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BLACK HEART ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

T. J. Forrester

Yvonne has that tired all-over feeling, and, when she shrugs out of her backpack and drops it next to the fire ring, the thud is part satisfaction and part relief. Her legs ache, but she and Devon hiked sixteen miles today, their high mark since beginning down in Georgia.

"A fire would be nice," Devon says, and drives a tent stake into the ground. "I'll make a Log Cabin tonight, get a big blaze going."

Devon prefers camp chores to gathering firewood because he worries about getting lost. Getting lost never happens to Yvonne. She has a keen sense of direction, much keener than Devon, who sees the Appalachian Trail as a conduit through the unknown. Venture away from the footpath, and he is doomed.

She nibbles a Snickers bar, savors chocolate melting on her tongue. Devon was supposed to join her for a week, but one week dragged into two, and two weeks dragged into three. Sometimes she wonders if he stays because of her or if he stays because of the campfires. He has become an expert at building fire out of her wood. He places twigs at the base, then shapes branches in various ways. Tepees and Log Cabins are his favorites, but occasionally his arty side surfaces and the wood takes on strange forms. One night he broke wood into equal lengths and built a square he called Skyscraper Deluxe. Another night he wove a ball that put out dense smoke and little flame. He called that one Dante's Inferno and later changed it to Dying Sun.

"Be dark before you know it," Devon says.

Yvonne, weary of his hinting, flicks the candy wrapper into the fire ring. Devon knows she would never toss out something she doesn't intend to burn, that the act signals she will go into the forest and gather wood, and he looks her way and smiles. It is the same smile he offered when he invited himself on her

adventure. She wanted to say no, but she wears his ring. The diamond is bright and hard and promises two people wish to live together forever. Together forever has taken on meaning during their time on the trail. He is the first thing she sees when she wakes up and the last thing she sees when she goes to sleep. In between, he is always there, always. She imagines gathering *his* firewood for the rest of *her* life, and the skin tightens between her eyes.

“I’m going,” she says. “But I will not be rushed.”



The earth is moist from recent rains, and a dank smell rises from where Yvonne’s boots disturb leaves and expose soil dark as charcoal. Fiddleheads, green and slender, curl out of the forest floor, but, higher up, where branches are without leaves, colors are muted slashes of gray and brown. She’s a quarter-mile from camp, on a slope that falls away to a narrow hollow. An owl hoot comes through the trees. The sound is forlorn, expectant: a lover, Yvonne supposes, separated and seeking assurance. She looks back the way she came, at the trees, the rocks, at the scuff marks in the leaves. She imagines she hears Devon, alone in the clearing, cup his hands around his mouth and shout her name into the graying air. Would she respond? She thinks back to junior year at Ohio State, tries to remember how it was between them when they met. She first noticed him after her floor exercise at an intramural meet. Later, at the gymnastic party at Logan’s Lounge, he came and stood next to her at the bar.

“You have remarkable balance,” he said.

She was ordering a drink and didn’t look at him right away. When she did, she saw a young man studying her intently. He wore black-rimmed glasses, and his pupils seemed soft as brown felt. He leaned in her direction, a posture that made her feel as if they had been friends for a long time.

“You’re staring at me,” she said, not displeased. She had gone to the dorm after the meet, taken a shower, and changed into

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nylon sweats. The top, unzipped to show what little cleavage she had, clung to her as she squared her body to his. She was a thick woman, muscular in the arms and legs, wide like a swimmer in the shoulders. Yvonne knew these were not attributes most men were attracted to.

"Did you know," he said, "that the cicada life cycle requires they live underground for seventeen years? Seventeen years! Can you imagine?"

Yvonne sucked down a lemon Jell-O shot. The shot warmed her stomach, and she gazed bemusedly at the man.

"That's an original pickup line," she said.

He went on as if he didn't hear her.

"Imagine living in the dirt for seventeen years, waiting to crawl up out of the earth to extend your species, then you find out they built a Wal-Mart parking lot over you."

"I'd be devastated."

He looked amused. "You would, would you?"

"Think of it. My little cicada paws scraping away at that asphalt roof—"

"Think of living your life in vain," he said. "Everything wasted, you might as well have never existed."

"I am more than my ovaries."

"That's not the point."

She ordered another shot, turned back to the man.

"I suppose you're right," she said.

He raised his wine glass, and she raised her shot.

"To the cicadas," he said.

"To the cicadas."

The band started up and he nodded toward the stage. She wasn't much of a dancer—as a teenager she preferred tumbling runs to the latest steps—but she had flexible limbs and could move well enough. Out on the checkered floor, she whirled in front of the man. Her hips twitched to the beat.

