. The bike slows on its own. The dog stops too—abrupt and rigid—and stares. On point. They sit on the motorcycle and watch the moose move silently, her dark coat catching the fading sunlight, her muscles churning. Ash falls on her forehead from fires burning thirty miles away. She is nothing unusual. She thinks she's invisible.

They watch and don't move or make a sound.

They don't breathe or calculate or expect.

They don't do anything at all.