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BROOKE SAHNI

A NATURAL HISTORY

HANNAH WANTS JOHN to tell her something that would surprise her, to feel that whatever this is, they are, is built on newness. Now, she craved only novelty. He turns on Dave Matthews, the only band out of a mix of dated soft rock that she can tolerate if he turns it down low.

“They are called prickly pears,” John says. They look out on an expanse of field. Except it’s dark, so they’re looking out to blackness and they could be anywhere.

“No comment?” he asks.

“Nope,” she says, watching the smirk curl up his face. Hannah had come from Michigan for college, and in the short four months she’d lived in the West, the prickly pear was one thing she could identify without him. They’re silent for a while, still against a low rumble of thunder. Then John begins to tell her a story about a time he brought a woman here—not here exactly, but somewhere nearby—and they had hiked all afternoon, drinking mouth-warm beers, tossing a ball for Leo, the black lab.

“We went off by ourselves, and when I found her she was butt naked, squatting over the creek, cupping tadpoles in her hands, letting out these weird, giddy sounds. She was so beautiful, but what the fuck, man? It was

like, our first date.”

“Maybe you should stop dating little girls, John,” Hannah mocks.

“Oh, Hannah,” he trails off, laughs, their usual back and forth repertoire.

In the car (*this is a truck, damn it*—he always says when she calls it a car), she contemplates *nontraditional student*, the term he’d tossed around four months ago, like an answer to the question, *why is a forty-something in the fresh-bodied space of twenty-somethings?* The question was never asked, never aloud at least. During their three-week college orientation in the backcountry, the group was not bothered by John’s age. They all shared the commonality of choosing a “nontraditional” college—all about the environment, inclusivity, and fostering a deeper understanding of the world—so it would be un-PC to call attention to difference of any kind. They accepted him the way one might take in and shelter a child: this older man with a wide-eyed look, the one who didn’t seem to understand how, given all the routes his middle-aged life could have taken, he ended up in a forest with a bunch of hippies.

LIGHTNING FLARES, THE sky is orange, lit from within. It’s a school night, she left the lamp on, she has to read exactly seventeen more pages before tomorrow, and she’s with him, their bodies silhouetted by blackness: behind the clouds, the moon.

John releases Leo from the truck bed. He offers her a beer, and she takes it, then a Mexican blanket even though it’s not cold, and she takes that too, wrapping it around her shoulders. No, she imagines him thinking.

She can practically hear the sound of him gritting his teeth at the sight of her covered, where seconds ago her shoulders had been bare and perfectly orbed. The blanket is rough, smells of pine. It's early November in the high desert; she can feel their small town going silent in the distance. Behind her, John leans against the tailgate. She gets out of the truck and wanders down a slight ravine, twice stubbing her foot on a rock. But she can feel his eyes on her even when she's out of sight, attention she both dismisses and is learning to rely on. For entire minutes, she is mindless, taken by the damp smell of approaching rain—swept, as though there is nothing ahead or on either side of her, except for that small awareness of him, like a ping.

“Once, when I was a little kid,” she'd told him a few days ago at the pub, “I told my mom I wanted to eat a leaf for dinner and without missing a beat, she plucked one from the tree, poured all these condiments on it. It was one of those moments when someone totally surprises you, you know?” Silence hung between them. John smiled and said, “That's so adorable, Hannah,” in a slow, genuine way that made her feel like this story wasn't meant for him, like he'd just absorbed a part of her.

It's not the number, Hannah tells herself. Less about his forty-five to her twenty-one and more a matter of their shapes, the nuances of their bodies. His gray hair, wrinkles threading around the eyes, the neck, the faded tattoo on his forearm from his Navy days. She contemplates his legs, which are perpetually tan and muscular from routine mountain biking. What if his whole body were like those legs, she thinks before quickly dismissing the thought. There's nothing to reconcile. He's told her that he loves her hands,

her hair, and she laughs it off, or sometimes, sometimes she says thank you.

Now they are in the new wild of the day. What did he say this place was called? The lightning has stopped, but the rain presses on, so she hugs the blanket closer, for the smell, mainly.