"We're dancing," he said, as though he couldn't quite believe it. His arm movements were small, typical of a man who doesn't like to stand out in a crowd. She raised her hands above her head

and pretended to claw an invisible roof. Then she leaned over and whispered in his ear.

“I’m doing the cicada. It’s the latest thing.”

Darkness came over his face. “You’re mocking me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was trying to make a joke.” She shouldn’t have made fun of this man, this cicada lover with the big brown eyes.

“Life is a serious thing; what we do matters.”

“Yes,” she said. “Life matters.”

After the set was over, she followed him to a booth and they sat next to each other in the bluish air. They sat for a long time without talking, and she was comfortable in the silence. The music started back up, and, instead of going to the dance floor, they ordered a carafe of red wine and started in on the conversation. His name was Devon McLanahan, and he was an art student who wanted to mold young minds and planned on teaching elementary school when he graduated. She was majoring in computer programming and had never considered teaching. Last summer, he went to the Dominican Republic as part of an outreach program and helped build houses; she flew across the big pond and backpacked through Europe.

“I want to know everything,” he said, and put his hand on hers.

His skin felt smooth and warm, and the more wine she drank the more she wanted to whisper secrets and wanted him to whisper back. At closing time, they went to his dorm, and he tied a sock around the hall doorknob so his roommate wouldn’t barge in. She offered herself to him, and, as he knelt between her legs, she thought she had found the one.

Now, as Yvonne walks around an upthrust boulder, the owl hoot again comes through the forest. The sound is loud, almost overhead, and she stops walking and peers into the trees. Against the sky, in the upper reaches of a yellow poplar, wings unfold, and a feathered shadow flits through the branches, gone before she can raise a hand and offer hello.

She picks up a branch and drags it through the forest. Finds

another branch and adds it to the one she drags. This hike was supposed to bring her closer to Devon, but the opposite has happened and she thinks maybe he isn't the one. Maybe nobody is the one. Maybe she will live life alone, impenetrable, a woman who goes away and never comes back. She laughs, a forced exhalation with a staccato at the end. If Devon knew her, truly knew her, he would not have invited himself on this trip.



Her black heart surfaced, a year earlier, on a spring-break hike in the Gila range. They had rented a car and driven from Ohio to New Mexico their senior year to celebrate their engagement. Devon, eating a peanut butter cracker, sat on the edge of a cliff that fell a quarter mile to spruce forest. Yvonne sat beside him. She had on a blue Nike shirt, and she wore long pants because they hid her legs, which were more solid than fat, but she lived with worry Devon would lose sight of the difference.

"That's a long way down," he said.

The urge came without warning. One minute she was looking at a hawk windsurfing the updraft, and the next she wanted to push Devon off the cliff. She was amused at the novelty, but, when the urge intensified, she smothered it with thoughts of how much she enjoyed spending time with him, and how tonight they would pitch the tent and snuggle into their sleeping bags and talk about whatever. She enjoyed her lover's voice in the darkness, liked how it surrounded and caressed her with its easy tone.

Marveling at the absurdity, she allowed her thoughts to dissipate and the urge to reappear. Devon was talking about buying a house with a spare room. He wanted a studio on the east side so he could catch morning light while he worked on his drawings. She nodded agreeably, aware for the first time sitting next to someone on a cliff is an act of implied trust. Had he ever thought about pushing *her* off? She put her hand on his back, applied the tiniest pressure, and he must have sensed something because he got up and went over to his pack and rummaged for a

camera. She studied his eyes, looking for a flicker of recognition, and, in the end, decided he was oblivious.

The rest of the hike, she stayed back when he stood on overlooks and took pictures. On the drive home, as they passed out of New Mexico into Texas flatlands, she leaned against the passenger door and glanced Devon's way. He had a NASCAR fantasy and wore gloves when he drove. It was a harmless game, and one that amused her. Although he hovered over the wheel, he didn't believe in speeding because it wasted gas. They chugged down the interstate at sixty miles per hour.

"Do you think I'm a bad person?" she said.

"You are a fire-breathing monster."

"Devon."

"Ask a ridiculous question, get a ridiculous answer."

"I've been thinking," she said, then, after a pause, "I don't know, really. I guess I think too much sometimes. You know I've never killed anything, not even a mosquito?"

"You want to kill something?"

"No," she said. "That's not what I'm saying." The lie was for the best. They had a long drive, and she didn't want to spend two thousand miles thinking about something she'd rather forget.



