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Cornelia Nixon

FLIGHT

One summer in Missouri woods, before the sun could boil the air, a small bird darted low from thick green vines, and, unable to stop, Webster's size-twelve running shoe came down on it. He was a biologist, and on the side of life. When he took plankton samples from farm ponds, he tried to let them go unhurt. Bugs lived undisturbed around his house. He tried not to eat meat. Dropping to his knees, he picked up the bird, a chickadee, delicate white windpipe popped through the chestwall, like a rubber band. A minute before, it had flitted through the trees, loopy as a butterfly, calling cheerfully. Now it was limp, like a water balloon, only too small—more like a used condom. He felt an anxious flash. What was his wife doing, that minute, in Chicago?

It was an ancient, stupid thought, whispered by the sloth-brain at the bottom of his skull. It had been years since she did anything like that, before he'd even married her. Five years of monogamy. Wasn't that enough to mean she never would again? He put it from his mind, and poked the windpipe back inside the chickadee, though it would never breathe again. He had deaths already on his head. In school he had dissected frogs, later fetal pigs shot full of plastic goo, pink in their arteries and blue for veins, plus countless starfish, octopods, crustaceans, clams. He tried to stick to projects that observed, charted migration or declines—but the day always arrived when you had to cut the creature you were trying to help. To pay tuition, buy his books, he helped with a project on amphibians, why they laid fewer eggs the last few years, or eggs that didn't hatch, around the world. He wanted them to hatch, but every day he tried to make them stop, zapped frog-eggs with fertilizer, pesticide, or UV rays. Brain surgeons learned to operate on cats. Dental students practiced cutting gums on live monkeys. You could specialize in the tiniest, most loathsome viruses and find yourself injecting them in baby bunnies to find out what they did.

He laid the chickadee on a tree limb, in case somehow it could wake up, and walked back to his campsite, in a glade by a sinkhole. He couldn't shake off the anxiety. The glade was full of black-eyed susans, bachelor buttons, pink yarrow, and his Harley'd scored a trench through them. What had he accomplished, besides crushing flowers, birds? He'd been away from home

almost a week, took samples out of forty-seven ponds, most of them full of nitrates, PCBs and chloridane, with nothing wriggling. They were just belly-up, with x's on their eyes. There were another eighteen he should check. But what would happen if he went home instead and saw his wife?

He knew what Margy would be doing now: she'd be asleep, alone. She was a violinist with an orchestra, playing in summer festival, and soon she would get up to practice, standing in the living room, barefooted in shorts if it was warm. She might play nothing but one phrase a hundred times. When he was home, he liked to loiter near her, watch the muscles twitch in her thin arms, fingers oscillating on the strings like hummingbird wings. Sometimes he stood behind her, pressed against her while she played, let the music vibrate in his bones—which could be almost as good as sex, depending on the piece (alas, it was all true, “Bolero” was the best). He followed her through the apartment, anxious if she went in the bathroom and closed the door. Was she all right in there? She wasn't making any noise. Once when she had ordinary flu, she fainted while talking on the phone and took a swan-dive backwards off the chair, until her head bounced half an inch above the floor. At night she had bad dreams. Sometimes she sat up and gave a rasping shriek as if her tongue had been removed.

“Unnnnnnh! Unnnnnnh!”

It was a big tube coming in the window, she would say, or a crevasse that opened underneath the bed. Once when he woke up, she was leaning out the window, six floors off the ground.

“We have to!” she yelped, when he grabbed her.

“We have to what?”

Lights came on in her eyes—she couldn't remember. She went to see a shrink, spent expensive hours discussing it. The shrink did not suggest she take a long vacation from the symphony. The shrink wanted to talk about Webster. Margy came home looking thoughtful.

“Did your parents abuse you?” she asked him casually. And, “Oh, by the way, when are you going to finish your degree, so we can have a child?”

