

Legacy

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Everything seemed smaller than I remembered.

This was no big surprise to me. After all, the last time I'd stood on the porch of my uncle's fishing cabin I was maybe fourteen years old. Looking up at the impossibly tall trees and listening to the quiet sounds of nature, I felt a sudden urge to whip out my pocketknife and find a chunk of wood to whittle on.

As tempting as that was, I had work to do. I dug through my pockets and found the thin wire key ring that the attorney had handed to me after I'd signed the papers. It was my place now. *Don't sell it straight away*, my uncle's last note had said. *Spend a few weekends there first. It's a great place to reflect and to heal.*

Someone had covered the furniture with plain white linens. It wouldn't have been Uncle Jim—he'd been too ill for the last year or so to come near this place. The lawyer hadn't said anything about a caretaker, either. Then I recalled the neighbor. A widow, if I remembered right—another of my uncle's generation. They'd been close enough that my dad used to joke about Jim and his woodland trysts. She must still be around. I made a mental note to call on her in the morning.

By the time the natural light began to fade, I had Jim's clothes and personal things packed in boxes on the front porch waiting to be loaded into my truck. He didn't have much up here to go through. I'd inherited the cabin and contents, so I kept most of the gear and figured I'd find a charity near home that would take his clothes.

The stove still worked. I rubbed some garlic and crushed pepper onto a thick steak and tossed it onto a cast iron pan, and kept an eye on it while I threw a few mixed veggies into some of the drippings and ad-libbed a quick stir-fry. Even simple food smells a thousand times more appetizing in the clean air of the mountains. I ate out of the pan—a bachelor's prerogative—and washed it down with a beer so cold I could feel the chill well after the bottle was empty.

Sleep came easily for the first time in months.

I woke up to find a crowd of tiny people looking down at me from the windowsill. The morning sunlight cast almost life-sized shadows of them on the wall opposite, forming a lineup of long-legged, still shapes.

I'd kept them for sentimental reasons, lining them up on the sill as I'd found them around

the room. Most of them were my uncle's work. There was a fisherman, complete with rod and a tiny fly, and a trio of rifle-toting hunters with well-burnished noses and cheeks. Several of the carvings were of the same pleasant-faced, matronly woman in various poses—holding a baby, kneeling down with a gardening tool in hand, carrying a plate of lovingly detailed cookies, knitting a tiny sweater in the comfort of her rocking chair. There was also a younger-looking version of the same woman with a backpack and walking stick. A few of the carvings were mine, too. I found the rocket ship, my first project—I'd been so proud of myself for finishing it without drawing any of my blood. Next to that, the totem pole I'd done to practice carving faces. There was a deer and a bear of mine, and then the magnum opus of my whittling career: a rough, hand-carved figurine of a young girl. What was her name again? It was too many years ago—the name wouldn't come back to me.

The agenda for the day was supposed to be simple: load up the truck, lock things up again, and head back to the city apartment that I lived in but still couldn't call home. When I opened the front door and felt the morning sun embrace me, the motivation to hurry evaporated. I plopped down on my uncle's whittling stool and relaxed against the side of the cabin. My mind quieted and began drifting from thought to thought. Uncle Jim figured largely in them, of course. He'd sit on this stool carving his little characters and dispensing worldly advice while I'd sit cross-legged on the floor and listen. Well, sort of listen.

I thought about my wife, who was now someone else's wife, and the child we'd wanted but never had. Just as well, I kept telling myself, considering how the marriage turned out. Maybe if I'd have listened a bit more closely when my uncle was waxing philosophic I could have saved myself a lot of pain.

"A man needs a woman who's got her head on straight," his voice echoed in my mind. "Don't matter how pretty she is if there's a mess between her ears."

How right you were, I rued.

"Take that Martha Engle, for instance," my uncle had said. "Marrying her was the smartest thing Phil ever did, and Phil is no slouch in the brains department. She may not be a beauty queen, but she's strong and she's sharp and, thirty years from now, she'll still be that way. If I were you, boy, I'd get real close to that girl of theirs—she's made of the same stuff."

A musty closet in my memory opened and an image fell out: a girl, all elbows and knees, with brown hair and freckles. She came up with her parents on occasion, as I did with my uncle. While the men stood waist-deep in the stream fishing, she and I would walk through the woods and trade stories about school and parents and what we'd do if we had a million dollars. We'd have picnic lunches out at the old stone chimney and swim in the nearby pond under the watchful eye of Mrs. Engle. Alice, I finally recalled. Alice was the girl's name. I hadn't thought about Alice in twenty years.