Yvonne takes a route that brings her to an oak grove north of the campsite. She steps across the trail and hoists herself onto a limb. She likes changing physical perspective when she thinks, believes the process frees her mind and allows her to view life from new angles. She climbs high enough to look down the trail into the campsite, settles into a fork, and holds onto a limb.

Devon faces the direction she chose when she went into the forest. He wears the yellow fleece they picked out from L. L. Bean. She watches him until she grows bored, then turns away and watches the sun fall below the mountains. An orange band stripes the horizon, and, above the band, the sky is the color of washed-out purple. Toward the north, where the sky is darker,

the first star appears. She imagines the star hovers over the trail's northern terminus, wonders how many steps it takes to get there from here.

Her fiancé believes she chose this journey because she wants to put off settling down. He calls her thru-hike a 2,000 mile procrastination. She has not told him the real reason. She hikes because she is 21 and tired of perfect Yvonne, the gymnast who spent her life in pursuit of tens. She wants change and hopes it comes like an erupting volcano, melting her so completely when she cools she becomes something else entirely. This, of course, has nothing to do with Devon and is something he would not understand.

"Yvonne!"

The two syllable explosion startles her, and she shifts in his direction. He turns on his headlamp, and the beam cuts a swath through black air, illuminates trees in its white glow. She roots for him to begin an all-out search but knows his fear is greater than his worry, and he will never venture into the forest. She listens to him call out, the croak that once was her name growing fainter with each repetition, and, when her back complains about the corrugated bark, and her stomach complains about lack of food, and her mind says she should feel guilty because she loves that man down there, she decides it is time to end this game and go back to the clearing and get something to eat. She feels her way through the limbs, lowers herself to the forest floor, and walks the trail to the clearing.

"Hey," she says.

"Over here!" Devon says, headlamp bobbing. "I'm over here!"

They come together, and his arms wrap around her.

"I'm here," she says.

"I've been calling for hours."

"I got turned around but I'm back now," she says.

"I can't believe you did that!"

"I didn't get lost on purpose."

"You never get lost."

She gets down on her hands and knees and follows him inside the tent.

"I'm hungry," she says.

He empties a food bag in the space between their ground pads. She plucks a PowerBar from under a baggie filled with raisins. The PowerBar is banana-flavored and she chews slowly, hoping to avoid conversation. The tent, with its low ceiling and narrow walls, feels unusually cramped tonight. Devon takes off his boots, and she wrinkles her nose at the smell of dirty socks.

"I think I heard a cicada," he says. "While you were gone, I think I heard one off in the distance."

"No, it's too early for the cicadas."

They are silent for a long time. The silence is uncomfortable, as if he wants something but is afraid to ask. She closes her eyes and tries to sleep, opens them when Devon pulls up her shirt and his fingers trace a circle around her bellybutton. She stiffens, but he seems unaware of her reluctance. His fingers drift under her panties toward the mound between her legs. She's dry but moistening, and at that precise moment—yes, right there, just the tip of the finger—no, she should say no, say it loud like she was taught in high school: "No means no, girls say it like you mean it."—"No!"—but there is only yes, and the finger thrumming and her mind focused on the swollen button until she is there and nowhere else, submerged in that hot river, pulling her to the precipice—just the tip, there, yes, please, just the tip, please Devon—and her back arching and her legs contracting and her toes curling and her breath harsh and unabated—don't stop, don't stop, please don't stop—and the free fall over the edge, and the magnificence and the pleasure and the transcendent energy of being there, only there . . .

Her voice, when it comes, is low and guttural.

"You bastard," she says.

"You love it." He guides her hand toward his crotch, but she won't have it, any of it, aware this is the first time she has refused to reciprocate.

"You're not playing fair," he says.

He'll get over it. Devon, if nothing else, is a forgiving kind of guy.



Yvonne wakes to rhythmic noise she can't place. The noise is insistent, drawing her toward consciousness. She gives in to it and opens her eyes. At first she thinks the noise is Devon rubbing his leg, then recognizes the sound for what it is. The rhythm picks up speed, and her lips pull into a shy smile. She didn't know he masturbated. She is pleased Devon has a secret side, and she wonders how he would react if she told him hers. He probably wouldn't believe her.

"Devon," she says.

The noise stops.

"Devon?"

His voice has a fake groggy tone. "Huh?"

