

ELLIOT KRIEGER

IF ANYBODY ASKS

WHEN CARLA WALKED INTO TOWN to pick up groceries, she spotted Judge in the parking lot by the Dunkin' Donuts, sitting astride a motorcycle that looked to her like two black tires and a complex system of exhaust pipes. She thought he must have fabricated the machine himself, from spare plumbing supplies. She paused, pouted, put a hand on her hip, wondering if he would recognize her. Carla stood for a moment in front of one of the shop windows, staring idly at the pinecone dolls, hand-tied sachets, and other ersatz local crafts displayed on gingham-covered shelves. Judge took a deep sip from his cardboard cup and set it on his bike's handlebars.

"School let out early?" he said.

Carla stopped and turned to face him. She thought maybe she should keep walking, but something in his tone of voice held her.

"School got out in June," she said. "I'm on vacation."

"This is what you do on vacation?"

"My mom's idea of fun," Carla said. "Sit by a pool, lie on the deck, watch the mountains. I think this place sucks."

Judge laughed. "No, the mountains don't do much. You'd probably rather watch MTV."

"I'd rather be home," she said.

Carla was surprised and flattered that Judge had remembered her. He had seen her the day before, but only from a handyman's perspective, flat on his back looking up at the soles of her sandals and her long bare legs dangling, while he worked on the disposal. If he had noticed Carla at all, her face must have looked remote and unsubstantial, like a cloud. But she had noticed him — slender, bearded, pony-tailed, like one of the handsome, grease-stained boys in auto mechanics back at school. Carla felt humiliated when her mother tried to give him a tip, which he refused. She liked that — his flash of scorn, his open disdain for her mother's condescension. What does she think, he's a waiter, a caddy? Even Carla could tell, he worked the kind of job where you don't take tips. "If you need me again," he'd said, as he flipped his toolbox shut, "they call me Judge."

Judge leaned back on his bike, folding his hands behind his head. "So?" he said. "Go home. It's a free country. Live free or die."

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"I can't believe you put that on your license plates," Carla said. "I'm like, what kind of choice is that?" Especially, she thought, when you're already 15, but you're stuck in a timeshare condo for a week with your mother.

"Maybe it should say: Eat, drink, and be merry."

Carla thought he might be mocking her. "Everybody's got to eat," she sneered.

"True," Judge said. He tilted his head back and gulped down the last slug of his coffee. He tossed the cup vaguely in the direction of one of the trash receptacles that flanked the doughnut shop's glass doorway. "What kind of stuff do you and your mother eat?"

"You should know," Carla said. "You've peered into the heart of our disposal."

"That tells me what you don't eat."

"Well today, for example, my mother needs oranges."

"You make a trip to the store just for that?"

Carla shrugged. "I told you this place sucks."

THE CHROME ON JUDGE'S MOTORCYCLE burned against the inside of Carla's thighs as they roared up the mountain road, past the converted trailers and the four-room shacks with weakly stained barnboard siding, the places where the year-round people lived. Laundry hung from long poles. Dogs lay sleeping in the dust by the roadside. Children played in pits of scooped-out gravel. Carla wished she had worn her long pants. She leaned against Judge's back, resting her face against his shoulder blades. A fold in his jacket pressed into her flesh, just below the cheekbone. Near the crest of the mountain, the pavement gave out, and the road thinned into a rock-strewn lane of hard-packed dirt. Judge slowed slightly, but Carla was jostled from side to side. She winced as she tried to clench her legs against the hot metal of the bike's frame. Instead, she wrapped her arms around Judge's waist and closed her eyes.

Judge turned off what remained of the road when they reached an old Quonset-shaped mailbox half-hinged to a leaning post. The bike's engine died with a cough and a sputter. Carla slipped off the bike and looked around. Maybe she'd made a mistake. She didn't think he'd live so far from town, so far from home. "Nice place," she said.

"I'm fixing it up," Judge said. He knocked down a kickstand and set the bike to rest under a sickly pine.