Webster had almost finished his degree. He had really done two doctorates, one in marine biology and one in lakes, though he had not quite been awarded either one of them. Nine years was perhaps a little long to be a grad student, especially in science. But when he got things worked out in the lab, designed the right computer model for his work, really refined the data down, who knew what might happen? He could get both of them!

But that didn't mean he knew what their next step would be. Margy claimed he had said yes to children in the murky past, when they first met on the Pacific coast, where you could walk for miles and not see others of your kind. In Chicago, though, they lived with seven million people in the space of a small atoll, dumpsters full of babyshit. He checked waterdrops that ought to teem with *Crustacea*, *Gastropoda*, *Scyphozoa*, and found them quite free of life. Was it really, logically, a human baby that was needed here?

He tried to joke. "Maybe when you get me out of Chicago."

She didn't laugh. When she was tense, the freckles on her cheeks went square.

"Sometimes I wonder if you could have filed your dissertation a long time ago."

"If only that were true," he said, and happily explained how freshwater plankton differed from their ocean counterparts, in ways that affected their population variance. She listened, sticking out her lower lip. Her face began to look like a small bulldozer.

"And that's the only reason? You really haven't finished it?"

Often she'd explained to him the right age for a woman to have her first baby (twenty-four), and pointed out how far she had exceeded it. A long time ago, her first year in college, she'd had an abortion. She never mentioned it, but the big tube in her dreams cut like a knife and tried to suck her up. The shrink was probably very interested. But did that really, logically have anything to do with him?

"You know what I've noticed lately?" she said. "You don't even kiss me like you mean it."

Webster stopped mid-step. He had been on his way back to a chapter on freshwater-snail digestive tracts.

"Like I mean it? Of course I mean it. What are you talking about?"

She was eager to explain. "Did you ever see that old commercial on TV, when we were kids? Bucky Beaver for Ipana, how it coats your teeth with this—knock, knock—invisible shield?" Making a fist, she knocked the air beside his chest. "It's like you've got this—knock, knock—invisible shield."

Webster showed his teeth. "In bed, you mean. It's like I'm under glass in bed."

She gave a breathless shrug. "Sort of."

That night, he couldn't sleep, read late, and she had been asleep for hours when he finally slid between the sheets. She sat up in the dark.

“Unnnnnnh! Unnnnnnh!” she shrieked, rasping.

He woke her up. “It’s me. What did you think?”

“It was a hell-dog with huge dripping jaws. A hell-dog getting into bed with me!”

★

In his camp by the sinkhole, he packed his gear onto the bike and rolled out of the glade, trying to stay in the same rut he had already made. Driving dirt tracks, country roads and freeways, skin encased in grime, sweat, motor oil, he reached the south end of Lake Michigan, where black clouds huffed from steel mills to the ground, flames flickered in the gloom, followed by miles and miles of tight-sealed plants that snaked with solvent, acid, corrosives, on ground that could ignite if someone threw a match—The National Sacrifice Zone, as the EPA called it, home sweet home. It became Chicago gradually, with slag heaps, blown-out factories, brown three-story buildings far as the eye could see, plastic bags snagged in the trees, several million rats that lived on dog feces, and shimmering beside it, green and tantalizing to the sky, the dead lake. On the southside, his tires thumped over potholes like heartbeats. Passing the Loop, the near northside, he turned off at Lincoln Park, drove to his own block and left the bike. Adrenalin zapped at his heart, like a frog’s tongue to a fly. Bounding up the stairs, he flung his door wide, walked from room to room.

Margy wasn’t home. An apple, half-eaten, had rotted on the music stand. Six pairs of women’s shoes lay strewn from room to room. The bed was an explosion, pillows flung and sheets erupted in waves, half sprawled on the floor. What had happened there?

He found her calendar, nothing on it for today. Underneath it, casually flipped back, the rehearsal schedule for Ravinia. Today was no rehearsal, no program. But three nights ago, they’d played Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff, with a piano soloist—panic tingled up Webster’s neck. Michael Sein, it said. Michael Sein, The Bagworm, whose dressing rooms she used to go to, so he could do things to her Webster would not think about. He would not. She hadn’t even mentioned that The Bagworm was in town.

