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## Deer Heart

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### Abstract

She wouldn't have gone on her own; two hundred miles across the prairie, it wasn't worth it. She'd read the embossed invitation immediately as a chance to be with her daughter, not the Queen, to be off with her on a long drive in the car, contained, remote, private.

BONNIE BURNARD

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She wouldn't have gone on her own; two hundred miles across the prairie, it wasn't worth it. She'd read the embossed invitation immediately as a chance to be with her daughter, not the Queen, to be off with her on a long drive in the car, contained, remote, private.

The invitation hadn't come as a big surprise. She found herself, at forty-one, on some protocol list in Ottawa, the result of serving on a provincial board or two, the result of middle age. When she'd asked her daughter to join her at the luncheon the girl had said, 'What Queen?'

She was aware of orchestrating these spaces in time with each of the kids, she'd been doing it religiously since their father's departure. She would have named it instinct rather than wisdom. And they were good, the kids were fine; there was no bed wetting, no nail chewing, there were no nightmares, at least none severe enough to throw them from their beds and send them to her own in a cold sweat. If they did have nightmares, the quiet kind, they were still able to stand up in the morning with a smile, forgetful.

Her own acceptance, after nearly two years, took an unexpected form. She'd started files. One file contained the actual separation agreement, which listed all five of their names in full capitals, in bold type, the format generic and formal, applicable to any family; with the agreement she kept her list of the assets, the things that had to be valued against the day of final division. Another file held the information supplied by her government, little booklets on this aspect of family breakdown, supportive statistics on that. And the notification that she would be taxed differently, now that she was alone. In the third file she kept the letters. It was by far the thickest of the three, though growing more slowly now.

When the mailman began to leave these letters, casually tucked in with the usual bills and junk, she'd been dumbfounded. She'd sat on the couch with her morning coffee after the kids had gone to school unsealing, unfolding, reading one word after another, recognizing the intent of the words as they arranged themselves into paragraphs of affection. A few of the letters contained almost honourable confessions of steamy fantasies, which apparently had been alive in the world for years, right under her nose. The words fond of and hesitate appeared more than once.

These men were in her circle, there was no reason to expect they would ever leave it. And they were, to a man, firmly and comfortably attached

to women they would be wise to choose all over again, in spite of waists and enthusiasms as thick and diminished as her own. She disallowed all but one of the fantasies with laughter and common sense and a profound appreciation for the nerve behind the confessions.

Her defense, the time she gave in, had been what she called her net gain theory, wherein she was able to explain that any increased contentment for her would mean an equal loss for some other woman, a broadside, with the result that nothing new had been created. Her admirer had stood with his hands on her hips and told her it wasn't her job to measure and distribute; he'd told her to relax. And she did relax, for about an hour.

She kept the letters. If she was hit by a truck on the way to the Tom Boy she would simply have to count on whoever went through her things to take care of them. The fireplace was just a few feet from her desk.

Her husband, her ex-husband, had found companionship more readily, young companionship, young smooth-skinned fertile companionship. A different marketplace altogether.

They began the drive to the small prairie city as she'd hoped, like an excursion. They stopped for gas and ju-jubes and two cans of Five Alive. They talked about school and the broad wheatland through which they were moving. She pointed out how bone dry it all was, told the girl how rain would change the colour of the landscape and how this in turn would change the economy of the province. And she told her that when she was twelve she'd kept several scrapbooks with Queen Elizabeth II emblazoned on the cover, had filled them with this woman's life, her marriage and coronation, the magnificent christening gowns worn by her children, her scrappy younger sister, in love. She confessed all her young need for romance.

Then, without deliberation, she confessed how easily the romance had given way to tacky glamour, Ricky Nelson and James Dean, Brenda Lee. And how easily the glamour had been overtaken by Lightfoot, and Joni Mitchell, and Dylan. She tried to explain Dylan, what she took from him, without much success. The old intellectual distancing from all things usual sounded arrogant and smug, and predictable. She didn't confess the next phase, the disdain, though she'd been happy to discover it at the time. She'd used it, while it lasted, without restraint.

The girl took it all in and asked the right questions, to please her. And then they were silent, cosy in the car and she set the cruise control and began to dream a little. She was interrupted by some of the questions she hoped might take their opportunity on this drive. There was a boy. Of course, there was a boy.

'Why can't he just talk to me normally? I haven't changed,' and 'Why does he have to sneak looks at me all of a sudden?'