Thinking about her then reminded me that I needed to go visit the current owner of that cabin, if only to return her linens. It was a beautiful morning, so I opted to walk the mile or so instead of driving. I folded the linens, put them into a duffel bag that I'd found in the closet, and set off.

Way back when, there had been a dirt path through the woods from my uncle's cabin to

the Engle place, but I wasn't positive it would still be recognizable. Instead, I hiked down a hundred yards or so of crushed stone driveway and followed the main road. A few vehicles passed in each direction but paid me little attention. The most memorable was a tan SUV with Virginia tags and a blonde-haired kid waving at me from his back seat window. I waved back. Why not?

About a mile later, the old signpost came into view. I remembered a thick timber post with a wooden carving of a leaping bass on the top and a plaque that said ENGLE in raised letters. The bass was there, looking weathered but still recognizable, but the sign was gone. In its place, reflective stickers on the post itself spelled out HENSEN.

The Hensens' drive was about as long as my uncle's, winding up the hill and curving around. There were no vehicles in front of the place, but I recalled that the Engles had usually parked around back. The front door was open behind a screen, so I stepped up to the porch and knocked on the doorframe.

Running footsteps heralded the arrival of a blonde-haired boy with a familiar face. He stopped about three steps shy of the door and backed up a little. "MAAAAA-aaaam! Gramma! It's that guy from the road."

A thirty-something woman in relaxed jeans and a yellow tank hustled out from the kitchen area. Her hand stopped briefly on the boy's shoulder as she passed him to stand in the doorway. She opened the screen door and studied my face. "Will? Is that you?"

I'd like to say that I recognized her. Truth to tell, I had a hard time seeing bony, gangly Alice in the filled-out, healthy-looking woman at the door. The way she looked at me made the inference inescapable, though.

"It's me, all right. Hello, Alice."

Before I could say anything else, she had me in a warm hug. I returned it, noting the smooth, firm contours of her back and hips. While I was still trying to connect the memory of Alice to the new reality, she took my hand and drew me into the house.

"Mom," she called out, "Will Delaney is here."

The smiling figure of Mrs. Engle came out of the kitchen and took my hands. "It's good to see you again, William. Your uncle talked about you so much I feel as if we've been neighbors all this time. I'm so sorry he passed." The sincerity in her face and voice were clear.

"Thank you," I said inadequately. "But I'm confused—who is Hensen?"

"That would be me," Alice replied. "Alice Hensen. And this guy over here is my son Josh." She roughed up the boy's hair. He grinned and hugged her legs. "Josh, Will and I were friends when we were teenagers, before I met your dad."

The boy regarded me with wonder. "Wow, you're that old?"

While his mother and grandmother laughed, the former a little self-consciously, I bent over and assumed the posture of an octogenarian. "That's right, Sonny," I croaked. "I knew yer maw when she was knee-high to a stegosaurus."

"That's nonsense," Mrs. Engle scolded. "We didn't have stegosauruses in this neck of the woods. The saber-tooth tigers kept them away."

Little Josh looked from me to his grandmother and back again. "You're both silly," he pronounced. "Mom, can we go fishing now?"

"Not just yet," Alice told him. "We have company."

"I don't want to keep you," I assured them. "I just thought these linens might belong to you." I opened the duffel bag and showed the contents.

"Oh, those," Mrs. Engle said. "Some do, and some your uncle had on hand. It doesn't really matter. We weren't using them for anything."

"Well, thank you for them. And for taking care of the place. I was expecting to find everything rusted out, covered with dust, or just falling apart. There's got to be something I can do for you in return."

Mrs. Engle would have none of it. "Nonsense, William. Your uncle was a good man and a good friend. A little dusting and oiling while he was ill was the least we could do for him."

"Still, I'd like to return the favor somehow."

"All right, then," she replied. "Come on into the kitchen, sit down, and have some fresh coffee. I put some on when we got back from the store and it should be about ready to pour itself by now."

The coffee was strong but not yet mean, as my uncle used to put it. We adults drank it and talked in the kitchen while Josh went out to the porch and amused himself with a handheld video game. I learned that Phil Engle had died of cancer while I was in college and that Alice and her mother came up here most spring and summer weekends. The tradition continued after Alice married. When her husband was taken in a car accident, my Uncle Jim had embraced her son and taught him to fish. Josh was eight now and could tie simple flies by himself.

