

I. FIREWOOD

“You start by collecting the kindling,” she tells me. “Twigs and small branches. Then we’ll arrange them around the fire starters. These things.” She’s holding two wrapped yellow blocks and waves one of them at me, motioning for me to start looking for kindling. Awkwardly, I bow my head and walk flat-footed in search of twigs.

I have never been camping before. I don’t think I have a desire to, even though I’m here now. That’s the power she holds over me—I start doing what she wants before I even understand my own feelings. The campsite is about an hour away from our apartment in Lafayette and completely isolated, and I shiver in my knitted navy sweater, kicking myself for not bringing more layers.

“What about leaves?” I call out, about twenty feet from her. She crouches over the firepit, inspecting closely, as if she’s willing embers to pop and spark to life with her mind, before she looks up.

“No. What? No. Twigs and branches.”

I toe fallen leaves aside with my boot and keep looking. By the time I’ve amassed a small collection, she already has a ritual-like arrangement of her own twigs. I watch her mumble to herself and jut out her jaw the way she does when she’s focused. “Bring me the firewood from the trunk,” she tells me, still concentrating.

It was my idea, actually, to go camping, but I suggested this in post-sex haziness, after she told me she missed the outdoors. Lately, I say just about anything in an attempt to make her feel closer to me. I must look ridiculous, a cartoonish bug-eyed boy on my knees, tongue lolling, trying to coax her out of her unreadable coldness. I think I’d lick her heel if she asked me to.

Dad didn't like her when they met, when I took her home for our first Thanksgiving together after we'd started dating in May. He said she had a "broody weirdness" to her, an attitude that she should've retired after her teenage years. He told me this one evening when she'd already gone to bed, when it was just the two of us, spread-eagle on our separate recliners with our separate beers, shared bag of tortilla chips and salsa in the middle. "A woman too wrapped up in her own world will never really give you enough of a chance to prove your worth. Learned that with your mother." I told him he just needed to get to know her better, said we'd come by more often for dinner, but she hasn't wanted to go visit since. She's always been able to read people, even though Dad treated her nice enough.

When I hand the firewood over, one of the logs catches on my sleeve and snags the wool. She doesn't notice. She is wordless and determined as she starts our fire. Maybe it's unfair to call it ours. I do nothing but watch her continually run her hand through her hair, over her scalp, pushing her black waves back as they flop over her part into an uneven cluster on top of her head. She looks beautiful and witchy, the way the smoke seems to trail after her every move. "Smoke follows the prettiest camper," she finally says, visibly trying to withhold a cough, and I can't stop the smile that breaks out over my face.

I help her make veggie chili and cornbread for dinner, and we eat quietly by her creation, listening to it crackle over the sounds of us chewing. I finally tell her that I'm amazed she can do all of this, to which she replies that I'm such a city boy and swigs her bottle of Bud Light. She moves her lawn chair a little closer to mine.

We roll a joint after dinner and pass it back and forth, still mostly silent. She closes her eyes, leans her head back and rests it against the mesh underwire of the chair, licks her chapped lips. "What do you think?" she asks, eyes still closed.

“Good bud,” I reply.

“Not the bud. Camping.”

“I love it.”

“No you don’t.”

I feel something burn in my cheeks and focus hard on the bundles of stars above us. I don’t know why I even try to say things sometimes. I don’t know how much of what I say is true anymore.

I don’t think I like camping, but I like the way she looks right now. She is the closest to being at peace that I’ve seen her in a long time. She outstretches an arm and laces her icy fingers in between mine, maybe for warmth, maybe to remind herself that another person is here. Maybe to remind me that it’s okay not to like everything she likes. Her thumb rubs my index knuckle like it always does.

When I told her I slept with Veronica last spring, she didn’t react. She stared at me blankly, so cold and unaffected that I was the one who had to look away. She asked me why I did it. I told her we’d gone out for drinks after work, which led to dinner, which led to coming up to her apartment for decaf, which led to sex. “It just happened,” I said. “We were friendly and then we were more. I’m really sorry. I just had to be honest with you.”

She blinked slowly, still refusing to crack. I could feel my heart in my throat, wanted desperately to know what was on her mind. “Thank you for telling me,” she said finally, and turned back to the book she’d been reading before I’d interrupted. Without looking up, she added, “Don’t let it happen again.”

I didn’t know I had started crying until I opened my mouth and my voice broke hoarsely, pathetically. “You aren’t going to leave me?”

“I don’t plan on it. Are you going to leave me?”

