

WATER DOGS

A Novel

Lewis Robinson



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Water Dogs

A Novel

LEWIS ROBINSON



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It was evening all afternoon.

It was snowing

And it was going to snow.

—WALLACE STEVENS

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About the Author

Bennie didn't recognize the sound. There were squirrels who sometimes nested in the attic and barred owls in the nearby woods, and, during the summer, cats in heat prowling the backyard, but the cries he heard were from a place closer to his bedroom. When he was perfectly still, not moving his head on the pillow, every few seconds he would hear the faint crying. He climbed out of bed and crossed the cold pine floor in his boxers. It was still dark out. Standing in the doorway, he listened. It seemed to be in the living room. He felt his way to the standing lamp in the corner and turned the switch, waited, then heard it distinctly coming from the far wall. He walked closer to the fireplace.

The sound was loudest just to the left of the hearth. He put his ear against the plaster, a gentle bump against the lath, and scratching. He imagined a new hole in the eaves—or an old hole Littlefield hadn't told him about—and now something trapped inside the wall, crying.

At the bottom of the basement stairs, Bennie grabbed a saber saw and a crowbar from Littlefield's pegboard, and a pair of canvas gloves and a flashlight from the tool apron. Littlefield would have suggested poison—and he wouldn't have allowed Bennie to use the saber saw—but Littlefield had gone out to the bar, which meant he was probably not sleeping in his Chevette. When Bennie returned to the living room, he knelt beside the baseboard, listened a final time, then cut a rough rectangle through the plaster. With the crowbar he pried back the lath. He aimed the flashlight into the hole. Eight or ten raccoon eyes looked up at him, little quivering noses pointed toward the light, black fur around the eyes, a stripe of white across the ears and snout. Tiny bandits with miniature claws. They didn't move much but they continued to chatter and cry. He steered the light around the space within the walls and saw only the babies—nothing larger—so he put on his brother's canvas gloves, reached through the hole, and pulled them out, one by one, putting them in the cardboard box used for kindling. They didn't resist, though he felt the light touch of their thin claws. When he'd gotten all five out, he took the box to the porch, set it down, then walked through the breezeway to the barn, where he found the galvanized live-catch trap their sister had once used for opossum in the basement. This plan felt very efficient to him, well conceived. To catch the mother, Bennie baited the trap with an entire tin of sardines. He knew she'd be back. He looked under the eaves and found a hole beside one of the porch support columns. He placed the trap next to the cardboard kindling box, on the corner of the porch, beneath the hole.

After switching off all the lights, he got back under the covers. Except for the billowing wind in the spruce trees outside and, occasionally, the steel chime of the bell buoy near Esker Point, all was quiet. Bennie's skin was still cold from the winter night. He tried to relax. He thought about what a victory this had been—the decision to cut the hole, making it the right size, saving the baby raccoons. He'd find a better place for them. Littlefield would laugh, but he didn't care. He'd done the right thing.

But crying in that box on the porch until morning—it was the first week of March, still bitterly cold—the raccoons would surely freeze. He shook his covers off again, stood up, and walked outside to retrieve the box. He put it on the kitchen table; the raccoons stayed quiet.

Back in bed, Bennie could hear them crying again. He got up, walked to the kitchen, and put the box in the mop closet, then returned to his room. Done.

Thirty or forty minutes later, the phone rang. Bennie marched back to the kitchen, then time aware of how tired he was, and how few hours remained before sunrise. It was his twin sister, Gwen. She lived in New York.

“Littlefield said you didn’t want me to come home. For a visit.”

“Gwen?” he asked. “Do you know what time it is?”

“For a visit. You didn’t want me around.”

“Gwen, that’s ridiculous. Come home. Of course I’d love to see you. What time is it? Are you drunk?”

“I didn’t think you’d answer the phone.”

“You shouldn’t believe Littlefield when he says something like that. He’s just messing with you.”

“I guess I just wanted to make sure. Could I visit next week sometime?”

“It’s your house, too. Of course you can visit. I’d love you to visit. I’m kind of asleep right now. Can I call you back?”

“Is Littlefield there?”

“He’s out. Down at Julian’s, I think.”

“Julian’s?”

“Eddie’s, the bar. Now they call it Julian’s. Julian is Eddie’s son.”

“Right. That tall guy. I remember him. Really, really tall. Like a freak.”

“I’m asleep, Gwen. Call back tomorrow, okay?”

“Will you pick me up at the airport?”

“When?”

“Next week. When I come.”

“Of course. Good night.”

“I’ll be there for our birthdays,” she said.

Growing up, they’d always celebrated together—they were born only fifteen minutes apart on either side of midnight. “That’d be nice,” he said. “I’m going to sleep now.”

“Wow. Somebody’s grumpy. Next time, just don’t answer the phone. We’ll all be happier,” she said, and hung up.

As he tried to sleep, he thought about their old family house—its leaky pipes, chipping paint, uneven floors, drafty windows. Baby raccoons in the walls. They called it “the Manse,” which had been a family joke, because the house was not grand or impressive compared to others along the coast, but now that Bennie and Littlefield were in charge, and the porch seemed one or two strong storms away from crumbling into the ocean, and the old copper pipes were failing, rotting the ceilings and the walls, calling the place “the Manse” seemed sad. The last time Gwen had come to visit them—the previous summer—she and Bennie had been sitting on the porch, drinking beer, discussing Gwen’s latest rationale for living in New York and continuing her quest to be an actress. Gwen said that pretending to be another person was invigorating. Bennie wanted to relate this to his own experience, so after he l

his sister finish, he took a big sip of beer and said that paintball was a pretty good outlet for pretending, too.