Old questions, easy to answer.

'Were you pretty?' Shared, intimate laughter, for the first time.

She told the truth as she knew it. She named the longing and the confusion and the hope of a crush and gave it a history common to all mankind.

When they arrived they had only to find the arena and it wasn't hard. The place was more or less deserted except for the parking lot and the streets leading into it. She guessed maybe a couple of thousand people would be involved in this little affair. She parked the car and they cut across the parched, leaf covered ball diamond to the arena. Inside they found the washroom and freshened up together, the girl imitating her mother's moves, though with her own style. At the entrance to the huge high beamed room which would in a month or perhaps even sooner be transformed into a hockey rink she found the invitation in her bag and handed it to a uniformed woman.

They waited only a few moments at their seats at the long table and then the orchestra, from the area of the penalty box, began God Save The Queen. They stood up and in she came. In a hot pink wool coat and a trim little hot pink hat, visible to all, waving and nodding with a fixed, flat smile.

She regretted not wearing what she'd wanted to wear, her cherry red coat and her dead mother's fox stole, which she kept wrapped in tissue in her closet, an absurdity now with its cold glassy nose and the hooks sewn into the paws; she had no idea why she loved it and longed to wear it, somewhere, before she grew old. She had her mother's opal ring, which she sometimes wore, so it wasn't that. There was a prayer, for the Queen, for the country, for rain and then the heavy noise of two thousand chairs being scraped over the cold cement floor. Prairie people, in expensive suits and silk dresses and elegant felt hats sitting down to eat a roast beef dinner for lunch.

She talked superficially and politely to the people around them at their table and her daughter listened and tried a couple of superficial lines of her own. 'Have you been looking forward to seeing the Queen?' she asked the woman across from her.

They didn't get to shake hands with the Royals, which was an obvious and unexpected disappointment for the girl but they heard the Queen speak, crisply, about the settling of this land, about the native peoples, textbook talk. She was followed by government officials, unable to resist a go at the captive audience. And then the program began, children in coy little dance groups and choirs and a youth orchestra and she could feel her daughter wanting to be up there on the stage, performing, taking the only chance she'd likely ever have to curtsy to someone. She wanted to tell her about Barbara Fromm saying there was no-one she felt the need to curtsy to. She often caught herself wanting to hand over fully developed attitudes, to save the girl time, and trouble.

A couple of hours later, when it was over, they both gladly left the arena and drove to the outskirts of the city, where they found a new shopping

mall. They wandered around together in the midst of sale signs and racks of last year's fashions and temporary counters filled with junk jewelry. The girl bought two pairs of earrings and did not ask why she never saw tiaras in jewelry stores, which was something she had wondered herself, when she was young. The prom queen, not her, not even a friend, had worn a tiara, so they must have been available then, somewhere. They were neither of them hungry, they'd eaten everything served to them, including pumpkin tarts, but they sat down to a diet coke and watched everyone else who'd been at the luncheon wander around the mall. Then it was nearly five o'clock and she said they should get on the road. The girl had school in the morning, and the sitter might be getting tired.

'She looks so fat on TV,' she said. 'She's really not all that fat.' The girl laughed in complicity.

In the car, on a whim, she dug out the road map and found the big dam. They would have to take smaller, older roads to see it and she asked the girl if she was interested, told her it might take a little longer going home than coming, if they decided to venture off. 'Sure', she said. 'Why not?'

She was glad the girl was game, capable of handling all this distance between their position here in the east central part of this huge province and home.

She knew next to nothing about the dam, but she'd seen lots of others and she could improvise if she had to. They could get some books on it when they got home. There might even be a school project on it some day.

It would take about an hour and a half to get near it and then some determining which little side roads to choose to get right up to the thing. She drove easily, there was no traffic left for the old highway, not with the new dead straight four-lane fifty miles to the west. She felt confident, anticipating the curves and she set the cruise control again, relaxed. They cut through farmland and then into bush, far more bush than she'd seen in this province. The prairie ceased to be open and she began to wonder if this side trip was wise. The sun that remained was behind the trees, blocked, and dusk, she knew, would be brief. She put the headlights on. There had been a time when she loved being in the car in the dark, like a space traveller, someone chosen, the blue white dash lights crucial, reliable, contributing precise information, the darkness around her body a release. Some of her best moments had been in dark cars.

