

**Waiting For Someone Like You**



It begins with a handshake. Paley takes John's hand with just the tips of her fingers the way some women do. They're at a party in a farmhouse in a town known for having a rock concert in the Sixties.

John offers Paley a ride back to school as a favor to a friend who's throwing the party. They've never seen each other before this night. They go to the same university but don't live on the same quad, share the same friends, or even go to the same bars. He's studying insects, she political science.

Without asking his permission, Paley clicks on his car radio. She cranks up a bed-time romance station but continues to shout over it about the internship she's doing with the Assembly Ways and Means committee, something in which John has no interest. He thinks instead about how he'll call their host as soon as he gets home and ask him what he'd done that made his friend want to punish him. Before they're halfway, Paley tells him three times that her position was earned. As she recounts the daily minutia that makes up her life, the injustice of having to wear a skirt and nylons and heels, John imagines a dauber wasp forming a cell from clay, stocking it with paralyzed spiders, sealing off the cell, and starting all over again. Clay, cell, spiders, seal, over and over until an entire nest has been built.

"You don't talk much, do you?" Paley asks.

"No," John says, and after that, Paley falls silent and they're each consumed with their own thoughts. She's wondering whether he'd freak if she pulled out her compact and did a line or two. She reaches into her pocket-book.

He's imagining pulling the car over, ordering her out, and driving off. Watching her in the rearview mirror as she stands curb-side, stunned and helpless. He hasn't had a girl in his car for three months. The last time, Carla had found his woolen ski mask in the cluttered back seat. Despite the warm evening, she'd pulled it over her face, insisting on wearing it as she straddled him. John had immediately envisioned a dragonfly larvae, its

face mask of extra skin trembling as its two hidden jaws eagerly awaited an unsuspecting mosquito. He'd been sure something bad would happen, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. Everything that occurred in life was part of a chain, each event leading to the other. The weak die off, the strong survive. His hands had locked on Carla's hips as if he were directing her, like a child will hold onto a plastic steering wheel in a fake car at the entranceway to a supermarket.

"No, no. Open sesame, bugman," Carla had said, her thumbs prying open his eyelids. As soon as he'd seen her hooded face again, he'd become as helpless as he imagined a tarantula would be if it were stung by a Pepsis wasp. When she took the mask off, the cooler night air had made her shiver while he was still inside her.

Their thoughts elsewhere, John and Paley don't see the sign: Dangerous Curve Ahead. At first they think they've hit a deer. The sound is heavy, a dull thud. Whatever it is they've struck, they drag it more than a hundred yards before the skidding car can be brought back under control on the muddy mountain road.

"Shit. What was that?" Paley says.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

A breathless yes from her. Then the opening of car doors.

"I think it's still under there.

He's on his knees, head down, peering under the carriage of the car: his father's second-hand Chevy Impala, the same car they'd taken family camping trips in, his brother, Sam, and him jostling in the back seat, old mayonnaise jars in their hands, full of beetles, spiders, bees. His was the only jar that had holes poked through the cap. Sam's jars were full of paralyzed legs and torn-off wings, leftover experiments. After his brother had thrown his jars away, John retrieved them from the trash and emptied them on his desk, rearranging the decomposed body parts into a facsimile of their original states, as if by reattaching a dusty wing to snapped off thorax he could breathe life into them again. But under his touch, the insect parts would simply crumble further into powder and shell-like fragments.

"What the hell is it?" Paley asks.

The October wind picking up. The sound of her sharp breathing in the unseasonably cold mountain air. Leaves scuttling across the black road.

"John?" Her voice can hardly be heard over the trees whipping above.

More wind, then John's voice relayed from under the car, his loafers

scraping, straining for leverage under the rusted back fender.

"Oh, God. It's a body."

"What'd you say?" she asks, hugging herself.

"Paley?" he says, his voice like that of a child locked in a closet.

The officer tells Paley he prefers to be called Deputy Jimmy. The overhead lights at the station cast a greenish glow over everything; everyone looks like they have the flu. John is in another room with Sheriff Brown. No first name. They were separated as soon as they were brought in.