He told her that paintball taught him to be careful, and patient, and that he and Littlefield and Julian went out together, competing against a group of sea urchin divers at a year-round course called the Flying Dutchman, sometimes going for a full session without taking more than two or three shots. Two or three gumballs, hopefully kill shots, full of bright-colored sludge. They played every Saturday.

When Bennie looked at her after describing this, he knew they were both having the same thought: there'd been a lot of promise, once. According to their mom at least. He'd done pretty well in high school. They were the grandchildren of an original member of the Stock Exchange. But while Gwen had decided at Vassar to be an actress (it took her a few years to get to New York, and she wasn't doing much acting, but she'd landed two small roles at the Brooklyn Family Theater in Park Slope and she had a gig as a temp at an accounting firm) Bennie hadn't finished college. He thought there might be a time when he'd start up again—when he would have good ideas about how to put a college degree to use in midcoast Maine—but for now he just wanted to keep the Manse from falling apart. Working at the vet office, taking care of the house—that was plenty. He and Gwen were about to turn twenty-seven.

The front door banged shut, and from his bed Bennie heard Littlefield knocking his boot against the wall, depositing, Bennie was sure, lumps of snow on the kitchen floor. Bennie heard the sink faucet turn on, and the clink of a glass. Littlefield tromped into the living room. After a brief silence, he said, "My fucking saber saw. Don't use my saber saw."

"I'm asleep," said Bennie. When they'd moved back into the old house, Bennie had chosen the downstairs bedroom. Most of the time, it was convenient, but there were occasional disadvantages to sleeping near the front door.

"Whoa! Did you cut a hole in the wall?"

Bennie flipped his light on and came to the doorway. "Take off your boots when you come inside."

Littlefield was poking the ashes in the fire, trying to find the coals. He was wearing a black sweatshirt with the hood up. "Those are my sardines in the trap out there."

"Has it sprung yet?" asked Bennie.

"That's no way to catch an animal. Have a heart? Please. Have some balls, Bennie. That's a better motto when you're catching an animal. Have. Some. Balls. Some scrotal ballast. You should design a grow-a-pair trap and force you to use it. A giant glue trap—with a guillotine."

"Did you look closely? Maybe it's already sprung," Bennie said, walking to the kitchen. He felt satisfying to ignore his brother's late-night bluster. Bennie held open the door and the dog walked onto the porch.

In his underwear, Bennie shone the flashlight at the trap. The beam sparkled on the empty trap's galvanized metal. "Did you talk to Gwen?"

"No," said Littlefield.

"She called tonight. She said you said we didn't want her to visit."

They walked back inside, Bennie holding the door again. Littlefield said, "No. I told her you didn't want her to visit."

Bennie felt a familiar anger rise in his chest. "What? Why?"

Littlefield crumpled newspaper and laid it on the andirons. "Where's the kindling box?"

"We're out of kindling," said Bennie. He grabbed a wool blanket from the back of the couch, wrapped it around himself, and sat in the rocking chair.

"I'll go chop some," said Littlefield.

"Hold on," said Bennie. "There's some in the kitchen." He retrieved the cardboard box from the mop closet and brought it to the living room, set it down gently, and opened it. The raccoon babies were clumped together, a mass of wriggling fur, squeaking quietly.

He waited for his brother's reaction.

Finally, Littlefield said, "Do you see those rats in that box?"

"They were in the wall," said Bennie. "They were keeping me up. They're not rats. They're raccoons."

"And you *put* them in that box?"

"I didn't want you to poison them."

"They'll give you roundworm. The grubs can get into your stomach. They eat your kidney and your heart."

"The grubs can get in your stomach?"

"If you swallow them."

Bennie knew it was rarely worth arguing details with Littlefield. He handed him the kindling and said, "I'm just trying to catch the mom. Then I'll let them all go."

"Get them the hell out of here. They're wild animals. They shouldn't be in here."

"After I catch the mom I'll bring them all down to the ravine."

Littlefield shook his head. He arranged the kindling on top of the newspaper. Bennie closed the box and returned it to the kitchen closet and poured himself a glass of milk. When he got back to the living room, the fire was towering, yellow flames lapping the entrance to the flue. Littlefield was sprawled out on the purple couch, still wearing his boots.

Bennie asked, "Why'd you say that to Gwen?"

"Didn't you tell me you didn't want my friends coming around?"

"Just Skunk and those other guys living in his trailer." Skunk Gould and Littlefield had thrown an impromptu party at the Manse in January when Bennie was away for the night. They'd broken windows in the living room and someone had pissed on the rocking chair.

"And that you wanted to keep the place neater?" asked Littlefield.

"And this has *what* to do with Gwen?"

"I told her you were dating some girl from Bowdoin. And you didn't want the house to look too messy. In case you brought her back here."

"Admit you *do* want to see your sister."

"I'd be happy to see Gwen."

"Admit you're just being an asshole," said Bennie. "And for the record, Helen's not from Bowdoin. She went to Bowdoin College. And she lives in Musquacook. She's a cook. A Julian's."

