



A LONG WALK IN THE WOODS

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She forgave him the instant he arrived. He offered an apology and no explanation, but her irritation disappeared at the first sign of his smile, melting in the heat under her skin when he leaned in to kiss her hello.

He was almost an hour late, but she had been on the phone to her mother and a friend had called, so she hadn't noticed the time until it was twenty to eight and then she panicked about not being ready herself. It was only fifteen minutes later, when she was sitting, changed and mascara'd and he still hadn't arrived, that she thought about it. A bit off, keeping her waiting on what was only their third proper date.

But he was here now. She fussed around him, offering him coffee or a beer — he said yes to the coffee, no to the beer, he was driving. She made it with her head down, paying more attention to the operation than would be warranted by complicated brain surgery. Her

voice was high, and as brittle as movie set glass when she talked, too much and too fast, not looking at him, keeping her back to him when she spoke, knowing that if she did not she risked embarrassing herself by reaching out to touch him. Carol noticed that her hands were shaking as she poured the milk. She wondered if she told him that he made her feel sick whether he would realise she meant it as a compliment.

They decided, after some discussion, to go for a drive. Jonathan didn't want just to go to a pub, and they'd already done the film and restaurant bit, so she was quite relieved at his firmness in suggesting this. It was such a lovely night, he said, they could go for a walk in the forest nearby where he used to live — where his parents still lived. She was flattered by this. She saw it as opening up, an invitation to share his childhood experience, which surely meant he wanted the two of them to be involved. He had told her so little about himself. She would find her own voice filling the silences, their every meeting leaving her with the impression that she had spent it chattering away like a hyperactive child. Carol was wary of taking silence for sensitivity; she'd done it often enough to know that sometimes it was just stupidity. Still, she found the less he said the more she credited him with, so that her own loquaciousness made her increasingly insecure, her words worn thin and meaningless with overuse. Surely this would redress the balance; she was seeing where he grew up, where he walked his dogs as a young boy. She felt that, since her own youth was tucked firmly out of inspection's way in another city, she would be on firmer ground now.

They did not talk much in the car. Carol resisted the temptation she always felt to sing along with the radio, knowing that her voice

couldn't survive scrutiny in such an enclosed space. The wrapover skirt she was wearing was the wrong choice for a walk, she realised, but she hadn't wanted to waste more time by changing or, worse, appear to be one of those women who fuss too much over their clothes. It fell open over her knees as he drove, and she was torn between leaving it, revealing her legs to the thigh, or tucking it closed and looking prim and uptight. She couldn't quite decide if it was a turn-on or off-putting, or if he had even noticed. She didn't have the greatest legs in the world, she knew that, but they had caught the sun and shed some of their usual Scottish pallor, so she decided to risk it and left the skirt as it was. She told herself that she had not lost all sense of perspective if she knew how ridiculously important the decision seemed, and comforted herself that while she was being stupid, at least she recognised the extent of her stupidity.

Jonathan stopped the car in a small gravel car park enclosed on one side by trees. She didn't recognise the area they'd driven through – hardly surprising since she rarely ventured out of the city centre. They seemed close to the kind of residential homes she could not imagine ever living in, the kind of houses he grew up in, with their gardens and their burglar alarms and their gated drives. He switched off the engine and turned to her, smiling. 'You do realise,' he said, his voice slow and quiet, as measured as always, 'that I've brought you here to kill you.'

Carol started to laugh, but the seriousness in his eyes made her stomach shrink. Her mouth was suddenly very dry, her tongue thick and immobile. She tried not to drop her smile but her mind was racing. There were no other cars in the car park, they were totally alone. She had no idea where they were, or in which direction to find

the nearest houses. Then he smiled at her, an almost laugh, and got out of the car.

‘Come on, then, let’s go for a walk.’

‘You bastard!’ Relief made her laughter shrill but she let him take her hand to help her out of her seat. The touch of his fingers condensed her fear into a more familiar nervousness. Men. Why did they all have such a sick sense of humour?

Her shoes were all wrong, as well, she realised. Though not as girly and stupid as some she owned, they were clumpily fashionable enough to snag on the loose rocks on the path, twisting her ankles. Her skirt flapped open, baring her skin to the thistles and branches that whipped her legs. She didn’t want to complain, though, feeling this was a test she had to pass. In an attempt to enter into the spirit of things, she called lightly after his back; ‘Good thing my friends know where I am, they’ll know who to set the police on when I don’t come back!’ He stopped and turned around. ‘Oh, it was your friends who paid me.’ She relaxed then, silently cringing at her own gullibility. How could she have thought he was serious, even for a split second? She’d obviously been watching way too much TV.

They went on without speaking. Jonathan had dropped her hand once they were away from the car; she wasn’t sure whether this meant anything or not. They were still at the stage when each gesture was a code to be deciphered and she didn’t feel she had yet learned the key. Instead, she allowed herself to stumble and grab his sleeve to steady herself, holding on slightly longer than necessary. He responded by taking her hand again and did not let it go for the rest of the walk. Unfit as she was, Carol could no longer feel her breathing. His proximity smothered her. She noticed nothing as they walked but him.

