

Ann
by Eric Cecil

Thinks I'm hiding something. Something you're not telling me, she says. She narrows her eyes to study me, then glances beyond my shoulder, surveying the others in the near distance. I won't tell them, she whispers.

There's nothing to tell.

She frowns, turns. Silt thickens her heels as she storms from the crowd. She kicks it away and wanders downstream. None of the others notice. None of them see her as she slips from their ranks, as she pads off and away, venturing down the jagged shoreline.

Nor do they see me. I trail Ann until the stream elbows left, expecting her to continue along its curve. Instead, she drifts to the right, edging into the furrows of a low, withering field. Its expanse is knotted with dense weeds, littered with the husks of uprooted shrubs. She snaps through them without pause, leading me over the crest of a small hill and into a gauntlet of thinning pines.

We enter a clearing. It's a park, I gather, or something like it. But it's going, or gone, and all that remains are suggestions of its former use: the high frame of a swingset dangling loose chains, the upended trunk of a children's slide, the tarred and curled skins of old tires. Tall, sere grass flames the sides of these fixtures. Its fronds are colorless and papery in the harsh light of the afternoon, which slants our shadows across the meadow, pitching them toward a larger, darker shape some yards ahead: an abandoned shelter.

Its blackened form mars the greenery of the derelict park. Ann's figure is pale and slight against it. Her stride is determined as she approaches the cusp of its pavilion. Determined and careless. It's as if she doesn't suspect she's being followed.

Followed. I scan the trees behind us, looking for movement on the horizon. There's only the wild grass, the hushed fringe of pines. And the sun, its glare defining the ruin of the shelter ahead: picking out the many holes that crater its contours, describing portions of its roof that have collapsed and daggered into the surrounding loam. Much of its gable, I now see, has fallen from its frame. It kneels into the clearing on fractured timber pillars, their splintered lengths thorning the shelter's entryway. Several other columns, still intact, uphold what remains. Ann's silhouette dwells among them, lingering at an opening that illuminates the pavilion's opposite end.

When I appear next to her, she registers little surprise. She's still, quiet, standing before the outline of a primitive fence. Many of its planks litter the ground, like bandages stitching the

suppurating mud. Beyond their reach, the earth cracks and scars into a small footpath, limping into the bloom of a full forest. Ann stares into its depths.

This was probably supposed to keep people out at some point, she says.

Maybe it was meant to keep them in.

Maybe.

She toes one of the fence's hanging slats. It clatters to the ground with all the hollowness of bone. Two others fall silently, pillowing onto a tangle of ivy below, its anemic coils preying at the edge of the pavilion. Like tentacles, Ann says.

Or tongues, I counter, too thin to speak the land's secrets.

She smirks, exhales a weary laugh. You talk like them now.

They say some interesting things.

They talk too much, she says. Everyone does.

I tell her that if we don't head back soon, they'll be looking for us. And we don't want that, I add. Ann fingers a streak of damp hair from her forehead and peers into the woods again, then drags her wrist across her cheek, nodding in silent assent.

She hesitates, as if preparing to lead me back to the stream. Instead, she thrusts toward the fence: kicking through its remaining slats, crouching just between them, hooking a thin leg over the wreckage and onto the balding earth below. Her foot catches the edge of another plank as she slides through its frame, and it shudders, drops to the ground. Ann doesn't see it. She just keeps going.

Into the forest ahead. She parts a high bank of shrubs and fins a bare browned shoulder into the overwhelming growth. It trembles and allows her entry. Fronds lick her sides, her ankles, the small of her back. They threaten to lose her as she shuffles into their folds, but the towering grasses ahead, even taller than those behind, can neither hide nor forget her. They can only signal her progress. They seem to waver before she even finds them, and as I lunge over the fence, they spring and spear toward me, nearly fending me away.

I'm fast. But she's faster. I find glades still whispering in her wake. I scent hints of her body, unwashed even after days at the stream, and catch flashes of her shirt, its worn indigo flickering

between the flutter of leaves, which cannot hide her hair: too auburn for arboretum, too lively for the wilds that inhale her. The noise of her sprint startles the woods awake, and I follow these cues, cleaving between weeds that rill with crickets, shrubs that whine with gnats and flies. The sun winks in the spaces between, first reducing to errant skeins that stripe the trunks of countless trees, then fading to glowing palls that softly ember the earth below. The ground, now starved for light, dampens to mud. My heels score its surface as I stumble over gnarled roots and fallen boughs, tripping into the dense woodlands. Sharp fronds lash my forearms. Thorns spike my collar, fang my shoes, legs, the tatter of a sleeve. Burrs needle the cushion of each palm. I swat them away, parting stiff branches, and the timber ahead thickens more still, foams into the full and impenetrable brush of the forest.

Ann is finally lost to it. I call her name, but there's no answer. No sign of her. All movement has ceased. All but mine. I waver, uncertain where to go next. Then I catch a glimpse of her scraping past the bark of a large oak, and I break into a full run, a near panic: Can't lose her. Have to find Ann.

When I do, she's winded, but alert, staring at the edge of a steep gulley. She steadies herself against the bend of an enormous branch. I motion to pass her, to stand before her and the wilderness ahead, but she extends her arm, holding me in place. Her palm and elbow graze my chest, and she whispers: Something's there.

Something is. Through the tufts of greenery, under the canopy of leaves, I spot an unnatural hue mottling the bramble: a pinwheel of lilac and licorice black, its colors leached and muted by the hunger of a sun that can no longer touch it. Clouds of milkweed obscure its foundation. Distance and darkness hide its depths.