"Impressive! That's some real fine cuisine they have down there. I just had their onion rings about an hour ago. Five stars."

"Screw you. She puts together their dinner menu. That kitchen is actually doing a much better job since she started there."

"I'm telling you—top-shelf onion rings." Littlefield kissed his fingertips. "*Magnifique.*"

“I’m so glad you enjoyed yourself, retard, but that’s the fry cook, not Helen.”

“What a shame,” said Littlefield, closing his eyes.

Bennie wrapped himself in the wool blanket again. He rocked back and forth in the chair, staring at the fire. Both brothers were quiet. Within minutes, Littlefield was snoring on the couch.

When Helen had moved to town in January, she'd started working at the restaurant, and Julian, her boss, passed along the following information to Bennie: she ate a PayDay before every shift, she listened to the Smiths, she liked watching zombie movies (*Night of the Living Dead* was among her favorites), and she'd grown up in Lewiston, the depressed French Canadian mill town, where her mother still lived. Julian said she and Bennie would make a great couple. Bennie knew Julian was mercenary when it came to women; he suspected that Julian had already taken a crack at her himself and she'd been polite but clear in expressing her disinterest. She'd rejected him so tactfully, Bennie guessed, that Julian had convinced himself he'd never even flirted with her. Julian's only disclaimer was that she seemed weird. This, Bennie knew, was his way of protecting himself in the event that her rebuff of him ever surfaced. "She's a little odd," Julian had said while he wiped down the bar with a wet towel. "She's perfect for you, though. She went to Bowdoin, but she's not a jackass."

Bennie had asked about her after seeing her through the glass door to the kitchen, where she pulled orders off the wire. She was tall and had dark eyebrows and straight brown hair and her skin glowed from the heat of the stoves. His first idea was to catch her on break and ask her to the porch for a smoke, but he knew if he got her onto the porch there might be too much pressure on the conversation; it'd be too quiet and intense, and she'd probably end up asking him how he spent his time and he'd be cavalier, he'd let something slip about hunting or paintball, or living in his mom's old house with his brother, who also enjoyed hunting and paintball. He'd learned that the first conversation was especially important—you plotted a course that was difficult to recalibrate—so he knew he had to be careful. He could open with news of his part-time job at the Esker Cove Animal Hospital and Shelter, allowing her to perceive him as a kindly guy with a soft spot for wayward cats and dogs, but follow-up questions about the animals might lead to a description of the crematorium, and perhaps even the specifics of the pentobarbital injections, which, actually, were a large part of his job. He didn't want to talk about the injections.

He was occasionally struck by how the details of his life didn't show well. His paycheck from Esker Cove covered his bills, but his bills were small; he lived in his family's old house which was falling apart. Guiltily, he liked war games; he'd dropped out of college. He didn't have a trust fund, but his mother was ready and willing to give him money (to get him "out of a hole") whenever necessary. She was a therapist. She complained about not having any money but he knew it was there. He never took her up on her offer. He hadn't felt desperate enough yet.

Helen probably drank wheatgrass and would hate that he smoked. He didn't smoke, not really—he just smoked out on the porch at Julian's. In the summer, he liked to smoke and watch the bats on the creek. Just when you thought you'd seen one, it was gone, but then three more would appear, and vanish. After a while, the flecks of brown blurring along the

surface of the water seemed to be everywhere. Now, though, the water was frozen and the bats were asleep underground.

Julian and Bennie had only recently become friends. They'd been high school classmates but Julian had spent most of his time working at the restaurant. The pub drew people down from Brunswick and up from Portland because of its views of the river, the tidal surge, the proximity to the ocean, its adequate food and comfortable atmosphere.

After first seeing her, on his way home from work Bennie stopped regularly at the restaurant, where he thought about approaching her but instead stayed quiet at the bar. One unseasonably warm afternoon in late January, though, Julian placed a pair of sunglasses beside Bennie's beer. "These are hers," he said.

"Why are you giving them to me?" asked Bennie.

"It's perfect. Just give them back to her. Say you found them outside. She dropped them."

Bennie looked at the black plastic frames. "You took these out of her bag?"

"Look, it doesn't matter," he said. "It's a great opening."

"No," said Bennie. "I'm not doing that."

"Bring them over to her. It's a built-in conversation starter. The glare off the creek, how tough it can be when the sun's shining. The angle of the sun. January thaw. You got it?"

"Give them back to her."

"I'm leaving them with you," said Julian, suddenly stern.

Bennie folded Helen's sunglasses inside a section of the newspaper and turned toward the kitchen to see if Helen had witnessed any of this. Julian was pulling back the Stella Artois tap, filling a pint glass, his hair hanging down in front of his face. Julian liked his place in the spotlight behind the bar, and at six-foot-seven, 230 pounds, with a booming voice, he was difficult to miss.

Bennie slid the newspaper across the bar.

Without looking up from the beer taps, Julian said, "You're a wuss."

When Julian got closer, Bennie leaned toward him. "What time does she get here in the morning?" he asked.

"Perfect idea," Julian said, pointing at Bennie and smiling. "I love it. Come by in the morning. You're the man!"

Bennie glanced back toward the kitchen, but his view was obscured. "What time."

"She gets here around ten," said Julian, leaning over the bar. "And she comes through the back alley. Bring the sunglasses. They could help."

