

THE TRASH DETAIL

Cora knelt in the window seat focusing her binoculars, hoping the prisoners were just beyond her view. The hard morning light reflected in the smudged lenses made her blink. Watching the road, down the hill and across the field, her eyes were drawn to movements: a crow, a naked sapling bowing in the wind, a dead leaf's falling shadow on the wizened grass. Cora wondered what the prisoners would be wearing, worried that the orange jump suit Mickey wore in jail would not be warm enough against the morning chill.

Robert said that Mickey's detail would be picking up trash along the county route, and at the picnic area just across the road from the farm. "That stretch is a mess. They'll be there for an hour or two," he told Cora and his sister Carolyn. She could watch from the house, he said, but if she went down to the road the guards would run her off. "Probably take Mickey off outside work, too." Remembering how excited Mickey had been to get on the road detail four days a week, Cora promised herself not to leave the house.

Fixing her binoculars on the empty road, Cora recalled Robert's cruiser disappearing under the green canopy of a September morning as he took his cousin to jail, and remembered his promise to her that Mickey wouldn't get time. "With no priors the judge'll give him probation," Robert had said. Since Mickey's sentencing, Cora had been staying at the farm. She hadn't seen him in almost two weeks, because the previous visiting day her car wouldn't start. Unable to call him at the jail, she'd cried, knowing Mickey would worry that she'd had an accident, and that he would wait alone for her. Prisoners could only call collect, and when Mickey phoned the next morning he'd been sweet, but hurried, a voice in the background

calling his name. Cora described the sounds the car made when she turned the key, and he told her to hit the solenoid with a hammer or a rock, and later when she did, it started. He said, "When I get out, I'll get you new wheels. I promise." She'd cleaved to those words believing there was nothing he could not fix, a broken transmission, a frozen pipe, a creaky door, her bruised heart.

Cora counted passing vehicles: six cars, a town truck, two school busses, their exhausts ghosting in the cold. She began to fear that Robert was wrong again, or that the plans had been changed.

Cora, Carolyn, and her mother-in-law, whom everyone called, Miss Annie, were the only people living at the farm. Miss Annie's husband, Jimmy, would come by for a few days each month, but since his wife had found religion, he preferred working the deep woods to life in the sway-backed white house on the ridge above the river. "Too many hens here," he'd say each time he departed.

Carolyn was the widow of Annie and Jimmy's oldest son, who'd been killed in a logging accident. She left the farm by six when she had work at the clothespin mill, driving Mickey's truck because her own needed an exhaust system. Cora had been elated to be able to do something to return her friend's kindness.

Cora rose early partly to help Miss Annie: filling the wood box, kneading dough, sewing buttons on the heavy flannel shirts Jimmy left behind, but also because each morning meant Mickey's return was closer.

The colors rioted on the far hills, and the river gleamed cold and bright beyond the road and through a stand of crowned white pines. Squinting into the binoculars, Cora's eyes ached. Sipping the cooling dregs of her milky coffee, she longed for Mickey's strong and veiny fingers to rub the pulsing pain from her temples.

Mickey had skipped his first court date, then plead guilty to aggravated assault and public lewdness. Like Robert, the public defender said he wouldn't get time, but that morning in court, Cora

could see the judge did not like Mickey. When she asked Mickey if he understood what it meant to plead guilty and if he knew he could get a year in jail and a five hundred dollar fine, he answered, "Yes." She asked him more questions, and each time he answered, "Yes, your honor," his chin forward, his voice strong. Squeezing Carolyn's hand, Cora shivered and felt her armpits drip.

The Judge leaned forward in her chair. "Mr. Savage, you seem remorseful only for getting caught. That is not enough for this court. Assault is bad enough, but your behavior is particularly vexing to me, and will not be tolerated by decent people."

Before she could finish, Mickey shouted, "When a man grabs your girlfriend's ass, your honor, you have a right to defend her."

The judge banged her gavel, pointed a finger at Mickey, and said, "You, sir, would do well to watch your mouth in my court. This is a nation of laws, not of men, and I'll give you some time to consider that. One year county jail, all but four months suspended, five hundred dollar fine, and restitution for victim's medical expenses. Sentence to begin in seven days. Failure to appear will result in full time served." Cora did not hear the rest of the judge's words. Carolyn pulled her out into the hallway, and Robert hustled Mickey out before he could get into more trouble. In a room in the courthouse basement, the public defender told Mickey, "You'd have gotten probation if you'd just kept your mouth shut."

Mickey had beaten the man unconscious, sending him to the hospital for two weeks with a shattered cheek and jaw. The restitution took the money they had saved for their wedding and honeymoon.

After the sentencing, Carolyn helped Cora pack the apartment. They stripped everything from the walls: posters, calendars, pictures, and placed them quickly into boxes from the liquor store. They filled suitcases and duffle bags with clothes, packed the bathroom and kitchen in plastic bins, and the CDs and tapes into a milk

crate. Robert and some friends came back in Mickey's truck for the furniture.