His mind shut to a pinhead, thoughtless as a creature with no brain. On instinct, cerebellum, his hand found the phone, punched the number of her friend Calvin. Calvin was a cellist, lived downstairs, and she sometimes went

with him to shop the flea markets or see an old movie. As he listened to it ring, he pictured her with Calvin, who at least was gay. She seemed to like to hang out with gay men, none of whom conformed to anything Webster thought he knew of them. They wore jeans and flannel shirts, trooped around like lumberjacks, maybe talked a little too much on the phone. Two of them were portly men about fifty, who drove a big-wheel pickup, had brown teeth and cauliflower ears, looked prepared to lynch the only gay man ever seen in Lubbock, Texas—but they'd been together thirty years. Once when Webster went downstairs to look for Margy, a young man he'd never seen before came to Calvin's door. Tall and dark, broad-shouldered in a black T-shirt and jeans, he looked more or less like Webster, who also happened to have on a black T-shirt and jeans. The young man's glance swept down his shoulders, belly, crotch, then back up to his eyes, ending in a soul-divining gaze.

"Margy," Webster managed to say. The young man stepped aside.

"Too bad," he murmured as Webster passed.

★

Calvin wasn't home. His machine picked up, gave a serious greeting about the Men's Emergency Health Network, which Calvin had organized, since half his friends had lately come down with strange cancers, weird blood-counts, stomach parasites that usually affected only sheep. The greeting was long, detailed, gave assignments to the volunteers, and Webster did not listen to the end. Clearly, Calvin was no help. Hanging up, he removed all signs he had been home and vanished down the stairs.

Rolling the bike a few blocks off, he hid it under a tarp. It was an August afternoon, the sky shellacked, the sort of day when teenage fathers shook their infant sons to death, and old people expired on sidewalks, trying to reach shade. Across the street from their building, in a finger of the park, drug dealers loitered, nursed cell phones, and a game of vicious basketball surged back and forth across the courts, one team all black, the other white. Webster found a spot under a tree, where he could guard his back and watch his front door without being seen.

He didn't have to wait long. Margy's car flashed up the block, an old yellow Mercedes, formerly her father's, hints of rust around the rims. Driving fast, impatiently, the way she always did, she accelerated till the last second and slammed on the brakes. The only open spot along the block was by the

hydrant, and she whipped into it, shrugged out of the car like it was a negligee she let drop to the floor. She had small fine limbs, hair like a mustard field in bloom, small round breasts that bounced as she clicked up the sidewalk in high heels. She looked jaded, in a black tank top and skirt that barely reached her thighs, circles under the eyes. Were those fingerprints all over her? Clacking to their building, she swung her hips, loose-boned, as if she didn't care who knew.

Ten minutes later she was back, with the slouchy shoulder bag she used to carry concert clothes, though she wasn't going to a concert now. She must have needed clean underwear, more birth control. Tossing it into the car, she drove fast away.

Webster had to sprint, but he stayed half a block behind her, trotting in place when she stopped at a light. His eyes had recently gone bad, using computers in the lab. In the average wolf-pack now, he would be left behind to starve. But he was lucky, since she stayed on crowded streets, not turning out to Lakeshore Drive, and he could keep up well enough to watch her twirl her hair around one finger, chew her nails, beat time to the radio on her car door. Parking at a drugstore, she came out with a plastic bag, then made complicated turns through residential streets, slowed to a creep.

Finally she left the car, a half block from the park, not far from their own place. It was a nice block, flowers in the yards, elegant old brownstones blasted clean, with potted plants that trailed from balconies. From behind a large oak tree, he watched her use a key on the front door of one and disappear inside it with the plastic bag.

