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THE TRAIL HOME

Pattie Wagner

Gray light filtered in through blue tent fabric, illuminating the woman as she slept through the brightening dawn. She reached her hand out of her sleeping bag, searching for the warmth of a familiar body, mouth crooked in a dream smile. Her eyelids fluttered against the pull of sleep.

“Mmm—” she murmured, her hand questing, finding nothing but the cold nylon of the tent floor. She opened her eyes fully as wakefulness found her, then, “—ah. Oh,” when she recognized the unoccupied half of the tent. She retracted her hand back into the warm cocoon of the sleeping bag. She zipped up the bag, all the way past her chin, and buried her face in the soft lining.

June squeezed her eyes shut and held her body as still as she could, trying to reclaim sleep and her half-remembered dream. The harder she tried to ignore them, the louder the campground birds seemed to get. A car door slammed somewhere nearby. The hungry rumble from her stomach was the last straw, and she threw back the sleeping bag with a groan. A spill of clothing spread out from a backpack near the tent entrance, T-shirts and socks splayed out carelessly. June picked up a faded, gray sweatshirt from the mess, brushed a bit of dirt off the collar, and pulled it over her head. She dug a little bit further down into the pile and pulled out two socks. They did not match, but she put them on anyway. That done, she tried to straighten up the chaos, but only succeeded in heaping her clothing over the tightly rolled inflatable mattress that kept her backpack propped upright. The mat sat next to a second sleeping bag, a twin of June’s own, but this one was still bundled neatly in its green sack. June looked at a bright yellow T-shirt near the bottom of the pile of clothes, pulled it out, and laid it over the packed-up sleeping bag. She slipped her mismatched feet into a pair of sandals that sat ready near the tent door and tugged her sweatpants until they covered her ankles. She ruffled her short blonde hair until it stuck up in the back, and yawned.

June unzipped the tent flap, unfolding herself into the morning light. She stretched her arms over her head, arching her back. Her mattress wasn’t quite thick enough to prevent sore muscles, especially after a few nights. She tilted her head to the side and groaned at the popping noise from her neck. She padded to her little car and removed the green Coleman stove from its backseat. Into the tin coffee pot went grounds and water, and soon the warm scent of brewing coffee was flowing freely through the trees. Eggs cracked and scrambled, bacon sizzled. June sat on the top

of the picnic table to eat her breakfast, her feet on the bench instead of the ground. The coffee tasted harsh, bitter and boiled, but she could feel the caffeine taking hold.

The couple in the campsite next to June's was up early as well. They looked good together, June thought as she watched them pack up their belongings. In fact, they looked like they stepped directly from an REI ad: both of them lean, fit, and wearing just the right amount of plaid flannel. The woman held what was probably an English muffin with jam on it in her mouth, leaving her hands free to pull up tent stakes. The man walked up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned, he reached toward the muffin hanging out of her mouth. She leaned back, out of his reach, but her eyes were laughing.

The couple had arrived on the same day June did, and she had watched them set up their tent, cook their meals, drink beer by their campfire. The man's name was Jonathan, she had decided that first night, staring into her own campfire, and the woman's was Betty. The campsites weren't close enough for her to have heard their real names. June thought up a happy life for the pair as she listened to them giggle their way through toasting marshmallows. Jonathan was considerate, but impulsive. Betty was the stable one. Betty was a dog person, but she would love the kitten Jonathan bought her as a birthday gift. They would bring their children to this campground, when they had them, and teach them to swim in the lake nearby. Each night, she got to know a little bit more about them, whether it was through their whispers in the campfire light or filling in the blanks of their lives herself. She knew them so well at this point that there was no need to even speak to them. Now she watched the two of them break down their tent poles over the rim of her mug. Jonathan glanced up and saw her looking. He waved, and she returned it, quickly dropping her eyes after. She wondered whether or not he brought Betty breakfast in bed. It seemed like something he would do.

Mark had brought her breakfast in bed once, on her twenty-ninth birthday, the year they had moved in together. She remembered his hands curled around the handles of the tray, the prim way he held his mug of tea, the way he sat beside her as she ate. She also remembered how his hands had moved after she was done, brushing aside the coverlet and tracing their way up her thigh. They had had to wash the leftover marmalade off the sheets that afternoon, a sticky orange film spread thin by their shifting bodies.