Ignoring the greenery, her eyes fixed on the black hair recently clipped short at the nape of his neck, the redness the barber had left there, the perfection of the lines between his jaw and shoulder. She didn't want to be here, tramping through dirt and weeds. She would have happily stayed sitting in the car, just looking at him.

They stopped at a wooden bridge over a stream that this too-hot summer had dried to barely a trickle, so that their laughing game of 'poohsticks' floundered on the lack of current. The air was still and clammy, and Carol could feel dampness start to spread under her arms. She hoped that if they ended the night together she would not be too sweaty and smelly; they hadn't even had a drink, so he would be sober enough to notice. Catching herself, she wished that she could just enjoy moments like these, rather than spoil them with trivialities.

'This is a good spot,' he said, lighting his cigarette, leaning against the frail-looking wooden railing.

'For what?'

'To kill you, of course.'

He was smiling when he spoke, but the reasonableness in his tone made her own smile freeze, freed only by the distraction of voices on the other side of the stream.

'You can't now. Witnesses!' Relieved, she moved away from him, towards the unseen arrivals. She stared down at the water, barely deep enough to drown in, and imagined herself in it. 'Anyway, if you're going to murder me, you have to let me go home and change first. I don't want to be remembered on Crimewatch wearing these clothes.'

It was fishing for a compliment but he didn't take the hint. She was aware of him on the bridge behind her, and stiffened as his fingers touched her shoulders, moving her hair away from her neck.

Anticipation gagged her, strangled her, pushed its fist down her throat and into her tightening stomach, but even as she sank back into him it couldn't smother the flicker of doubt. What if he wasn't joking? She did not know this man, this acquaintance of friends, this person she had been with for only a few short hours, for that was all a couple of dates really added up to. So when she felt his mouth on her neck she sagged as much in relief as desire. Then it was simply desire, as she twisted her head back to kiss him, their mouths meeting in an awkward and uncomfortable embrace that neither of them wanted to pull away from. He put his arms around her, one hand on her jaw as his other clutched her breast, fingers vainly seeking the nipple through the layers of her clothes. She was pinned against him, twisted against the bridge, the pain of her straining neck and pulling nerves starting to surface beneath the pleasure of the kiss. She tried to move, then, but he held her tighter, his kiss hardening. Carol had barely started to struggle when she was released, before she was even sure her body had reacted to her mounting sense of panic.

Laughter, again, and the unmistakable sound of children swearing. Jonathan was away from her, parting with a conspiratorial grin just as a group of kids appeared only feet away from them on the bridge. Three boys and a couple of girls, carrying plastic bottles of cider and smoking with the casualness of experts. Carol tensed, prepared for trouble; even at that age they were old enough to do some damage just because they didn't like the look of someone or they were having a dull night. But these just filed quietly past, subdued by surprise and, unbelievably, embarrassment. Jonathan calmly watched them go, unmoved by either their presence or the knowing giggles they dissolved into as soon as they had safely passed, quite aware of

what they had disturbed. He seemed to have materialised another cigarette from somewhere — she wondered if it was the same one, if he had held onto it while they were kissing. Her own embarrassment irritated her, as did the fact that he didn't share it.

'Come on,' he said, holding out his hand. 'It's getting late. Let's get back to the car.'

They stopped and kissed again before they reached the car park, but Carol was uncomfortable in the open, wanting to get back to the security of strangers, uneasy about the ride back. She was unnerved by him, annoyed that a stupid joke could make her feel this way, not sure whether it was his insensitivity or her over-reaction that angered her most. She was silent as he drove her home, pulling her skirt over her knees with an impatient twitch. She tried not to catch his eye, but she could see him watching her, frowning at her fidgeting. Was he upset? Annoyed that she could, even for a moment, entertain the thought of him as a killer? Or angry that such a juicy opportunity had been spoiled by a bunch of kids? His face was unreadable, giving nothing away. Had he felt powerful on the bridge, as she had tried and failed to push him away; turned on by the struggle they were both pretending had never happened? She felt she had let him down somehow, disappointed him in some vital way, and wasn't sure if this was simply because she hadn't got the joke. But the knowledge of her helplessness clung to her like a sweat, tainting the space they shared. They both relaxed slightly when he reached over and opened the window, flooding the car with what passed in the city for fresh air.

'This is me, then,' she said, unnecessarily, as they pulled up outside her door. They sat for a moment in awkward silence, both knowing that, by now, sex — either its presence or its lack — was an

issue, but neither knowing how to confront it. Carol looked pointedly at her watch. Then she leaned over and kissed him, enjoying again the sheer shock of attraction when she touched him, the straightforwardness of desire. She pulled back and looked at him, her gaze focused on his mouth to avoid his eyes. It was still early.

Her flatmate was out and wouldn't be back for hours, if she was coming back at all that night. Carol kissed him again, even as her hand reached down beside her to open the car door and she tried to pull herself away. He held onto her tightly, locking her in his embrace, and when he finally released her he was smiling.

'So,' he murmured, his voice thick with longing. 'Are you going to invite me in?'

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