

Owl Hammock

Standing on a mud-caked track of the yellow tractor, Jack leans into the cab and begins padding the brief bench behind the seat with his quilted camouflage coveralls. They smell faintly of motor oil. No sick-bed bedding, no smell of the antiseptics that ghost over the house. Not this evening. Soon, never again.

Careful not to slip, he steps down and back, duckboots crunching in the pale dry grass, and slogs on toward his pickup parked in front of the tractor. He opens the door and says to his wife, "Let's go."

Tracey turns her head his way and the fire of the late sun flares in her green eyes. She smiles--that same weak smile he's gotten used to over the past four and a-half years. Sort of. But she looks stronger in the outside, in the green surround of pines. Oh, yes, there are brittle gray hardwoods vine-bound to the living pines. But mostly green in Owl Hammock. Green too is the puffed down coat she is wearing. She has on the gray knit cap and matching gloves he gave her for Christmas last Friday. This is Sunday, and the pom-pom on the crown of the cap makes her look perky.

Jack cradles her in his arms from the truck to the tractor. She feels light. Like a child. Like a cloud in the puffed down. She feels like a petite 31 year old woman with her insides scooped out--which she is. The very language associated with her condition, illness, disease had kept shifting, swinging, sinking--mamographed heat, lump, nodule, tumor--till "malignant" became "cancer" and there was no way to sweeten what it was. Last week, he asked one of her many doctors, When...how long does she have? and he said, Soon, a week or two at the most. But like the language, the prognosis was subject to change.

He stands her on the tractor track. She sighs, lets go of his shoulders and steps back into the cab. Sits on the black vinyl seat to rest. Then she turns and kneels on the seat, hooks her gloved fingers into the grid of the cage, and steps one foot and then the other into the tool storage well behind the seat. She sits and goes abruptly still--still as a bird on a nest, still as a school girl daydreaming, still as death. The queer yellow light of the cage transfers to her suck-cheeked face.

Jack climbs up and takes his place on the seat, and her right hand comes up automatically to his right shoulder. His long legs are sprawled, one camouflage duckboot on the steering mechanism and the gummed sole of the other propped against the dash. His drab blond hair curls over the rim of his brown cap. Like her, beneath the cap he is almost bald.

He starts the tractor and the silence of the wintering woods erupts in roaring and reverberations of roaring, then is overlaid with the CLACKA-CLACKA-CLACKA of the tracks as he gears into first and the ribbed steel slats crank over and under and up along the

freshly bladed mud road carved from cured broomsage. Cold blooming in the deep shadows of the woods up ahead. In the easterly breeze the fuzzy spit tops of the wheat-like sagegrass billow and wave. You can't hear it whisper though, because of the grinding roar of the tractor. And you can't see the falling spikes of Tracey's heart without the monitor. Some things you just have to know are there, from memory maybe.

At the west end of the soupy black road, where the woods start for real, Jack steers north with the pedal under his left foot, into the heart of Owl Hammock. First land he ever bought, seven years ago, when he and Tracey got married. Bought it at a bargain, he said, just one-hundred dollars an acre, prime timber. During the good times they laughed about "the bargain," that hundred acres they called Owl Hammock. Which turned out to be expanding swampland, thanks to the engineering of beavers. If Jack had had the time and money, he could have gone into the hammock every day and bladed the beaver dams in the creeks and branches and slews. He could have hired one of his men to do it. He might have taken off from one of his high-paying construction jobs, pulled a tractor, and done it himself. Or put in an hour before daybreak each day, or an hour after sundown, and bested the beavers. He could have sold the land to some other sucker who, observing the front of pines from the dirt road, believed he was getting a bargain.

Soon, the hammock will go the way of the rest of the land he's scrapped together since he went into the construction business and made good. All gone to pay for medical bills. He'll start over later. That's no problem.

Above the roar and clacking of the tractor, he imagines he hears Tracey fumbling with the cassette-thingy beneath her coat to rev up the morphine piped via her spine to her brain.

"Too rough on you?" he yells and steers the tractor over a hump of mud.

"No," she whispers into his ear. She kisses his cold cheek. He leans back to feel her breath, to take a measure on her pain.

I wish I could take your pain, give you a break.

You can't, so quit thinking about it.

I can't help it.

Your time will come someday. Go to sleep.

I can't. To his shame, he had slept like a rock that night.

