



LOST

JAMES R. KINCAID

Lost is the worst sort of nightmare, a real one. Two rather ordinary and symmetrical families without preparation, suitable equipment, or just plain common sense, set off to tent in the high country. Immediately enveloped in blinding snow, their inner blindness unravels one foolish step after the next. But no reader could be prepared for how much horror and blood can be set loose by such apparently innocent people—especially if they are not innocent. They think that nature is just waiting for them. They’ve read the guides: nature is waiting. But no guide could carry you though this Hell.

– **Sidney Goldfarb** (author of Rushes of Tulsa and Other Plays)

Kincaid offers up greasy grimy story guts in a game of lost and lost where the only things found—and who needs more?—are raucous wit, exuberant musing, and exemplary irreverence. But don’t be fooled. Even though the story slides down easily, it sticks to the innards and leaves readers long after it ends thinking about the lure of placing ourselves in danger and oh what delights that may bring.

– **Patricia Cherin** (author of Familiarities, Park Quest, and other volumes of poetry)

Lost is an extraordinary book. It is not your ordinary thriller. It is not merely a tale of terror of two families of four being lost in the snow-filled, bear-infested mountains. Rather, as the horror quietly mounts, the story builds to a rich and moving examination of generational divisions-- parents and children. The writing itself is what we would expect from James R. Kincaid, lucid and spare and direct. While not without dark (very dark) humor, the story holds the reader chiefly through its spellbinding descent into sadness and horror. A very special book.

– **N. John Hall** (author of Correspondence: An Adventure in Letters and Belief: A Memoir)

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ABM

Lost

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To My Dear, Never-Lost Nita

For a man needs to be turned round but once with his eyes shut in this world to be lost.

Henry David Thoreau

“Are you lost, daddy?” I asked tenderly.

“Shut up,” he explained.

Ring Lardner

All the privilege I claim for my sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.

Jane Austen



WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

They had managed to get themselves lost. Lost was as good as located to seven of the eight, but George found it unendurable to be somewhere other than where he figured he should be. All his life he had needed to know where he was, to know exactly, and to be conscious of knowing. Only twice before had it suddenly come upon him that he could not name what held him up. It was like being nowhere at all, not being. This was the third time.

To be caught in the unnamed, helpless to call up the right word, paralyzed some part of George. He kept moving and talking but his heart was trapped. It wasn't as if some name would soon come along to help him. He hadn't forgotten or neglected to learn the name; it just wasn't. Acutely aware of his terror, he did not know how to fight it. Not



being able to speak the ground could, he supposed, be exhilarating—to explorers or lunatics. Explorers, however, were equipped with the power to name for themselves, just as they liked; and lunatics supposed they were.

There were worse places to be lost: the Pacific Ocean, the Arctic wastes. Yet both held a grandeur absent from these mountains, and they were, when you thought about it, safer. How many people lost themselves forever on a life raft or on ice caps? The mountains were, comparatively, a slaughter house: people cashed in all the time in these pretty hills, wandering deeper and falling harder until they were always nowhere.

George's map did show names, of course, safety points. He tried to satisfy himself with the knowledge that he was surely on one right now. Which one, he didn't know, but almost certainly one of them. This helped, or it should have. Perhaps he was less a pioneer in a wordless world than a booby fumbling for the obvious term.

To keep himself going, he picked up the map from the uneven rock where it lay and rolled it out again on a huge mushy-looking oak trunk, first brushing away some dead bark and activating bugs who hadn't seen the light of day ever. Born and reared right there in that trunk, they remained loyal to their neighborhood; it might not be much to look at, but it was home sweet home to them. The death of the oak had supplied good news to many generations before them, better news to recent bugs, who found ever-softer pulp to chew. Someday, of course, a long time away, the pulp would be gone, forcing new families of wormy slimers on the road to look for new fallen death, out into the light. You can bet they'd spend as little time sunning as possible. Their instinct drove them to make themselves comfortable killing things slowly in the dark.

George slapped the map right on them, and went down on one knee, slanting his body so others could see. He didn't expect much help, but he didn't want to be alone in this either. The other seven stood around

pretending to be attentive, though no one moved to grab the loose end of the map, which waggled awkwardly off the trunk.

“I guess—would someone please hold down the map?—we’re just a little short of our campsite,” George said, pointing vaguely to a part of the map densely covered with lines. Looking around him and then back again at the map, though, focusing on the well-memorized tiny black lines marking the agreed-on campsite and the approach to it, George found only panic. There was nothing in the world around him to correspond with where the map indicated they had been headed or where they had recently been. He forced himself to examine again that part of the map that showed where they ought to be. But wherever that was, it was where they were not. There was supposed to be a hill to the right, level to the left and ahead, and downhill behind. This was a topographical map, expensive, miserable to read, but pretty rudimentary if you took the time. You couldn’t get lost using one of these.

Still, that’s what they seemed to be. Forget that. The problem now was getting themselves oriented, defined. How had they ended up at this lost point, and what point could it be? It was tough reading the map in the late-afternoon (real late-afternoon) light, and he wasn’t sure how you read a map like this to find out where you *were* if you didn’t already by God know. He could discover, over and over, that they weren’t where he figured they should be and hadn’t passed anything like it either, but where in the midst of all those squiggles was the irregular pointy hill plainly before them, what might be a deep canyon or maybe just thick sloping chaparral to the left, the confused jumble of rocks to the right? Where were they? What was it like to be any old place and not know? How did one act?

The only thing that matched the map was the more-or-less downhill behind, if that’s what it really was. They’d managed to keep climbing, which was correct, but not to the right fucking spot. And, come to think of it, steady climbing had been interrupted by short and annoying descents. “Climbing” simply meant more up than down, not anything

like all-the-time up. Had they switched mountains? That was possible. Not only hadn't their climb been straight uphill, it hadn't been straight anything. There were times when you couldn't see fifteen feet ahead, so who knew whether there was one uphill path or a dozen? While they had gone uphill, on the whole, there was no knowing which uphill on the whole they had gone up. He had, in preparation for this crucial outing, studied the map for hours—or at least he had brought it out and stared at it when the McDormitt's were over.