Streaming with sweat, he leaned his wet face to the tree's rough bark. For a long time he managed not to think. He checked the bark for ants. There should be ants here, but there weren't, just as spiders didn't blow in the windows of his apartment house, and only a few sick fish gasped their way around the lake. He could just leave Chicago. He didn't even have to tell her where he went. Oh, God, what was in that plastic bag? Condoms, sponges, foam. How long had she been doing this? It was the basic rule of field-sighting. For every one you saw, there were a hundred you did not.

Knees stiff from standing, he walked up and down the block, not caring who saw him. Peering through the window on the foyer of the brownstone, he tried to read the mailbox names but couldn't see in the dim light. Inside, a door closed firmly.

“Careful,” said a voice that might be Margy’s.

Lurching to a run, he loped the half-block to the park, willing himself to keep going. Did he really want to know? But his feet would not go on. He had to look.

The front door of the brownstone opened slowly, and the two of them came out. The man was tall and dark, and draped around her shoulders, Margy’s bright hair massed against his black T-shirt. One of her arms clung tight around him, hand no doubt in the back pocket of his jeans. They drifted toward the stairs, slow as in a dream. Oh, it was a cozy scene, cozy. Did he kiss her like he meant it? Fuck her, of course she meant. Fuck her, with sincerity.

She bent down, took hold of the man’s knee, lifted his foot, set it on the stair below. She picked up the other leg, braced herself against the rail. The guy lost interest in the operation. His eyes wandered, found Webster’s down the block and fastened onto them. Webster took a step back toward the trees. Where had he seen that look? On a man with wider shoulders, cheeks more full? Now he looked gaunt and pale. Ill. But still it was a soul-divining gaze.

★

Nothing looked the same. The whole street rearranged itself. Webster rushed them.

“Margy, my God,” he said.

“You never listen to me,” she said mildly, re-introducing him to Todd. Todd lifted a stiff finger, waggled it at him, scolding. One side of his face looked slightly bent. He couldn’t seem to talk. Margy’s small arms held him, and her face looked soft.

“Todd was a wee bit forgetful about how to walk, after his meningitis. But now look at him. He’s a champ.”

Webster walked around the park with them. No drug dealers appeared. Old women in babushkas nattered together on benches, in Polish, Serb or Croat. A young woman walked a Great Dane bigger than a calf. Light seemed to pour from Margy’s hair. Margy, his wife! Not lost! A man who looked Armenian, in a brown suit, walked toward them carrying a baby in a party dress. All of these people seemed to know the secret of happiness. They passed Webster by.

Margy touched his arm. "You're shivering. You're soaking wet. Did you run in these clothes?"

Webster shrugged. He wasn't cold. But he let her send him home. The apartment looked completely different too, while he showered, put away her shoes. Making the bed, he bent to smooth the sheet and saw her chart, tucked under the mattress. He had found a midwife who could teach them natural birth control, requiring no poisons, no trash, no plastic wrap, except for a few days each month. Margy took her temperature as soon as she woke up and marked it on the chart—unfolding it, he checked. Her temperature had spiked the day before, right on schedule, day fourteen. It meant a live egg was at large, packed with fifty billion years of evolution, Margy's music talent, green eyes, frothy hair. Prickling swept Webster's back, as if a bed of nails had been applied to it, briefly. The timing didn't mean a thing, of course. It was only a coincidence. He made the bed.

He heard her coming on the stairs, rattling a grocery sack. She dropped her keys, sang bits of opera. Her voice was low and smoky, but trained from years of music school, so she could hit the right notes, hold up both ends of an intricate Mozart duet.

"La ci darem la mano. Vorrei e non vorrei . . ."

Her heels kept time, click, click, *sprezzatura* on the hardwood floor, up the hall toward him.

He stood in the middle of the living room, too agitated to sit down. When she saw him, she stopped and tipped her head.

"What's the matter, sweetie? Your hair's standing up." Shifting the groceries to one arm, she reached up, tried to smooth it down.

He took the sack away from her and put it in the kitchen. When he turned, she was behind him, looking quizzical. He put his arms around her, pressed his nose into her hair, flattening the tip against her skull. It was a need he hadn't known a nose could have. He'd been drawn to women's flesh since he was nine or ten, never before to women's bones.

