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## The Deer

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## THE DEER

The deer come at night. They visit the bird bath where a little battery-powered “Wiggler” keeps the water from freezing. We know because we see their tracks in the snow the next morning and because the next day we must replenish the water. Actually, Lora does this, her balance is better than mine. It is February and the deer have stopped checking out the apple tree for fallen fruit. Most of it is gone anyway, and the snow is deep there. It wouldn't make sense, pawing for frozen apples in such deep snow.

There are six deer. Their tracks orbit from water to our new transplants. They like to nibble Lora's baby peach and pear. The plum, too. That is why she calls them “assholes.” In the middle of the night, sometimes, I'll come awake to a pounding sound. The bedroom door will be open to a distant light. The other side of the bed vacant. “What's wrong?” I'll shout.

“It's the assholes!” she'll yell back. “I'm trying to scare them away.”

I lie back.

Lora says, “Six of them is too many. They're destroying our trees.” Lora does not believe in God—she has her reasons, and they are good ones. She doesn't believe in secrets, either, or encouraging freeloaders. She thinks “my” Virgin Mary is a crock, and “my” pope a crook. If it were not for the tracks and the depleted water in the birdbath, if she had not seen the assholes with the help of the porch light, I'm not sure she'd believe six deer live in the woods across the street.

Truth is, the Pope and I parted ways long ago, and Lora knows it, but she now knows I like to be teased, as well as to tease. It's taken us a while—close to four years—to start to understand each other. Later in life, one's opinions—political, religious, and all the rest—get in the way, I think. Teasing, maybe, is a way of gelding those opinions and exiling them to the backyard to frolic harmlessly night and day.

Of course, the deer have no time for opinions, and walk right past them on their way to the birdbath. I don't blame them, or the opinions, for their failure to acknowledge each other, but on some level I'm disappointed and think of changing the opinions into—close my eyes—let's say, six friends of my youth made invisible by war and disease and ordinary time.

I raise the moon and see them in the backyard now, standing where the opinions were a moment ago—Jim and Nita, Dick and Jack and Andrea and Johnny P.—as they were in high school. My lost friends.

From the kitchen comes another round of pounding. "Assholes!" Lora shouts.

Yes, I think, the deer. Well, this is their chance to show off skills other than mooching. So the six of them—like trained ponies—form a line and kneel on their front legs. My friends cautiously mount them, and the deer—their eyes wide with fear—slowly rise with their unfamiliar burdens. Then finally one deer leaps, and then another—it's like watching music—until eventually all six are leaping through the snow, and on their backs, my friends are hanging on and howling with pleasure. Round and round the deer and my friends go, making circles and figure eights, and staying away from the apple tree where the snow is deep.

Jim and Nita, Dick and Jack and Andrea and Johnny P., all dead, yet there they are, having a good time riding deer in my backyard. Who would have guessed that darkness and opinions could be put to such a use.

Lora comes back to bed. "Are you awake?" she says.

"How are the assholes?" I say.

She turns on the light and looks under the bed for something. When she comes up, she says, "I could pound on the window all night, they never go far—they're not afraid." She looks over at me. "What are you thinking about, lying there like that?"

"The Pope," I say.

"Oh," she says, "you're so full of it." And turns off the light.