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An Encounter in the Woods



My parents died on a hot August evening. It was my sixteenth birthday, and my best friend, Annie, and I had snuck out to Santa Rosa for the day to celebrate. We took her car and spent the afternoon at Buzzard's Point Beach, tanning, flipping through magazines, and walking along the jetty. Around five o'clock, just as the tide began to come in, we packed up our towels and headed home so we'd be back before our parents returned from work.

Annie was driving, her long sandy hair fluttering out the open window as we sped down Prairie Creek Drive.

It was a scenic road that started at the coast and wound inland, meandering through the redwood forest. Annie didn't want to drive through the national park; the route was narrow and dark and gave her the creeps, but for some reason I felt that it was the right road to take. After ten minutes of convincing her that it was the fastest way back to Costa Rosa, she complied.

"So when are you seeing Wes again?" Annie asked me, adjusting her sunglasses.

Wes was a senior, tall and smart with perfect teeth, the captain of the soccer team, and the only guy in our high school worth dating. Unfortunately, all the other girls felt the same way. They followed him around in groups, giggling and trying to get his attention. I would never be caught dead doing that, partly because I thought it was pathetic, but mainly because I didn't have time. I had lacrosse practice, homework, and a part-time job. And although I was decently popular, I had never been the outgoing type. I liked to pick my friends, opting for quality over quantity, and since I spent most of my time outside working or reading instead of socializing, I always assumed that Wes didn't even know my name. So when he asked me out, I was speechless.

"Saturday, supposedly. But he said he would call me this week and it's already Thursday... Maybe he changed his mind."

Annie rolled her eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course he’ll call.”

I hoped she was right. I worked at a farmers’ market on the weekends, manning a fruit stand. Wes had stopped by two weeks ago and asked me to help him pick out apples for his mom. He was completely lost when it came to fruit; there are so many different kinds of apples, he told me, running his hands nervously through his hair. Afterwards, he asked me to the movies, and I was so surprised that I dropped the bag of apples, letting them roll about our feet. Ever since our date I hadn’t been able to think straight about anything except for the buttery kiss he had given me in the darkness of the theatre, his lips melting into mine with the taste of popcorn and salt.

I shook off the thought and shrugged. “I don’t even know if he likes me that much,” I said. I didn’t want to get my hopes up.

“Well, I think you guys are perfect for each other,” Annie said, leaning back in her seat.

I smiled. “Thanks, An,” I said, and turned up the radio.

We’d both had a crush on Wes for ages, but Annie would never let it come between us. She was the beautiful one, modest and graceful with a gentle personality that was easy to love. I, on the other hand, was impulsive and skinny, and wished that I could be more like a character in

a novel, so I would finally stop blurting out the wrong things at the wrong time. My brown hair was wavy and had a life of its own, with a sideswept fringe that had seemed like a good decision at the time, but never stayed in its proper place once I left the hairdresser. I preferred outdoors to indoors; running to walking. As a result, my knees were always covered with Band-Aids, and my cheeks were sun-kissed and sprinkled with freckles.

The road grew narrow, making sharp and unexpected twists and turns as we drove north into the redwood forest. My wet hair dangled around my shoulders, and I ran my hands through it while it dried in the warm California breeze. Ancient trees lined the kerb, and the sky began to turn an ominous shade of red. That summer, the weather had been strange and unpredictable, and after a day of blue skies, clouds were beginning to hover on the horizon.

Annie slowed down as we rounded a bend. The car smelled of sunscreen and aloe vera, and I was prodding my cheeks, inspecting my sunburn in the visor mirror, when I spotted the car. It was a rusty white jeep with a roof rack, parked on the shoulder of the road, by a cluster of trees.

I sat up in my seat. "Pull over," I said.

"What?"

"Pull over!" I repeated.

Annie pulled in next to the jeep just as the remains of the California sun folded into the clouds. "Is that your

dad's car?" she asked, taking the keys out of the ignition.

"Yeah," I said, confused, and opened the door.

"Why would it be here?" Annie asked, slamming the door.

I had no idea. He was supposed to be at work. He and my mother were both high school teachers in Costa Rosa, almost an hour away from here. Cupping my hands, I peered into the jeep. It was empty, with objects strewn across the seats, as if my father had left in a hurry. The giant trunks of the redwoods stood a mere three metres away, creating a boundary between the road and the forest beyond, which was quickly being swallowed by darkness. I reached into Annie's car for my jacket and pulled it on.