Bare gum saplings each side of the black mud track look stunned by the opening-up. Smells of camphor and pinetar and chilled mud. Beyond is a continuous close growth of green fanned palmettoes, wax-berry myrtles and wintering berry bushes. Soon the green will turn gray; already ponds have spread in map-like plats between islands. Tops of tall straight cypresses touch the high blue sky. And peeping through the poplars, hickories, sweetgums, oaks and pines are flat mirrors of light where twiggy scrub trees with hairy green moss grow from water.

Carrying its broad tilted blade up front like a shield, the tractor crawls through track-deep water freed by Jack yesterday when he had gone in to try to drain the swamp. For something to do, and at the same time hoping to spot a duck roost for Tracey. The whole idea of bringing her into Owl Hammock rising up in the spirit of surprise and enabling him to stay, to work, without guilt of fleeing the

numbing sterile chrome and white of the hospital where he had left her. Lately guilt has overflowed sorrow, unless he is moving, making, surprising. Used to, when he would wade into the hammock to duck hunt--neither jeep nor four-wheel drive could make it through the swamp--she would follow on foot simply to listen and watch the migrating birds winging low and crying and splashing into the water. She would look cute and spunky in the black rubber gaiters, tramping through mud alongside Tracey with her blown-up squiggles of blond hair and diamond studs on her dainty earlobes. Made him proud and less ashamed of buying swampland for timberland.

The scummy dark water rises above the tracks, but still they roll over and on, shallow water the only clue that the tractor is crawling across another island. Swales of water mirroring straight-down light, dull dusk.

"Cold?" he calls back.

"No," she whispers in his ear, kisses his cheek, settles back in her cage.

He can still feel the tickle of her cap's pom-pom on his temple, and for some strange reason it reminds him of his recent reaction to the tall young woman at the Winn Dixie supermarket. How his eyes had suddenly clamped on her demim-covered rump as she bent over the refrigerator case then stood holding a yellow carton of eggs. Not even his type--that woman; Tracey is his type--small but strong and ambitious and believing enough to earn a degree in Early Childhood education between stints in the hospital to lop off her breasts, her ovaries, to carve away her colon and her uterus, and finally even the muscles of her vagina. It was her independence and grit, her attempts

at normal sex, that wore him down. As of the last six months, all her energies had gone to looking neat, smelling clean, smiling. Of course, she never used the teaching degree, never would. And Jack won't lie and say he hasn't thought at times what was the point in all that brain straining, that expense--her education? He'll still have to pay off her student loans; he still has \$400,000 owing in medical expenses. No medical insurance. Nobody's fault. They were too young and healthy and barely getting by for such frivolousness.

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They were on the plane back from Athens, Greece, where they had gone to an experimental cancer-cure clinic noted among the doomed as the last stop, either way. Tracey sat looking out the window at the floor of plush white clouds. Fingers interlocked--her right with Jack's left. She wouldn't even look at him. He had kept talking, jostling her arm. Telling her about a woman he met at the clinic in Athens who heard about a man who was cured with coffee enemas at a clinic in Mexico City.

"Listen, baby," he said. "Soon as we get home, rest you up a bit, we'll head out. I always did want to go to Mexico." He was broke but not broken, traveling on borrowed money.

"No," she said, still staring out the window. She was wearing a green gingham turban covered with a broad-brimmed straw hat. Lovely, wan as a saint.

"Baby, listen."

"NO!" Then she had looked at him; the middle-aged couple across the aisle, who resembled each other--tanned and white-haired--looked at him. That's how loud Tracey was talking. "No more. No more

surgery, and no more smoking old tobacco with Indian chiefs. No more herbs, exercise or vitamins. Leave me alone," she shouted and snatched her hand to her waist and held it there as if Jack had squeezed it too hard.

Then she cried, open and loud, not even raising a hand to her face. "I'll leave you, Jack Warren, if you don't let me alone...let me die."

The flight attendant, a tall brunette with day-glo earplugs, leaned over Jack and touched Tracey's arm. "Ma'am, let me get you some juice."

"No," Tracey shouted. "All I do is drink juice and recuperate while this idiot here is dreaming up new cures."

"Honey, wait," Jack said.

"You...you try swallowing extract-of-apricot-pits and crap till you're vomiting up your guts."

The two men and a woman in the seats in front were turning their heads left to right, in one accord, trying to see, to figure.

The flight attendant stepped back into the aisle.

"She's okay," Jack said to everybody. "She's just..."

"Ravaged." Tracey stood as she shouted. "Ravaged by disease. Too ravaged for further treatment, that was the evaluation."

