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MAUREEN LANGLOSS

THEY CAME TO MONTANA TO SUFFER

THE TRIP OUT was easy at first. Even stoned as I was, I managed to hop from rock to rock without stumbling. I was trespassing again, on a ranch where Dad was fixing pipes. There was a rock off the river's edge that I could stare at for hours. Size of a bear. This time I was going to touch it. Wrap my arms around its ragged edge.

When the puddle jumpers ended, I waded in. The water was still shallow enough for me to stand. But I didn't factor in the current, which was strong with spring melt and came at me from several angles at once. I lost my balance in a funny, slow-motion way. If dad was watching, he would've laughed, and I wouldn't have blamed him. But then icy water rushed through my clothes. The shore was farther than I thought. My feet couldn't find bottom and the current took me for a minute or two or forever. When it finally slammed me into a clump of smaller rocks, water gurgled around me like I'd pissed it off, done it some harm. I dug my fingers into the dirt below, clung to the riverbed so long the trout swam right over me. I was nothing to them. Mom said fish wouldn't come up to a human like that. She was wrong.

When Dad clapped his hand on my shoulder, it was heavier than I expected. He was medium-sized, but he didn't wish he was any taller.

"You keep following me, I'm putting you to work," he said, pulling me from the pissed-off water.

"I already got work lined up."

"Could've fooled me."

I scanned the water and spotted another trout. Once I adjusted my eyes to their presence, they were all I could see.

"Best thing I ever did was figure out what would always break and learn how to fix it," Dad said. "People will shit for eternity."

The only truth Dad ever taught me on purpose. Even though he never asked, he was counting on me to take over his plumbing business. It had been six years since Mom died. Felt more like a spring coiled tight than a straight line of seconds and hours and days. I was twenty-two, and the best thing I'd accomplished was beating a Destiny raid with teammates I only knew by their usernames.

I sat on the riverbank, dripping into the dirt, shivering. Dad's legs were wet up to his knees, but he took off his flannel shirt anyway, threw it over my shoulders, and stood beside me in his undershirt.

"I'm gonna try fish guiding." I whispered so quietly I didn't expect Dad to hear over the rush of the river.

"I knew a fish guide once," he said. "Abandoned his wife and kids with rent to pay and no money to pay it."

I watched the river in silence, thinking about those kids, picturing the

holes in their shoes. I could still see the trout. Their sleek bodies sparkled for me.

“Look, Dad,” I said, pointing at them.

His back was already to the river. He was walking to his truck, his shoulders rounded, a slight limp in his right knee. I stayed with the fish until it got dark. I hadn’t seen anything beautiful in such a long time.

• • •

I DIDN’T KNOW jack shit about fly fishing. Guiding was a spur of the moment, pot-infused decision. It felt good to make a decision after so many years of avoiding them. I read every post on TakeMeFishing.org. Helpful tricks—like the best water temperature for catching trout is 55 to 65 degrees. They’re hungrier because they process food faster in cooler water. Mom would’ve been all over this stuff. She was always hunting down truths from nature. There was even one about fish that she loved. *Most fish can’t swim backwards. But humans can. It’s what separates us from the beasts.*

“So what?” I remembered saying after having heard it too many times.

She was in bed again. Dad let me skip school to sit by her, fetch her the mint chewing gum that helped her stomach, the old *National Geographic*s when she got bored. I was no good at school, but I hated this chore almost as much as sitting at a desk. The room seemed dark even in the middle of the day with the windows wide open.

Mom handed me the pencil that was always tucked behind her ear.

“Write it down.”

“Do I have to?”

“Write it down, Wyatt.”

When I didn't make a move over the paper, she gripped my hand hard and forced it to write. She slit the page, underlining *backwards backstroke beast*. The next day, she gave me a shoebox, and for weeks, for as long as she had left, she made me fill it with facts on scraps of paper. Her urgency scared me. My hand shook so much I could barely read what I'd written.