"Sweetheart. Would one child satisfy you?" He felt himself quiver, from somewhere in his abdomen.

She laughed. "Is that a theoretical question?"

He watched this scene from eight or nine feet in the air, the guy down on the floor some other man.

"It's an offer, I think."

She pulled her head back, frowned. “How long have you been thinking about this?”

“About five seconds. If I thought about it longer, I’d be too afraid.”

She gave him a flashing grin. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen my chart.”

Heat rushed to his eyes. “I have, actually.”

“Better watch what you offer.”

“I know exactly what I’m offering.”

Laughing, tipping back her head, she lifted his hand and looked at it. Casually, as if she wasn’t doing anything, she started strolling up the hall. His breath rasped in his ears. He couldn’t hear. The walk was too short. By the bed, he paused.

“I’m not sure I recall the procedure here.”

She took his T-shirt off, his jeans. Suddenly he could recall everything he’d ever read by Kierkegaard, Camus. Someday this kid would ask why it was born. Why was it here? What was the purpose of its birth? It would grow old, lose what it loved, feel pain and die. Webster wilted, not yet inside.

“Stage fright,” he said, grimacing.

She chuckled. “Look at it this way. It’s not your body on the line. It isn’t you who’s never going to be the same. You could do this ten times a day across the countryside, and not be changed.”

Possibly not ten—but that was all he needed now. Resuming, he waited for the tornado that usually arrived to whirl away the feel of their bodies. But this time a big light in his brain switched on, and he knew exactly where her skin met his, thighs around his hips, tissues parting slippery. He could calibrate each upward ratchet of his heart, hydraulic rushings through small tubes, valves that opened or did not, just like a motorcycle speeding toward a cliff, wind in their faces, lots of time to swerve aside, they couldn’t fly, the cliff too high, the air too thin, how could they fling themselves out into it?

Then they were in the air, her head thrown back, his face pressed to her neck, his body pinned on top of hers, both of them crying out, about to plummet to the ground.

★

They did not make love again for weeks.

Diarrhea, Webster thought, as he opened his eyes. The only time he ever took care of a baby, it was a huge boy with the runs, and it kept wobbling to

its feet, giving him a toothless grin, while huge dollops of yellow shit dropped to the floor from its exhausted diapers. He tried to change them, but it got up and careened around the room, emitting happy shrieks, tipped over chairs and lamps. He looked around their small apartment now. Where should he begin? Buy rubber sheets? Bolt down the furniture?

Margy seemed to shine, with a moist radiance, like a lightning bug. Humming, she stopped by his chair to kiss his head. One afternoon, when he came home from the lab, a T-shirt and jeans lay on the bed, no bigger than his hands. They appeared to be a person's clothes. A person with arms and legs, another person in their home. A fat kid with small eyes, riding in the back seat of the car, disapproving of their every move.

"Jesus, Dad, you call that a *haircut*?"

"Yeah, my Dad's a scientist, *sort of*."

Two excruciating weeks oozed by, one millisecond at a time. Margy had a textbook cycle, always the same. Furtively he checked her chart. It was day fifteen, then sixteen, twenty-one. Twenty-five, when would it end? Twenty-seven, twenty-eight at last. Then twenty-nine. Thirty, thirty-one, dread cresting up like nausea. In the bathroom cabinet, the tampons disappeared, replaced by a new box, lurid pink. Seven days after missed period, ten drops of urine in the tube, stir with the stick.

In the mirror she admired her breasts, already bigger, sore. On their way to huge. She laughed, holding them.

"The Irish are very fertile. My mom got pregnant five times in three years. We can conceive from a sultry look."

On the morning of day thirty-two, she kissed his back as he got out of bed, put her arms around him from behind.

"Don't ever let me throw you away," she said.

Webster was arrested in the middle of a yawn. Was it up to him? Was she thinking of it?