He sees her before she sees him.

“I’m in here,” John calls out from inside the truck bed. Hannah sticks her head inside the camper shell.

“Should we go?”

“This is so beautiful,” he answers.

Climbing in, whispering, Leo, Leo. The dog crawls a guilty crawl across the bed, lands his damp head on her lap. “You remember what this is?” John stretches his arm through the cab window, holding up the datura skeleton that hangs always from his rearview mirror. It’s you, she thinks. Already a relic of him, of the West. Same for the white GMC with maroon velveteen seats, datura, dead, hanging from the mirror. The truck that carried them, a month ago, to witness the flowers unfurl under the moon—*devil’s trumpet*, *jimsonweed*, he’d instructed—all a metaphorical limb to the body of this new life.

Rain bears down like a beaded curtain. He’s on his back, hands behind his head. She’s happy. She thinks about her body, rigid against the window. No matter what, she won’t lay down.

“I love how we can hang out in silence together,” he says. She doesn’t want to say, “me too,” but does.

ON SATURDAY, JOHN picks Hannah up, and they head out to Sycamore Canyon, a place she's never been. They talk about school, reflect back on their three-week orientation at Walnut Creek, when he'd gone to sleep early and the rest of the group stayed up late, laughing, sometimes at the silly things he'd said that day.

"You were such the old man out there, sneaking off with your cot at 7 pm."

"You should have come found me," John flirts.

"You're stupid, John."

They hike down into the canyon. It's the first cool day of fall, and the air has a crispness she hasn't felt since she moved in early August. He shows her Redrock Cabin, tells her tales of Geronimo. Together they suck on mesquite, spitting the pods along the trail when they become dry and fibrous. They take their time, tossing pinecones for Leo, aware of their steps.

"Do you want to get married?" he asks.

"To you? No." They laugh. She walks ahead a little.

"Seriously, is that something you think about?"

"No, I don't think about it. I'm twenty-one."

"Shit, I was married when I was nineteen." He pauses. "Did you know that I was married?"

"I didn't know."

At the river, they relax. He tells her about his ex-wife, a once-young bride whom he loved and still does. "I never fall out of love," he explains. "That essence is always there."

As John offers this brief history, Hannah imagines he could be trying to tell her that he loves her. The possibility flourishes, and she takes it in like an essential nutrient she didn't know she was missing. She wonders if he just means, I'd still fuck them. But perhaps she's being reductive. She's only been in love once. Not to her boyfriend back home in Michigan, but to a boy from high school. She had yearned for him for a solid three years after their departure. She still tries to replicate that feeling.

"I haven't been head over heels in a long time," he says before trailing off again. Don't say it, she thinks.

"I guess I haven't felt that way in a long time, too," she succumbs.

"You will," he promises. He allows the silence to stretch. She thinks of the way her poetry teacher described the white space on the page: imbued with quiet meaning.

"I wish I could take you to Alaska. It's. So. Beautiful."

"It's so beautiful here," she says. He says he'd like to take her places that only he's touched, that even in the vast, open spaces of the west, you can always find tracks, small pieces of garbage, memos of civilization. She rolls her eyes, takes a sip of beer, her way of keeping whatever this is at bay.

Riparian corridor, she thinks to herself, taking in the loveliness of the words, the chilled water at her feet. He's off somewhere in the aspens, gathering, she assumes. In their orientation, the group would chuckle when, while hiking, John would hand her a small log, a random flaking leaf. "What do you want me to do with this, John?" she'd laugh, throwing the object back where it came from. But sometimes he had surprised her with

something cool, interesting in a way that made her want to keep it, tuck it inside her pack. She even cataloged these nature-gifts in a notebook, titled it “John’s Gifts: A Natural History.” Next to each, she’d drawn a little picture, shaking her head at his child-like nature, his silly flirtations, nothing more than a joke, he, the old man of the group.

“I can’t believe I just found this.” John emerges from the woods, hands Hannah a slender, blue-black rock, so long and smooth it looks manipulated.

“It’s obsidian. The tip’s been carved to look like a bird.” It’s warm, practically pulsing. At the end of it, a beak, two pools for eyes, looking more like a skeleton of a bird.