After a while, Josh came in looking bored. He sat at the end of the table with his fishing rod and toyed with it aimlessly. Alice smiled at him. "I think someone's trying to drop a hint that he'd like to go fishing now."

I was about to excuse myself and go but Mrs. Engle preempted me. "I have an ingenious idea. Josh, why don't you show Mr. Delaney your secret weapons while your mother and I fix a picnic lunch?"

The chance to show off his handiwork brightened the boy's face. "Okay," he agreed, "but don't take too long. The fish won't be as hungry after lunch."

Several of my uncle's favorite designs appeared in Josh's collection of hand-tied lures. He went through each one, careful to tell me which he'd gotten from "Mr. Jim" and which he'd tied by himself. At the bottom of the tackle box I spied a small chunk of wood and a pen knife. "What's this?"

"It was gonna be a fish," Josh explained. "Mr. Jim said he'd teach me to whittle like he does. Like he did, I mean. That was before he got sick."

The women found us then. Mrs. Engle was wearing a canvas hat covered in fishing lures and a matching vest and Alice had a large wicker basket. "Time to go, Joshua," Mrs. Engle said. "Let's get to the fish before they fill up on real food." Her eye turned to me. "And while we're gone," she added pointedly, "your mom and Mr. Delaney can go visit one of their old favorite picnic spots and do some catching up."

I tried suggesting that we all go fishing, but Mrs. Engle was having none of it. Alice kissed her boy and wished him luck, then grabbed a walking stick from its place by the door and led me the other way.

The path that I'd been hesitant to try turned out to be in decent condition after all. We followed that, Alice leading the way, to a fork about halfway between our properties. The right path would lead to my uncle's cabin. We took the left, which led downhill toward an old haunt of ours. It was interesting watching Alice. Her gait reminded me of the gangly girl of twenty years ago, but her body had none of the awkwardness of that age. Instead, it reminded me of the little wooden hiker figure I'd found in the cabin.

We kept a brisk pace and so didn't talk much on the way. Soon we reached the old stone chimney, our old favorite spot. "Remember this place?" she asked.

"Of course." We'd spent a lot of time here on summer days. The story of the place was never really clear. Apparently, a previous owner of my uncle's plot had started to build a new lodge next to a pond at the back edge of the property. There was a foundation with a flagstone fireplace and chimney built into it, but nothing else. The project was never finished. The fireplace made a great outdoor stove, though, if one felt inclined, and the foundation walls were the perfect height and width for sitting and talking. A few yards away, a clear freshwater pond seemed built for swimming.

"I still come out here whenever I can," Alice told me. She set the basket down and stretched, arching her back and reaching for the sky with wiggling fingers. The action was familiar enough to bring back memories of a twiggy girl in a red bathing suit. "I don't think I ever told you this, Will, but our little picnics out here were the highlights of my summers."

"For me, too." Just being in the place was like opening an old box from the back part of the attic. Countless happy memories, things I hadn't thought about in decades, came easily to mind. "I seem to remember an experimental kiss behind the fireplace, for instance."

A touch of red crept into Alice's face. "Which my mother saw, by the way."

"Really? She never said anything."

Alice shrugged. "She liked you too. Now, let's see what goodies we have today."

We spread out one of the linens from the duffel bag to cover the ground and sat cross-legged on either side of the basket. Alice produced from the basket cold cut sandwiches, some deli potato salad, and a chilled bottle of wine. I poured for us while she unwrapped

the food.

The familiar location put me more at ease than I could remember being in a long time. It was easy to talk to Alice despite the long gap in years. Before I knew it, we were talking about my uncle, recalling more happy times.

“He missed you,” she told me. “He talked about you all the time.”

“I missed him too. The summer weekends up here are some of my favorite memories.”

She refilled our glasses. “So why’d you stay away so long?”

I sipped and sighed. “The family moved, for one thing. Coming up here from DC was easy—it just took a little driving. But we moved to St. Louis, and then to Portland, and then to Boston. My folks and Jim lost touch. He and I wrote and phoned, but there was college, and then the job, and then the wife.”

“He told us about that,” she said. “I’m really sorry. That must have hurt you a lot.”