"No. I'm leaving them here."

"Yeah you are, baby!" said Julian, swinging his fists like a prizefighter. "You don't need nothing. You're a killer!"

So far the winter had been mild, though they'd weathered a few storms. Most of the snow had melted, as it sometimes did at the end of January, before the winter picked up speed again and kept everyone cold and snowbound until early May. For the past five years the January thaw had arrived predictably about a month after Christmas—rivers of snowmelt running along the shoulders of every road, everyone driving around in T-shirts, confused moose and deer trotting out of the woods to lick salt off the roads, causing accidents.

When he arrived at Julian's the next morning, Bennie didn't go inside; he sat on one of the

dented trash cans beside a storage shed, near the restaurant's back entrance.

There would be no way around the awkwardness with Helen. He'd just muscle through, skip the bullshit, flip past the usual channels. With Helen, he would be ready to put forward his best self. With Helen, he would make only occasional mistakes, and only mistakes that could be construed as charming and guileless.

He arrived at nine-forty, giving himself some extra time to relax and acclimate. The time passed slowly, though when she finally turned down the alley, her clogs clapping the pavement, the hood of her sweatshirt bouncing around her neck, her approach was rushed—he hadn't thought about giving her some kind of warning. He stayed quiet until she was just a few yards from the door, when he said, "Excuse me." She slowed her stride but she didn't look up.

"Excuse me?" he said again, this time a little louder.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, looking at the ground as though she had dropped something.

"Let's go sailing." Bennie was wearing his favorite windbreaker, with the stripe down the sleeve, army green pants, and running shoes.

Helen removed her sunglasses—the ones Julian had stolen from her—and looked plainly at him. The muscles in her face relaxed. "What do you mean?" She wasn't being cruel; it was a sincere question.

"Well, the ocean is right over there," he said, pointing east. "And it'll still be war tomorrow. And windy."

"Do I know you?" The sweatshirt was zipped all the way up, and she wore a calf-length jean skirt.

"No," he said, without elaboration. He'd planned for this; he assumed she wouldn't like a defensive stance. He stood by his answer.

She folded the sunglasses and slipped them into her pocket. "Do you have a boat?"

"No," he said, and it felt even better this time. "My name's Bennie. I eat here a lot. I'm a friend of his."

"I've seen you."

"You have?"

"I think so." Again, she maintained an even tone and didn't smile. He had no reason to believe she was being coy. "Were you the one who returned my sunglasses? Julian told me they must have left them on the bar."

During this first exchange he got a good look at her eyes, up close—they were, as he thought, brown, and big, and the whites of them were shockingly clear. Under her dark eyebrows, they were identical in color and shape and glossiness and brightness, but then you could see that her left one was pointed gently inward. Was this called a wandering eye? She told him her name, her full name: Helen Coretti.

She'd never been sailing before. He picked her up on his motorcycle at one the next day when it was so freakishly warm that it felt like early summer. He knew there was a good place to rent boats near Meadow Island, Sagona's Marine, and he was surprised they were closed. He hadn't expected they'd have boats to rent in January, but he'd assumed someone would be around to loan him one. The owner had been a friend of Bennie's father.

The big doors to the back of the boathouse were wide open, though, and Bennie spotted a few small fiberglass boats tucked in the corner. He asked Helen to help him drag one down

the shore.

“Are you sure this is okay?” she asked.

“He’s a nice guy, Mr. Sagona,” said Bennie.

“Have you sailed this kind of boat before?”

“This kind? I think so. What is it, do you think?”

“I have no idea. It says ‘Sunfish’ here on the side,” she said.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Sunfish.” He’d grown up on Meadow Island; he’d been around boats all his life. He didn’t know much about sailing, but it didn’t take him long to figure out how to let out the sail and drop the centerboard.

Out in the channel, even though they nearly capsized five or six times, it only happened once and they were able to climb back into the boat quickly enough. The air felt like June but the water reminded Bennie it was still January. Helen didn’t seem to mind. She reminded him of bookworms he’d gone to middle school with—those girls who seemed to know so much more about the world than he did. Helen was surprisingly strong for a skinny person. He loved how her face looked with her brown hair slicked back as she came out of the waves, her thick green sweatshirt heavy with seawater. Helen easily scissor-kicked herself aboard, but Bennie was flustered and weak from the cold, so Helen helped him back into the boat, and even though the physical aspects of the moment were awkward, he had the presence of mind to breathe deeply and forget himself for a moment and simply be in awe of how pretty she was with the water shiny on her face, a drip rolling down her nose. He gripped the slippery fiberglass and she grabbed both of his cold wrists and pulled him up as he kicked in the water. When he was aboard he said, “You’re like a nymph.”

She waited a moment before responding, which made him nervous.

“Like in the myths, or the bug kind?” she asked. She made little pinching gestures with her hands.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Which one?” she asked.

“Maybe both,” he said. She seemed to like this answer.

Bennie had stopped thinking about how embarrassed he should have been for not knowing how to sail. Helen was shivering, and she looked out at the surrounding islands like she was flying through the clouds in a dream. When the wind gusted on their last tack across the channel, instead of flipping over they picked up speed. The wind died and they drifted in toward shore, the bow pushing gently up onto the rocks. He still didn’t know Helen, but what he read from her eyes, and the way she huddled close to him in the boat, asking him for the names of the spruce-tufted islands they passed, was that she was glad to have involved herself in such a plan.