"Hey there!" a deep voice resonated through her head, scattering her thoughts. June started and almost dropped her mug in the dirt. "Ah, I'm sorry, didn't mean to scare you there. Just checking in," said the campground host as he neared her table. The host had white hair frizzed in a ring around his balding head, and his face looked like wrinkled leather, but he still walked tall and square-shouldered. He continued, "Was wondering if you were still expecting a second?"

"I," June started, "no. I'm not. It's just me."

"Ah, my mistake then. I thought you had registered for two. Wanted to make sure everything was okay."

June realized she must have written there would be two campers staying on the campground registration form instead of just herself out of habit. Betty wouldn't have made that mistake. Betty wouldn't be in this situation in the first place, either, she thought. "Oh, yes, I'm sorry," she said. "There was a change of plans at the last minute. I have some extra coffee if you would like, though. I always make too much."

"Much appreciated, young lady," said the host, producing an orange plastic travel mug. "Fill 'er up."

She did.

"You going out on the trail today?"

"I think so. Quartz Lake, probably. I did part of it yesterday and it was lovely."

"The overlook is worth it, if you want to do the whole trail. It's a bit of a climb there at the end, though."

"I saw that yesterday. I went about a third of the way up the mountain and turned back. I didn't bring enough water for that."

"Well, good luck and enjoy," the campground host said, sipping his coffee as he turned away. "You have bear spray, right? I don't like the thought of a little thing like you hiking alone, much less without spray. I'll lend you some if you need it, no problem."

"I have it, thank you," June replied. She was fairly certain her canister of bear spray still sat securely in Mark's car, still parked in front of their—his—house, but she couldn't admit to this smiling man that she had come here unprepared. Little lady my ass, she thought.

"Good, good, just doing my civic duty," said the campground host. He winked at her. "Have a good one."

"You too," she said and waved.

By the time June had cleared away her stove and remnants of her breakfast, Jonathan and Betty had already packed up and left in their Subaru. They had left a few sticks of firewood behind, and June gathered it up to add to her own pile. That done, she brushed her hands off and zipped herself back into her tent. She found her jeans where she had left them, crumpled by her sleeping bag instead of in the greater slump of laundry coming from her backpack. She put on a relatively clean T-shirt and her red windbreaker, tied her hair back under a bandanna, and exchanged her sandals for a pair of sturdy hiking boots. Also in the tent, next to where her boots had been, sat a larger pair of boots. They looked newer than hers, like they hadn't been broken in yet. June looked at them as she tied her bootlaces. She tried not to, but there they were. Loop a bit of cord around that metal hook right there, look at the boots. Tug the laces taut, look at the boots. Double knot, hey, look at those other boots still sitting right there. June narrowed her eyes at them, then picked them up and carried them

outside. She set them down underneath the nearest tree, upside down, then reached back and zipped the tent shut. She turned right out of her site and followed the curving, twisting road as it traced a path among the other campers and their collapsible weekend homes. The rest of the campground was mostly empty, she noticed, and realized with a small shock that it was Wednesday. She had been here since the previous Friday, and had paid her fee up through the maximum one-week stay. She didn't know what she would do when Friday came again. Mark certainly wouldn't be making her breakfast in bed again anytime soon. She supposed she would have to stay with her mother while she got back on her feet.

June had last spoken to her mother three weeks ago, when her world was still whole. Mom had asked her about her job (fine), the weather (fine) and, of course, Mark. "Have you two made any special plans?" she had asked. This was, of course, Mom-code for "Are you engaged yet?" June had rolled her eyes and looked over at her boyfriend, hoping to commiserate. He had been focused on his phone and didn't look up.

June remembered thinking she saw more of the top of his head, bent over that phone, than she saw of his face these days and replied, "No, mom. No special plans." Mom would get quite the surprise, then: June on her doorstep, unannounced and alone, smelling like a week of woods. Well, maybe that was all right. June's mother had introduced her to Mark after all. She could help clean up his mess.