"I can see that," Carla said. The house looked untrustworthy, as if each of its elements—the rough-pine siding, the tarpaper roof, the plastic-sheathed windows, the unframed doorway—had been selected on the basis of flimsiness and incongruity.

Judge led the way inside. "Make yourself comfortable," he said, as he shut the door. The house consisted of a single room, dominated by a rusty woodstove with a silver pipe that poked through the thin roof like a straw. Beside the stove lay a stack of tattered magazines. The room smelled of motor oil. Carla could feel the mountain wind blowing in, through the chinks in the slats. She wondered where she might sit. She saw only one chair, and in the corner an iron bedstead.

"I guess you don't spend much time at home," Carla said.

"A place to hang my hat," Judge said.

"If you had a hat."

He rustled around in one of the cupboards. "Get you something to drink?" He put two jelly-jar glasses onto the countertop.

"I'm not thirsty."

"Who's talking about thirsty?" Judge said.

"I mean I don't drink," Carla said.

"Not what I hear."

"What do you know about me?"

"Working around the condos, you see all sorts of things."

"Things like what?"

Judge shrugged, but Carla knew. He had taken inventory of the empties her mother stashed under the sink, as if she could redeem herself through the penance of recycling.

"My mother drinks," Carla said softly.

Judge swatted shut the cupboard door. "I thought you wanted to have a little fun."

"You call this place fun?" She should have said something, before she hopped onto his bike. Had anyone seen them leave town? She thought they would go for a ride, out to some lake or to look at a view. She wished she had noticed the route he took, riding up the mountain.

"Come on over here," Judge said, as he sat on the bed. He slapped his hand flat on the corner of the mattress. The springs groaned. Carla heard a scuttling sound. A brown mouse crossed the room like a slash mark.

"I maybe ought to go," Carla said. She shifted her weight from foot to foot. Judge looked all right to her, but things were moving too fast. He no longer reminded her of the hard guys back at home, the guys who

smoked behind the bleachers and supplied her with pinks and yellows when she needed them, before a track meet or an exam. He was older, she realized, stronger and more determined.

Judge stretched his long legs, toppling one of the stacks of magazines with the heel of his boot. "Then what'd you come here for? The scenic view?"

"I don't know," Carla said, shaking her head. "Maybe I'm leaving." She didn't want to raise Judge's anger. But she didn't want to be friendly, either, and raise his hopes.

"It's a long walk home."

DOGS SNARLED AND GROWLED, pulling so hard against their chains that it looked as if they might break their necks. Carla walked the tiny strip of sandy gravel at the margin of the road. How long before some dog pulled loose and came after her and tore a chunk out of her bare leg? Riding up to Judge's place, breathing the waxy scent of leather off the oily creases of his jacket, Carla hadn't realized how high they had climbed. The trees grew tall and straight, like virgin forest, except where someone had cleared a scrubby patch just big enough for a prefab house or a trailer. The leaves high above shimmered in the wind. Carla felt as if she were passing through some kind of tunnel, fully enclosed except for the smallest dapples of sunlight. Ahead, she looked at a wall of pine, as the road curved away sharply, following the contours of the mountain on its long descent into the valley.

Had the air been so cold this morning, when she had set out to the store, when she had lifted herself onto the frame of Judge's bike and placed her hands against his sides? Carla shivered. Perhaps a storm was coming. Carla could see far above a few tabs of milky blue, but she couldn't find the source of light. She felt a crease of fear. Which way had she come? Which way had Judge turned as he roared up the mountain? She began to run down the middle of the road, heedless of any car that might come rushing toward at her, concealed behind the next sharp curve.

Her chest was stitched with pain. She doubled over for a second, gasping for breath. She could never manage to run all the way home, so what was the point? Besides, she might have turned the wrong way. What if she was heading down the wrong side of the mountain, farther from home? Just ahead, she saw a ribbon of chalky smoke rising through the bony branches of some brownish pine scrub. She tried to picture a

little house, a country cottage with a brick chimney, where she could stop to ask for help.