"Okay," he said, and waited till she let him go before he stood up, pulled on jeans, loaded his pack. He was especially busy now, collating data from his trip, plus giving extra hours to the frogs. The university was all the way across the city, on the southside, and he had to leave early to beat the traffic, stay down till late at night, stare at a computer screen until he couldn't see across the room. Sometimes he didn't make it home till Margy was asleep.

Day thirty-three, after almost three sexless weeks, he stayed in the lab long after everyone was gone, and masturbated quietly on his lab stool. Margy was

too close to think of, and mixed up now with yellow babyshit. Instead he saw his first girlfriend, whose father had spotted a footprint on the chimney, planted there one muddy night as Webster shoved his way into her room. Then the new student in his lab, who must be all of twenty-two, some awful name like Tiffany. She watched him with sad eyes, brought over slides and asked, could he help her? Silky blond hair slid across her neck, earrings tinkled, blouse gapped at her breasts as she bent down to watch what he was showing her.

He caught some on a slide, used the big lab microscope. Thrashing was all he saw at first, lots of mobility—no hope of failure there. He focussed in on one of them, nothing but a tail and a wish. Was he supposed to live its life? The rest of him just legs and feet to carry it around, get it properly injected, build a nest?

“Salmon, squid, all that stuff spawns and dies,” he told the creatures on the slide. He washed them off.

★

Lights burned in the living room when he got home, violin case in the corner by the couch. But she was not in any room. Checking the kitchen counters for a note, he picked up the phone and started to punch Calvin’s number, when he heard a small sound like a gasp. Following it up the hall, he tried the bedroom, then the bath.

She was in the empty tub, clothes on. His eyes adjusted to the dark—he saw a small box, not the new one but the old kind, blessed blue, tampons. Wings unfurled in his chest. Flinging aside the shower curtain, he put his arms around her in the cold tub, picked her up.

“Sweetheart,” he said. “Sweetheart.”

Carrying her to the bed, he folded around her. She felt so good! He pressed in close and put his nose against her head. She smelled warm, a little acrid, sweet.

“You bastard,” she said.

He was just hauling in a breath, and he went ahead and finished it. Okay. Okay, sure. He could feel it now, her skin clenched like starfish armor, *Echinodermata*, spiny to the touch. He pulled back to look at her.

“Why, exactly?”

Even in the dark, her eyes were fierce.

“Oh, come on. One grand gesture, as if that means anything. And then you were so cold to me. What would have happened in another month? You would have *slept* at the lab by then.”

His head hurt suddenly. He rubbed his forehead, but it didn't help.

“I tried to give you what you wanted.” That wasn't the whole story, but that was part of it. How could he explain? It was as if he had been tricked, or tricked himself, and then the trick had stopped.

She searched his face. “I didn't want to do it by myself. I thought if I just waited a few years . . . Men want children too, don't they, when they grow up?”

Name two, he might have said—but he could name them himself. Whole cultures of them, chanting on the evening news, demanding six sword-waving sons. Moslems, Hindus, Baptists, Mormons, Catholics, all responding to some urge he didn't feel, to swim upstream, be fruitful, multiply, make four where there were two, then six or eight or twelve, a baseball team of one man's progeny. The Pope travelled the world, saying a special mass for women who had borne fifteen, answering the call of God. Which God exactly, though? The one that made the manatee, the snow leopard, the dodo bird?

He felt staked to the bed. “We can do it, if you want. But I can't make myself want to. It doesn't work like that.”

She lay crumpled next to him. An hour seemed to pass. Then her body seemed to settle, like a door clicked closed. She looked calm, relaxed. Reaching out one hand, she gave his chest a pat, once, twice, with finality. It was a tiny gesture, but something lifted off in him. He was not such a bad guy! He was a friend to jellyfish, freshwater shrimp, and frogs. He had given life a chance. Life had its own reasons, and he would keep an eye on them. Raising his arm, the way he always did, he made room for her against his chest and waited for her to roll toward him.