"What are you doing?" Annie asked apprehensively.

"He's got to be in there," I said, and made for the edge of the forest.

"What?"

I stopped. "Maybe he went. . . hiking. They do that kind of stuff sometimes on weekends." I tried to say it with conviction, but I didn't believe it. "I'm just going to check it out."

"Wait," Annie cried after me. "Renée! It's getting dark. Maybe we should just wait for him at home."

Without responding, I walked back to Annie's car and leaned through the passenger window. I fished around in the glove compartment until I found the flashlight that

her parents kept for emergencies.

"Don't worry; I'll be back in few minutes. Stay here." And without saying another word, I turned and ran into the woods.

The redwood forest was cool and damp. My wet bathing suit soaked through my clothes as I darted between the trees, my sneakers sinking softly into the earth while the ferns and underbrush whipped my shins.

"Dad?" I shouted into the darkness, but my voice was overpowered by the wind rustling through the branches. "Dad, are you here?"

The beam of my flashlight bounced wildly about the trees as I ran, illuminating pockets of the forest in brief and sudden flashes. The giant redwoods loomed darkly around me, the tops of their trunks extending far above the fog, which had just begun to settle on the ground.

It felt like I had been running for miles when I stopped to catch my breath. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a glint of light reflecting off the ground. I slowed to a walk and edged towards it. My hand trembled as I guided the flashlight in its direction. It was a coin. I prodded it with the tip of my sneaker and walked forward cautiously. A long thin sheet of white cloth was embedded in the dirt next to it, and I followed it into the darkness.

As I stepped deeper into the forest, the air seemed to drop in temperature. I shuddered, pulling my jacket around me tightly, and scanned the ground with my flashlight. It was scattered with coins and pieces of white cloth. Curious, I bent over to get a closer look, when somewhere in the distance, the leaves began to shift. Then movement; the soft thump of footsteps against earth.

I raised my eyes to the shadowy thicket that surrounded me. It was still except for the wind rustling the branches above. Relieved, I took a step forward, when my foot hit something soft and large.

The muscles in my stomach tightened as I lowered my flashlight to the ground. And then I saw it. A hand, as pale as porcelain, its delicate fingers curled into the soil. I followed it to a wrist, an arm, a neck, a face streaked with dirt and shrouded with strands of long chestnut hair.

I gasped and looked away. The pungent smell of rotting leaves wafted through the air. Reluctantly, I looked back at the body.

"Mom," I whispered, barely audible.

She was lying on her back, her arms limp by her side. Her eyes were closed, and I might have thought she was sleeping if her skin hadn't been so pale. Her thin athletic legs, which I had inherited, were now cold and stiff, though they still retained the same girlish shape that she was so proud of.

I leaned over and placed my fingers below her jaw. Her skin was freezing. I don't know why, but I checked her pulse even though I knew she was already dead. Lifeless, she looked older than usual, as if she had aged ten years. Her cheeks were unusually sunken in, and her glasses were nowhere to be seen. Without them, the skin under her eyes looked raw and exposed, drooping down in circles like the rings of a tree.

My father was a couple of metres away, coins scattered around his body. The flashlight slipped from my fingers and landed softly in the dirt, rolling until its beam shone on my father's legs. As I stared at his boots, slumped unnaturally to either side, I felt my breath leave me. I wanted to look away, to run back to the road and call for help, but I couldn't bring myself to leave because I knew that these were the last moments I would ever have with my parents.

"Why?" I choked out. When I was growing up, my parents had always seemed to have an answer to even my hardest questions. But now, for the first time, they were silent. I wiped my eyes and touched my mother's lips. They were parted just enough for me to see a thin shred of cloth peeking out. Gently, I pulled it from between her lips and held it in front of the light. It was tattered around the edges and had the soft consistency of gauze. I turned it over in my hand and looked down at my mother. There

were no signs of violence, no bruises or scratches on her body, no blood. But the gauze, the coins – this was the work of a person. The mere thought of it made my heart race. I turned and stared into the darkness, wondering if I was alone.

The woods seemed to be caving in on me, the tops of the trees circling and bending together. Images of my parents dying clouded my mind, and I felt dizzy and disoriented. Holding the cloth in my fist, I rested my head on my mother's chest and closed my eyes, listening to the creaking of the trees and hoping that when I opened them it would be morning and the woods would be empty and filled with sunlight, and everything would be clear. Around me the cool night air blew through the branches, and the shards of white cloth fluttered on the ground, like moths clinging blindly to a screen.