“No. God, no, I love you. I’m not.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

The real truth was, I’d slept with Veronica because she smiled a lot and made me feel good. Because she seemed to think I was genuinely intelligent, seemed to care about what I had to say. Because she fucked me with more care and passion than my own girlfriend ever had, even held my head in her lap afterwards and finger-combed my hair. But I still knew I wasn’t meant to leave. Something was keeping me tied to the woman who treated me with as much stone-faced indifference as I deserved.

After half an hour of silence, I realize she has fallen asleep in her chair. I nudge her awake, then take a piss on a nearby tree while she brushes her teeth with bottled water. The tent provides an unexpected warmth when she zips up the rainfly. Our sleeping bags are pushed together and we briefly lay on top of them. The hesitation to burrow ourselves away for the night signals something in me, I think, so I reach for her breasts over her sweatshirt, start kissing her cold neck softly. We make out for a few minutes before she pulls away and whispers that she’s too tired. “Can we just do the usual?” she asks. So I jerk myself off while she arches her back and sticks her ass up in her gray joggers, mimicking doggy style, her face tucked into the crook of her elbow, silent and devoid of pleasure, but why would she feel pleasure from this in the first place? I still manage to finish. By the time I’ve wiped myself off with my towel she’s already crawled into the sleeping bag and has pulled the polyester up over her cheeks and nose. I feel compelled to kiss her smoky-smelling scalp before I zip myself into my own covers and lie there awake, feeling more like a corpse in a body bag than a man in a tent.

We met at a mutual acquaintance's party, ironically one whose name we've both forgotten in the years since. I was twenty-three and she was twenty-five. She'd captured my attention almost as soon as I saw her—quiet, reserved, alluring. She was the cliché to end all clichés, the mysterious dark-haired woman smoking outside of a party, or at least I'd thought she was smoking, until I got closer and realized it was actually a vaporizer with pot in it. She offered me a few hits and asked me my name. When I asked her what she did, she said, "A little bit of everything." At the moment, she graded standardized public school tests and waitressed at Texas Roadhouse. When I asked her what she wanted to do, she went on a long tangent about secretly wanting to be a florist, that her parents had shamed her for years for spending too much time out in the garden, once even grounded her when she brought home a bouquet of black-eyed Susans that she'd arranged and tied by hand. This touched me for some reason, the fact that this strange and seemingly intimidating stoner loved flowers so much, and I asked for her number.

Months later, I remembered the story and smiled to myself. I brought home a bouquet of the bright yellow flowers after work. She cocked her head comically. "What is this?"

When I reminded her of that first conversation, awkward and young as we were, recognition washed over her face and she started to laugh. "I forgot I even told you that story. That was all made up. I went through a phase where I would tell fake stories to all the strangers who insisted on conversation."

When the sun calls us out of our tent around seven, she boils us hot water to mix with powdered instant coffee. Then she scrambles us eggs, shredded cheese, and diced tomatoes over the portable gas stove. The morning chill nips at our ruddy faces, but it still feels significantly warmer than yesterday. I suggest we take a swim in the stream that is a few minutes away from the campsite before we pack up.

“You really are a city boy,” she tells me. “That water’s way too cold for you.”

“The sun will feel good,” I argue.

She has pulled her heavy curls into a swinging ponytail as she brushes her teeth again. I watch her spit out Colgate and water with ferocity. “We didn’t pack swimsuits either.”

“We have dirty underwear, don’t we? No one’s around.”

“I don’t want to.”

I feel my fist involuntarily clench. “Sorry—I forgot this weekend has been all about what you want.” And the words are out of my mouth before I can even think them.

She pauses, almost as if she’s shocked that I’m speaking to her this way, but her steady voice doesn’t falter. “What is that supposed to mean? This whole trip was your idea. And I’ve done all the work when I didn’t even want to go.”

“Then why the fuck are we here?” I’m yelling now.

“Why the fuck do we do anything that we do?” she yells back. Possibly the first time I’ve even heard her yell. She squeezes the tube of toothpaste in her closed fist so tightly that the lid pops off and a stream of cool blue gel shoots out. We both freeze at the sight, until she starts cackling hysterically. I’m at a loss for what to say. Her laughter is unrestrained and ugly, her head thrown back as she shakes. She grabs the neck of my sweater and pulls me closer, kissing me forcefully, breathlessly, her tongue so intrusive I forget who I am, and I am the tube of toothpaste in her hands. When provoked, she can squeeze everything out of me, emptying my passive insides out onto charred clods of dirt and spit and ash.