He had fallen in love, not so much with the map as with its makers. Such fussy cartological precision seemed to him both exotic and grand. But he wasn't faking his fascination. He liked picturing the mapmakers, those beautifully deranged men and women, almost unimaginably devoted, charting so carefully all that remote rock and dirt and irregularity. He'd been in the mountains enough to know how impossible any charting was: there wasn't a flat square inch anywhere, just crazy angles and juts, dips and swerves and sudden ascents. The land went everywhere and nowhere, not a continuous edge in it. It was haphazard and meaningless, and it was all on the move. Not a contour that wasn't interrupted violently before the eye could catch it. How could all this be controlled by lines?

What were mapmakers thinking? What strange isolated cells did they inhabit? He thought of them as anchorites, fueled by the preposterous hope that someone, somehow would find a way to make use of their sacrifices. But he honored them, could more easily find himself in their lives than in the lives of their mockers. There was something absurdly grand in the way they went right on, happy Bartlebys, loyal to their preferences, drawing lines as if nature approved or conformed.

Among the assembled eight, he was the only one who could read this map, by God! It had occurred to him that ten seconds of focused attention would make the cartographic principles of these ordnance survey maps clear to almost anyone. The reason so few could read them rested not with the maps' complexities but with the general human ten-

dency to do anything to avoid tedium, even small tedium short-lived. Most of us are reluctant to throw ourselves into as much as ten seconds of hard work for no reward but the satisfaction or incitement of curiosity. The truth is curiosity loses most of its oomph after about age five, and then has no chance against sloth or fear of being bored. It was for this reason, George figured, that few understood an abacus, the Electoral College, how to play chess, or the mechanics of changing their own oil. They were happy to remain ignorant of the operation of an abacus, the Electoral College, the rules of chess, or the mechanics of oil-changing, since they couldn't see any point in expending the energy it would take to direct their minds into those paths.

But George had energy for such pointless challenges and wanted to have all these victories and hundreds like them under his belt. He took some pride in this characteristic, though he also found it a little troubling, as if his reasons for going after such knowledge wouldn't bear close examination. But he did it, wanted to do it: most especially he wanted to read maps—or maybe just wanted to put himself and others in situations only map-reading would excuse or save. He had several times offered to explain the elevation lines to his wife and daughter (his son was impossible) and to Dave, Nicole, and their son and daughter. Only the daughter-not-his was interested, and she was a mere twelve years of age, maybe thirteen. He turned to her now.

“What do you think, Mim?”

The pretty, large-eyed kid looked at the map so long George was beginning to suppose uneasily she'd unlock its mysteries. Finally she said, “How do you read these if you don't know where you are? I guess you could sort of if you could see a landmark, but we can't see any of that here.”

Mim tossed her head back as if she were flipping her hair. George noticed that and was caught by how mobile and telling the gesture was. She couldn't actually be doing anything to her hair, not with the snow-

cap on. Mim was simply used to clearing her eyes by this spasmodic jerk, a harsh motion altogether free of vanity.

“I agree,” George said with his customary pedagogical tact, as if he were possessed of knowledge being withheld from the child. Only he wasn’t. He thought what she thought: these maps were made for those who already knew where they were. Such lucky adventurers probably employed maps just to plot the future, not to fix the present.

“This looks like a good place to set up, anyhow,” said Dave, already struggling to get his slightly (or maybe very) flabby body out from under his steel-railed back-breaker of a pack. “Don’t you think, George? I mean, it’s real pretty.”

It wasn’t pretty, George thought, without re-examining the surroundings; it was scrubby and dusty, filled with grayish crumbly rock and no vegetation one would want to know the name of. He guessed he wouldn’t have to be the one to point that out.

“Anything this side of Gehenna would satisfy me. We’ve been chuffing along over six hours on what you said, George, would be, ‘Oh, a little four-hour walk.’ It’s getting dark. Let’s get this shit off our backs.” Thus spake Jinny, his wife. Jinny was tall, lean, and demanding, demanding in that strange physical way some women have. They force you to look at them and make a judgment. George had looked and judged long ago; and he had liked that, liked it that Jinny had the balls to make him do it. He hadn’t stopped in some years to ask himself whether he still liked it. He never thought of her as a shrew, but he was often throwing that word out of his head. He did know that she was not at all feline, that her face and body were soft and that she took little pleasure in clawing.

And she was, in this case as in most, right: George had indeed said that the hike to the campsite would take “oh, four-to-five hours,” figuring it would be less, since the distance was seven miles—less than eight, certainly—he calculated; and even allowing for the uphill “OK, I guess stopping here’s a good idea,” he said, after everyone had already untrussed and sprawled.

“After all,” Nicole said, with some heartiness, “it’s not like we were looking for a KOA or anything in the first place, is it now? We were looking for a spot and we found a spot. We were after an adventure and we got an adventure. Can you top that?”

Nicole had always struck George as an uncanny yet still uninteresting replica of a character in *Lolita*, the Farlow woman that Humbert describes as all teeth and leathery-skinned, the worst of those conventional assaults to the spirit and eye, “a handsome woman.” Her nickname, which no one but her husband seemed to use and he only occasionally, was “Cola.” At some point, a drunken acquaintance may have found her fizzy or refreshing; when sober, maybe just common, inexpensive, and mildly toxic. Maybe she chose it for herself, in a gallant, hopeless gesture that would be compelling, if a little sad, were Nicole not so tough to be around. She was terminally perky and irritatingly alert to the needs of others. She was as predictable as human beings get; but right now George couldn’t tell if Cola were supporting him, one-upping his sour partner Jinny in the pioneer woman contest, sending a signal to the kids not to be bitchy, trying to get her moony husband focused, testing herself in a new role, or burbling.

He sat on the log and wriggled himself out of his carrier with no less difficulty than Dave. Standing, he looked at the map, which, moistened by the mashed bugs and further mauled by his own ass, was smeared and ugly. It looked as if it had spent days at the bottom of a Sanolet.