A tiny measure of it swelled up in my chest and stomach. I took a deep breath and sighed through it. “It did,” I admitted. “There’s a tendency to withdraw, to focus on the details of each day. Work more, work harder, distract yourself with this and that. But it’s done, it’s over. Time to move on.”

She looked closely at my face. “Have you?”

“Hm?”

“Moved on.”

More wine, another breath. “Mostly. I came back to DC, got a new job and a new apartment. I’m still settling in. You?”

She also took a drink and a breath. “Mostly,” she echoed. “I focus on being there for Josh, and on making opportunities to spend time with him and my mother. She and Jim were very close. But you knew that.”

I nodded.

“So what next?” she asked.

Alice’s manner was casual, but there was something about the set of her jaw and the steadiness of her gaze that suggested a stronger interest. I gulped down the rest of my wine. “I haven’t decided yet. Uncle Jim figured I’d sell the place, but he urged me to use it for a few weekends first. It’s tempting to keep it, if I can handle the taxes and upkeep. I don’t know. I’m still sort of living in the moment.”

There were little beads of sweat on my brow. From the sun, I wondered, or from something else? An impulse struck me. I stood up and started peeling off my shirt. “And in this moment, I think I need a swim.”

Alice’s eyes widened and her mouth opened in a surprised look that quickly shifted to

amusement. She chuckled and put down her glass. “Bad planning on my part,” she confessed. “I didn’t bring my suit.”

“Neither did I.” I grinned as I proved it by dropping my pants and boxers together. “Good thing your mom isn’t watching us now.” Without waiting for a response, I hopped over the wall, ran to the edge of the pond and dived in.

When I came back up for air, Alice was standing by the edge of the pond. “You’re nuts,” she said. “We don’t have any towels or sunscreen or anything.”

“Quit thinking like a mom,” I chided.

She laughed and shook her head. “I can’t help it—I *am* a mom!”

“Even moms need a little crazy time. Are you coming in, or will you just stand there and watch?”

It only took her a moment to decide. “Okay, I’m coming in, but you’d better not laugh.”

“Scout’s honor.”

Alice kicked off her shoes and socks, then unzipped the jeans and let them fall before pulling off her tank top. She set the clothes aside on a nearby rock and stopped. “You’re staring.”

She’d caught me. “You don’t look like a boy anymore.” That was an understatement—standing there in a white strapless bra and low-cut bikini panties, Alice looked nothing like the twiggy tomboy of our youth.

“Thank you for noticing.” Her tone and posture cried out “Duh!” but even from that distance I could tell from her face that she was pleased. “You can turn around now.”

I did. A few moments later, I heard a splash as she entered the water. I caught a blurry glimpse of her approaching and, while I was trying to make out details, her hands broke the surface and sent a heavy spray of water into my face.

“Got you,” she sang as I stepped back and shook my head like a dog drying his fur.

“Paybacks are hell,” I cried, splashing back with enough vigor to send her bobbing backward.

We played like kids, but the feel was far from childlike. I’d never really had sexual thoughts about Alice before—heck, for the last twenty years I hadn’t had any thoughts at all about her—but now I couldn’t seem to have anything but. The water was nowhere cold enough to keep the obvious sign of my arousal from manifesting itself, either.

Splashing turned to racing, with Alice daring me to keep up with her. I did, despite the extra drag of my extended rudder. I put on a burst of speed and pulled past her just before our appointed finish line.

“Cheater,” she accused teasingly. “You stayed back there until the last minute just to check out my ass, didn’t you?”

"Of course," I teased back. "The view was superb, too."

"Perv," she laughed. Her hands shot to my ribs and flexed, finding all those places that I'd forgotten existed.

I yowled and jerked at the tickling, laughing and yelling at the same time. "Stop it, girl."

"Make me!"

She used to be ticklish too, I remembered. Dodging and turning as best I could, I reached for the sweet spot just below the armpit. I missed—instead of bone, I felt something soft and round.

"That's not my rib," Alice needlessly pointed out. She moved my hand slowly, dragging it across the front. A firm, erect nipple danced across my palm. Our eyes met and for a few moments the world stopped moving while I drew her to me and kissed her. Her lips yielded to mine and she pressed her body against me in response.

I don't know how long we stayed there like that. I felt a strong, focused desire that had been missing from my life for too long and I didn't want it to end. But then Alice was pushing away. She drifted back, gently pushing off against my chest. "Everybody out of the pool."