“Do you think—”

“I really want to kiss you, Hannah.” Suddenly that man-look on his face: boyish desire. His US Navy hoodie is touching her knees. Earlier, he’d noticed her goose bumps. The thought, I can’t kiss him in this sweatshirt, surfaces from deep down, and the obsidian burns her hand.

“I’m not going to kiss you, John.”

“Shit,” he laughs.

Her refusal isn’t moral. Certainly it isn’t because of her boyfriend a thousand miles away, that habit she knows she needs to quit. More the way he’s looking at her as if he realizes what he has given her, the gift of the vast and the foreign. It’s his size, the bulk of his body, not out of shape, but uniquely adult, matured, the twenty-four years between them spreading out like a chasm, how time had charted its slow course along his skin.

On the car ride back to town, it’s not uncomfortable. It’s as if all the

time spent together was inevitably building to this, and now they'd both gotten it over with, knew where they stood. She believes he can recover. Even though she'd heard that *men and women can't be friends*, and throughout her teendom had found this to be true, John was not a boy, and part of her believed they could remain in their current standing. She knew she wouldn't, couldn't fall for him, never fully, and this fact alone, manifested as a particular kind of comfort that comes from being a prized thing and not caring one iota if you're dropped.

Inside his house, she sits. She appreciates how minimal it is—the kind of place one could pick up and leave in an instant. He starts dinner while they talk, also minimal: some rice and vegetables simmering in a pot. Half-naked women fade in and out on the computer screen. Hannah gives him shit for it every time.

“Your screen saver is so gross. Offensive, really.”

“They are beautiful,” he says.

“It reminds me of something a teenager would have. No, a prepubescent.” She shakes her head. The dog begs for something from her with his eyes. “I don't have anything for you, I don't have anything for you,” she sings.

She talks about her writing classes, how in love she is with all of it—the books, the teachers. From behind the kitchen counter she catches his eye. She loves the urgency with which he looks at her, this hidden power that comes with not caring how it ends. His marine ecology classes aren't as inspiring, he says he might drop out and move to Alaska.

“I won't drop out because you're here, Hannah. Don't worry.”

“Oh, I’m not worried, John,” she jokes. He joins her on the couch, hands her a beer. It’s dusk. The front door is open, so she can see the butte, and it appears to be glowing from within: the town’s holy monument. They stare straight ahead at the light show outside, the fall’s changing shapes, elongated shadows. And the dusk, without trying, pulls something out of her, a nostalgia for past rebellion, for her teenage lover. She remembers when they’d sit on her roof, hued with some unnamable anticipation, a longing. The newness of the desert, with its own innate lust, pulled, stirred her. So when she says, gently, “this is my favorite time of day,” she knows what she is doing, how it will bring him into it, how he’ll fall a little for that, and then all she has to do is turn her head to her right, where he is sitting beside her, because from here their eyes will meet, and the rest will be implied. So she turns. Just to see what it’s like to be here with him.

They take their time. It’s been years since she’s kissed anyone besides her boyfriend, and after several seconds she allows herself to enjoy the ease with which they fall into one another. “We should check the food,” she finally says. They eat and talk. Around ten, she insists on walking the mile home to her apartment. She steps out into the night. *Fuck*, Hannah thinks when she thinks about their mouths and how, together, they used them.

• • •

FOR TWO DAYS they hang out and don’t touch, and then, on the third day, they kiss again. Every time now they kiss—only kiss—like two adolescents

satisfied with the newness of such physicality. Once, on a Tuesday, when the night felt particularly thick and enveloping, they'd returned to the field she can never remember the name of, with the galaxies of prickly pears, talking, joking, testing their footing against the dark earth, and when they were brimming, each in their own way, they kissed, his hand groping the warmth underneath her shirt, whispering, in a voice she'd never heard: "Where did you learn to kiss like that?" And then: "I've never been touched like this before," as though she is Woman and he, a schoolboy. Inside she feels that power break away like a ball of lava freed from its source.