Jack felt he was hearing it for the first time, when only the day before he'd heard it from her doctor at the clinic in Athens, Greece.

In the states, the doctors had been milder.

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"This is the main island in the hammock," he yells. "Recognize it?"

He expects her maimed whisper of no again, but, "Not with all this water," she yells in a voice bright and strained.

"Killing the timber," he yells back.

"What's the solution?"

"Bomb the beavers, I reckon." He laughs but regrets saying it, fears he'll remind her about the US bombing Baghdad during this her last holiday season. Watching the news on TV, in the twinkling colored lights of their Christmas tree, she had cried about her own selfishness, her self-importance. When you get too full of yourself, she'd said, get on a plane and look down on the specks of people and places you're flying over.

She laughs now, stitched-together chuckles. Leans close. Kisses his cold ear. "Duck time," she says and taps the lens of her large gold watch.

He looks left at the sun guttering out behind the trees. Steers the tractor east through a viney brake of reeds and scrub trees. The blade slices neatly through to the moonlike light of open water with lacy green duckgrass and matching hairy moss on dead trees.

When he switches off the engine, the roaring quits and the twittering of sudden birds fills in--sounds there all along but only if you knew or remembered. The engine ticks, growls low, the blade settles into the marsh grass, the tracks spring up with a sigh, go still. The burned diesel smell thickens like heat.

"You see from there?" he asks and leans left.

"Enough."

Two ducks arrow over the slew, crying, and splash into the water.

"Look at that!" He stands and steps out onto the track. The light is going fast, blue film sliding to gray. "Listen," he says and cups one ear. "More ducks." Whinging sounds followed by crying, plashing. The bothered water rings out from the bull's eye. The ducks on the water fret and flap their wings. Close as thoughts.

"Come here," he says to Tracey. "Sit on the seat."

Thudding, thunking, rustle of coat, and she is seated in her fluff of green down, her capped head peeping out like a doll's. She is smiling.

More ducks. Their cries so clear and dense you have to focus to remember, to hear, the throb of the woods. A beaver tail slaps water; owls hoo, single and double noted; coyotes yowl and yip, traveling. Overhead the thundering of a jet from Moody Air Force Base, twenty miles northeast of the hammock. And then an abrupt bright snuffling that could be anything.

"Bear?" she asks low.

"That or hogs, one," he answers.

"I've never heard hogs like that," she says.

He holds to the roof of the cab and peers inside. "You scared?"

She cocks her head at him as if to say, Why would I be afraid of anything? I'm not afraid now; I'm at peace. I've been praying and I am convinced there's more to life than the few years allotted on this earth. If not, what's the point?

Ducks cry, shoot singly and in pairs through the sky.

He reaches inside and scoops her up easy, turns to stand her on the track and his right boot clips the edge and is over before he can let go of her or even grab for a handhold.

Bundled in the green coat, she lies on her back in the blond grass near the front of the track with one arm over her eyes. Her sleeved arm looks fat, her gloved hand bony as a claw. On his knees he crawls to her, stares down at her. She is shaking, either laughing or crying. Her cap is off and her scalp looks clean and waxy, is sprouting baby hair. He recalls his first time seeing her bald, close to bald, and her walking along the hall of the hospital carrying a glass gallon jug of blood, healthful looking as tomato juice. That was back when they still believed she would live, that they would conquer the cancer. Later he bought her a real hair wig that made her look like an old Barbie whose glued-on hair was slipping. They had laughed even then--her hair would grow back.

"You okay?"

"Okay." Tracey is laughing, not crying. "Help me up before that bear eats us."

More ducks glide in like long corks with feathers shot from trick guns. Twiggy oaks, duck grass like the finest lace, water mirroring the last light. A water turkey stands wait on a clay gall.

He lifts her, sets her on the tractor track, holds her around the waist. She feels safe in the green fluff of down.

"You cold?" he asks.

"No."

If only they could start over; if only the bad water or air or God hadn't made her sick God has His reasons. "You ready to go?" he asks.

"No."

"We ought to. Before dark, I mean."

"I wish I could stay."

"We can't."

"I know. I have to get back to the hospital."

"Baby, don't...don't die." He looks up but doesn't let go.

"Let's go to the house and let me call up Houston about that bone-marrow transplant."

"Shh! Sorry." She holds his head to her breasts--where her breasts would be if she had breasts. "We've been through all this before; I have to stop here."

He feels her shake. Maybe crying. She does that sometimes--silent crying.

Soon.