One good thing was that setting up camp had been less exhausting than it might have been. Almost every bit of the equipment was brand new and as expensive as possible. From the two huge three-room tents to the portable toilet, the snake guards, the bear packs, the camp tables, and the reading lamps, things pretty much just unfolded into finished form. They had enough food, much of it smashed into lightweight, boilable packets, to have saved the Donner party. All was efficient and clean.

From another view, the very ease of the process gave George time to consult his wilderness survival book and thus make things needlessly

difficult. The campfire site had to be dug out and lined with rocks, the rocks (being everywhere) posing no difficulty and the digging proving nearly impossible. Each tent had to be rimmed with a deep trench in case of rain.

“Don’t you think, Dear, we’d be better with a fire-break too? Some earthquake preparedness? It hasn’t rained in months. Besides, it’s way too cold. It might snow, I suppose, though the sky was blue when you could see it; but it’s never going to rain.”

“Yes, Jinny, but if it does, we’ll be glad we have this done. Don’t you agree, Nicole?”

Nicole was ready to agree with anything, anytime; but she was also ready to faint from hunger, bone-weariness, and boredom. “Well—” she trilled.

The food was good, even though various parts of the meal emerged at different times and wildly different temperatures. They did have two three-burner stoves, but even they proved barely sufficient for the special needs of several in the party. Jinny was lactose intolerant and claimed to be unable to digest any starches. Dave and Nicole were loose vegetarians, going for fish but nothing with knuckles or knees. George and the kids ate anything, all except George and Jinny’s troublesome Bert, whose definite tastes and rude objections changed day to day.

By the time dinner was over, a revived Nicole seemed ready again to devote herself to the idea that this outing was real fun. She made s’mores and actually got out her harmonica for camp songs. “Everyone take a turn now—‘Oh what did Dela-wear, boys; oh what did Dela-wear? Oh what did Dela-wear, boys; oh what did Dela-wear?’ OK? Now I’ll play—you all sing. ‘Oh what did Dela-wear, boys; oh what did Dela-wear? I’ll ask you again, as a personal friend: oh what did Dela-wear?’ You take it, Dave—‘She wore a New Jersey, boys; she wore a New Jersey. . . .’”

When it came round to the kids’ turns, they tried various lewd variations, brainless enough to amuse themselves and block adult censure.

“Oh what did O-hi-owe, boys? He owed that Ida-ho. Oh where did Mary-land, boys? She landed on Kan’s ass.”

This was followed by story time. Even Bert entered in, telling about a boy that had the power to render himself invisible any time he wanted but could not control when he might snap back into his usual form. At first, the boy confined himself to quick petty theft; then he moved on to assault. He compiled a long list of those he disliked and those who had done him wrong and set about systematically punching them in the nose, breaking their ankles, burning out their mucous membranes, and humiliating them in remarkably ingenious ways in front of their friends. The school bully got his when the invisible boy hooked up a series of pulleys and chains, walked up unseen to the despised brute at the Senior Prom, yanked down his pants, and hoisted him high above the dance floor by his very own balls.

Moving on from simple viciousness, the invisible boy took to hanging out at the girls’ school bathrooms, finally and boldly entering the bedroom of the prettiest girl in school, the one who had been attached to the bully before but who had cast him off after seeing him swinging back and forth above the gym suspended by his hairy nuts. Just as the hero was about to slip into bed with the pretty girl, however, the invisible spell wore off, the girl turned over, saw him, and exclaimed, “Oh! Josh!” That, Bert insisted, was the end of the story; and he refused to add more despite being hounded by all and then tickled and suspended upside down over the campfire by Dave.

Giggling and writhing there, his sweater falling over his head, his still babyish tummy revealed, Bert struck both Jinny and George as vulnerable and loveable again, a cute and clever little kid who was solemn and wildly excited by turns. He had, just such a short time before in his life, been a fine, uncomplaining companion on any adult venture. They had often forgotten he was a child; and, small as he was then, he had attracted the attention of strangers, what with his self-possessed, slightly detached public solemnity. He looked like neither of his parents and had

been, at some stages of his rapid growth, beautiful. Right now he struck others as a hunk and his parents as somewhat exotically foreign, what with his lush blond hair and very dark complexion and eyes, eyes that no longer twinkled or revealed a damned thing. Where did he come from, this remote creature? Why wouldn't he let them move in with him?

By this time the air had taken on a rewarding chill that froze most of their resentments and made them, for a moment, glad they had come. The forest itself was a blank, George being the only one with anything like interest in it. They all, however, suddenly seemed to one another less scripted and less fully known. Who could anticipate what they might unfold up here where the sky seemed so close and the air was paralyzed?

When they finally separated for the night, kids to one tent and adults to the other, miseries were put on hold and no one remembered to care that they were lost, chilled, and mapless.



BEFORE

No one of the eight could have said with much confidence how they all had managed to become so entwined. It had happened fast. Two or three family barbecues, a swim party, the joint Halloween affair; then suddenly they had found themselves on the beach at San Simeon in November making plans to join their fortunes for this adventure in wild living, unite against the world. How had that come about? How did they even get to the beach together?

Well, it was like this. In late September, toward the end of a joint barbecue (all too much a duplicate of their last joint barbecue) they had found themselves sitting in a lumpy circle, all eight of them, silent. It seemed the right time for the adults to launch into planning the next event, just so they could end this one. After all, they had a good deal in common, or, if not, the capacity to get through evenings together. Besides, they were symmetrical: Dave and Nicole were in their very-late thirties, with Mim fourteen and Keegan ten. Mim seemed to fit her name comfortably, but there could be no match for “Keegan.” In a burst of parental sprightliness, the boy had been given what the book said was a rich Gaelic moniker, one that forced on him a series of nicknames: Keg, Pee-again, Big-One, Vegan, Keeler, Megan, Pee-Gone, Pee-Gun, and any number of others, vaguely obscene, mostly cruel. Keegan was so used to being called by anything but his name, which only his parents used regularly, that he took in stride the latest, “Oblivia,” handed him by Bert. There was nothing particularly attention-demanding about the other couple or their kids: George and Jinny were in their early-forties, with Bert thirteen and Pam nine.

So, the question was, what to do together next?