• • •

IT DIDN'T TAKE long to learn the most important thing about being a guide: don't bring tourists right to the fish. It turned out I had a knack for knowing where trout would bite. I could follow multiple currents at once and see which one the fish slipped into. I'd take clients to island rocks where the fish practically committed suicide on their flies. But catching trout by the dozen was not what rich tourists wanted. They came to Montana to suffer. They wanted to put on protective gear and squash big, tall grass with their boots. They wanted to go up some hills and down some hills. If it was all flat, their tips sucked.

Jane didn't come with all the gear, which I respected right from the start. She wore a necklace of concentric circles painted a white that was a notch above normal white, each one a little bigger than the last, like the nesting toys Mom gave me every Christmas. Sometimes I still broke them apart

and pieced them back together. Red and blue and green. Dolls and pigs and frogs. My favorite was John Lennon, dressed in Sgt. Pepper gear, holding the neck of a guitar. I kept it in the truck for good luck.

Jane acted like that truck was a carnival ride. 1966 Chevy C10 in fire-engine red. Dad let me use it with New York clients because its country-music vibe appealed to them—that is, if they got past the lack of seatbelts. The seatbelts always triggered a frown, a passing glance at an internal risk-assessment decision tree.

“Thank God for this,” Jane whispered to her husband Christopher when she noticed they were missing. “We’re here to touch a little danger.”

She was sturdy and tough, despite her slender wrists, her long neck, the gentle way she pronounced her *c*'s and *t*'s—like it pained her to make them land too hard. She caught me staring at her mouth as she pronounced *came* and *touch*.

We were in and out of Dad's truck, trying our luck in all sorts of water. It had rained the night before, so the rivers were murky and confusing for the fish. The trout couldn't spot our flies. Christopher got carsick, and Jane told him to stop being a baby. They sat close but seemed not to like each other very much. They talked a lot about their kids. Maybe that's what kept them together. The fishing trip was supposed to end by 3:00; at 4:30 we still hadn't caught a fish.

“Don't worry,” Jane said, wiping dust from her face. “I've read *The Snow Leopard*. I know what it means to seek and not find.”

She didn't explain what *The Snow Leopard* was, like I would naturally

know things like that.

“Oh, you’re finding something here,” I said. “I can sense it. Not a fish though. Something more important.”

Later I learned that *The Snow Leopard* was a book from the 1970s and that I’d summarized the entire 350 pages without even reading it.

I set my tackle box beside the wheatgrass and dug down till I got to the flies in the bottom drawer, the messy ones I’d tied myself even though I sucked at tying.

“Ooooooh,” she said. “You were holding out on us, Wyatt.”

Jane held up the fly with the bit of blue thread I’d secretly plucked from the sweater of the last girl to dump me. She rubbed the fly’s soft side against her cheek. I helped her cast, leading her into the water, waving the line back and forth over our heads. It made a sound like filling a cup. We’d moved so far down the river from Christopher that he didn’t notice his wife’s necklace graze the inside of my arm.

The feel of it against my skin sent chills into my legs, my stomach. I had to step away. I worried Jane would notice, but she was staring into the river. The mountains on the other side were slouching. Darkened by the clouds overhead. A bird was squeaking like those kids’ toys you have to squeeze to get the sound out. I was searching the horizon for it when Jane pulled a rainbow trout from the water. Gray with a perfect pink stripe. That stripe righted me. Jane was steady as a gangplank too. The mountains in the background seemed to straighten up. I reached to help her, but her eyes said: *Stay back. I got this.* When she wrangled the fish into her hands, a gasp

burst from deep inside her and tears poured down her face. I thought she might be one of those women who feels guilty about causing trout pain. But she wasn't. Those tears were all joy.

"I take it back," I said. "You're not here to find something more. It was just the fish."