Robert stashed Mickey's clothes and tools in the attic at the farm. With the familiarity of sisters, Carolyn helped Cora put her things into the mousy closet and chipped dresser in the back bedroom. The realization that she'd lost her own home seared Cora's heart. She was reminded of the way Carolyn had looked out for her in grade school, where they'd been called Big Cee and Little Cee because Carolyn was so much taller. When an older girl had cornered Cora and tried to force her to eat soap, Carolyn had defended her. Cora remembered asking when the bully ran off, "Will you always protect me?"

"Until you're older," Carolyn said, "then your husband protects you."

"What if I don't want a husband?"

"You will," Carolyn had assured her.

It grieved Cora to have a man but still need Carolyn's protection.

Five doe crossed the field below the farm then bounded across the road toward the river. Cora did not see the buck, but she knew he was nearby in the edge of the woods nosing the wind. She panned her binoculars over the field and scrubby brush where stonewalls had begun to appear as the weeds died and red leaves fell away from the sumacs, but could not find him.

Cora slumped on the couch, and watched the show with no sound. Never knowing the prices of things, she guessed high most of the time. Almost nothing, she imagined, would feel as good as winning the final showcase and getting a vacation or a new car, except getting Mickey back. Every few minutes she scanned the road. As the sun rose higher, dust devils spun sand on the shoulders, and bright hues deepened on the hills. She dozed, then awoke with a start.

“You want some coffee? I made a fresh pot,” Miss Annie called out over the thud of her cleaver. For a moment she did not know where she was. “Cora, you want some coffee?” Miss Annie shouted a bit louder.

“Yes. Please.” Cora shook her head and tried to stand. She stumbled toward the kitchen. “My leg fell asleep,” she said.

“Mickey with those boys on the road?” Miss Annie asked.

“They’re out there?”

“Have been some time now. Figured you heard the trucks and the men talking. I got the kitchen window open to let the smoke out. You really fall asleep?”

“Yes. Yes I did,” Cora said hobbling on her half-numb leg toward the window seat, the binoculars swinging freely from her neck.

“Well, I hear you up half the night, it’s none surprising.”

“I have trouble sleeping. I hear things.”

“Just the sounds of the country. You must remember them, eh? You been livin’ in town too long. I’ll bring it to you. Look for that nephew of mine. My eyes too bad. That’s why I can’t drive no more.”

With her leg tingling and a faint pricking in her arch, Cora trained the binoculars on the road. The men wore denim jackets, blue work shirts and jeans, and most of them were topped in blue ball caps. A truck and van sat on the near side of the road at the bottom of the hill by the entrance to the farm’s rutted driveway. Panning the binoculars, Cora, at first, could not find Mickey. Spying him in the big pines near the water, she watched for him to look up toward the farm, but he kept his head down, stabbing pieces of trash with a long sharp stick and putting them into a clear bag hanging at his belt.

The men worked with a slow but deliberate rhythm, the guards sitting on the bed of the truck smoking. When a bag was full, a prisoner tied it off and set it along the edge of the road. Cora saw an older, stooped prisoner tossing cans and bottles into a bin in the pickup, and heard them clattering like sleet on a tin roof. She

opened the window wide. When the wind blew up the hill, conversation and laughter, diffused and indistinct, invaded her perch, but when the air was calm she heard nothing. The cool breeze soothed her head and the sun warmed her face as she flexed her calf to keep her leg awake.

At ten o'clock, the prisoners stopped working. Cora, fearing they might get into the van and drive away, copper-fastened her gaze on Mickey, but the men sat down and rested. He seemed to look up at the farm in small glances and she wondered why he did not point it out to the other inmates. She waved, imagining the white house gleaming in the sun, the porch and barn roofs sagging, heat shimmering off the bright tin, and Mickey squinting through the glare to find her.

The coffee had swelled her bladder, but she dared not leave the window. Cora remembered how Mickey had pissed on the man after he knocked him out, standing over the man shaking his thing at him, barely getting it back in his pants before the cops drove him to the ground. He'd struggled too much and cursed. She wished he hadn't exposed himself. She knew that was why the judge sent him to jail. As Cora watched Mickey sitting in his prisoner's clothes, she tried to be angry with him, but she could not. She wriggled, shook her sleepy leg, and tried to wish away the urge to pee.

Cora imagined Mickey in his little league uniform, his black hair peeking out of his hat like it did when he played softball. Cora loved watching those games on long June nights, and going for pizza and beer at The Victory Tap Room afterward, where the men played darts and the girlfriends and wives gossiped and danced together to the jukebox. Driving home, windows open to the warm night, his musty scent itchy in her nose, she'd snuggle against Mickey while he sang with the radio. She had felt an affinity for him on those nights in the bar, but it had also been there that she'd been grabbed, and in the bar's parking lot where he'd been arrested and frisked and cuffed. For an instant, staring at the line of trash bags,

she blamed herself for crying out, for slapping the man, for letting Mickey know she'd been touched, for inciting his anger.