Another barbecue seemed out of the question. To suggest such a thing would be too close to acknowledging that the relationships, or most of them, hadn’t advanced, that the eight were no closer than when they began. Something not only bigger but relentlessly public was needed, something to announce to someone that they were, indeed, linked

in some way, all of them. The joint Halloween party had been the first suggestion, probably because Halloween was the next holiday, about a month away and thus useable.

It turned out not to be quite that next-step-in-the-friendship it was meant to be. It turned out to be a whole lot more. For one thing, neither family had ever given a Halloween party, had ever decorated for Halloween, had ever given much thought to Halloween. They had no traditions, not to mention paraphernalia, to dust off and use as a foundation. The resulting challenge left everyone uneasy, in a nervous, shopping mood.

(I am speaking of the adults. None of the kids paid the slightest attention to the preparations for the party until they were forced into service during the last two days.)

Not knowing what they had in mind, but also unwilling to admit that they were so at sea—hey, we’ve thrown parties before, right?—the couples started buying things, lots of things. In a half-assed way, they also looked at party books for “ideas,” but could hardly concentrate long enough even to make a decent pass at coherence. Dave and Nicole, whose house had been chosen for the affair, started out with bright thoughts of sound and light, remembering impressive shows they had seen at Canterbury Cathedral on their honeymoon. So they bought and rigged up speakers throughout their front yard and up on the roof. Then they got some strobe lights and black lights and lots of other lights, many of which they planned, vaguely, to cover with orange cellophane. A fog machine. A rope and pulley arrangement that sent a ghost flying toward the street. A whole lot of artificial spider-web material that turned out to be hell to clean up. A big pot that would hold dry ice and steam.

George and Jinny also got a big pot that would hold dry ice, but luckily that was the only duplication and it didn’t matter anyhow, as two cauldrons worked just fine. They had decided one thing in concert: that it would be “just a small trick-or-treat sort of affair,” with a few invitations for adults to come and mill about while kids were showered with candy. Very simple food and drink—spiced cider and the usual Halloween fare, very simple. The idea would be for the adults to mingle casually, you know, while the kids came to see the decorations and get their candy.

It seemed wrong to inquire further into the details, much less to plan closely or to divvy up chores. That sort of attention to particulars would have felt unfriendly, casting doubt on the closeness of their alliance and the fine webs of intuition that connected them. The process would be clear once the process itself was in motion. The process would allow all of them to make those minute and judicious adjustments friends know how to produce because of the rich background they share.

Of course there was no such rich background, so each couple piled it on, frantically showing how at ease they were. George and Jinny kept producing fancy carved pumpkins—they bought a kit and tormented their children so that by the 30th over forty pumpkins, some now sagging, had been artfully hacked. They also did funny tombstones, zombie costumes they figured the four kids could wear while stalking around the yard, chattering skulls that were activated by movement, dead bodies to hang from the two big trees, and an enormous toad figure they regarded as druidical, having gathered as much from an old, deeply unpleasant Ingmar Bergman film.

Neither of the couples was especially materialistic, no more than normal and a lot less than some, and certainly neither was wealthy. George was a professor of English, Jinny of Comp Lit; Dave was a social worker with consulting on the side, Nicole a free-lance grant-getter



for some non-profits. They simply became caught up in the field of assumptions in which they were all grazing. It was as if each of them had, while sleeping, signed a four-way pact, the terms of which were known only to the other three. They were three left hands kept in the dark about the doings of the right.

By the time they were finished, they had a house so overtaken by Halloween that it would have won all the prizes, were there prizes for such things. Unfortunately, they also had a party that hardly got started before it was over, with a mountain of food and spiced cider left behind. The adults had been told to come at about five-thirty, in deference to the trick-or-treaters, whose early start was mandated by act of City Council. A five-thirty start, making sense from one angle, however, made sense only from that angle. Ten or twelve adult couples showed up shortly before six in order to mingle happily and watch the kids get candy. It had sounded like fun when the idea had floated past the planners, but it wasn't fun. For one thing, people expected dinner and discovered only a quarter ton of cookies, raw vegetables, candy apples, sixty-four pounds of M & Ms (plain and peanut), a little cheese, a tub of chocolate covered almonds, and gallons upon gallons of over-cloved cider.

No wonder the party ended almost exactly when the wave of kids slowed to a trickle, at about eight-fifteen. By then, only Pam was still dutifully stalking the yard as a zombie and only Dave was still tousling hair and peeking under masks as he handed out ever-larger gobs of junk, delighting late-comers, who, by the end, were doubling their evening's take at that one stop.

Stuck with one another at such an early hour, then, there seemed nothing to do but regard the evening as a success, the springboard to a whole new set of joint commitments. But what? True, Thanksgiving was rushing at them; but another joint holiday would hardly mark an advance, would it? It would suggest stagnation, treading water, hesitation, some doubt somewhere. But there was no doubt. They were cemented together like flagstones on a patio, so they naturally pushed hard toward intimacy. In another era, they might have tried sexual swappings, but this was not that other era, so they were led by an invisible hand to

schedule an out-of-town weekend. A weekend together would suggest something like sex, after all: an ease with bathrobes and tooth brushing, some unguarded farting, letting the kids talk dirty.

That's how they ended up at the Surf Spray Inn on Moonstone Beach Drive, near San Simeon, but actually in Cambria. The irritatingly frou-froued motel-calling-itself-an "Inn" was right on the beach—or just across the road from it—and they had procured two rooms, more exactly "family suites," each with a convertible couch sleeping two, in addition to the bedroom, small kitchen, and porchlet. They had divided up adults in one suite, kids in the other. That's what close buddies do, and surely they were all buddies.