I ask what it is. Ann disregards me. She eases forward, draws her fingers along the length of another low branch. Its twigs snap under her grasp. Slowly, she releases them, or they release her, and she creeps ahead to the colorful dome. As she does, she speaks over her shoulder: Wait.

The wait is long. And it's blind. I can't see her progress through the confusion of the woods, but I can hear her rustling: a remote crackle in the timber, the moaning of branches, the purling of leaves like the rushing of water. I think of the stream, then, and the others. I picture them in their soaked clothes, their ranks silently slapping away at the mud of the shore. They will have noticed by now. They will be onto us soon.

Ann reappears at the side of the structure, waving me forward.

I tramp into the brush and bat aside more barbs and rushes. The full design of the small enclosure reveals itself: the dented and lacquered tin of its dome, its underside choked with the hay of old

nests, embroidered by the loom of gnarled branches. Mirrored shards glitter a wide column that throngs its center. They reflect several curious figures that populate its interior. Their eyes are frozen in terror, and their lips are curled in eternal neighs, exposing large, impossibly white teeth.

Like they're in pain, Ann says.

Like the others.

She nods. It's the eyes, she says, caressing the whitened sclera of one nearest. The mouths. She works her thumb into its open maw and huffs a bitter laugh. These and your ivy, she says. Neither can speak, so they'll never tell lies.

Now you sound like them.

Never.

Her delicate fingers trace the outline of the sculpted mare. She finds pieces of its ear missing, its mane gone. The curve of its neck rings hollow against the drawl of her nails. She knuckles the brass column that spears its midsection, grasps the verdigris rail, brushes the divot of the saddle before her. She then turns, her movements quick and severe, and steps to another column at her right.

She kneels at the side of a mauve showpony. This one's fallen from its perch. Its hooves are fixed, midair, in static prance. I look on as Ann gently leans into its form and presses the bend of its flank. A small hole appears at the curve of its thigh. The opening slivers under her hand, widens into the certain line of a fracture, which extends throughout the length of the animal's right leg: split, broken, missing its lower half. Pieces of its hoof remain glued to the bar that once supported it. She strokes the contours of the wound, then gingerly tests the jagged stump of its ankle. A small rod, bronze with rust, erupts from its mangled end.

Ann.

She doesn't respond. I fix her with a severe look, one that reaches for her, but her eyes wander instead, finding something just beyond the edge of the platform. She folds her arms under the rigid body of the fallen horse, the fracture of its back leg trembling.

Help me, she says.

We have to get back.

Clear a space.

She nods toward the clubbed foot of a large oak ahead. I lumber before her, lower to my haunches, brush aside piles of dried leaves. Their soughing is loud in the still of the woods. Like the snuffling, I comment, of a stable at dawn.

Or the stream, Ann says.

It's far now. But I'm sure they're close. The darkness won't stop them. It has not stopped Ann. The horse is white and raw, nearly glowing in her arms. She ferries it to the tree as I remove the last of the dried leaves, uncovering the wet and mouldering compost below, and lowers it when I back away. She feathers the foliage about the mare's face, its hindquarters, its legs. Its wound. The leaves curl and slip along the plaster like colorful scabs.

You won't tell me your secret, she says, surveying her work. But I'll tell you mine.

We need to get back.

She shakes her head. That's just it. I'm not going back.

I stand and pace to the fork of an elm, placing my hand at its trunk. I try to think of something to say: some kind of deal to strike, maybe, or flattery, vague curses. But none of these will work. Not like the truth.

You know you can't do that. You know, I say, they won't let that happen.

They won't have a choice.

We won't let that happen.

Ann turns to me, stands. And she smiles: her brow narrowing to a near slit, her mouth first wide and open with consternation, then closed, lips trembling.

We can start back now. All of this can be forgotten. We don't ever have to speak about this again.

I'm not going back.

We'll be moving on soon.

Moving on soon. She laughs again. The sound is low, pained. You're already talking like them. Soon you'll look like them. But that won't be enough. They won't care about that.

They care about us.

They don't care about anything anymore, she sneers. Not even themselves. Maybe, she allows, maybe they care about their little rituals and routines. But those won't save you. She swallows, her nostrils wide. You don't know what they'll do with you when they don't need you anymore.

I tell her she's right, that I don't know what the future holds for us. But I do know what will happen if I return without her. It will be certain for me, I add.

She eyes our surroundings. You can come with me. We can find help.

We help each other.

Listen to yourself. What do you think they've been doing at that stream?

Some of us are ill, yes.

None of you are well. None of you, she says. She lets her sentence trail off, then grits her teeth, speaking through them: What will bringing me back get you? she says. Ask yourself that. Ask yourself where we'd go from there.

I imagine it, then: our return to the stream. Ann and I rejoin the others quietly. None of them will have noticed our absence. None of them will have departed the banks, frantically searching the woods for two of their missing. We'll find them as we left them: their faces spackled with the deep mud of the stream, and their arms, mottled with scabs and scars, extended toward the sky: so blue their pleas can't bruise it, so big that it won't care. She'll thank me for taking her back to them. They will be moving on soon. But not without us. Not without Ann.

When I look back to the woods, however, there's no sign of her. There's only the small dome, the brass bars, the horses. And the gulley ahead, its drop dark and uncertain in the approaching night. A stirring crackles the trees behind. It's the kindling of footsteps. Like fire, I say. Ann does not respond. She's already moved on.