Months pass, energized. The sweet winter days, still day-warm. From time to time he tells her he loves her, but he has always said that, handling the term with equal casualty and genuineness. And like before, sometimes she believes that she could be in love with him because she confuses the song of the places they go with a love song for him. They kiss and touch and every time she pulls away, stops herself, says or does something friendly, unsexy. She awaits the moment when they'll have to acknowledge the terms of the relationship. She can feel the masculine dissatisfaction coming off him like an odor, the unsightly term, tease, cresting on his mouth. I'm not, she thinks. She just doesn't want to see his dick.

THEY DRIVE TO visit John's sister in Sedona. In the truck, he offers to fix some things she has that are broken—a loose car bumper, a faulty garbage disposal. As they drive, this new ruby planet appears. It surprises her every time, how without warning the landscape turns to ember, suddenly aflame.

He reaches for her leg.

“Is it our ages?” John asks.

“What do you mean?” Though she knows. She fixates on the landscape. There’s nothing better than this.

“Do you think we would be together if I were younger?”

“Yeah, maybe,” she admits. “I don’t think I could ever introduce you to my family as my boyfriend.”

“Isn’t age just a number?” She knows he knows it’s not. *Because of your body*, she thinks. Because of how, lately, in the darkness of the truck, he guides her hand to his cock—the uncharted mass—the silent gesture like a perversion of the night.

“Beth really liked you,” he says after they’ve all shared a meal in a hole-in-the-wall casino.

But I’m not your girlfriend, she thinks. “Does your sister think it’s weird that you hang out with young girls?”

“You’re not a girl, Hannah. You’re a woman.”

They park at the base of one of the copper-colored mountains. Drunk, they have sex in the back of his truck, and it feels like the least sensual activity they’ve been part of, together. How to tell him that she only wants part of him and not the rest? We’re both adults, she imagines him thinking, when he thinks about the natural course of things.

“I’M GOING TO that party at the storage units,” Hannah tells him a few weeks later. She circles a juniper tree like a cat. In the sky, a white daytime moon.

“You are?” He slinks around, tries to grab her by the waist. “You’re going to hang out with all those kids? Those hippies?” John’s disdain for the college, for the *kids*, is becoming intolerable.

“They’re my peers.”

“Maybe I’ll go, too.”

“Yeah, you should. Get out a little.”

ARTIFICIAL COLOR OF hula-hoops and tie-dye, vivid and bursting against the natural brown landscape. Hannah, too, emblazoned: a floor-length sundress, printed with women’s faces, Technicolor, illegible writing in a sixties style bubble font. She arrives with Eleanor, and the two make their way through the maze of storage units. Students masked in face paint lean against cinderblock walls, roll cigarettes. Others sing bluegrass. The vacant units are open, and in one, Hannah sees shirtless men handing out free homemade beer and veggie chili. In the common courtyard space, she sees him. “I’ll be right back,” she hears John tell his friend. He approaches slowly, with caution.

“Oh my god. You look awesome,” John says.

“I thought this might be the only time I could get away with this dress,” Hannah says, patting herself down. “You know, so I’d fit right in with the hippies.”

“Except you shower and smell good.” He reaches for her a little. Hannah scans the party. People toss fire into the air. The sun is setting. From the corner of her eye, she sees the abs of a shirtless man: he looks like Tarzan.

“I’m going to go get some food with Eleanor, I’ll talk to you later.”

“I’ll come find you,” he says, but already, she’s gone.

“WHAT’S GOING ON with you and John?” Eleanor asks, her mouth full of chili. Hannah had wondered why no one had asked until now. She knew they noticed: she and John, out together every weekend, even spotted out in the brush once, in the wilderness that grew instantly smaller at the discovery of classmates. She had come to enjoy the mystery they carried together, the way she’d never let John touch her in public to ensure their friends would never have anything solid to chew on.

“We’ve just been hanging out a lot,” Hannah says, passing the soggy end of a joint to Eleanor.

“He’s so old, dude. He likes you.” The women sip their home-brewed beer, tangy in a way it shouldn’t be—sharply delicious.

“We’ve kissed,” Hannah finally confesses. “Just a few times,” she lies.