The adults took to this awkward division by pretending it was the most natural thing in the world, despite the fact that only a kleenex-thin partition separated the convertible couch from the bed. One closet, one dresser, and one bathroom, located on the other side of the bedroom. Very little privacy, you might say. That was bad, considering that, of the four adults, only Nicole was at ease with her body and public nudity. She was forever embarrassing her children (and husband) by gliding about the house in whatever she had on or didn't. Nicole had always been that way: never embarrassed by the public showers in seventh-grade gym class, reveling in the communal displays of youth hostels. Recognizing no difference between underwear and outerwear—"it's all just cloth"—or between one exposed part of the body and another—"we all look the same"—, Nicole (a woman whose features, taken separately and disregarding her too-often displayed woodchuck teeth, ranged from very good to better) managed to make herself formidably unerotic. She was not repellent, to be sure, but only because there was no eros to repel. One could admire Nicole and come to rely on her, realize that she had no false pride or false modesty either, find pleasure in her company, even feel for her a deep glowing warmth, when she was not there in the flesh to cool it. For Nicole was not really the buddy type either, buddiness suggesting a low-grade erotic hum that gave some edge and tingle to companionship. As a companion, Nicole could be a guide, a consultant, a lender-of-money, but never more than that. She confided and invited

confidences; she touched and invited touching. But she was always treasurer of the club, goalie on the soccer team, mainstay of the decorating committee. She had once, while in high school, wandered out of the J. Crew dressing room in a bra and panties, looking for a different size. Nobody noticed.

But her husband noticed and hated it, did all he could to avoid seeing her at all in any form, and strove to hide his own nakedness not only from others but from himself. Dave managed to be what he probably wanted, a guy who looked so much like others that nobody would ever see him.

George and Jinny didn't much think about the subject of physical attraction. Their early life together had been marked by an eager and mutual curiosity about bodies generally and the partner's body in particular. They had posed, ogled, costumed, and probed; but by the time they were married there seemed to be no more mysteries and hardly any more interest. From then on, they found it easiest not to make a big deal of nudity, which meant trying to avoid it where possible and, where not, to be blind. There had been problems in the body and sex department, but they had agreed not to remember them. One of them had agreed, at any rate.

The kids were much more self-conscious about bodies and cloth, but they were also able to turn their embarrassment into a pretty good time. Whatever was missing from the adult room in the way of carnality had found its way to the youthful side and was bubbling out in the blushes, glances, and half-daring talk. Mim, the prettiest and, at fourteen, the most mature, would have been willing to adopt half her mother's naturist notions, at least as regards underwear, but she must have sensed what a losing strategy that was and fought against it. All four kids recognized that their enthusiastic if indefinite voyeuristic urges could not match their modesty. So they took this energizing uneasiness and ran with it, managing to enjoy themselves with talk as they never could with actual strip poker or playing doctor.

The odd thing in this unnaturally accelerated family pairing had been the general eagerness with which the kids took to it. With a few

temporary and one permanent exception, they maneuvered together with some imagination and, now and then, delight. They were at an age, though they wouldn't be for long, where gender differences mattered but were as often fun as cumbersome. Sometimes they all felt that their identity was on the line if they found themselves playing across such basic divisions, but sometimes not. This now-and-then concord was oiled, certainly, by the fact that the youngest were exceptional: Pam, at nine, was precocious and self-possessed; and Keegan, at ten, was generally abstracted and easy-going, a little like his dad, except that, unlike his dad, he was neither baggy nor plain. Mim was an early adult, but she was also startlingly beautiful and still resistant enough to see that the one thing she didn't want to become was what she probably would, her mother. Bert lost much of his silence and a little of his snappishness around the other kids and was, on occasion, something of a group coordinator. He was, just as often, an acidic dissolver of groups. Still, each one of the kids was energized by the other three; and together they did find a way to maintain the curiosity, not to satisfy and kill it.

But the one permanent problem: Bert was forever saying cutting things to the moony Keegan. The older boy seemed unable to be close to Keegan's body without shoving at it or punching it, and once he had grabbed the much littler boy by the shoulders and shaken him violently back and forth, so violently that Keegan's head, following his body a beat behind, seemed likely to snap off. The worst thing was the expression on Bert's face: he looked as if he were howling, though there was no sound. His eyes were almost invisible behind the creases and his mouth was extended to an O that made you think he would, at any minute, scream. Scream or perhaps cry.

Keegan had reacted to the shaking as he had to the other assaults: he smiled afterwards and stood there with his small body relaxed, stooped, probably the equivalent of an animal submitting, a beaten wolf presenting its bare throat to the fangs of the victor. After going at Keegan, Bert would produce snorts and mean jokes. Following this especially violent shaking, though, he had taken the little boy into what was almost a hug, as if he wanted both to shield his small sometime friend and absorb him.

Left to their own devices here in their very own family suite, the kids slept boy-boy/girl-girl, though they were mushed so close together and so muffled by sleeping bags and clothes, it hardly mattered who was where. For one night, they were purposefully kind, these kids, much kinder than any genetic chart or their history would have predicted.

It was on the second night of the two-night stay that the wilderness scheme had been hatched. Dave, of all people, felt moved by the beauty of the beach and the warmth of the dinner wine, so moved he brought up something he hadn't realized he noticed in the *Review*.

“You know those cabins way up in that big canyon north of town?”

So sudden and without context was Dave's question, that nobody said anything.

“The cabins,” he continued, “are a mixed bag, I gather, but they are all close to the creek and the willows and some are way back up the canyon into the mountains.”



He paused, as if someone else would pick up the ball. What ball?

“Anyhow,” he reluctantly went on, “these cabins are owned by the Forest Service or something like that, official and governmental, and are let out on ninety-nine-year leases, very cheap. Seven of them have come vacant, I saw in the *Review*, and you can call and reserve them for a week or so, just to try them out. The Forest Service, see, is setting aside a six-month period when people can go and try them out. Then they will issue the leases to those that want them, pretty cheap I gather, though it isn’t necessary to sign up for ninety-nine years right now, as there’s this trial period as I was explaining, which starts early-January, and is even cheaper, the trial rate, as they want to get lots of people interested, I suppose, since the cabins, I guess, probably are pretty ratty and, well, messed up.”

“You think we might go up there for a week?” asked Jinny, with uncharacteristic tact.

“I thought it would be an adventure,” said Dave, “just, you know, to go up there for a week.”

George lit on it like a hawk on a rabbit. “But what you’re really thinking is we could maybe lease a couple of side-by-side cabins for the long-term, real cheap, maintain them, and have all to ourselves a mountain home. Close to town too, considering—and a once-in-a-lifetime bargain, with apologies for the cliché.”