The girl was quiet beside her, thinking. About the Queen? About her new earrings, which pair she would allow her sister to borrow if she promised not to leave them somewhere, or trade with a friend? About the boy who could no longer talk to her, normally?

The deer appeared in the corner of her eye. It had every chance. It was thirty yards ahead of them, in the other lane. All it had to do was freeze. Or dive straight ahead, or veer left, lots of choices. She threw her arm across her daughter's chest, forgetting that she was belted in, and she kept her steering as steady as she could with just one firm hand. She braked

deliberately, repeatedly. She did not slam the pedal to the floor. She locked her jaw. Just hold tight, she told the deer. Just close your eyes and hold tight. When it dove for the headlights she yelled Shit and brought her arm away from the girl's chest back to the wheel. And then it was over. She'd hit it.

Before she could say don't look, the girl did. 'I think you took its leg off,' she said. 'Why didn't you stop? Why did you have to hit it?'

She saw again the right headlight coming into sudden, irrevocable contact with the tawny hindquarter, all in silence. The thump belonged to something else, seemed to come neither from the car nor from the deer.

'You killed a deer,' the girl said.

She pulled the car over to the side of the dark road and they sat there, waiting for her to do something. She put her hand on the door handle and unbuckled but she made no further move. Wherever it was, it was beyond her help. Her daughter looked back again.

'He's in the ditch. I think he's trying to climb out of the ditch.'

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I couldn't go off the road to save him. We'd be the ones in the ditch if I'd tried. I'm really sorry.'

She pulled slowly back onto the road and, remembering her seat belt, buckled up. She took note of the reading on the odometer.

'Are we just going to go?' the girl asked.

'I'll have to find someone to kill it,' she said. 'We'll stop in the next town. That's all there is to do. I don't feel really good about this either.'

The girl sat in silence, pushed down into her seat.

Ten minutes later there was a town, a small group of houses clustered around one long main street, the only sign of life at the Sands Hotel. She pulled in and parked beside a blue half-ton.

'I'll just go in and talk to someone,' she said. 'You might as well wait here. I won't be long.'

She got out and walked to the front of the car. The fog lamp was bent like a wall-eye and the glass on the headlight was broken but there was no blood. She'd broken bones, not skin. She noticed for the first time a symbol on the Volvo's grille, the Greek symbol for the male, the circle with the arrow pointing off north-east. She remembered the first time she'd seen it, when she was a girl, wholeheartedly in love with Ben Casey, with his dark face and his big arms, a precursor to the men she would really love, later. And now it was later than later and here she was in a bleak prairie town with grey hair growing out of her head, with an angry adolescent in her car and a mangled deer twelve kilometers behind her on the road.

Inside the hotel she went directly to the young blond bartender to explain what she'd done but she'd known the instant she was in the bar which of them would be the one to go back and find the deer and finish it off. They were sitting in a large group around a table, watching her, eight or ten of them in green and brown and plaid, drinking beer and



coffee. She knew she looked ridiculous to them in her boots and her long dark trench coat with the oversized shoulders, like something out of a bad war movie. Still, they waited in well mannered silence for her to speak.

'Talk to him,' the kid at the bar said, pointing. She approached the table and a couple of them, the older ones, tipped their hats. One of these hat-tippers leaned back in his chair and said, 'Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?' and it took her a few stalled seconds to reply, 'I've been to London to visit the Queen.' He chuckled and saluted her with his coffee.

'I've hit a deer,' she said. 'About twelve kilometers back. I was wondering if someone could maybe take care of it.' She looked at the one she'd chosen.

'North?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'On number 10.'

'How bad?' he asked.

'I think I pretty well ruined his hindquarters,' she said.

'Your car,' he said. 'I meant your car.' There was no laughter.

'The car's all right,' she said. 'I think my insurance will cover it.'

'You have to report it,' he said. 'You should phone the wildlife people. Unless you want to pay the two-hundred deductible. You call and report it now, it's the deer's fault.'

'Is there a phone then?' she asked.

He led her out of the bar into a cold back room. The light was amber, muted, dusty. There was a stained sink in the corner and a battered leather couch along one wall, the rest of the room was filled with liquor cases, stacked four feet high. There was a pay phone, and beside it, taped to the doorframe, a list of phone numbers. He put his own quarter in and dialled the number for her.

She took the phone and talked to a woman who put her through to a man and she gave him all the information she could, the time and location, her registration and license numbers, her apologies. She couldn't tell him how old the deer might have been.