But as she neared, she could see that the smoke was seeping from a makeshift chimney pipe that jutted through the roof of a yellow school bus. The bus had been set on cinderblocks. Black tarpaper covered the windows. A mossy woodpile blocked access to what had once been the door. Two skeletal goats were tethered to a stake. They gave off a stench, like rotted cheese. Carla hurried past. She felt sure she had not seen that place on her way up the mountain.

Nothing looked familiar. But then again, she had closed her eyes, part of the way. Should she walk back to Judge's place, regroup, get her bearings? Better to walk downhill, Carla thought, even in the wrong

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direction. She had no strength left for climbing. If she could get to town, she could call her mother for a ride. But the thought of her mother kicked Carla into a higher level of panic. If she could get back before dark, maybe she could parry her mother's third degree. She had just taken a walk in the woods, she would explain. Then she would seal herself away within the cold embrace of her headset.

If only she could see the sun, she might be able to get a reading on the time. Or if a car would pass — but Carla had the sickening sense that nobody would come down the road, or up either. If a rock had been nearby, she would have sat down in despair. She saw no place to sit, so she willed herself to walk on, at least to the next house. There, she said to herself, no matter how fierce the dogs, she would knock on the door.

But she saw no more houses. It seemed that the school bus marked the last outpost of settlement. The overgrowth thickened. The road flattened. At last, the scrabbly pavement gave out, and Carla walked alongside two thick ruts scoured into the hard, dry dirt. Too far, she said to herself. She knew she should turn back, but she heard a sound that frightened her, a ripping noise, followed by a whistle and a sharp crack, like a stick snapped in two. A fragment of a leaf drifted to earth, right in front of her, a shred of green shot from a living branch.

Carla had reached the end of the road, a flat clearing hardly broad enough for a turnaround. The trees along the perimeter had been marked with orange blazes. A small metal sign had been hammered into one of the trunks. She approached and read: National Forest Boundary. Beside the rusted sign, a board nailed to a flat post told her that she had reached the head of the White Pine Ridge Trail.

She felt a surge of exhilaration. This trail would lead her home.

THE TRAIL TURNED OUT to make for much harder going than Carla had expected. She had taken plenty of hikes through the county park near her high school, along the wide bridle paths and sinuous walkways where the ground felt soft and loamy, blanketed with a spongy layer of aromatic pine needles. But here she found herself scrambling over rocks and stumps, poked by the long fingers of the dead branches, their tips scraping her flesh. At times the trail seemed to give out entirely, and Carla feared that she was pushing her way forward through the rough. She would look up, hoping to spy one of the blazes, and then she would stumble on a patch of loose stone or a fallen limb. So she would watch her footing, but then, in a few yards, she would find that she had pushed herself deeper into the woods.

If the trail had been heading toward the condos, she should by now be on a gentle descent. Soon, the forest should open up and she should see below her, as in a tourist brochure, the spires of the little town, the red roofs of the pseudo-Swiss chalets, the hourglass shape of the swimming pool, sparkling like a piece of blue glass. But Carla could see nothing through the openings in the branches except the endless thickening of brush. When she reached a small clearing, she sat down on a toppled trunk to catch her breath. She felt as if she were drowning in air, as if the trees were waves on a rough sea, huge and monotonous.

She tried to picture her mother, waking from her nap, clearing her head of its alcoholic funk as she slowly realized that her daughter had vanished. She might do just about anything, Carla thought, from pouring another shot and sinking back into the folds of sleep to making some totally inappropriate, embarrassing call for help, like to the FBI or to a congressman. Thank God I managed to get myself really lost, Carla thought. That way, they will be so grateful when I get back that they'll forgive me for everything.