Nobody said anything. This was a leap: from backyard barbecue to shacking up together for ninety-nine years.

“You trying to say we would move up into the mountains? Like dick-sucking fucking survivalists?” Bert yelled.

“Watch your mouth, young turd,” said George. “Nobody’s talking about living there permanently, just having a kind of retreat. It could be the opportunity of a lifetime. A lifetime! A whole lifetime! You’d have fun, Bert. You could grow a beard and take up trapping.”

Bert didn’t grin, but he didn’t look too contemptuous either, which George took as a victory. Nobody else said a word, so George broke the silence, without anything new to say. “Really—it could be the opportunity of a lifetime—I mean, well. . . .”

“It could be for hermits, and into-the-wilds, and other loons,” said Jinny, “but we don’t know a damned thing about the outdoors, George. You’ve never shown the slightest interest before, that’s certain.”

This last was a punch at George for dragging his heels several years earlier after Jinny had signed the family up for Sierra Club outings. He recognized what she was doing, but kept his mouth shut.

“We could do the one-week thing and see how we liked it, don’t you think?” purred Nicole. “That way, we’d have fun for sure. It’d be an adventure, so fun and unpredictable. We could then see if we wanted to go whole hog.” George wondered why Nicole wore her hair in what might have been a pageboy bob or something equally unflattering, borrowed from some lost era where women followed one another in pursuit of uniqueness.

“Yeah, that would work, Cola,” from Dave.

“I sure as shit am not going to *live* there!” said Bert.

Dave glanced at him uneasily. “I don’t think any of us will be there for ninety-nine years, honey. You’ll try it for a week, won’t you?”

Bert said nothing, looked at the ground, not quite willing to be rude to an adult who didn’t stand over him in some institutional role. Somehow his silence seemed to seal it. They were, before they knew it, off for the week, up a canyon without a plan. To make it more of an adventure—and to pass the time (after all, what do you DO for a week in the woods apart from moving about to different parts of the woods)—they had decided to head from the high country for the even-higher country, the rough country, the home of bears and, this time of year, real cold weather. Yessir, they had done it. And now they didn’t know where they were in the land of bears and snow.



WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Inside the kids' tent, there was so much time spent alternating goofy stories with giggles that nobody thought to be too embarrassed about close-quarters sleeping. It was way too cold to think of peeling off, had that been a worry. Still, they felt the unfamiliarity of the intimacy and found themselves tingling and, without recognizing it, a little tense.

Nobody quite wanted to give up and go to sleep, so they began on the two-liter soda bottles and spicy hot Cheetos. It wasn't that they weren't hungry, in the way kids always are, but hunger was not what was driving them.

"You're going to sit on the chips, Oblivia, you stupid asshole!"

Keegan was not all that close to the chips, but, predictably, grinned. On edge like everyone else, Mim wasn't going to let Bert's anger pass, as if it were somehow fitting.

"Stop it, Bert. Just stop picking on my brother."

"That's OK," Keegan murmured.

"No, it's not OK, Keegan. Stand up for yourself."

"OK."

"Don't say 'OK,' Keegan. You won't do it. If Bert cut your throat, you'd just grin—or try to."

The Keegan she had set out to defend now looked hurt, so Mim quickly switched targets, just so she wouldn't lose her thread by apologizing to her brother.

"You take advantage of Keegan's being nice, Bert, you always do. He likes you so you bully him, all the time."

"Hell I do! Are you running to your sister to complain, Oblivia?"

Before Keegan could answer, Pam broke her silence—"Don't fight!"—and began to cry.

“I’m sorry,” Mim said immediately; just as quickly, Pam’s tears stopped. Mim saw it and went on, “Hey, I have an idea: a story-telling contest. Whatdya say?”

Even Bert was glad to stop battling, and, as the best storyteller, volunteered to start.

“*Very short stories, OK? That’s the rule. OK.*”

“Once there was a kid with wings. He didn’t always have them, just woke up one morning and noticed these flaps, sort of pinkish-brownish flaps on his back, with pimply red bumps but not too disgusting. ‘Hey, there’s wings!’ he said. He found out he could use them too, to fly, but only at night. By day, they tucked back in and disappeared into his back, like under a bra, I guess, except it was his skin. At night they came out and grew and he could fly with them.

“Know what he did? Well, this kid had lots of other kids he didn’t like and he knew where they lived, too. I forgot to tell you that he also had this great and complete chemistry set. His uncle had bought it for him ’cause his parents didn’t want him to have it, so he asked his uncle, who was cool, and he got it for him. He hid it in his room, this kid did. He right away figured out how to make bombs with this really cool chemistry set.

“So, every night, late at night, he would take some bombs with him and fly to a house where one of his enemies lived and he’d drop a bomb. ‘Boom—!’ It would kill the kid he hated, along with everybody else in the house and the goldfish. After a while, everybody he hated was dead, so he started killing other people too. And he never got caught. He’s still out there, every night, flying around, dropping bombs just anywhere he feels like—anywhere, maybe even—HERE!”

This was just the story to break the ice. The audience of three laughed and cheered and poked each other, Bert joining in after a minute of basking. The stories that followed were all copies of Bert’s happy and bloody plot line, adding small variations in the nihilistic machinery.

Pam told a story of the million-kilowatt kid who could shoot electro-cutting (“electro-cutting”) rays out of his head. Mim’s was only slightly more elaborate: a kid who transplanted a pump into his stomach and was thereby able to squirt acid out of his belly button.

Keegan, with more time to think but with less to draw on in the way of invention, gave a name to his hero, Scott. Scott was, like the others, filled with homicidal fury, but his was directed at household pets. His murdering methods were banal, but, unlike the others, he turned murder into profit, casting the animal corpses in iron (“putting steel on them”) and selling them back to their sometime owners.

By the time Keegan was done, they had found again the uneasy harmony they now and then achieved. Bert proposed Mim as the winner; Mim, Pam; Keegan, Bert; and Pam voted for herself. This caused a little elbowing and grabbing, but not enough to make anybody too uncomfortable. None of them said anything about being lost, in danger. Maybe it didn’t occur to them.