"He didn't even scream," Paley says to Deputy Jimmy, tucking her wavy hair away from her eyes, behind her ear. She can feel her fingers trembling against the side of her head. The strands are too short to stay. They come loose before she's even lowered her hand back to her lap. Something about that makes her feel like crying. She's twenty-one years old, and although beautiful, she has the awkwardness of someone who wasn't always good-looking.

"Didn't you have the music turned up?" Deputy Jimmy is in plainclothes, a flannel shirt and khakis. Paley notices that his work boots are caked with mud as if he's just walked in from milking the cows. His face is permanently red but has a soft look because he's slightly overweight. He seems kind.

"What?" she asks him. She's forgotten what the question was.

"John told us you had the music turned up too loud to hear anything."

"Oh, God," she cries. She remembers that the music had been blasting. Kenny G. There might have been screaming and they wouldn't have heard.

"Good party?" Deputy Jimmy asks. His face doesn't look kind any more.

Her fingers try to brush her hair back again. She pushes against the side of her head, pressing the rebellious strands in place, holding them there as if she has a headache or is staunching the blood flow from a head wound.

"Why was he lying in the road?" she finally asks quietly. "Was he hurt?" She tries to keep her voice steady but it wavers as if she's simultaneously witnessing something beautiful and destructive, like a rampaging forest fire.

"He was waiting," Deputy Jimmy says.

"Waiting?" her voice breaks.

The deputy clears his throat. "He was waiting for someone like you to run over him."

Her breathing quickens with the shock, as when she snorts that first line of the day: the crisp, rolled dollar bill bringing her that delicious sharpness,

making her shoulders flinch, her heart seize for a moment.

"Oh, my God," Paley says, but she's smiling; it's the kind of smile she's prone to when a man is being unpredictable or comes on to her—like when Senator Lahue told her, "You're a bit of a loose cannon, aren't you?" As her mouth widens, she knows that given the circumstances, it's the worse response she can possibly give Deputy Jimmy. She is smiling involuntarily, as someone might after hearing about a divorce or death.

Deputy Jimmy picks up a brown mug, eyeing her over its rim with a line of crusted sugar like the salt on a Margarita glass.

"I better get your boyfriend," he says, swallowing hard.

"Yes. Please," Paley says, her fingertips pressing into her temples.

In the other room, Sheriff Brown swipes at a flurry of fruit flies that hover like helicopters over a pile of curling apple peelings on his desk. A brownish, tooth-marked core lies next to the pile.

"Bastards," he says under his breath, sweeping the ribbons of peels and core into his trash can.

"They're attracted to the sugar," John recites mechanically as he stares at the trash can. "Well, really the alcohol. Once the fruit starts fermenting, they can't help themselves."

"That right?" Sheriff Brown says. "That what happened tonight?" He drums his massive fingers on his metal desk like a final exclamation point.

John looks up at Sheriff Brown. "I don't understand—"

"You and your girlfriend couldn't help yourselves. Had a bit too much to drink. Got in the car anyway. I can understand—you just wanted to get home. That sort of thing." Sheriff Brown fiddles with a woodblock sign on his desk that reads, "*All things come to those who wait.*"

*Phymatidae*, John thinks. Ambush bug.

They're allowed to make one phone call each, but Paley can't think of a single person she wants to call. She's worried that telling someone else the story will lessen its impact, like when you finally disclose a long-held secret and the other person says, "That's it? I thought you were going to tell me something really terrible." She wants to keep this night for herself.

John dials his brother's work number; Sam has the night shift at a biotech firm where he spends part of his unsupervised time cooking up batches of hallucinogenics for college students. Sometimes he messes with the combinations, not enough to give a sophomore a psychotic break but enough to provide a taste of exploration.

"Everyone wants the unknown," Sam has told John, "and I give it to them." If anyone can, Sam will find a way to explain everything so that John will be able to fold what's happened into his life.

"You're that guy's legacy," Sam tells him now.

"His legacy?"

"You're the bag man. He's handed something off to you."

"What? What has he handed off to me, Sam?"

There is silence then.

"Too soon to tell," Sam says finally. "You have to let it play out now. It was out of your hands as soon as you got in the car. Something bigger than you is happening now. Man, I envy you."

John looks across the office at Paley, who is pacing in the hallway, her arms hugging her waist. Sheriff Brown and Deputy Jimmy are huddled in a corner, talking in low voices, like at a wake.