June's footsteps led away from the temporary community of the campground. She followed the signs for Quartz Lake until she found a thin trail that hugged the edge of the clear lake by which the campground was built. It wound her along the shore for a half mile, then turned left between two hills that rose gently in the shadow of larger mountains. She breathed in a lungful of clear mountain air and felt the rhythm of her legs, muscles flexing, as she propelled herself along the path. The trees lining the trail stretched to the sky, branches reaching out to intertwine with the ones next to them, Spanish moss dripping from their tangles, shrouding the forest floor in shade and still. The trees were enormous, with thick, gnarled bark to protect their massive trunks. Here and there, lichen-covered boulders sat amid the trees, incongruous on the otherwise smooth ground. Mosses and ferns sprouted from the shattered trunks of long-fallen trees. They spilled out over the ground, blended one into the next, a thick, green mat that absorbed the sound of June's passage.

Her boots carried her on down the trail, her breath coming faster as she increased her pace. Twigs crunched dryly beneath her feet as she passed a section of fallen log, and she thought they sounded a little like bones snapping. Tiny little bones, she thought, and brought her foot down hard on the nearest bunch of sticks. A smile uncoiled across her lips. She thought again of Mark's hands clasping his mug of tea each morning, found another group of sticks and jumped on them, this time with both feet. They cracked loudly, the report echoing through the trees. Her smile

widened and she pushed her legs to move faster. She was practically jogging down the trail now, her small pack bouncing and thudding against her back. She jumped over a root sticking through the well-packed trail surface and focused on the thump-thump-thump of her feet on dirt. Her breath came in shallow gasps. The deep forest became a blur of green and gray as she sped through, hurdling roots and rebounding off the rounded rocks dotting the trail's smooth surface. Her brain was a whirl of white noise and green motion, her vision narrowed to the path in front of her.

As she hurtled along, she thought she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Her concentration broke and her left foot slipped through a slick of mud. She was still trying to see what had moved when her knees impacted the hard-packed surface. Her palms hit dirt a second later, and she cried out as gravel scored its way through her flesh. She lay stunned, the wind knocked out of her from her sudden stop. June caught sight of a deer bounding away down the trail, its white tail flipping gaily as it ran away from the intruder. *A deer. Only a deer. Venison, still on the hoof.* She tried to laugh, but all that came out was a breathless wheeze.

She rolled gingerly over onto her side and scooted off the trail, using her elbows instead of her hands to pull herself along. June turned her hands over to survey the damage. Tiny rock pieces dotted both palms and blood oozed around the edges of the holes they had made, but the worst of it was on her right hand. Three long furrows had been gouged across her palm, from the heel of her hand almost to the base of her fingers. A red pool was accumulating in the cup of that hand. June pulled the bandanna off of her head and wound it around her damaged skin, applying pressure. She let out a sob and wondered, for the first time, what in the fuck she was doing out here.

She had come home after work last Thursday to find her suitcase splayed out on their bed. Mark stood next to it, his spine straight, his face stern. She barely heard him speak, the flow of his words swallowed by the enormous, empty maw of her suitcase. He had rehearsed this, she thought as he spoke. How else could he sound this calm as he told her to pack her things? He hadn't even stumbled over the part where he told her to be out by the end of the night.

"Why, Mark?" Her voice sounded thin, reedy, small. "What did I do?"

"I just can't do this anymore. I'm tired of having the same fights, June. I'm done with it."

"Please don't do this. Please. We can work through this." She hated the begging whine she heard in her voice, but could not stop it. "Please," she whispered, her breath hitching as the enormity of the situation hit her.

Mark puffed out his cheeks in irritation and raked his hands through his dark hair. "If you wanted to fix our problems, you would have put some effort into it at some point over the past five years. I haven't seen that. I'm

done,” he repeated, then looked pointedly at her suitcase.

“If you want this over so much,” she mumbled through her tears and mostly to herself as she began to empty her dresser drawers, “why aren’t you the one packing?” She glanced at Mark and saw, oddly, fear in his eyes.

“It’s my house,” he said, a sulky tone in his voice. “I’ll help you move your furniture when you find a new place. I’m sorry.” He actually sounded sincere, she thought. She looked at his terrified eyes again and a horrible idea wormed its way into her brain.

“Is there someone else?” The silent, miserable look on his face gave her her answer, and she threw the handful of clothing she carried in his face. Mark flinched at the sudden attack. “You son of a bitch.” June leaned forward until she was inches from Mark’s nose, her teeth bared. He did not step away, but he didn’t meet her eyes either. “Big plans for tonight, then?”

“I—”

“Oh, go fuck yourself,” June spat.