The adults were certainly aware of the problems, but not too aware, allowing themselves to be annoyed, but merely in a half-assed, grumbly way. Only George, to his credit, realized that being lost in the mountains was never a joke. He had read those exact words in a terrifying book called *How to Survive in the Wilderness*, written by a prick who seemed convinced that no one stupid enough to go in search of such a book as his would stand a chance of surviving any of the dangers so gleefully enumerated: illnesses without end; freezing; heat stroke; starvation; insect assault; poisoning from bad water; poisoning from mushrooms and lots of other attractive plants; death from insufficient fat in the diet (pounds and pounds of rabbit or trout could be consumed as you slowly starved to death); breaking bones and becoming fair game for vultures, rats, and army ants; falling into holes; getting caught in an avalanche; wandering aimlessly until finding death from exhaustion; staying put and dying a little more slowly from exhaustion; hypothermia; drown-

ing; death from hysteria; and, worst of all, finding yourself the object of a bear attack. Against all that, cartoon-simple sketches on how to build a sparrow-catching snare or insanely complicated instructions on making non-lethal grass soup seemed bitterly sarcastic.

In his rational moments, George figured that their only real danger was being lost and getting more lost. It seemed to him it'd be a good idea to build a fire, to get quick action and avoid running low on the fuel they were using in these expensive heaters (warranted to be safe). George figured they needed to send a clear signal to searchers, were there any, which there probably weren't. So—build a fire. It was something to do. However, the book had been downright shrill in its insistence on what a bad idea that was. None worse. Get a fire going and you'll set alight your tent, your mates, and the surrounding forest. Forget it!

He then considered constructing a way to alert passing airplanes, attracting their attention and causing them to come to their aid. In a movie he'd seen once, the survivors of something spelled out "HELP" in huge letters in a meadow. George spent some time trying to remember what they had used for the letters—rocks? piles of leaves? ruts in the snow? Then he recalled that since he didn't have a meadow close by—or certainly hadn't seen any—it didn't matter a damn. Signaling planes was a good idea still; but, as he could think of no way to do it, he carefully put the terrific idea on hold.

George knew that there were bears up here and, though not mentioned by the author of *How to Survive*, mountain lions, too. There had been several lion attacks in the past few months, resulting in a lot of fear, some scratches, and one death. The dead guy had turned out to be a mountain biker, probably mistaken for a deer by the lion, which jumped down on him from a rock overhead and chewed through the 'til-then-peddling biker's neck. George had read about the episode with grisly fascination, but he also read that lions were no danger to groups or to people, generally. They simply had bad eyesight and might mistake a single jogger or mountain biker for fleeing prey. George didn't jog or

mountain bike, detested both species, and would not mourn their complete extinction. Still, he knew that reassurances based on what lions thought and why they did what they did were pretty slender reeds on which to lean. Who knew? Anyhow, he liked the idea of being afraid of lions, as there was something Tarzanish about it.

Not so bears. Bears were a real menace, even if the actual number of attacks was not large. They were around everywhere, these terrible bears, as lions were not, and they messed with you, as lions almost never did. Bears figured in George's nightmares. They would chase him to his front door and, every time, come right inside the house after him, leaving him nowhere safe to run or hide. In this dream, home itself became a trap. He would run to his bedroom, the bedroom he had as a boy, and the bear would come right after him, cornering him and then, looking to the side, advance directly for him, as bears did. Only when he was right within dancing range, ready to embrace him, would the bear let his eyes swing round to meet George's terrified gaze. That moment lasted forever: the fuzzy, beautiful bear standing full-size and roaring, with teeth dripping pre-digestive saliva, filthy offal-packed claws extended, and eyes bulging. George couldn't have told you or told himself what happened at this point in the dream. Maybe the bear just stood there gnashing until George died of a heart attack; maybe the bear got him, kept coming ever closer until he was right into him, absorbing his paralyzed victim. Anyhow, George did not escape. There was no escape. Even if he were to throw himself out a window or slither through the bear's legs and make for the door, he'd just enter another dead-end, spinning round to find the animal before him, waiting to enfold him in its eyes and arms. Trapped there, the dream suspended, he revisited it, forced it to replay itself at odd intervals in the worst nights of his life.

The thing about a bear grabbing you, George knew, was not its cruel fangs or filthy claws, not even its red eyes or hot shit-smelling breath. The worst thing was the softness, the deep fluffy fur. In the second before your head was taken in those jaws or your arm ripped from the

socket, what you would notice would be the cuddling. You might even swoon into pain and death, surrounded by all that tender warmth. Death by teddy bear.

George had read books on bear attacks and watched several heart-stopping nature specials on these cruel animals and their habits, especially their habits of killing. He had seen *The Night of the Grizzly* maybe twenty-five times and, even more often, a film about a cute family with cute pets shipwrecked in Alaska or someplace and harassed by an enormous Kodiak bear. He knew that bears could run thirty miles an hour and climb up to thirty-five feet into trees. He knew they might be afraid of humans but, again, might not be. They might charge at you and only be faking. They might only want your pack and the food inside it. They might only be dangerous if they regarded you as a threat. None of that meant a thing to George, though he acknowledged that people talked that way. What sunk into his heart were the qualifiers, added reluctantly each time at the end of the sensible reassurances: well, yes, bears sometimes do attack and can be deadly; there are reports of bears stalking people; if they get after you at night, they are thinking of you not as a danger to them but as food.

George was fascinated by the advice experts handed out on bear attacks: what to do to insure your safety or at least load the odds in your favor. There really was a lot of such talk, all of it contradictory and in the worst way. What might save your life might also lose it. Bear bells or constant loud singing could warn bears that you were coming, either allowing them to lumber away from your path or find a way, easy enough, to ambush you, should they decide that's what they'd like to do. If a bear charged, a good plan was to play dead, though of course that only worked if the bear believed your act and not always then—and it took away any chance you might have of dodging (bears are clumsy) or fighting back (bears had been known to abandon an attack when hit in the nose). Run and you look like prey, drop and crouch and you present an appealing treat, fight back and you enter into combat with a beast who

can decapitate you with a half-hearted swing, rip your guts out with one casual claw.