"I've got something to help you sleep if you need it," Sam says quietly. "I'll send it in a box of cookies." John fumbles the receiver as he drops it back in its cradle; he's thrown by the thought that Sam will slip a hallucinogenic cocktail into the cookie batter, which will make him see the accident over and over.

"What do you think he meant when he said, 'He was waiting for someone like you'?" Paley asks John when they're driving home two hours later. It's the first thing she's said since they've returned to the car. After John had passed a breathalyzer test, Sheriff Brown had simply told them to go home and get some rest, as if they were being discharged from a doctor's office.

"That's it?" John had asked. He was disappointed there hadn't been more of a struggle for freedom.

Paley hadn't waited; she'd almost run out of the building, afraid that since they'd asked John to take the breathalyzer test, they might ask her to do the same. They might begin a whole new line of questioning in which they'd accuse her of being the real driver, of a cover-up, a pact between her and John made before the Sheriff had arrived on the scene.

John hadn't wanted to ever get in that car again, but they had no other choice, no other way of getting home. He'd closed his eyes as he opened his door. But Paley had rushed inside the car as if she couldn't wait to get on the road.

Now she's sitting with her knees drawn up under her chin, her arms wrapped around her shins in their black leather pants, an oxford shirt buttoned up to her neck underneath her camel hair coat. It's as if she can't



decide what look she wants. Her slender fingers hold an unlit clove cigarette, and every so often she leans forward to push in the lighter on the dash. But then she forgets so the cigarette stays unlit.

"What did he mean by that?" she asks John again.

"Is that what he said? Mean sonuvabitch," John says. He says it too fast; Paley can tell he doesn't use language like that often. He strikes her as someone who gets quieter, the angrier he gets. He's hunched over the steering wheel, his face inches from the window, though he's only driving forty miles an hour and the highway is clear. He's pale with exhaustion and something more lasting. She notices for the first time that he's handsome. She moves closer.

"He wasn't exactly mean," she says.

"Jamie Roberts," John says, confusing her. She feels disoriented, strung out, like she does the day after she does too much coke. She slides back away from him.

"What?" Paley asks.

"Jamie Roberts," John repeats. "His name. I asked."

"Don't tell me any more," she says, raising her voice. She pushes in the lighter again. To calm herself down, so that she won't seem too eager, she tells herself she'll take the lighter when he drops her off. She has a habit of doing that, lifting objects as mementos of where she's been, what she's seen. But then she remembers she already has: she's done that already.

When John doesn't say anything else, she prompts. "You asked?" she says.

"He was only eighteen," John says.

"Shut up!" she shouts, covering her ears lightly, like a child who's pretending not to listen.

John hunches even more over the wheel, his chest leaning against it. "Why didn't he just take pills or something?" he says quietly, to himself, as if he's working out all the possible answers to a mathematical equation. She wants to touch him then, but she can't. She's afraid that if she does, they'll end up driving off the road and hitting something else, or turn over in a ditch.

She forces herself to look out the window at the leafless trees, the breakdown lane. The land around stretches for miles without the relief of a house or fence. She reaches over and snaps the lighter back in, but this time he unexpectedly slaps her hand away.

"For Christ's sake, stop messing with it," he yells, "Just leave it the hell alone."

"Don't touch me," she says, but her voice is strained with excitement. Afraid that he's heard the uncertainty, the yes in the no, she angles her body away toward the window. Holding her slapped hand, she concentrates on massaging the slight pinkness that has risen to its surface, trying to recapture its tingle.

"I've never hurt anything in my life," he whispers.

"Jesus. It's not like we did it on purpose," she says. She wishes he'd just stop talking. He's going to ruin it, she thinks. Like when a one-night stand feels the need to rehash everything in the morning.

"He chose us," John says.

Paley looks. His eyes are shining darkly.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asks, smiling.

"He chose us, Paley," he repeats.

"You're fucked up, you know that?" she says, wondering whether he's right, that they've been specially chosen, simply players in someone else's—Jamie Roberts'—life.

John shakes his head. "There are no accidents," he says.

She laughs nervously. "I can't even talk to you about this. I can't even—"

"That Sheriff was right. It's like Jamie Roberts knew we were coming," John says.

Paley crosses her legs, then just as quickly uncrosses them.