“Holy shit,” Eleanor says flatly. Hannah contemplates continuing, divulging their clumsy sex, but there’s nothing to say anyway, nothing to report.

“You know he’s going to fall in love with you. That would be so John of him.” They sit with the facts Hannah cannot refute.

“We just get along so well,” Hannah says, and this, she knows, is the most honest confession she can make.

“Dude.” Eleanor exhales smoke to the sky.



MORE FIRE THROWERS now and people tossing poi, carving sacred geometries out of the black. All the light tonight, an offering. From behind, someone snaps a glow stick around Hannah's neck. The stranger's body is lean and tan; the fire illuminates a slender matrix of muscles beneath his skin. "It's you," she says. "You're Tarzan. You're beautiful." Silently, Tarzan threads a pink glow stick through her hair, takes her hand, and places a warm bottle of beer there. She looks at him, then at the teem of bodies, thinks, these are my people. And she doesn't count John among them, wonders if he is watching her.

All night, John and Hannah circle. So many people, so unlike their usual realm of quiet and mountains. Two oscillating bodies, one hungrier for the other. When they find their way back to one another, they stand in a circle with friends from their orientation group, glance at each other with an understanding. Listen to all this nonsense they're talking about, she can hear John think. We have something, she says back with her eyes. She's not sure where Tarzan went, but John is right there and Hannah feels *good*—the fire, all the bodies, lighting her from within. So, with her eyes, she gives John permission to kiss her. Let them see—an offering for him. Right there, they kiss, the only time there's so much noise she can't hear the wet music of their mouths. Then, just like in the movies, he says, "Let's get out of here."

In his house, the top of her dress is down to her waist, and she studies his body on the bed, graphs it like a carcass, the slices of skin old and young.

Young: forearms, hands, legs. Old: Stomach, face, cock with its shroud of gray hair. Even in her drunkenness, she knows that the lights and the music, the youthful flesh, the rarity of their public display brought her to this point. She cannot move.

“Come over here,” John says, rolling onto his back. His cock follows, landing limply on his leg.

“Why do you always want me on top?” Hannah asks. Leo licks her leg, and she turns him away violently. “Get out of here, dog.” She pushes his face.

“Always? This is only the second time.” His eyes leave the points of her nipples. He turns onto his side, an uncomplimentary posture that jolts Hannah to sobriety. “I didn’t know we had an always,” he says, his voice hued with an unfamiliar tone.

“Oh.” Hannah reaches for the other half of her dress, pulls it up, covers herself. Too cold to get into logistics, not in the mood for rationale.

“Don’t do that. Don’t *do that*,” he says. But Hannah can barely absorb the sudden desperation in his voice because there’s the awful squeak of plastic coming from the giant pool toy that is his bed. He’d sold his regular mattress—“downsizing”—and the sight and sound of him getting up off the air mattress, the rubbing together of plastic, the folds of skin, the struggle of movement is all too much. She could vomit. Or laugh. Instead she nears the front door, gathers up her things.

“Have I told you you have the most beautiful tits I’ve ever seen?” He has.

“I don’t like being on top,” Hannah says, looking him in the eye.

“I guess I’m afraid of hurting you, Hannah.” She imagines him on her, enveloping the whole of herself, this magical man-weight, unaccounted matter—yes, he could literally crush her.

“I think I’m going to go,” she says, reaching for her phone. “It’s almost two.”

“What? Really?” He slides into his Navy sweats, rubs his face. “I can drive you.”

“No, it’s ok. I’ll be fine.” And like the first time they kissed, she steps out in her neon dress, shivers against the cold, and walks the mile home.

THEN IN THE spring, almost a year since they’d met, he tells her the owners of Walnut Creek—the place where they’d spent three weeks in a group of fifteen, hiking, cooking, learning, practicing yoga, getting to know their bodies—have asked him to do some maintenance work, and will she come and join him. And although it’s spring, the air has a crispness and a certain hue of light more akin to fall. Nostalgia, an ever-lingering longing to be among this wilderness, to be with the person who showed her, moved her, once again, to say *yes*. John removed the camper shell so they could hang out in the open air. This is where Hannah sits, writing the words, *here again, back where we started*. John fixes an old lawn mower; the work streaks the clean air with the smell of tools and manly chemicals that seem to go hand in hand with handy work. She associates the smell with her father, quickly dismisses the thought, buries it.