Alice backstroked toward our picnic spot. I followed up to a point and then stopped to enjoy the view as she emerged from the water. She took one quick peek over her shoulder and kept on going past her pile of clothes to the stone structure beyond.

When I caught up to her Alice had pushed the basket and debris to one side and was stretched out on our picnic cloth. I sat on the wall and looked down at her, admiring the way the sun sparkled off the wet contours of her body. She planted her arms and rose up to a semi-sitting position that did a beautiful job of showing off the teardrop shape of her gleaming breasts. "You're staring."

"You're breathtaking."

She looked me over, letting her eyes linger between my legs. "How long has it been for you?"

"Three years, two months, ten days." I think I blushed a bit when I realized how quickly I'd come up with that figure. "Give or take a few. You?"

"Five and a half years. Not since Tom—my husband, that is." Her wry smile told me that she felt the same.

"So you'll understand if I'm a little rusty," I remarked.

Alice lay back and stretched her arms toward me. "Take your time," she said. "We've both earned it."

Her eyes stayed fixed on me while I slowly stood and walked over to the cloth. I dropped to my knees in between her feet and ran a hand down the outside of each moist thigh,

around her bottom, and back up to the knees. Her eyes closed and a sigh of anticipation escaped her mouth.

She came quickly the first time, less than a minute after the first soft brush of my lips against her button. I held on through the bouncing of her hips and the crushing force of her legs around me. I tried everything I'd ever done to a woman with my lips and tongue, learning what Alice felt and responded to the most. She didn't know what to do with her hands—they alternated between clawing at my head—which was all they could reach of me—sliding over her belly and breasts, and thumping the ground on either side of her. I think she came twice more before I slowed down to let her catch her breath.

"This is divine," she gasped during the lull, "but, if you keep it up, I may pass out before I can return the favor."

So I took the hint, hopped over her leg and crawled forward, kissing and nuzzling my way over her belly. I paused at her breasts and toyed with them until she grabbed me with both hands and pulled my face to hers for some deep kissing. I freed up a hand to fondle her breast some more and she reached back with hers to tickle my balls. That got my hips moving and my breath ragged. She read the signs and started to roll me over.

"Have a seat," she said into my ear.

I pivoted and sat, propping myself up with one arm while Alice crawled up and went down on me. Oh, but she was good. I used my free hand to stroke her back, but my head kept wanting to drop back and my body wanted to flop backward and go limp from the blood rushing to my groin.

Alice moved to straddle me, pulling me up into a full sitting position. I held her close and we kissed some more while she slid herself onto my shaft. Our breathing synchronized with the rocking of her hips. The tempo increased as the motion increased until Alice cried out and leaned back. I felt the pressure of her inner muscles squeezing on me, saw her chest heave and that was it—I hung on with eyes closed as I felt the rush of my orgasm. Seconds stretched out into minutes as we clutched each other and writhed together in slow motion. Then all my strength drained away, and I fell onto my back.

Alice dropped with me and slid off to one side, resting her head on my bicep and an arm across my chest. "A little rusty, eh?" she breathed. "I'd love to see what you're like after you've had some practice."

"So would I."

By the time we dried, dressed, and got back to Alice's place, it was almost time for dinner. Josh was waiting for us on the back porch, and ran to meet us.

"Finally!"

The exasperation in his voice was comical. Then again, maybe we were just feeling generally giddy. "What have you two been *doing* all day?"

I spied Martha Engle standing in the doorway. The knowing smile on her face told me

she could have answered the boy quite accurately if she wished. Alice and I just laughed and let Josh yank us by the hand to the house so he could show us the fish they'd caught for dinner.

We broiled the fish with herbs and butter and ate it, with rice and mixed veggies, on the picnic table in the back yard. Josh regaled us with tales of their battles in the stream while Mrs. Engle watched the two of us with undisguised pleasure.

The sun sank low and I knew it was time. "I'd love to keep this up," I said, "but I need to get back on the road. I managed not to get lost on the way here, but I'm not sure I can follow the path back to my uncle's place in the dark."

Mrs. Engle was ready for that. "No need for that. Alice, why don't you give Will a ride back to his place? Maybe you could stay a while and show him where the controls are for the pump and the septic system. Take some fuel for the generator, too, if you want." Her eyes twinkled as she added one more suggestion. "And don't feel like you have to hurry back here, Alice. I suspect Josh and I will be turning in very soon."

Uncle Jim was right: Martha Engle was still one very sharp lady.

-wg
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