Well. She didn’t have to worry about her bear spray anymore, she thought. She had made enough noise pulling gravel out of her wounded hands to alert anything within half a mile of her presence. If bears really avoided people who made noise, she thought she was good to go. Her wounds stung horribly, and she decided she would turn back instead of trying to reach the overlook today. She had pushed herself upright into a seated position and rested her back against a convenient rock while she cleaned her wound as best she could and rewrapped it. She was fairly certain she could stand, but wanted to take a quick rest before starting the walk back to camp. She wasn’t making good decisions, as her head-long dash into injury had shown, and relaxing by the campfire with a beer sounded better and better. She had emptied the fridge when she left her house—Mark’s house now, she had to get used to thinking of it that way—and looked forward to getting spectacularly drunk on her ex-boyfriend’s beer collection tonight. She dug into her pack gingerly, avoiding using her right hand as much as possible, and pulled out a pair of protein bars. As she ate, she thought she might not drink all of Mark’s beer after all. Maybe she would bring it back, hand it over to this new girl, if she was still there. June would tell her, “You’ll need this. Now excuse me while I get my shoes, which are probably still in the closet.”

She had also taken her camping supplies when she left. Her sleeping bag had made a satisfying thump when she’d thrown it out of the garage door and onto the driveway in front of her car. Mark had opened the door that connected the garage to the house and cleared his throat. June had her hiking pack in her hands, ready to throw that outside too, but turned and took aim at him instead.

Mark flinched, but June did not let go of the pack. “Are you taking the tent?” he asked.

June told him that she was, indeed, taking the tent. After all, she needed to make sure she would have a place to sleep while what's-her-name took over her bed.

He sighed. "Could you not take that right now? We can split everything up when we've had a chance to calm down."

June reiterated that the tent was coming with her, and if Mark did not like it, he could, in fact, come find her and take it. He knew where she'd be. He had not risen to the bait, but had instead walked out of the garage and away from her. She had watched his back retreat and flipped him a one-finger salute as he left. She looked at their dwindling stack of camping supplies, once neatly packed on the metal shelves along the wall, now scattered across the cement, the scent of long-extinguished campfires rising faintly into the garage air.

"Screw it," she said, and grabbed Mark's sleeping bag, self-inflating mattress, and brand-new hiking boots as well. Into the car they went, tucked between the tent and her suitcase. As she had driven out to the campground the next morning, her back stiff from the cheap motel mattress she had lain sleepless and red-eyed on until dawn that first night, she thought there was a chance he may come after his gear and find her along the way.

She had driven the entire way playing out different ways their reunion would go in her head. He would start by walking across her campsite, their eyes locked. He would apologize profusely to her (in some iterations, he even fell prostrate and sobbing at her feet), and they would weep together. No matter how it started, the scene always ended with the two of them wrapped in each other's arms, stumbling toward the tent, her hands tugging at his shirt and his teeth nipping her collarbone before they were even inside. They spent hours there in her mind, a tangle of limbs and lips, bodies intertwining over and over. June had spent the first two awful days looking up hopefully at every car that drove through the campground's gate, her heart in her throat, her hands fluttering at her navel. He had not appeared.

She brushed the crumbs from her protein bars off of her makeshift bandage and heaved herself to her feet. There would be no running on the trip back, June knew, and did not relish the thought of how sore she would be upon her return to camp. She pointed her boots back toward her tent and set off.

June rounded a bend in the trail. Stretched out before her was not more shady, old-growth forest, but a flattened column of trees, all pointed downhill in the direction of last winter's avalanche. She had been surprised the first time she passed this way and marveled at how the trees fell in such clean lines, dazzled with the sudden brightness of the sun when there was no canopy of branches to shade her. She had run through this

section of forest too quickly earlier to appreciate it, but on this return trip, June paused and looked out over the flattened woods. She was amazed to see there was a force powerful enough to level these huge trees so easily, and wondered what it would have been like to be here and see the snow roar in a white wall of destruction across her path.

She followed the curve of the trail as it left the devastated section of trees and was in shadow and still once more. Her hands hurt worse than ever, and now her knees were beginning to throb where they had fetched up against the dirt. June stepped to the side of the trail and placed her left hand flat on the smooth surface of a boulder, left on the hill by a long-retreated glacier. Another hiker had left a long stick wedged against the boulder, almost as tall as she was. She took a sip of her water and sucked in a deep breath. Her head leaned against the cool stone surface.