While she stood there, reporting the incident, the man stayed on the arm of the couch, watching her. She became aware of her perfume and her long, wild hair.

When she was finished he got up and stood beside her. 'Someone hits a deer here about once a week,' he said. He reached behind her head and turned down the collar of her trench coat, slowly. She would not have been surprised if his mouth had grazed her forehead. 'I can check your car.'

'The car's okay,' she said. 'The engine didn't take any damage.'

'Whatever,' he said.

'My daughter's out there,' she said. 'She's pretty upset.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'This kind of thing is hard on kids.'

Outside, he hunched down in the light from the hotel sign and ran his hand over the shattered glass. 'Looks like it was a young deer,' he said,



standing up, stretching. He opened the car door for her and she climbed in behind the wheel. 'I'll go back for it,' he said. 'I've got my gun in the truck.'

'Thank you,' she said.

He tucked her coat around her legs and closed the door.

On the highway again, the girl listened to the explanation of the procedure. She sat in silence for a long time, her legs under her on the seat, trying, in spite of the seat-belt, to curl up. When her mother turned on the radio, to some easy listening music, she began.

'I don't see why she has to be there every week-end we go to Dad's,' she said. 'I don't see why we have to see her lying in bed in the morning. I think it's rude.'

'Where did this come from?' she asked. But she knew where it came from. It came from a very young woman riding in a dark car through the bush with her mother.

'You could tell your Dad if it bothers you, her being there when you are. Or I could, if you want me to.'

'I already have,' the girl said. 'He just tells her. They don't care.'

'Your Dad cares,' she said. 'He's not himself. He misses you, he's told me.'

'She bought that nightshirt I wanted, the mauve one,' she said. 'She bought it for herself. And she doesn't get dressed till lunch time.' She reached for the radio and punched in a rock station. 'She's everywhere you look.'

'That's why you changed your mind about the nightshirt?' she asked. There was no answer.

The young lady in question had not shown any particular skill at the unenviable task of winning the affections of a middle-aged man's half-grown kids. Though she'd tried. One weekend she'd even done their wash, an effort to appease the mother who bitched about sending them off clean and getting them back, always, in disorder. When they got home they'd stood in the kitchen emptying their week-end bags, showing off their clean clothes. In her pile, the girl discovered pink bikini panties not her own. She tossed them across the room to her sister, who screeched and pitched them like a live hand grenade to her defenseless brother, who cringed at the sight of panties of any kind.

'She loves your Dad,' she said.

'Because you won't,' the girl said.

'I'll talk to him,' she offered.

'Don't bother,' the girl said. 'I'll just get a lecture about how everyone's got a right to be happy and all that crap.'

'It's not crap,' she said.

She wanted to be his wife again, just for a little while. She wanted to talk to him about what people, very young people, had a right to. She'd heard more than once, from her friends, from the inarticulate counsellor, from

a homemakers' magazine, the theory that kids could withstand a lot. All you had to do was look around you, all these kids, carrying right on. She bought into it herself, sometimes, taking pride in their hard-won stability, their distracted smiles. Good little pluggers.

The girl stared out her window, watching the bush. 'Don't ever expect me to say good-morning to some boyfriend of yours.'

'No,' she said. 'I won't be expecting that.'

They drove on. She could think of nothing light and harmless to say, nothing would come.

'I saw this TV show,' she said, hesitating.

The girl waited.

There was a woman standing in front of a mirror, she was very unhappy. It was just a dumb mini-series. Anyway, she was standing talking into this mirror, to someone behind her, and she said when she was a kid she'd been driving with her father in a car, at night, like we are, and it was winter, there was a lot of snow, and they saw a deer draped over a fence. It was dead. She said she began to cry and her father told her it was all right. He told her that deer have a trick. When they're trapped like that they don't have to wait to die. They can make their hearts explode.'

'A trick,' the girl said.

'I think it would be fright,' she said. 'I think it would be a heart attack brought on by fright. That would be the real explanation. But it means that our deer could be out of its misery before the man gets to it, maybe even before we left it in the ditch.'

Even as she recited this she knew it was unlikely. She assumed the deer was back there dying, not far from the ditch, the hard way. It would likely see him approach, hear the soft 'Easy now. Easy.'

And she knew that one of them would hold the deer in her mind for a long time, not dying, but fully alive in the bright shock of the headlights. And that the other would hold it just as long cold, wide-eyed, after the hunter.