The drive home on the motorcycle made them colder than the capsizing. Bennie usually drained the oil from his motorcycle by Labor Day. But after asking her to go sailing he thought a motorcycle ride would be perfect, so he charged its battery and checked its tires. He’d been riding it off and on for a few years—he’d bought it two years earlier from his boss at the animal hospital, Dr. Handelmann—but it was more of an amusement than a mode of transportation, something to be used during a few weekend afternoons in July and August. It was midday and warm when they’d arrived at Sagona’s, but when they drove home the sun was nearly gone and the wind was still blowing hard off the water. Their cotton clothes were

sopped in seawater. Helen made it bearable, though. She latched on to him, pressing herself against his back. He tried not to make more of this than what it was; he knew she was cold. Still, ripping along those back roads, banking turns with Helen hugging him—it felt miraculous.

He gave her a lift to her house, less than a mile from the restaurant. When they arrived she was shivering, and she looked startled as she took off her helmet. Her lips were blue and her shoulders were raised, as though she was trying to keep her neck warm.

“Thank you, Bennie,” she said.

He was too cold to speak, so he moved to kiss her, which happened at the same moment she handed him the helmet. This was a smoother exchange than he anticipated; he just took the helmet, instead of Helen, into his arms. He didn’t go through with trying to kiss her; even then he figured they had a future, and he could wait. But then she said, “I’ve got to get out of these wet clothes,” and she smiled brightly one more time and started walking up the sidewalk toward her house.

He followed her. When they got to the porch, Bennie could tell she didn’t know he was right behind her because she opened the screen door and spun around. It looked like she was planning on waving to him as he drove away. But there he was, two steps back. The way she jumped—a tiny flinch—was almost imperceptible.

She said, “Oh!”

“Hi. Sorry.”

“Do you need something?” she asked. Her eyebrows were arched and she seemed genuinely interested.

“I guess not,” he said. “I thought you’d invited me inside.” All of a sudden he was aware that because he hadn’t been wearing a helmet (she’d worn his), his hair had dried like a stiff flag, flying straight back.

“You thought that I’d invited you inside?” she asked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head.

“Wait, I don’t understand. Why did you think that?” She couldn’t tell that he was dying inside. She was trying to be precise. She was still holding the screen door partway open.

“Well, didn’t you say ... that you needed to take off your clothes?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. Her hair had been matted down by the helmet. Her bangs stuck to her forehead.

“Never mind,” he said.

As he turned back toward his motorcycle, she asked, “Well, did you need to take off your clothes?” and she opened the screen door a little further.

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

“But you don’t have other clothes to change into,” she said. “Do you?”

“No, I don’t,” he said, deflated.

“Then I guess you need to go home.”

“Yeah,” he said. “See you later.”

“Thanks again,” she said, and she winked her good eye.

Later, when he got home, after lying in the tub for an hour, his brain thawed. He thought more about that wink. He remembered thinking how smart she seemed, how aware of everything she was. There was no way she could have been oblivious about her reference

taking her clothes off, even if she was planning to take them off on her own. But then again, aside from the fact she was a good cook, he didn't know much about her yet; in her line of work, put the linguini on the plate meant put the linguini on the plate, and maybe she had simply been telling him she was cold—just sharing this information.

He wondered if it had really been a wink, after all. Maybe it was just a muscle spasm brought on by hypothermia, or a way to distract attention from her wandering eye.

They saw each other a week after borrowing the Sunfish from Sagona's. It was their second date and they went to the Musquacook Public Library, where they were showing *Babe*, the movie with the talking pig. Afterward, Bennie declared the movie stupid. "Talking animals—doesn't it seem silly?"

"I thought it was pretty cool," she said. His Skylark was in the shop and it was too cold for the motorcycle, so she'd picked him up, and was now dropping him off. They were parked outside the Manse in Helen's old Jetta, which she rarely used. If she had a shift at the restaurant, she walked.

"I mean, everyone hopes a pig or a dog or a horse will talk. Of course we do. But the whole point is ... the thing about animals is ... well, that we want them to talk and we think they might be able to talk, but they *can't*. They just can't."

She was staring out at the darkness through the windshield. She paused a beat before saying, "What?"

"It's too easy. It's like a person being able to fly, and making a movie about it."

"Like Superman?" she asked.

"I guess," he said. He was feeling grouchy. He wanted her to understand his annoyance.

He knew they were working their slow way toward an awkward goodbye, a silence in the car, the gearshift and emergency brake sentinel between them, so he told her they should do something like this again, smiled defensively, climbed out, then bent down and waved to her through the window, walked to the house, opened the door, and shut it without looking back toward her car. Of course he had wanted to kiss her. The logistics had seemed untenable, but now he suffered searing regret. After drinking half a beer and brushing his teeth, he climbed into bed. He hadn't even thanked her for driving. An hour later there was a knock at his window. She was wearing sneakers and a dark blue tracksuit. Bennie opened the window. It made sense to him that she was standing there, out of breath. He wanted to reach his arm out the window and give her a hug, but instead he said, "Do you need something?" She didn't get the joke. She just hitched an ankle over the sill and started climbing in.