Inside the barn where the orientation group had eaten dinner, Hannah

sits, and when John meets her at the edge of the table, she succumbs, lays herself flat. And just like the first time, she feels, more powerfully now, that their bodies weren't made to harmonize in this way—where their kissing had unfurled volumes about the nature of love and sensuality, time, rhythm, and place, their sex feels perverse. And on the table she realizes this fully, that all this time he was waiting for her to surrender, to give in, to be his girlfriend, his wife. He'd marry her, she knew this for certain, just as she knew she never would let herself be anything at all to him. She is young, and he wants it too deeply, and she does not want or need his love. That night, curled against him, against the wind, she tries to explain this, but doesn't have the words.

SHE'D SEEN, DURING the monsoons, the way it took endless days of rain before the cracked earth began to pool back into itself. She herself was overflowing with John's neediness, with few openings for absorption. He started talking more seriously about dropping out. "I'm so sick of this school's fucking politics," he'd complain, while Hannah fell more in love with her studies, her poems, and her books.

For days, she doesn't respond to John's messages and calls. After one week, he leaves a card on her windshield. On the cover, a glossy photo of a scrawny ponderosa deep inside a hidden crevasse they'd visited together, lit by the sun:

Hannah, I feel as though I have dropped and smashed something beautiful. Our friendship is unique, delightful, painful, scary, and loving all at once. I

think it can be fixed if we collect the pieces and rebuild. I miss you, my friend.

She tucks the card away.

Before he moves, they meet in the evening, in front of a fire he'd built at his friend's farm. Alone, they ruminate over the course of things. For Hannah, it's the natural course, the obvious, inevitable end. He needs her permission to add her to his list of great loves, and she will not grant it. He says some harsh things, things like, "You're so fucking immature, like a child." Does she need to say that she is the same age of his own child, the kid he'd confessed one night that he'd had, but never met?

John drops out, leaves their small desert town and moves to Alaska, where it is beautiful but void of her, as she finishes her studies, allowing their aftermath to sink in—a revitalizing dose of vitamins. At times, she tells herself she'll never talk to him again—it's the only way to pull away from one another—but every so often, when she's feeling particularly moved by a landscape, an image, a time of day, she sends him a brief message: *hello*.

"DO YOU REMEMBER the spot we buried Leo?" John asks one night while they're on the phone.

"I do," Hannah says.

"Maybe you could go there. I'm curious if animals have found it."

"I remember what it looked like, but I don't think I could find my way back to it."

"Don't worry about it," he says. "Are you still writing?"

"I was writing before you called, actually," Hannah says.

“What are you writing about?”

“I’m trying to write about the desert. This small desert town of ours. Well, I guess it’s not yours anymore.”

“Am I in it?” And then there’s that long silence. This time she is afraid to speak, as if it would fracture some very fragile understanding to pieces.

“No, you’re not in it,” she lies, that forgotten manipulation.

“Well, you’re ruining your chances at it being a best seller.”

“Shut up, John,” she says.

After, at her desk, she looks at her story. Too close to home, she thinks. This isn’t right. She changes his name to a name of a man she doesn’t know, but that doesn’t seem to solve anything, so she changes her name to something else, something plain, like Sarah. But the pieces are unchanged, the imagination a frivolous thing, she thinks. And how can she write a desert story absent of him? How to write him out of her?

Hours go by as she tries to reshape the narrative, avoids familiar shapes in the dark outside her window. She takes out the prickly pears and canyons, the mountains and pickup trucks, the creosote and datura. The monsoons. She replaces them with Alaska’s icy rivers and the bone-on-bone sound of antlers against trees. In the story, her heroine emerges from an ice-tipped cabin, to find snowmelt; the man walks out behind her and together they lift their faces to the sun. Only then can Hannah see, finally, how things could be different. Only then is it no longer their story.