"Christ, at this rate we'll never get there," she says. Leaning over, she presses her foot down on the gas pedal, urging the engine past fifty. She can't believe she's doing it. It's as if she's watching someone else.

"Get off!" John yells, pushing her away. "Listen to me. The universe isn't some game. You think we're in control?" His words start to race together as the car itself picks up speed; they're going sixty now. "Everything is planned, down to things much smaller than we are. There's these moths, *Alabama argillacea*, and they're programmed to move north from Columbia every summer, but they're only supposed to go as far as the Cotton Belt—"

"What are you talking about? You're talking about some fucking bugs in Alabama?"

"They're supposed to stay put, where it's warm and they have plenty to eat. All that cotton is there for them." He motions with his arm as if

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he's showing her acres of cotton fields. "They could stay there, getting fat as goddamn hogs. But they don't. They keep going, sometimes as far as Canada, where they end up freezing to death. It's like they can't help themselves."

"I can't, I can't listen to this," Paley says, and she pulls up on her door-handle. The door swings open, and her hand is still clasped onto the silver handle, but it's a calculated move, like in an old movie when the girl drops her handkerchief on the floor.

John grabs her automatically, sending the car into a swerve. Reflexively, his foot lifts off the gas pedal. He pulls Paley hard into his side, and the door slams shut as he yanks on the steering wheel to right the car; with his other arm he grips her tightly around her shoulder. They're both breathing hard, exhilarated.

"This is it. It's all remote control from here on out," John says softly.

They drive the rest of the way home in silence. Wanting to be back at the farmhouse, in separate rooms, never having met. And at the same time wanting never to get out of the car, to leave one another's sides.

They pass through a phalanx of her suitemates leaving for class and lock Paley's door behind them. Paley goes straight to the bookshelf with the quart of gin. She feels the same as she did when she was vacationing out in Los Angeles during the earthquake: off-balance, slightly nauseous.

She holds out a full glass to John, but he's busy skimming through her *Behavior of Law* and *The Legislative Process* textbooks, refusing to look at her, as if those books will tell him everything he needs to know.

She drinks half the glass of gin in one swallow. The room is so quiet, John is so quiet, that she's reminded of when she asked him in the car, "You don't talk much, do you?" and there was the sickening thud, and then she's right back in it.

"Help me," John says, pulling her down, grabbing her hands as he moves underneath the car, making her take hold of a wet limb, Jamie Roberts' wrist or ankle—at first she isn't sure which because a chill is racing through her, everything's heightened and vibrating like a drug rush and she isn't there, she's somewhere else, in that same place she went as a kid when she jumped off the garage roof to prove she could. Her feet are braced against the car and she tugs too hard, so that she loses her grip on the slippery hand. She

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feels the brush of finger tips, still warm; no longer alive but still warm, though the warmth is fading. "Oh God," she says. Feeling her way back to the safety of cloth, she can tell by the pockets it's a jeans jacket.

In her room, she grabs her bottle of Valium from the window sill, but the top hasn't been screwed back on properly and the lid falls off and pills, twenty or more, fly everywhere. They remind her of broken-off teeth. She gets down on her hands and knees to pick them up. For a second she thinks she's going to start crying. She forces a pill down with the gin.

"A mind is a terrible thing to waste," John says. He's right next to her, sitting back on his hunkered-down ankles. Everything is jumbled; she doesn't know if he's referring to her, or to Jamie Roberts. With one finger, John is poking at two of the pills in his palm so they jump around like those funny beans she remembers having as a kid.

She hands him the glass with just a swallow of gin left. "Just one," she says as she slides it into his mouth. Before she can stop him, John pops in the other pill as well and, polishing off the gin, says, "All gone." He unexpectedly shows her his mouth is empty, like a patient after taking his meds. Paley pulls him in close, kissing his open mouth hard; she can feel his teeth against hers. Then she pushes him away.

"Look," she says, reaching into her shirt pocket.

In her palm lies a silver metal button with an imprint: Levi Strauss & Co. SF CA.

John takes it. With his thumb and index finger, he rubs the metal surface. Then he holds it out.

"Take it," he says.

Her hand encircles the button. Her eyes widen.

"It's warm now," she whispers. "You've made it warm."