

HOUSE

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had come. It was mid-December, the almost end of a long, parched year. Drought had hit in the summer like a wave of nausea, left burned-out charcoal ridges in the mountains and spineless, skeleton trees in the valley. Georgia drew back the kitchen curtains. Light came in and left a jeweled shadow on her neck. There had been, in the two minute downpour, a shudder she'd wanted to mistake for wind and then a terrible cracking like an old body colliding with cement. The tree lay big and surrendered across the flattened fence. The roots had ripped out like a seam.

The Craigslist page irked her in its ugly simplicity. She had used it once before to get rid of an heirloom table passed down from her dead grandmother to her mother to her. It had teetered on lopsided and spindly legs so that each time she placed an object on it, it shifted its weight in a loud, obnoxious clang. She felt little betrayal in initiating its sale. It had been a quick exchange conducted in the empty parking lot of a church on a Saturday and the buyer had thanked her so profusely that afterwards she thought, big-headedly, that maybe she'd saved a life.

Her post, today: *Big tree fell. Need help removing. The wood is yours to keep.*

He replied within the hour: *My name is Griffin. I need wood for a project. No need to pay for my labor. Maybe just a sandwich. Does tomorrow work for you?*

He arrived in a powder blue truck, rust smeared across the side like a shit stain. Too many points in his turn in the driveway. His path in the gravel made a bizarre star, the type you'd find stick-and-poke tattooed on a teen. He emerged from the truck all stretches and scratching his head beneath his baseball cap. He was a big man - meaty

in his arms and his calves. Blonde hair cut into a bowl on his head, functionally out of his eyes and fitting neatly beneath his hat. Georgia put on her shoes and went outside. Heat, unusual for December, fell down on her, unwanted and weighty.

As way of greeting, he said, “This is a big fucking tree. Didn’t realize you meant this big when you said big.”

“That’s one of those words my teachers always discouraged us to use. Because it can mean too many things, you know?” she said.

“Yeah, too vague. But you used it anyway. Guess the lesson didn’t stick.”

They stood across from each other, tree cutting between them. On the ground, it was much larger than it had seemed upright. Its width came up to almost her waist. The roots splayed like stretched fingers; clumps of trembling dirt hung on to them. Where the tree had stood was a shallow hole, soil loose and dark.

“How old do you think it is?” she said.

He kicked it with his toe. “100 years maybe. Don’t really know. Old though.” He bent then, put his hand on the

tree. Georgia mirrored him. The bark was rough and damp on her skin, warm too. They stayed like that for a moment. Georgia drew her hand away, straightened and looked at her palm. Little indents puckered her skin. She curled her thumb so that it touched her pinky.

“My skin is so wrinkly,” she said. She brushed her hand on her thigh like she was getting rid of dirt. “You have everything you need? Please feel free to use the bathroom. Just knock and I’ll come to the door.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

He worked through the morning with a humming chainsaw, cutting away first at the branches and piling them in the bed of his truck and when that was done, he moved on to the trunk, slicing it in round pieces that reminded Georgia of coins. The pile in his truck bed grew higher, like a bank of snow. Around noon, he knocked on the door and she answered. He was thirsty.

Georgia turned on the faucet, filled a cup, pitch rising like a scream. She handed it to him and then moved to look out the window.

“There wasn’t any wind,” she said. “Why’d it fall?”

He sipped the water. Swallowed. “Drought,” he said. “When the roots are dry, they don’t go as deep. Rain comes and floods them. They fall. It’s a shame, really,” he said.

Outside the window, a leaf dangled from a spider’s thread. A breeze had picked up and the leaf moved as if guided by a hand, scratching and scribbling in the air like a frenzied pen. The movements reminded Georgia of her grandfather’s signature, how it had shown up faithfully in birthday and Christmas cards as she was growing up and then toward the end of his life had disappeared, his name instead written in her grandmother’s neat, curled cursive. She worried about reaching that point in her own life when her body would seem a tether, a hindrance, a wieldy and unfamiliar thing.

Griffin finished his water and set it on the counter. Georgia washed his cup in the sink, noted that the pattern of his fingers had stayed on it in a grease ring around the center.

“Turkey or ham?” she said.

“Pardon?”

“Cold cuts. For a sandwich? I can make you one if

you're hungry.”

“Oh. I'll be hungry in a little bit. Cheese. Just a cheese sandwich. No turkey or ham. Please. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Hard to tell if I'll be able to finish it all today. There's a lot of wood,” he said. “Didn't expect a tree this big.”

“What is your project? That you mentioned?”

“I'm building a house.”

“A whole house?”