Right now where they were, they were not threatened by Kodiak bears, of course, or polar bears, or even grizzlies. George said as much to himself in exactly those words. The real killers once were here but had been slaughtered or driven back north. Black bears were all that stalked these hills, and most people regarded them as cute. Even the books hardly took them seriously. State parks advised campers to look fierce at these cuddly intruders, throw things at them, even charge them.

But the state parks, George felt, were perfectly willing to sacrifice a few campers as part of an experiment to see if aggressive behavior might keep the bears from foraging for marshmallows at campfires and garbage in bins. Nobody, nobody could predict what any bear might do, at any time.

George knew that there was a fair chance they would be visited by bears during the night. Wherever the eight of them had landed, it was off the beaten track and likely to catch the attention of everything shy and grumpy. They had cooked and yelled and put the food into bear bags on trees. Might as well have sent out invitations. Bear bags, George figured, were like sweet-sounding, come-and-get-it calls. The food hung there out of reach, attracting the hungry animals but not appeasing them. Those tantalizing bags got the juices flowing and then delivered nothing, setting up ravenous and frustrated beasts to find other food. George hadn't thought of this before, really; and now everyone, at least everyone in his tent, was asleep. What made sense was to carry the bear bags off a mile or so, but it was too late. He would look like a fool doing it, and it would certainly be more dangerous to try and find your way for a mile or so on a rough and strange mountain in the dark than to take your chances with bears that were not all that dangerous anyhow. Probably—so they said.

All the same, George would have moved the bags had it not been for the fear of ridicule. Certainly he felt that it was better to fall down

a dozen ravines, break arms and legs, plunge into the hereafter, than to take a chance on that roaring softness. This was his always-lurking fear, stronger than the fear of death, but he couldn't bring himself to push it away by moving the bags. He wondered why, both panicked and embarrassed. Perhaps he dreaded being mocked more than being ripped apart. Perhaps that fear of being ripped apart was something he really didn't want to put at a distance.

The kids, having warmed up enough temporary good feeling to wax over their tensions with stories, were not about to sleep. Unlike the adults, they were intrigued by one another and had no histories to protect. At least the little ones didn't. What they wanted to do was think new thoughts.

What would you do if you had to live out here forever?

If you had been raised by wolves, how would you be different?

What if we had switched parents at birth?

What if the girls were boys and the boys were girls?

Why are people turned on by underwear or shoes or stuff like that?

What if we swapped underwear, boys and girls?

What if we all pierced one another with these pine needles?

Do you think people live on other stars?

Why is it that you are you and not somebody else?

What would it be like to die?

Bert had been silent throughout all this, not sullen for once, but darkly attentive, as if waiting for a chance to spring. "What would it be like to die?" was the prey he was watching for: "Hey, I have a question. You want to hear it?" He looked light for the first time, making him seem much younger, inviting and part of them.

Of course they wanted to hear. Bert wasn't asking, just telling them to stop thinking of their own fears and listen to his.

"Why do you think we're up here?"

"To have fun?" Keegan offered, looking so doll-like in his eagerness to please, he brought to mind a kitten or Shirley Temple being cunning.

Bert scowled at him. Keegan was not so spacey as to miss the scowl, maybe wasn't spacey at all. But he was passive, which emphasized his good looks and made so many people respond to him oddly and intensely. Perhaps he sensed that his prettiness, not so much girlish as androgynous, was his best ally. If so, it was an instinct that also made things a little dangerous for him. Whatever it was, that something got inside Bert and chewed.

Keegan's older sister was another matter to Bert, as was his own little sister Pam, the one person he treated with something almost approaching patience. Pam was very small, with delicate features, but she looked a lot like a little old man, some strange character out of Dickens. She was devoted to Bert and could be counted on to pick up any invitation he dropped. Mim was more skeptical about Bert, but she was interested in what he might have in mind. So, both of the girls started talking at once, saying pretty much the same thing: what did coming up here have to do with what would it be like to die?

"You think they brought us up here to have us die?" Pam asked, in a voice so matter-of-fact it seemed as if she were seeking confirmation of the most natural hunch in the world.

No one rushed to hush or to ridicule her. Somehow the idea seemed familiar, an old friend. Had the four old people brought the four young people, our very own selves, up here to commit murder? Of course not. They knew that not one of the four adults would be capable of imagining such a thing, not for a second. At least they would not be capable of making any contact with such imaginings, even if they entertained them. They might think of it, but they wouldn't think of thinking of it. Their parents, they knew, were really pretty good as parents go, but that didn't change things as far as the idea of infanticide went.

"Well," Bert said, "why would they bring us along? To save on babysitters?"

"To kill us," said Pam.

"The reason they brought us up here," Mim said, "is to prove what terrific parents they are, prove it to us or themselves maybe, to the whole wide world. They are giving us new opportunities, like when they take us to museums. It's all very educational."

Keegan gaped at his sister. He caught the sarcasm but was not able to find himself within such a discussion. He tried, though. “I don’t think they’re bad.”

“But you wouldn’t mind killing them, would you, Oblivia?” Bert snarled. “Just think about it. Sure you would think about killing them. I mean you’d think about it, if the thing came up and all. So that’s why they’d want to kill you.”

Keegan was now far out of sight of the shore and kept still.

Pam liked all this very much. “I think we might kill them before. I agree. We could drop big rocks on them or set their tent on fire.”

“What Bert is saying”—this was Mim—“is that there are lots of reasons they brought us up here, not all of them good.”

“Jesus, Mim! Don’t you get tired of being such a kiss-ass?”

Mim didn’t seem the least bit ruffled by this. “What I was going to say, Bert, is that they don’t know why they’re up here themselves. Or anything else. That’s dangerous.”

Bert started to say something, but kept quiet.

“What is wrong, Bert? Why aren’t you happy?” Mim was not interested in winning any fights with Bert. He saw that and smiled at her.

“I noticed that too, Bert. Why aren’t you happy? Can we help?” This from Keegan. Bert looked at him in silence, not forgetting to scowl.

By this time they were cold and wrung out from the discussion, so they nestled quietly into four lopping-over sleeping bags.

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