"I can go open the front door," he said, but she ignored him. She didn't speak at all. She had a fistful of condoms. He didn't have a chance to turn on the light; she kicked off her shoes, crouched on the bed, and unzipped her tracksuit. He couldn't see her face very well, but he could see nervousness in her smile. She reached her hand into his and relinquished the rubbers. All but one fell like playing cards to the floor; there must have been six or seven. "How long are you planning on being here?" he asked. When she lay down on top of him, his breasts and her stomach were soft and warm. They kissed and it felt almost argumentative, and he liked the feeling. He put his hands on her small breasts but she grabbed his wrists and pinned his arms to the bed. He tried to move but he couldn't; she pressed him more firmly against the mattress. She released him momentarily to take off her tracksuit pants. Then she pinned him again, but only one of his arms, so he reached out and put his hand on her as

which was cooler than the front of her body. He imagined her at the restaurant, dominating the kitchen, which Julian didn't dare enter. Her physical strength was a secret: the people who ate her food didn't know how heroic she'd been when the Sunfish had capsized. Soon she was squeezing him so fiercely, he couldn't see straight, and usually this would have made him want to escape, but somehow he recognized that being trapped beneath Helen was an almost perfect place to be.

Bennie loaded the raccoons into his car, including the mother, who had eaten the sardines and was sleeping in the trap when Bennie came onto the porch at dawn. He wanted to take them down to the ravine before Littlefield woke up, but as Bennie was backing out of the driveway, Littlefield emerged from the house and climbed into the passenger seat. “This is a stupid idea,” he said.

They parked on the high shoulder near Esker Cove, and when they got to the bottom of the ravine, Bennie put the babies, first, on a flat spot in shallow snow beneath a gnarled spruce tree. When he released the mother, she darted away. Bennie and Littlefield waited beneath the crooked tree to see if she would come back for the babies, but after a few minutes she was still gone.

“It’s because we’re sitting here,” said Littlefield. “As soon as we leave, she’ll come back.”

“You’re probably right,” said Bennie. They walked out of the ravine and returned to her warm car. Bennie was certain that in the cold the babies would die within the hour.

“They’re rodents, man,” said Littlefield. “They can survive anything. They’ll be fine.”

Later in the morning, Bennie and Helen ate cheese omelets at her house, listening to NPR, a report from California about the rise in the price of pine nuts, and a story about the beginning of Clinton’s second term. Bennie wasn’t paying close attention; he knew his brother would be picking him up soon to take him to the Flying Dutchman. Bennie hadn’t yet told Helen about his involvement in the paintball league—the dynamics of competition, the protective masks, the highly pressurized plastic semiautomatic paint markers, what it felt like to run around in the snow at the Dutchman, playing on the same team as his brother—because they hadn’t been dating for very long. He guessed she would have some kind of ethical resistance to the whole idea. He also suspected that she would enjoy it if she tried it; she’d revel in the irony. It would make her uneasy, like the zombie movies she loved to watch, but she would get caught up in the competition. She would be pleased to find how safe the game was, and that what they did in the woods was closer to cops and robbers or hide-and-go-seek than it was to war. It would surprise her. Maybe he’d take her to the Flying Dutchman for her birthday.

For now, though, he didn’t say anything. Despite his rationalizations he felt immature about playing paintball so often and didn’t think he could easily convince her that he was not. Just after they finished their omelets, they heard a car horn outside; it was Littlefield. The game started at noon. He gave her a kiss and told her he’d check in with her at the restaurant later in the day.

Littlefield and Bennie drove across Musquacook to pick up Julian, who was slouching on the front steps of his house with a cigarette tucked behind his ear. Julian climbed in the backseat of Littlefield’s Chevette, then reached between the seats and popped *Back in Black*.

into the cassette deck. Bennie could see his own distorted reflection in Julian's silver mirrored sunglasses. "Gentlemen, no more tears," said Julian. "I'm feeling it. We'll win today."

Julian and Bennie always rented guns from the Dutchman, but Littlefield brought his own. With one hand on the wheel, Littlefield lowered the volume as they sped down Masungu Road, and took a cigarette from a pack on the dashboard. Littlefield was skinny, like Bennie, but his eyes were brown, the angles of his face more distinct, and he rarely shaved. The Chevette's heater was broken, so Littlefield grabbed a wool hat from the dashboard and with one hand pulled it onto his head, covering most of his close-cropped brown hair, which—though he was only twenty-nine—was getting gray at the temples. He gently pressed in the lighter, rolled the window down an inch, brought the lighter to the end of his cigarette, placed the pack in his coveralls, and finally returned his hands to the steering wheel. Proud of this maneuver, he glanced over at Bennie. In the cemetery they passed, the snow was so deep that only a few of the headstones were showing. More snow was on its way that evening. Littlefield exhaled smoke over the top of the window.

The Chevette was a new acquisition of Littlefield's—Bennie had no idea where it had come from, and he didn't ask because he knew Littlefield wasn't happy to be driving it. His previous car, a Ford F-150, was rusty and temperamental but it had fit with his work as a builder.

Julian was usually good for some pre-contest banter, but instead he was focused on Littlefield's oversize paint gun resting in the backseat.

"Why'd you spend money on this?"

"You like it?" said Littlefield.

"It's not bad," he said, turning it over in his hands. "But I don't need it. The rented guns kill just as well."