• • •

WHEN SHE GOT home to New York, I emailed Jane pictures of her trout, along with a few thoughts on how fishing relates to the inner life force. I don't know why I invented this life force bullshit. I guess I wanted to impress her. Maybe I was just the exact right amount of stoned. The first snows came early and dried up my business, just like Dad predicted. I had a lot of time to fill, so I baked pot brownies and sold them to Bozeman high school kids. While they were in the oven, I tried to read Peter Matthiessen's book. It was slow going, but I understood more than I thought I would. Over the next few weeks, Jane sent me questions about life force and how it related to love and happiness. She wondered if it was a cure for loneliness. I had a feeling she was stringing me along; she was too smart to believe the stuff I was making up. But I replied anyway. I couldn't stop myself. I was checking my phone dozens of times a day, waiting for her messages.

"Yeah," I wrote. "Maybe even for cancer."

I made up more parts of the theory, concocted out of fish data from the internet.

“Take your rainbow trout. It has the innate desire to spawn in the same place it hatched. People have innate desires too, but we ignore them. That’s why there’s war and loneliness and suffering.”

Jane really went for this idea. I asked her if she’d ever felt these primal urges, and she immediately FaceTimed me. Her head was too big for the screen. I couldn’t see her chin, but her eyes were brown streaked with green like a miniature forest.

“Your fish philosophy is something,” she said, half-closing those eyes as if deeply considering what I’d said. She was so earnest I wanted to touch her, make sure she was real. I ran my finger over her eyelids on the screen. “Maybe you should teach it to kids.”

“Kids?”

“Come to New York. Manhattan children need fish. They crave them. You’ll make a fortune.”

“Nah. I couldn’t. Out of water and all.”

She shook her head and accidentally dropped her phone on the floor. It landed face-up. I could see the ceiling in her house. It was pale blue with gold stars. I’d never seen a ceiling like that.

• • •

I KNEW LIFE force wasn’t a philosophy. There couldn’t be more than a handful of New York City nerds that craved fish. But I didn’t have anything else to do, and Jane’s *c*’s and *t*’s were starting to get to me. They felt so familiar, like

I'd been hearing them my whole life and needed them to figure out my future too. I let Jane cover my ticket to New York, and she picked me up at the airport—something she said New Yorkers never ever do. I went to shake her hand over the center console of her SUV, but she pulled me into a hug instead. Her hair was longer now and fell against my cheek.

Pretty soon she had me teaching four-year-olds about sharks. I was singing about sharks too. I learned to play some A-plus fish songs on the guitar. I got the kids to do back-ups on “A Song I Heard the Ocean Sing.” Children had a natural thing for that chorus. “Run away, run away, run away.”

Dad claimed that's what I was doing. Running away. He texted to ask where I was staying three separate times, which, for him, was practically freaking out. His semi-freaking out made me feel semi-good. It put something natural in our relationship that hadn't been there before. He never worried about me; he left that to my mom, and after she died, he left it to me. I came home on my seventeenth birthday with black eyes from a girl I'd been messing around with who called me too clingy with the first punch, then too distant with the second, and Dad didn't even ask me about it. But when Jane found me a place, he sent me three more texts that all basically said: bad decision, knucklehead. Dad loved the word knucklehead. Shithead. Shitforbrains. The apartment was on First Avenue near the UN and was shaped like a dumbbell with two rooms connected by a galley kitchen. No way I could have afforded it if Jane hadn't taken the other side of the dumbbell as her office and paid the rent.

Jane designed bras and panties for high schoolers. She thought really hard about how to make them appealing to teenage girls, but not to teenage boys. Her business was booming.

“Date rape is a real problem,” she said.

The week before my first class, Jane showed me LakeshoreLearning.com, a site that sold “Sea Life Kits” with plastic fish, flash cards, and octopus stamps. The kits came with teacher instructions. I stood beside her at the computer and read aloud:

Students will use oral language to describe objects and experiences.

Students will sort objects by various attributes.

These instructions gave me a real sense of purpose. I was going to be the best fish teacher I could be.

“Look, there’s a face peeking out,” Jane said. She touched side-by-side moles on my hip that got exposed when I reached for the cursor. “Two sweet, little eyes.”

I read some more. *Students will learn the characteristics of living things.* But I couldn’t concentrate on the words, because Jane was kissing my mole eyes. Within seconds we were on my side of the dumbbell, in my bed, and Jane kept saying, “I don’t think it was just the fish.”