As Carla stood, she heard a shrill whistle just past her ear. Startled, she turned and saw splinters of bark explode from the trunk of an old pine stump. Before she could react, another whistling sound ripped past her, followed by a smack, like an ax cracking into fresh timber. Carla

tried to shout, but when she opened her mouth, no words came. She thought she heard the crushing of branches, off to her left. She looked that way and saw a little triangle of orange, like one of the blazes marking the trail. The long dark wand of a shotgun protruded through the branches. Carla lifted her arms as a puff of smoke rose from the muzzle. She screamed before she heard the retort, and as she fell to the ground she heard the crackling of the shot far above her and then the sound of boots.

THEY BOTH SPUTTERED out the same words: "Goddamnit, oh, goddamnit." Carla was writhing on the ground, alternately pressing her hands to her face and to her left leg. Her thigh had been riddled with shot. She couldn't bend her leg. It felt as if someone had hit her on the knee with a hammer.

The hunter towered above her, trying to reach down with his big hand to calm her, steady her thrashing movements, assess the damages. He had dropped his shotgun somewhere back in the woods.

"Goddamn," he said. "You should never have been walking through these woods here like that. Coulda got yourself killed!"

"Asshole, you shot me!"

"You looked just like a deer."

"Deers wear shorts and sandals?" Carla squinted in pain. She had no strength to argue with this guy. She felt cold, there on the rough ground. The pitchy needles scratched her bare arms.

"You should've stayed on the trail. Nobody goes through the brush like that, 'cept deer."

Carla tried to sit up. Her head felt light, as if it might float away. She saw some blood matted on the pine needles. She didn't want to look at her leg.

"You've got to realize, miss, that I could've just left, once I saw what happened. I could've tailed back to my truck and left you here to your own devices, like they say, and none would have been the wiser. You would've never known what hit you. I mean who."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"I'm saying I don't want you turning on me, laying any blame or pressing charges."

"Just help me up."

"You hear what I'm saying? Anybody asks you what happened, you suddenly forgot. You don't know a thing."

"No?" Carla felt dizzy. She understood each word the hunter was saying but not the meaning of all the words together. Hearing him speak was like trying to listen to two stations at the same time.

Carla propped herself up on her right elbow, reaching her left hand toward the hunter. He pulled her upright, but as he started to release his grip she almost collapsed to the ground. Her wounded leg could give her no support. No way I can walk, she thought. Her leg looked scary, pocked with the fragments of metal, but the bleeding had eased.

"I want you to lean forward, toward me," the hunter said to Carla. "Yeah, like that, and now drape your arms over my back. Okay."

He bent his knees, struggled to position her across his shoulder, and with a grunt heaved himself to his feet. He took a moment to rebalance himself and accustom his body to this sudden shift in weight. She felt no heavier than the deer that he might have been carrying out of the woods, but he had to proceed more carefully as he worked his way along the rough, poorly marked trail. Carla moaned lightly, and every few feet she startled him with a slight twitch. Her bare skin felt warm against his neck, and the flesh of her thighs felt smooth and firm where he held her in the crook of his arm. He had always enjoyed some sort of sexual stirring whenever he hauled his prey out of the woods, but never anything like this, an almost primitive, involuntary arousal that made him feel lonely and ashamed.

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As they crossed the crest and approached the turnabout where he had left his pickup, the hunter tried to speak reassuringly. He hoped that

she wouldn't slip away from him, into shock. But his words came out strange and wheezy. He wondered if she could detect the hitch in his voice. She said nothing, but from over his shoulder he could hear her sigh and whimper, a little cascade of plaintive sounds that trailed their passage through the woods like a line of fallen tears.

She was almost silent, though, by the time they reached the pickup, gleaming red like a jewel in a patch of late-afternoon sunlight. The hunter fumbled with the door latch and genuflected slightly, as if in prayer, to lower Carla onto the bench seat. He pushed away some boxes of shells and an old Thermos to make room for her. Carla shifted her hips slightly to turn into the cab. The movement caused her to yelp with pain. "Sit still," he said, as he shut the door. Without her weight, he felt buoyant, as if he could spring over the hood, like a gymnast on a vault, and land at the driver's door.

"I'm getting you to the hospital," he said.