"They charge you eight bucks every time you rent from them. We go every week. My gun cost one-twenty. It won't be long before I've earned it back."

"Nice work, math whiz." Julian put the gun back down on the seat. Bennie was embarrassed that his brother was earnest in his defense of this purchase. *Laugh at yourself once in a while*, Bennie thought. *It's paintball. The gun's a toy.*

The guns the Dutchman rented were low end, but for battles with the urchiners, precision often wasn't essential. They tried to outfox their opponents and shoot at point-blank range. Bennie agreed with Julian: a poorly gauged sight wouldn't cost you a win.

Still, when they passed Rubin's Small Engine Repair, Julian rolled his window down. He picked up Littlefield's gun again and rested its muzzle on the car door and squinted his eye lining up his sight. When he fired—missing a diamond road sign with a large black arrow—Littlefield shouted back at him, "Idiot!"

Julian fired another one, and again the paintball sailed off into the woods. Then he brought the gun back to his lap and rolled up the window. "I can't shoot for shit with that thing," he said.

"You think that moving along at fifty miles an hour has anything to do with it, douchebag?"

As they pulled into the Dutchman's parking lot, Littlefield opened his door and flicked the end of his cigarette to the snow. Littlefield pulled his Camel Lights from the front pocket of his coveralls, shook another one out, and lit it. Bennie tightened the cuffs of his gloves. More

of the time he found ways to get excited about paintball, but his brother's foul mood made the whole charade cringeworthy.

It was at some point late in high school when Littlefield completed the transformation from rich kid to local—from a boy who'd trained hard for their father's ski team, earning all-star honors in ninth and tenth grade, to a kid who sold an ounce of weed every week at the private school where their mother worked part-time as a counselor. When Littlefield finished school, he started learning how to build houses and started caring less about what the family thought of him. The change happened not long after their father died. Bennie and their sister Gwen, helped their mother run the house, but Littlefield had always battled with Eleanor, so he moved in with Pete and Skunk Gould, sleeping on the couch in their trailer until she moved up to a place in Clover Lake. When she moved, she left the family's house to the kids. That was when Gwen packed up, too, and started her life in Brooklyn.

They zipped up their tan coveralls as they walked over to the office. Usually, Bennie liked watching Littlefield pull the headgear down over his face, the rigid mask with built-in goggles, and he admired Littlefield for his toughness, his stubbornness, his fierce approach to the game. He'd always been in awe of this, actually—Littlefield's ability to stay focused, to take the game seriously, to want to win, always, to never let the thought of losing distract him. Watching Littlefield check his gun this time, though—making sure the reloading action was working, lining up the sight, pumping a few gumballs at a nearby spruce stump—reminded Bennie of how pigheaded his brother was in general, how he took himself so seriously. Littlefield had isolated himself after their father's death—he'd become much more stubborn and smug—and while there were times when Bennie was envious of Littlefield's confidence, this was not one of them. *We're playing a game. Take it easy.*

Through the scratched, fogging plastic of his own mask, Bennie saw the urchiners. Their masks were down, too, and they wore belted white snowsuits. They held their guns tight against their stomachs, each in the same way. They were rugged, but with their new matching snowsuits, they looked like happy snowmen.

"Here's the thing," Julian whispered. "They've got a new guy. I don't even know his name."

"LaBrecque," said Littlefield. "Ray LaBrecque. The one in the middle."

Boak and Shaw were the veterans of the urchiner team—they were squat and muscular—and LaBrecque, the tallest of the snowmen, towered between them like an older brother.

"Yeah, okay. Well, he's their weakness," whispered Julian.

The game was better in summertime because more shots were fired and you sprinted around the course like a spooked dog; the anxiety about getting shot was heightened because you wore fewer layers and the paintballs left bigger welts. This was something the rookie paintballers didn't consider: the incentive to avoid your opponents' fire went far beyond just wanting to stay in the game. Getting shot was not like getting tagged in touch football. Getting shot hurt, like getting snagged on a barbed-wire fence. With paintball, you were always just one stupid move away from the shockingly sharp sting of humiliation and loss.

In wintertime, this fear was lessened because of heavier clothes and snow bunkers, but the starkness of the weather added to the drama. The margin for error was small. There was no greenery, and the drifts were difficult to run through.

Bennie and Littlefield's understanding of each other was best in evidence at the Flying Dutchman. Their father had been a marine, which made running around with guns especially appealing to Littlefield. (It didn't seem to matter to him that their father hadn't gone to Vietnam but had instead served stateside as a "logistical specialist," driving trucks.) Bennie, on the other hand, didn't care for paintball itself, but he liked the camaraderie—most of the time, he liked being on his brother's team. Julian competed for different reasons. He was both a pacifist and a hedonist, a guy whose idea of the perfect afternoon was getting stoned and reworking dessert recipes at his restaurant, thinking about pasta specials and new keg beers for the bar. Most people who knew him would never have guessed he was a top-shelf paintballer—not exactly an instinctual marksman, but a sneaky, ruthless, no-conscience killer. He played because he hated to lose.