• • •

I SANG A catfish version of “Wheels on the Bus” to a class at Jane’s apartment a few weeks later. It was mostly her son’s preschool friends. Caroline, her

seventh grader, was there too. She was old for the class, but home, sick with what seemed to be a case of the lazies.

“I didn’t like school either,” I told her.

“I can tell.”

She stared, lids barely open, through the window at Central Park. For a skinny kid, she had a lot of baby fat in her cheeks. Her hair was long and messy. When I passed out “discovery” boxes, she didn’t reach for one. Jane had come over the night before to help me fill their compartments with toy fish. But instead we went at it on the floor, tossing like a sex ocean over the plastic whales and pufferfish.

Sabina, a girl in a Yale T-shirt, pulled a turtle from her discovery box and smelled it. Preschoolers needed to smell and lick everything before they made any decisions about it.

“This turtle smells really, really good.” She held it up to my nose.

“Jane’s Black Orchid,” I said.

Jane was across the room, talking to the other moms. Their conversation stilled to concrete. You could break a tooth against it. Jane gave me her gangplank stare, then disappeared. I wanted to look for her after we sang the last verse of “Down by the Bay,” but the other moms mobbed me—asking to set up classes in their own homes. They put their hands on my arm and looked me in the eye. They touched their hair. Jane had taught me to charge what the market would bear. Today, it bore fifty bucks per kid per class.

The moms left me to tap out the details via email while they chatted in

the kitchen with the door open. I packed up my guitar, returned the plastic fish to their compartments, and eavesdropped.

“He’s good-looking, for sure.”

“Hot is more like it.”

“Too short. If I’m going to have an affair, it’s going to be with a big man I know has a big dick.”

Laughter shot down the high-gloss hallway.

“Maybe it’s his music that’s the turn on.”

“I don’t even think he knows how to play guitar for real.”

I’d studied every page of *Guitar for Dummies*. Twice. I thought I was finally breaking through to something important. But these women made me feel stupid and small-dicked for ever being proud of teaching myself “Baby Beluga.”

• • •

THE NEXT TIME Jane came to her office, she was wearing rape-proof underwear from her lingerie line. Forbidding prints of police badges and the number 9-1-1. Bra and panties that went above and beyond in the coverage department. She was still pissed about the Black Orchid thing. She didn’t want anyone to know about us. She’d come to prep for her trunk show, not to have sex. But that underwear didn’t work like they were supposed to. They were a total turn-on. The bra required special instructions from Jane and a little key to unclasp. We’d never had sex so fast. The bra was easier

going back on than coming off.

“You want to stay in bed, talk life force?” I asked. “You haven’t mentioned it once since I got to New York.”

“Huh?”

“Admit it, you thought it was bullshit right from the start.”

Jane didn’t answer. She was already dressed and holding a clipboard, sorting inventory. I stayed in bed, watching her. She shifted her eyes from me to my clothes, which were spread across the floor. Still naked, I pulled the shoebox Mom gave me from under the bed. It was dumb to bring it cross country, especially because most of the scraps were too messy to make out.

“The sun isn’t perfectly round,” I read from one I could decipher. “Its surface constantly changes, sending out solar flares and hot plasma as big as 300,000 miles.”

“I can’t count these panties if you talk,” Jane said.

“Here’s another one. Lynx live in a ten-mile by ten-mile area their whole lives—”

“This miles stuff is messing up my counting.”

She tucked her pencil over her ear, picked up my clothes, and tossed them to me.

“Can you help me carry these boxes down to the car?”

• • •

TWO MOMS GOT into a bidding war over me for a Saturday morning in March. They had amazing vocabularies. Biologism. Inquest. Nebbish. I went to the highest bidder: the inquest mom who was planning an “Under the Sea” party for her son Oscar. I called my dad to tell him how big the check was.

“Does that mean Jane can stop paying your bills?”