He pulled the wheel hard, braked, then shifted into reverse to make a sharp turn. They rode high, bouncing hard over the stumps and ruts. The roof of the cab knocked against low branches. Occasionally a wand of pine would brush the side of the truck bed, like a roller in a car wash. "Hold tight," he said, as the truck pitched forward over a mound of rock. Carla braced her hands against the dash. Through the dusty windshield, she could see a widening in the foliage and what looked to be the beginning of a paved roadway, but just before the wheels touched pavement the driver jammed the truck to a stop.

"Ah, shit," he said. "My gun."

WHAT DID THEY DO TO YOU, DARLING? What's happened?" Carla could hardly keep her mother in focus. She seemed to pop up first on one side of the bed, then the other, like some figure in an animated cartoon.

"Excuse me, ma'am," the nurse was saying, a large woman holding long silver tweezers and a wad of gauze that stung like hell when it touched skin. Don't they wear white anymore, Carla wondered.

"My husband will be here soon. I mean your father," Carla's mother said, from somewhere out of sight. "I called him."

"I'll be out of your way in a moment," the nurse said. "Then you can talk." Carla wondered if she had said anything to her mother or if she had just been lying there mute while the nurse worked over her wounds.

The room was choked with noise from monitors and machinery. Orderlies, their rubber-soled shoes slapping against the floor, chattered in some unintelligible tongue – Portuguese? Polish? – as they wheeled bodies past on their gurneys. From time to time, Carla heard the disembodied sounds of an intercom, like a voice speaking from the sky: “Doctor Seth, Doctor Seth wanted in ER.”

As the nurse dabbed and plucked through her riddled flesh, Carla slipped into a waking sleep. She felt as if she were at the bottom of a hole, a deep well, gazing up at the moonlike faces of people far above her, grim and concentrated, uttering words that died by the time they reached her. The syllables struck her ears as little barks and grunts and clicks, sounds with no meaning.

A policeman seemed to be standing at her bed rail, talking to her mother and the nurse and someone that she assumed must be a doctor – a dark man with a stethoscope peeking out from his shirt pocket like a third eye. Carla tried to focus on what the policeman was saying.

“Doesn’t make sense she would walk in here on her own with her leg all shot up like that.”

“But that’s what she told me, officer.”

Carla turned her head slightly, to look at her mother.

“We’re nowhere near the woods. She couldn’t have walked through town, dressed that way, bleeding from her leg, and nobody notices. Somebody brought her here.”

Carla tried to speak. “Mm, Mem, Mm,” she said.

“I’m just finishing now,” the doctor said. “So you relax, okay?”

“We’re on vacation here,” Carla’s mother said. “Don’t know a soul.”

“But your daughter was observed in town.”

The doctor and nurse had floated away, so all Carla could see above her were the forms of her mother and the policeman, facing each other across the narrow bed, like the steep walls of a canyon.

“He lives in a shack up on the mountain,” the policeman was saying. “I know he owns a couple of shotguns. I could go up there, if I had a warrant.”

"Mm, mem," Carla said.

"She's only a child. He must have kidnapped her, abducted her." Carla's mother turned away and put her hands to her face. Carla could see her shoulders moving up and down, as if she was crying. The rocking motion made Carla feel slightly sick. She closed her eyes.

"I want you to find that man. I want you to arrest that man. He shot my daughter and left her to die, like an animal."

When Carla's mother became angry, her voice grew harsh and shrill, sharp enough to pierce through walls, through closed doors, through the blankets and pillows under which Carla liked to fold herself away, nearly smothering herself in the steamy stillness of her own tannic breath. With her mother's voice snapping far above her, Carla floated down into the dreamy depths, like a pebble moving slowly toward the bottom of a clear pool. When she opened her eyes to see if her mother had left, she had the sense that hands were moving above her, that she was being wheeled, rapidly, down a hallway. She hoped they were taking her to some room where they would leave her alone and let her sleep. When I wake up, she thought, I will tell them what really happened, if I feel like it, if anybody asks me, if I can even remember.