The urchiners didn't wait around to shake hands. When they saw their opponents arrive, they started walking to the west side of the field. Julian and Bennie still needed to pick up their rented guns. Gendron Knight, the overweight ex-con who ran the Dutchman, knew they were coming, and he lumbered out of his shack and handed them two semiautomatic markers without a word. They hadn't been to other paintball courses, but they knew the Dutchman was a no-frills enterprise. It had banged-up rental guns and a wire-mesh fence containing an un-manicured thirty-five-acre plot of land with just about every possible New England geological variation: thick woods, fields, sand pit, low scrub, stream, pond, boulders, swamps, though the snow flattened everything out a bit. Even the man-made obstacles, plywood bunkers tall enough to stand behind in summertime, were half buried.

The rivalry with the urchiners was the worst kind, because the urchiners didn't consider Bennie and Littlefield and Julian much of a challenge. Once the game began, Bennie and his teammates moved around the course, sweating, squinting their eyes, searching the woods for any suspicious movement, wondering whether or not they'd get shot in the back. Bennie felt the urchiners' presence behind every tree, every bunker, but catching sight of them was rare. On a small paintball course, games lasted five or ten minutes, but on the big open course at the Dutchman, with practiced, paranoid soldiers, games lasted much longer. For the first hour, Julian and Littlefield and Bennie stuck together, and they didn't once glimpse the urchiners. They suspected the urchiners had taken hold of the interior, so they trudged the way along the fence. Littlefield didn't make any sprinting forays. He was usually a good one for the kamikaze mission, swooping through enemy territory at full speed, making kills and flushing meat out into open ground for Julian and Bennie, but everyone was more tentative that afternoon. Because of the urchiners' new guy, LaBrecque, Littlefield said they had a real chance to win.

Boak and Shaw, the mainstays of the urchiner team, were glass-eating gorillas, burly and tough and unpredictable. They were cousins, and both of them had military training, which helped with the game, but what made them better than most teams was that they didn't mind sitting in a snow hole for hours. They'd keep a man out front—in this case, LaBrecque, the rookie—and Shaw and Boak would bunker in the deep snow or camp out in the big plastic tunnel at the center of the course: "the snake." They'd had a few matches with the urchiners in which Littlefield had gotten shot by both Boak and Shaw, from either end of the snake, the barrels of their guns pointing up through the snow. What these gorillas did for a living (maneuvering a small boat in shallow waters during the wintertime; diving with two tanks of

their backs in the surge around the shoals in a dry suit that kept you just warm enough to stay alive, gathering sea urchins) got them accustomed to being patient and weathering pain. The best strategy with the urchiners was to do whatever possible to spring them from the little rat tunnels.

The paintballer's credo is to kick ass. To blast hard and fast and to kill indiscriminately, to model yourself after soldiers or Indians or gangbangers acting fiercely in battles you haven't had to fight. Bennie tried to be fully compliant with the paintballer's credo whenever he was at the Dutchman. It was guys like Shaw and Boak who had originally established the credo—actual vets—they'd been in Saudi during the Gulf War. They had a good handle on how to set the tone at the Dutchman.

During the second hour, Littlefield ventured about twenty yards ahead—Julian and Bennie hung back in a snarl of spruce trees—but nothing came of it. As usual, the urchiners were perfectly happy just holing up, waiting for their opponents to make the wrong move. Just before the whistle blew, Bennie found LaBrecque. He was set up behind them, prone, most of his body hidden by a plywood bunker, but Bennie had a clear bead on his head. Because it was so late in the match, a hit would seal the win. Bennie locked him in. He had him fully FedExed (Julian's term), but just before Bennie squeezed his trigger, LaBrecque must have felt his gaze. His head popped down, out of view. Gendron Knight blew his whistle.

Ultimately, an uneventful match.

When the whistle blew, Bennie's fingers were stiff in his gloves, his back ached from crouching, and all he'd been thinking about (before he'd had the chance to aim his gun at LaBrecque's head) was heating up some beef stew, filling the fireplace with wood, and sitting on the old purple couch with Helen.

They all knew the Dutchman closed at two-thirty in the wintertime and that Gendron got crabby when he had to shut down late, so when the whistle blew everyone came out from the trees. Bennie was relieved, ready to end the game despite the tie score, but the urchiners were clearly annoyed. They all gathered by the frozen duck pond near the north fence, masks still on, as Boak and Shaw approached.

Boak was their captain. It wasn't until all six men had gathered in a tight circle that he pulled off his hat and mask. His hairline was just a few inches above his eyebrows and his cheeks were badly scarred from acne and other aggressions. There weren't many guys in town that just by standing in front of you made you consider exactly how to defend yourself. Boak looked capable of considerable bare-handed violence. The same was true of Shaw. The game was over and no one on his team had been hit, but still Boak looked like someone had kidnapped his sister. He was flushed and ugly. Shaw and LaBrecque removed their hats and masks, too. Bennie hadn't seen LaBrecque before today—he was six or seven inches taller than Boak and Shaw, had wide shoulders, whiskers on his sturdy chin, and gray eyes. He was probably younger than he looked. He gazed out and nodded to Bennie, to Julian, and then to Littlefield.

Boak said it was a cracker way to end the battle. Littlefield said he couldn't agree more. Tying was not part of the paintballer's credo. But when Gendron Knight came out on his snowmobile to reiterate the time issue, there was no room for discussion. That's when the snow began to fly; the storm was starting, little light pellets landing on Bennie's eyelashes. They all put their hats and masks back on and trudged to Gendron's shack to return the guns.

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