The men sat easily, most smoked. She was glad Mickey didn't. She loved the taste of his breath. She wished she could bring the inmates lemonade or beer and that she could work beside them, to be close enough to smell his sweat. The prisoners looked hot, though she felt a chill.

Cora went to the bathroom. When she came back the men were up, some of them working in white undershirts, their blue shirts and denim jackets draped over the side of the truck bed like bunting. As a gust stirred the dead grass, Cora caught Mickey's laugh, deep and dirty. Though she knew it would draw her no closer to him, she longed to remove the screen, each strand of wire between them like a silent dark hour of night. Before noon, the men had worked nearly to the end of her view.

Cora's head throbbed. The air, choked with dust motes, smelled of meat and fear. She heard the shower and Miss Annie singing a hymn. When she could no longer bear the thin barrier of screen between her and the outside air, Cora put on gloves, a jacket, and Carolyn's barn boots, two sizes too big and caked with mud. She stuffed one of Miss Annie's doughnuts in her pocket and went out the back door.

Cora trudged over the small rise behind the barn, almost to the edge of the pond. From there she could pass unnoticed into the woods and down toward the road under the scrubby cover along the wall. Wind sang in the dry hay and clacked the bare birch limbs. A partridge thrummed up from an alder thicket. Burdocks gathered at the cuffs of her coat, and brambles snagged her jeans. Cora had grown up in the woods, but the October forest was alien to her, a place without landmarks. Wild thoughts plagued her. Would the guards shoot if she came too close? She thought about Mickey's deer rifle in the closet of her room. A dark noise rustled the brush like a buck scraping. She held her breath, then realized it was small birds

rummaging in dry leaves. Stumbling over the hummocky rubble in Carolyn's clumsy boots, her stomach rioted. She'd expected to feel nervous as she hid herself among some small boulders and young cedars with her binoculars, but the dry leaves and dark trunks felt like a nest. A cloud darkened the sun. She held a gloved hand to her face each time her nostrils tingled.

Steadying her elbows on a rock and peering through the binoculars, Cora could see the men clearly, and the wind bore her distinct fragments of their speech. The prisoners teased the guards. The guards laughed but sometimes barked orders to speed up or to be more attentive.

Cora almost cried out when she heard Mickey say, "Hey, Officer Grindle, they gonna put up a sign saying this section of highway proudly maintained by the prisoners of the County Jail?"

The guard shot back, "You should try comedy when you get out, Mickey. You're a funny guy." Cora adored Mickey's jokes. He knew lots of dirty ones, and could always remember them. Once, he told her so many jokes so quickly that she wet her pants laughing. He could still make her laugh whenever she was sad or angry with him.

Cora pulled her coat to her throat with one hand and panned the horizon with her binoculars. The brilliant leaves, green river, and bright white shirts of the prisoners spun before her. Her eyes watered and the dry wind tangled her thin golden hair. Her leg tingled again and she shifted her weight. In the corner of her eye she saw a flash of white as a doe, then four more, skittish and quick, flags erect, bounded into the cedar. Cora sensed the buck nearby quartering the wind as it upsloped, and she ached to see him in his fall rack and fever. As a child she had often stood on a chair to stare into the glass eyes and rub the soft fur of the buck's head mounted over her parents' mantle, imagining it could speak a language only she understood. Cora heard the buck in the dry grass and scrub, but she did not see him.

The inmates moved almost from view. A guard eased the pick-up

a few hundred feet up the blacktop. From her perch, Cora watched Miss Annie amble down to meet her ride to the Weekly Women's Bible Luncheon. Dwarfed by a red and black hunting jacket, and crowned with a crimson scarf tied over her black hair, Cora thought she looked like a giant loon. Miss Annie waited at the bottom of the driveway, her pocket book in one hand and a loaf of fresh bread in the other, Cora envying her nearness to Mickey.

When Hazel Spock's green Taurus slowed to pick up Miss Annie, Mickey looked up, but did not wave. For a moment Cora imagined she could smell him, and that he smelled the way he did after work, soured with sweat and sweetened with turpentine.

The noon kindergarten bus, tiny faces pressed to the windows, droned past the prisoners in a diesel haze that wafted up the hill and seemed to hang in the thinning woods. Cora watched Mickey as he dragged a large piece of plastic to the roadside, pulled two full bags of trash over it, and went back to stabbing litter with his stick. He would know she would be watching, and Cora wondered if he was shamed by being so close to her, and if that was why he worked the farthest from the road.

Cora fished the doughnut from her pocket and tried to eat it, but her mouth was as dry as if she had run a long way on a cold day. She'd been gaining weight at the farm, Miss Annie's rich meals, fresh bread, and sweet pies topped with ice cream settling in her hips and belly. When they'd been together in the apartment, Cora had shopped at the end of each of her shifts at Food Mart to make Mickey healthy suppers, and when he stopped at The Victory Tap Room for a few beers after work she'd always kept it warm for him.

The men broke for lunch. The guards gave each man a brown bag and a plastic bottle of water. Two older men squatted by themselves. Cora knew they'd been in the prison at Thomaston. Mickey told her you could spot hard time cons by the way they squatted.