"Never mind." She puts on her headlamp, opens her trail guide, and muses over tomorrow's hike. In the forest, an animal skitters through the brush. The footsteps are so light she can hardly hear them. Probably a squirrel or a night bird, maybe a raccoon. The air is cool against her skin and doesn't smell as bad as it did when she went to sleep. Devon's socks must be drying out. She wets her thumb and flips a page. Fourteen miles up the trail, there is a campsite with a spring nearby. Between here and there, the trail crosses a major highway they'll reach mid-morning. She looks over at Devon, who mumbles something and yanks his sleeping bag over his head.

"The light's in my eyes," he says.

"Sorry." Yvonne flicks off the headlamp, and darkness returns to the tent. The animal moving through the brush has either stopped or moved out of hearing range. She rolls over on her stomach.

"Devon?" she says. "Hey, are you awake?"

No answer.

"I feel a little sore, same spot as yesterday," she says. "I think I might have to take some ibuprofen."

A rustle, and Devon's hand finds her back. He applies gentle pressure, and every so often she lets out an appreciative moan.

"Is that it?" he says.

"A little higher."

"There?"

"You have nice hands," she says.

Moaning and complimenting during a Devon back rub is like standing in front of a candy machine. Drop quarters into the slot, and the candy keeps coming.

"Hey," she says, eventually tiring of the attention. "Did I tell you there was a road crossing tomorrow?"

She hasn't the courage to come out and ask him to get off the trail. Not that it matters. Her lover is good at reading the fine print. Devon turns his back to her, and she does the same to him. She pulls her sleeping bag to her neck and listens for sounds in the forest, thinks of cicadas tunneling through soil. She wonders what it feels like when they break free.



Cars and trucks stream over the highway; they come from both directions, drivers in a hurry to get to opposite sides of the mountain. A station wagon pulls off the road, and a white-haired man gets out and hobbles their way. He has a narrow forehead, hooded eyes. He hands Devon a card and she reads it over his shoulder. Mr. Quinton calls himself a trail angel, and he has a house in town where he rents tent space for ten dollars a night. Shuttle fee is by the mile.

"Thru-hiker?" Mr. Quinton says, directing his question at Devon.

"Springer to Katahdin," Devon says. "One step at a time."

"You livin' my dream," Mr. Quinton says. "I tried to hike her when I was a young man, but I got this trick knee that would

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have none of it. I hang back now and try to help you fellows out. Do what I can here and there. Shower's hot, got a couple rooms. They're full up at the moment."

Yvonne moves up to where she is shoulder to shoulder to Devon, intent on breaking up this all boy's club. *She* is the thru-hiker in this duo; Devon is the tag along.

"One step at a time," she says. "That's the only way to thru-hike a trail."

The man glances at her, looks back at Devon.

"So how about it? You want a ride in?" Mr. Quinton says. "Five dollars each coming off the mountain, but you and your gal friend ride free coming back, if you stay with me, I mean."

Devon says, "Sounds reasonable."

"I don't say it on my card, but I cook blueberry pancakes for breakfast. Not all mornings, sometimes I sleep in. Breakfast is five dollars each if you want it."

"What about a ride to the nearest bus station?" Yvonne says.

Now she has the man's attention. Devon's too.

"You thinkin' about gettin' off, honey?" Mr. Quinton says.

"Just asking," she says.

"I don't blame you one bit," he says. "It's a hard go out there. Wear you to a nubbin' no time flat."

Devon puts his arm around her and squeezes. "She gets grouchy at night, but she's been pretty good so far."

Mr. Quinton goes back to his station wagon, picks up a folder lying on the dash, and comes back over. He flips open the folder and runs his finger down a page filled with jotted notations. "I can never remember these figures. Let's see, shuttle to the bus station in Asheville run you a hundred twenty dollars. Pretty lady like you and I'll knock off the twenty." Yellow teeth show between parted lips. "No offense, just trying to be helpful."

"I might have to stop and pee," she says. "You know us women folk. We got us these small bladders, no bigger than a thimble, really."

"Don't I know it!" Mr. Quinton says. "I had me a wife who

couldn't drive no more than fifty miles without wantin' to run out to the bushes. When a woman has to pee she has to pee."

"I could pee right here," she says. "Right here before God and country and this here highway."

The man says, "Don't let me stop you."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she says. "Bet you come up here and hide in the bushes just to see hikers pee."

"Now see here," the man says. "There ain't no call for—"

She steps onto the highway, dashes through a gap between a semi and a glimmering Porsche. Devon is close behind. He catches up and tugs on her backpack, slows her to a standstill.

"That was rude," he says.

"Him or me?"

"What?"

"Who was rude? Him or me?"

"He was trying to be helpful, trying to make a buck."