I tried to put his question out of my mind, but I was still thinking about it when I handed Ziploc bags to the kids at the party. I demonstrated how to fill them with sand and seashells. I helped them pour bottled water and blue food coloring inside. Oscar was mesmerized by his bag of fake ocean.

“What does it feel like to breathe with gills instead of a nose?”

I’d learned to make my answers sound as realistic as possible, even if they weren’t always 100 percent true.

“Water rushing over gills is ten times more awesome than air going through the human nose. It’s electrifying in a way our noses can’t come close to feeling.”

Oscar breathed extra hard, down to the bottom of his lungs. His eyes popped with wonder like fish eyes.

• • •

JANE’S PLACE HAD pocket doors at the start and finish of every hallway and room. Between the toilets and the sinks. All shut tight. I knew to open them

gentle and quiet like casting a fly, because that's how Jane did it. Almost everything she did reminded me of casting a fly.

I must have opened every door in the apartment a sliver before finally finding her with Caroline—practicing Tae Kwon Do. I didn't announce myself right away. Jane was reciting numbers. After each one, Caroline shifted to a new position. She'd look at her mom with an ugly, scrunched up face, while Jane paused to scrutinize. Eventually, she'd give a slight nod of approval and Caroline's face would relax. It was an intense, messed-up situation that somehow made me jealous.

"There you are," Jane said, finally noticing me through the crack in the door. "What happened to you?"

I wanted to kiss her, but Caroline was already pouting at my arrival. I was dripping all over the polished floors.

"It's drizzling."

"More like a flood."

I felt chilled and overheated and needed a towel. I remembered how my mom always kept a stack of old towels by the door when I came in from a storm.

"Caroline has a science project. I picked oysters as the topic so you could help."

Caroline and I locked eyes. Collaboration didn't appeal to either of us.

"Christopher and I are going out," she continued. "There's din—"

"Out?"

"He thinks you're a genius science tutor." She passed me an envelope of

bills. “He wants to pay you to be oyster project manager.”

“I don’t know anything about oysters. They aren’t even fish.”

“What’s the difference?”

I didn’t know.

• • •

CAROLINE AND I watched oyster YouTube videos and ate sushi. We learned words like bivalve mollusk and nutrient cycling. We studied clips of plankton and detritus entering one side of the oyster and coming out the other as waste bubbles. Caroline explained what detritus meant, which I found condescending. But she was right; I’d never heard of it.

“How cool are these little guys, Caroline? They’re the plumbers of the sea.”

I thought of Dad. The oyster of the humans.

“Whatever.”

“Did you hear they can filter fifty gallons of water an hour?”

“Duh. Don’t you know that about oysters?” Caroline said. “It’s like the only interesting thing about them.”

• • •

A THREAD WENT up on UrbanBaby about my long hair. My raspy voice. How sexy-mysterious I was. One woman wrote that she fantasized about

having sex with me at the bottom of the sea. Before I knew it, I was hiring an assistant, two male hotties (Jane's word) to handle overflow, and a composer to write an original fish-themed A-B-C song. Jane said I needed to brand myself. She thought I could land a show somewhere. Maybe even Nickelodeon.

Meanwhile, I hadn't baked a tray of pot brownies in months. I was spending all my free time on the seventh-grade science project and fielding texts from my dad. *Come home. Important stuff to tell you. I found something you should see. Come home. You're better than this. Come home, dumbass.*

Given the oyster due date, Jane said a trip was impossible. She was afraid Christopher was on to us; we hadn't had sex in weeks. She kept stressing the need to "legitimize our tutor story." She had Caroline and me volunteer for this Billion Oyster Project thing, which was putting shitloads of oysters into New York Harbor to purify the hell out of it. We were going to build wire mesh sleeves for baby oysters. Jane sent me with the world's heaviest camera to get professional pictures for our PowerPoint presentation. She was worried we didn't have enough visual material of us physically doing stuff. My dad called as we were getting off the ferry onto Governors Island.

"Real emergency here," he said, something weird happening with his breathing.

"Geez, Dad. Are you sick?"

