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The World Must Know

Jeff Price

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The World Must Know

When she neared the bank and looked up, his clear eyes, crinkled at the corners, were locked on hers. The smile she felt spread on her face overwhelmed her reserve. He took her hand as she stepped onto dry pebbly ground and, with her next step, pulled her body against his.

They were kissing for a moment. On this, their second morning, one more before they returned to New York—their respective offices, ostensible rivals—he had stopped their rental on the side of the mountain road and spontaneously suggested a hike. Her meeting with the so-called friend of the deceased author wasn't for another few hours. He had only his story to write, but she knew he would share the notes from his own interviews. Not that she wouldn't do a better job of writing it up. She was looking at the treetops again—the thin coniferous tendrils of an eastern hemlock (there must be inspection-worthy cones at their feet)—and he was concentrating on her neck, attending lips oblivious to the sunlight or else enlivened by it to seek the darkness of her. She was about to say something, but didn't, sighing instead.

Her eyes were closed again. Cupping one breast through the yellow fabric of her blouse, her white shirt, the wire filaments of the bra beneath, he took the back of her bare thigh. She let him guide her backwards. With neck crooked over her shoulder he watched for any obstacle to her backward steps, urged that way by his weight against hers, seeking the cradle of the sunlit boulder. One hand at the small of her back, he lifted a leg out from under her with the other. She turned to look where he was setting her down, ponytail tickling his nose. When she faced him again, he covered her mouth with his.

She felt the boulder at her back and gasped. She wriggled to find the most comfortable purchase and looked around them, through the trees to the bend where the brook curved. Her back was arched, her neck tilted over the top of the boulder. She laughed at the immediate discomfort, her anticipation.

"Are you sure?" she said.

"Yes," he said, working beneath her skirt. "I'm sure."

She wanted to believe him, was ready to, but didn't quite. There could be people. There could be anyone. They were strangers here. She looked over top of his blond buzz-cut that came to a whorl at the crown, one of her hands gripping the tensed veins at the side of his neck. She could feel what he was doing and it was nice and there were trees all around and above them, and the brook, and there was smooth moss at her back and the sunlight pleading her not to keep staring, to close her eyes at its relentless urgency. But there was something moving over there. A black dog. An enormous black dog. She could see its rump where it stood in the water at a bend in the brook. She squeezed his neck. He didn't look. It was turning. It wasn't a dog.

"Sid," she said, sharply and under her breath. "Sid!"

Mistaking his name for her pleasure, he doubled down with renewed ardor.

Her cheeks flushed. She exhaled. She tapped him twice sharply on his whorl with two joined fingers.

He sought her face, his brow furling, and saw what looked like panic, her brown eyes wide, lips caught on something.

"What is it?"

Her heart was colliding with her breastbone, trying to get out.

His eyes followed hers and, as he saw it looking at them from about twenty feet off, he heard her say, "Bear." He pushed away from the boulder and rose very slowly, taking her hand without looking. He wanted large rocks or something to wave far above his head, but there was nothing he could see with his vision tunneling on the dumb black mass that was rising now to its full height.

Her hand touching his side, he heard her say like a comforting maxim, "Blueberries. It's after blueberries." What were blueberries? Hysteria. He wanted large rocks.

"Get out of here, bear," he said, identifying, and despising, the strain of timidity in his voice. He could feel where her nails had dug into his neck.

"I want you to go," he murmured to her without looking, reaching around to place his palm on her hip.

"No," she said.

"If it charges, you're up over that ledge."

"We need to clap," she said and clapped.

He clapped. She clapped. The bear looked at them, thick all around, impassively observing, monstrous in its curiosity.

He was picturing in his mind how fast it would charge, if it charged. It looked like it would lumber. It looked indecisive. He would turn in the opposite direction from her and lead it after him. He would stay a step ahead. They kept clapping.

It took a step forward. The fur was smooth and even across its back, and its snout was grey and dripping with water.

Every part of him wanted to get over the abutment and sprint while knowing that sprinting was exactly the wrong idea. She was right there behind him.

She looked at the back of his head, the tension in his shoulders.

If he was going to do something he would have to do it now. He lowered his voice and commanded as an owner would a dog: "Get out of here! Go!" It took another few steps toward them, though angled in its path slightly to the right. He yelled again, paused, and yelled again. It might have been turning around, or it might not. Then from behind, a piercing whistle, and the thing turned in a blur, so fast, it galloped from sight, seeming almost to lead with its hind legs out in front. It galloped from the brook and over the bank, moving like a spinning barrel. They could see only the contortions of its back as it crushed underbrush and rushed through the trees up toward the road where they had parked. In the blink of an eye, a good twenty-miles-per, at least. He glanced at her next to him, the pine cap held with two upraised thumbs behind it, the source of that whistle, her lips. She was flushed, eyes shining madly. Looking back, he saw the bear, the big scared black bear stopped and turning to see if they had followed until she blew on the pine cap again and the thing reared and took off once more, across the mountain highway. They heard the gust of a passing car, the blare of its horn about eight or nine bleats in passing.

They waited a moment. The bear didn't reappear.

He cursed, as if alone.

She looked at him ecstatically, elevated on her toes.

Her eyes were wildly expectant; there they were in the middle of some random wilderness he knew next to nothing about. It could have been on them in an instant, on him, or her. And what could he have done but run if running were even possible, or kick at it and listen for her screams? She might have, would have surely had it attacked. He wanted to check his e-mail, to get to where his smart-phone would have reception. She stood right in front of him, was speaking to him from inches away, but she looked like someone else now, not the girl whose neck he had been pressed against a moment ago.

She could have said what she wanted right then but that would have ruined it. He looked at the ground as he said they should get back to the car, and she felt an instant disdain. Did he have no power to lose himself in goose-pimpled awe? Had his thoughts ricocheted to somewhere else, someone else?

He did not pick his way across the brook, but stepped fully into its shallows in his tennis shoes. At the grassy upward slope from the culvert, he glanced behind him to see that she was following. And she was, carefully treading over the stones, still crossing the shadowed water.

She thought for a moment that she might be wrong to judge him.

He looked in the direction of the road and, as he advanced, began to clap.

About Jeff Price

Jeff Price's fiction and essays have appeared in Electric Literature, The Potomac, Opium Magazine, The Rumpus, and The Millions. He lives in Brooklyn.