Yvonne, with a curt wave of the hand, motions him up the trail. He tells her he'll wait for her at the next shelter, and she says that will be fine. She watches him walk out of sight, then pulls down her shorts, squats behind a bush, and lets loose a stream that sends a beetle scurrying across the leaves. She hops behind the beetle, urine splashing the leaves, her boots, everywhere but on that blue back. She gives up the chase, thinking, if she had been born with a penis, life would be different all the way around.

An hour later, she catches up to Devon at a lean-to built under a hickory tree. She sits cross-legged on the wooden floor and waits for him to stop writing in the register. He hands her a notebook and pen, and goes to the spring to fill water bottles. She flips to an entry made in early March and reads about September Sunset and Lizard Boy, a couple who started their thru-hikes earlier than most, and who hiked through a foot of snow that day. Then comes Gregarious George, a man who hikes with a copy of Robert Frost poems and writes about starry skies and clouds white as cotton. She skims forward, stops on trail names like Monkey Butt, Greasy Spoon, Riot Boy, Sweet

Dreams, Strider, Dances with Ravens, and Sloppy Seconds. She comes to Devon's entry. *Devon and Yvonne passing through on the 29th of March.*

Devon comes up and hands her a water bottle.

"I hate my name," she says. "It's boring. Who's named Yvonne these days?"

"You know how I feel about trail names." He goes over to the fire ring and kicks at a rock.

"They're fun, a bunch of hikers having a good time."

"I don't want you to change your name."

"Never mind," she says. "I'm sorry I brought it up."

"No, really, why obscure who you are?"

"Come on, Devon. We're not talking about plastic surgery."

His voice has a helpless tone. "Please, Yvonne, I'm tired of arguing."

"Never Lost," she says.

"Excuse me?"

"Never Lost. My new name. Yvonne is history."

Yvonne crosses out Devon's entry and writes: *Never Lost solo hiking the trail. Me here. Me gone. See ya when I see ya!*

Devon says it is time to go, and she looks over at him, wonders if he notices anything different about her.



Oaks, pines, and rough-barked hickories give way to rhododendrons and spruce, waist-high mountain laurel bushes. The air is clean and cool. The trail switchbacks to the left, levels out, switchbacks to the right and steeply ascends a leafy slope. She watches her quadriceps expand and contract with each step, notes with satisfaction the climbs are easier than when she began this hike. Her shorts are looser around the waist, not so loose they are in danger of coming off, but loose enough so she knows she is losing weight, a few pounds here and there, nothing major.

The trail tops the ridge, and she sees Devon sitting with his back to her on a ledge that overlooks the Smokies. The mountains are blue and humped and ripple toward the horizon. Far off, down in a narrow valley, smoke curls above the trees and bends in the wind. She imagines a house, or a factory down there, a place where humans live out normal lives.

Devon lowers his legs over the edge. He stares in one direction, shaking his head, as if locked in silent debate. She takes her pack off and lays it next to his. For the last three weeks, she has walked past him when she finds him on an overlook. She has offered excuses like she doesn't want to take a break just yet, or she's tweaked her ankle and wants to keep walking so it won't seize up. Today, though, she gazes at his back, at the flat spot between his shoulder blades. She estimates the distance, twelve feet across gray rock, and takes a step his way, heel to toe, like Indians walked when they stalked these mountains.

"You talk in your sleep," he says, without turning around. He grips the rock, and fingers whiten around the knuckles. "Did you know that? You talk in your sleep, and sometimes you say things like you want to push me off a cliff. Do you want to push me off a cliff, Yvonne?"

She closes the gap one step at a time.

"I love you," he says. "We can work this out between us, we can fix this, this, whatever it is."

She puts her hand on his back. He's shaking, doubting her love.

"I thought for a long time there was something wrong with me," she says. "Wanting to push my fiancé off a cliff? How crazy is that?"

"It's my breath, isn't it?" His laugh is feeble and ends abruptly. "I knew I should have carried some mints."

The ring comes off in a single twist.

"You are my asphalt roof, Devon McLanahan."

He picks up the ring and holds it in his palm, turns the ring over and over. Then he turns toward her. His face is pale, and his eyes are wide open.

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"I imagine that man's still down there," she says. "Plenty of cars coming by if he's not."

She puts on her pack and jogs up the trail. The gait comes easily, and she pumps her arms and throws back her head and glides through the forest. She doesn't want to live life like a cicada under a parking lot. She wants to matter somehow. When she walks the streets, she wants people to point and say there goes a woman of consequence. She thinks of the fire she will build tonight.