His voice sounded crinkly, like tinfoil in motion.

"I might be."

Caroline pulled on my arm and accidentally knocked the camera bag

off my shoulder.

“Have you been to the doctor?”

He was panting now. His panting put a tightness in my chest.

“Hold on. I need some water,” Dad said.

“I need water,” Caroline said too.

All I had in my backpack was leftover fake ocean, dyed blue. It turned Caroline’s lips blue. Then her whole face blue. Almost green.

“I want you to take me to the doctor. I can’t go alone.”

Dad crinkled extra crinkly, as fake ocean spilled right back out of Caroline. She puked all over me and the camera.

“I hate water,” she said. “Anything to do with water.”

• • •

JANE AND I finally had sex again the morning of my flight. She sat on the bed, opened all my nesting toys, and spread them across the blankets. She took a long time putting them back together, placing the wrong heads on the wrong bodies and then starting over again, like she was working up to something. I didn’t use that technique where you kiss every inch of a woman’s body because I could tell she didn’t have patience for that kind of lovemaking. But I wanted to. It was the kind of sex people have when they’re saying goodbye—it took as much as it gave.

• • •

THE OLD HOUSE reeked of super glue. Dad had used it earlier that day to fix the fake wood paneling in the house. It had been coming loose for years. He made us a late dinner of bologna sandwiches and tomato soup from a can. He cut a sprig of parsley over the soup, and I wondered where in the world he learned to do that. We ate standing up by the counter.

“So what’s wrong with you, Dad? Is it your heart?”

“Nothing wrong. I’m tougher than that.”

“You said it was urgent. Go-to-the-hospital urgent.”

“That was just to get you home, knucklehead.”

“So you lied?”

Dad looked down, scraped his spoon against the bottom of his empty bowl.

“How could you get me worried like that?”

He put his dish in the sink.

“Plumbing’s a real job,” he said.

“I don’t know anything about plumbing. You never taught me.”

“You don’t know anything about fish.”

“It turns out I do. This fish thing isn’t just a dumb idea I had sitting in the Madison River. I’m good at it. For real good. I’m making a podcast. Maybe even a whole TV show.”

His glass was still full of Coke, but he dropped it into the sink so hard it shattered.

“I thought you’d be happy,” I said. “Jane wants to help me make it happen.”

“Fuck Jane.”

Dad left the room without cleaning up the broken glass. My eyes got hot and blurry. I could hear him opening and closing drawers, picking things up and putting them down, rifling around for something. He returned with a small picture frame. After he handed it to me, he pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his fingerprints from the glass. I dropped a tear on it, and he wiped that too. I didn't know Dad carried a handkerchief. It was a surprise, like catching a fish with bare hands.

“Been saving this for you,” Dad said. “Thought I'd got them all, but this one was stuck under the seat in the truck. All these years, I was trying to protect you from reminders.”

In the picture I was seven, maybe eight, on my back in a public pool that was blue once but looked yellow now. One arm up over my head, one down at my side. Face tight, kicks sloppy, full of splash. Mom's dress was rolled up to her thighs, her feet in the water. She probably had a chill, that pool was always so cold. I couldn't see her face, the camera was trained on me. But it looked like she was leaning over to tell me something. *Pinky dips in first*, she used to say. *Think about the smallest part of you and the rest will come*. Backstroke was her favorite way to swim. But it wasn't mine. The water would rise over my neck and I'd feel like I was drowning.

“Did you take this picture, Dad?”

I didn't remember him ever bringing me to the pool. He put his hand on my shoulder. It didn't feel heavy anymore. He shifted back and forth on his work boots until they squeaked. I could swear he was trying to speak.

If only he'd say something. *I'm proud of you. I'm happy about the show. You could do it here. With me.* Fish don't have vocal cords. They can't talk. But they make all sorts of noises with their bodies. They rattle their bones, grind their teeth. They hiss, moan. They want to communicate so badly they rub their muscles against their swim bladders just to make a little noise.

I'm still worried about Dad's heart. I don't think he's told me the whole story.