A flash of motion caught her eye again. This time, when she turned her head to follow it, she caught a glimpse of tawny, sleek fur. A mountain lion crouched on the opposite side of the trail from her, still as a windless August day and the color of dried-out grass before a fire. The big cat held itself low to the ground, tense, a coiled spring, waiting for her to run like the deer had. *I'm so stupid*, June had time to think, then their eyes met, green to blue, and June forgot how to breathe. Her heart gave a lurching thump, and she felt cold adrenaline surge its way through her body, her entire torso gripped tight in frozen terror.

The cat lashed its tail back and forth, and it lowered its head, preparing to strike now that it'd been spotted. June's insides turned to hot, molten iron. She pressed her shoulder blades against the boulder, its cold touch reaching through her jacket. She wondered what the bright red jacket looked like to the lion, if it might see its bright color and think she was poisonous. Her injured hand brushed the stick wedged against the boulder, sending burning fire through her scored palm. She gritted her teeth and closed her hand around the wood.

The lion came at her in a silent rush, bursting out of the underbrush in a fluid ripple of muscle under thick fur. June swung the stick around, trying to catch the huge cat before it could leap. She found her target, and there was a satisfying thump as she connected with the lion's nose. It skidded to the side, wheeling around for another attempt. Its pupils were huge, empty black discs, widened so it could see every move June made.

June brought her stick downward with a loud shout, sending up a puff of dust where it hit the trail between her and the hunter. The lion narrowed its eyes and a low growl bubbled out of its throat.

"Hah!" she shouted again, louder, higher pitched, and swung the stick around to her right. She choked up on the stick with both hands, ignoring the way the wood scraped against her fresh bandages. The lion moved toward her again, belly low to the ground, sinuous and sleek. She held its gaze, her breath heaving in her chest. The stick swished through the air again, right to left.

“Hah!” June yelled. “HAH!” she screamed, her yell echoing through the trees as her final swing connected with the huge cat’s nose. He jumped back and growled again. She held her stick in front of her, pointed at the green eyes still locked on hers. She felt like a rabbit, transfixed by hypnotic predator’s eyes. They held that way for a second, a day, a year.

The lion wheeled on its feet suddenly and turned away from her. As it loped silently away into the trees, the tip of its tail swished once-twice, back and forth. June watched it go for a few steps, her breath ragged. The big cat slipped between two stumps and was gone, vanished into the woods. She gripped the stick in her hand hard, but she couldn’t yet feel the bark biting into her abraded palms, little pieces of wood grinding into raw flesh. She turned her head toward the bushes next to the trail. They were covered in lush, green leaves, she saw, and the remnants of spring flowers still clung to them. She turned her head as if to consider this fact, this way and that, then was abruptly and quietly sick into the leaves.

It was well past dark when June returned to her campsite. The night had brought a chill with it, and she shivered as she fumbled with her car keys. The bandanna wrapped around her right hand was stiff with dried blood, making her movements clumsy and slow. She was finally able to slide the key home, unlock her car, and crawl into the passenger seat. She’d left a blanket in the car, and she draped it over her shoulders before opening up the cooler in the backseat. The first thing she found in the cooler was a package of thin-sliced turkey, and she ate it piece by piece, holding the package in her clawed, aching right hand.

She sat in her car for about two hours, she thought, before she made her way back out to her tent. Her clothes were easy to pack up; those she just threw loosely into the passenger footwell. She rolled up her sleeping bag as quickly as she could. Each time she heard a noise outside, she froze, terrified and wide-eyed until she could convince herself the cat wasn’t coming back. While she was rolling up her tent, she heard a crackle behind her, maybe the sound of paws on pine needles, and swung around with a tent stake in her left hand, breathing hard. There was nothing there: no teeth, no fur, no claws. Her stomach roiled, and she took a step away from the half-rolled tent in case she had to be sick again. When she wasn’t, she gathered the rest of the tent in a bunch and stuffed it in her trunk. She kept her car headlights turned off as she wound her way out of the snarl of camp road.

In the morning, the campground host found June’s campsite empty. She had left behind a sleeping bag and inflatable mattress, he saw, and what looked like a brand new pair of hiking boots. *Free*, read the note tucked into the right boot. *Sorry, no coffee this morning.*