He nodded. He had made his way to the door and stood beside it, hands in pockets.

“You have property?”

He nodded again. “Family property. Goes back a few generations.”

“You know how to build houses?”

He shook his head. “Never done it before, but I figure I can learn.”

“What's the permitting process for that?”

“Come again?”

“The permitting process? For building a house?”

He laughed a little, pulled a hand from his pocket and rubbed his jaw. “It's not exactly on the books. I just

want to build myself a small house. Nothing special.”

“Why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah, why do you want to build a house yourself?”

He shrugged. “Just do.” And then he turned and went back outside, back to work, indicated by the whirring of the chainsaw.

Georgia stood alone for a moment, listening. Wind had picked up, but she strained to hear because without the tree and its branches and its leaves, there was nothing to let her know.

His yell was a throaty thing that reminded Georgia (embarrassedly afterwards) of sex. Her body was moving before she knew it, pushing open the door and slamming it shut behind her, racing barefoot across the yard. He knelt on the ground, bent like a macaroni, blood coming down in a slick and easy stream from where he clutched his stomach. Georgia cupped her hand over her mouth. The chainsaw stayed humming on the ground, shimmying like a dancer.

He pulled his hand out away from his core and Georgia pressed her own harder against her mouth, expecting to

see his innards tumble out of him and when that didn't happen, she saw that with his left hand he was clutching the limp form of his right, at the point where his wrist grew into palm.

"I'm hurt," he said. "Jesus. Fuck. I'm hurt."

His pinky and his ring finger hung on by little threads of skin.

"Your fingers," Georgia said, pointing.

"I know." He said. "My fingers."

She felt within her a calm but steady energy, a sort of thing she'd felt only a few times before in her life. It hopped into her chest and drew out an excitement that colored the edge of her vision and altered the rhythm of her heart. When she was a child, her grandfather had shown her how to make knots. He'd lived in a little cabin on a lake in Minnesota when he retired and showed her how to troll for Northerns. The memory of it was vivid: his hands, arthritically bent, sticking a wire through the mouth and out the rear of a minnow long as the length of her palm. It had been a morbid but fascinating thing, the minnows squirming, tails flapping like the wings of a hummingbird. Stomach on the brink of turning, adrenaline pushing her blood so that she felt a heart-

beat all the way in her thumbs, she helped him bait their poles, knot the fishing line above the jig so that it wouldn't break in the event of a Big One.

Her grandfather, for all his knowledge of fishing, had never caught a big one, and even the small ones eluded his hook. They didn't bite for him, no matter the color of the sky, the angle of the sun, the temperature of the day, the type of lure he used. When she went fishing with him and caught one and then two and then three and then four and his pole stayed still and serene, avoiding even the tangle of weeds that mirrored the bite of a frenzied fish, she wanted to throw her own back before he could notice, but he always noticed and he always insisted that she bring them ashore to eat.

Griffin was crying. His shoulders jumped up and down.

"I'll take you to the hospital," Georgia said. "We'll drive." But her car was fenced in by the tree and so it would have to be his powder blue truck, sunk with the heavy pile of wood.

It was slow going. The truck crawled at a pace that reminded Georgia of leisure. The inside of the cab was neat,

looked like it had just been vacuumed.

“Are you always this neat?” She said.

Griffin’s face was pale and sweaty. His eyes were closed and he leaned his head against the window. In his lap, the mangled hand bled into a wrap that she’d hurriedly wound for him from a towel she’d found in his car. He didn’t answer.

“Are you always this neat?” She said again. “Will you keep your house this neat? The one that you’re going to build?”

She imagined him in the midst of laboring, his three fingered hand precariously clutching a hammer.

“Are you right handed or left handed? And how many bedrooms will there be? For your family?”

They hit a bump and the truck swayed and Griffin opened his eyes. He looked right at her.

“I’m not really building a house,” he said.

Georgia felt a small twisting of her stomach, like a curled wire driven in.

Griffin closed his eyes again. The wrap was seeping red. The truck moved slow and lumbering. “They only come in green,” Griffin said.

“Pardon?”

“The green ones?” His eyebrows knit together and he mumbled some more, a string of incoherent nonsense.

After she returned home from the hospital via cab, she stood in the yard a moment. They’d removed Griffin’s hanging fingers so that his hand perpetually looked like a gun. Now, Georgia raised her own hand, held it out in front of her, surveyed. What a miraculous thing, the hand. To hold and to clench and to signal.

The yard was quiet. The tree had lost much of its bulk. All these hours, the chainsaw had not stopped whirring.

the back of it / JKL Collective
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