SEA OF TINY LEAVES

There was this time I went camping.

I was sixteen, and I may have been in love. I was supposed to study for the SATs. My mother pressed me. Stanford. She wanted it. Because I was just like her. But I was not my mother. My mother worked sixty hours a week. When we sat at the table together, our talks ended in tears. I was no way like my mother.

The boy lived across the street. He was short, with pink skin. Wore Tevas and a belt with the letters OP on it. A shrimp kid who lacked a lot and yet I could not stop staring.

My mother was a lawyer. She claimed to read the most inscrutable people.

She said, “Keep your distance from that boy.”

I asked her why.

She told me not to ask why.

I said—*why*?

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Two weeks before my father got gone, I ran away. I ran away and my mother never knew. It was a failed run away. I was a failed runaway.

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The boy came to the yard one morning. It was June and the porch thermometer read one-oh-seven. The bougainvillea withered on the trellis. Grasshoppers made clicking sounds in the dry grass.

I was planting a garden. My mother loathed spice. I was planting a chile garden.

James was the boy’s name. He came to the front gate and rapped on the pole. He wasn’t wearing a shirt. I was sixteen. I could count his ribs. And his eyes—he had cool blue eyes. My father’s had been blue. Mine were black, like my mother’s.

He said “Hey” and I frowned. I frowned because I was on the spot and frowning was a kind of protection from feeling vulnerable.

“You should wear sunscreen,” I said.

“Do you have any?”

I gave him a look. Then I laughed.

I spent the next three weeks with him in secret.

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I got grounded. My mother had seen me with *the boy*. While my mother was at work, I went to his house. I got him to hold my hand. I got him to kiss me. Three weeks in, I wore the right shirt and bent the right way. And even though he turned away, I knew I had him.

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James’s father, Junior, thought it funny that I was Mexican. I thought it funny that he thought it funny. Junior made us laugh. And sometimes he was kind. On the way home from Carl’s Jr., he veered off the road to dodge a resting rattlesnake.

It is this thing that I remember—not just the other stuff.

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My father loved to camp. He would lay on the top of his sleeping bag, next to the fire, with his hands behind his head and he would look up and say, *Aaah*. Then I would do the same. I was his little girl, and I was his only son. I wanted my father to know I was like him.

My mother stayed home. She was raised in the city. She was a human rights lawyer and she was always busy. To camp in the forest was to waste precious time.

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There was a Southern Front sticker on the back window of their Wrangler. James told me they he and his father had come from Idaho to protect the border.

I said, “From what?”

He said, “You know.”

#

I am Mexican, Mexican enough. My father was Irish and my mother was Mexican. She never hesitated to tell me all the terrible things that happened to immigrants.

Mi madre digo que los dos fueron loco.

I may be painting an idiot’s picture of my past, and for that I blame age. I am older now, and less honest with myself.

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They invited me camping.

“On the San Pedro River,” James said.

The Pedro starts in Mexico. It comes out of the Sierra Madres, comes right across the border into Cochise.

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Mostly, I wanted to punish my mother. I told her I was sleeping at Fran’s. Fran was my friend from grade school. Fran and I hadn’t talked in years.

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Junior’s truck cab reeked of gas. My leg was pinned to hot metal but soon we picked up speed, heading south and east past rolling hills to Benson.

James said, “Saw a scorpion last time.”

The last scorpion I saw, my father put his hand out, and it struck his palm.

He died in a car accident. Lost control of his Corolla and went into the wall of a Circle K.

He was drunk. Or he wasn’t drunk. Was or wasn’t doesn’t matter. My mother blamed him. I blamed her. She blamed me.

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The mountains were hazed with dust and the sky looked like medicine. James brushed his fingers along my hand. I pulled away, playing coy. I slid an index finger over his arm hair. A game of who flinched first. Then, who was faster. I was faster.

The road crested. A jackrabbit stood on its haunches. We came up, hill among hills. Below were trucks and campers clustered like toys in a field of dust. My mother was a million miles away.

#

I peed. When I came back they were talking to someone.

“Charles, this is Tess,” Junior said.

Charles gave me an eye, reached out his hand.

“A picture of us,” he said.

Another man snapped a photo before I had a chance to think.

“Why’d he take a picture of me?” I said as I followed James up the trail.

“Who knows,” he said.

The trail turned. I heard a mockingbird, a Gambel’s quail. To the south, obscured by dust and shadow—Mexico.

I asked James, “So what do you think of me?”

“Why?”

“I mean, what do you think about me being here.”

“It’s good.”

“Why?”

“It means you’re a good—you know.”

“A good what?”

“I don’t know. A good whatever.”

#

Junior came up the trail.

“I figured you’d stay here tonight,” he said to James.

James said, “I wanna go.”

Junior shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“Go where?” I asked.

“What about her?” Junior said.

“Go where?” I asked

“Patrolling,” Junior said to me.

“Hunting,” James said at the same time as his father said *patrolling*.

I watched Junior’s face. It was a face that struggled with ten things at once.

Junior said to James, “We’ll talk later—show Tess around.”

“Hey,” I said to Junior, “I wanna go.”

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There were eight of us. Six men, two women. I am counting myself as a woman. The men carried AR-15s and Sig Sauers and talkies and binocs and mags and clips and belts and scopes and straps. Junior wore night vision googles. He looked like a character in a video game. They all did. I wondered if they thought they would die.

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After the accident, I never saw my father again.

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We found a dead man curled beneath a paloverde tree. He has naked and there were red marks on his back.

Junior said, “You don’t need to see this.”

But I saw it.

Dehydration was the cause of death, but desperation killed him.

Back at camp, I watched the fire on peoples’ faces. Soon the clouds rolled in. Soon it would rain.

I thought about my mother, about how she fought for people—how she would protect them. I’ve always thought it was better to protect than it was to hurt. I found it weird how people conflated and confused the two terms.

James handed me a plate of meat and potato salad.

“I’m not hungry,” I said, because I wasn’t.

I felt woozy, like I was grieving. Where had the dead man come from, who had he been with, where he was going? I thought about my grandmother, who had crossed to Texas a million years ago.

“C’mon,” James said. “Eat.”

I said, “What do you think about the dead man?”

I said it just like that.

James shrugged. “Saves us the trouble.”

I thought he was being ironic. I waited for a laugh. But there was no laugh. What an asshole thing to say. What trouble would that man have caused? And it was in that moment that I gave James my darkest look. And then I pushed him.

He fell hard.

Junior came over, lifted James out of the dust.

“What’s your problem?” he said to James.

I said, “I want to go home.”

James said I was being a *quote unquote* bitch.

I said, “I want to go home.”

Junior said, “She’s a guest here. And a girl.”

“I want to go home,” I said.

And for the first time since my father died, I wanted to cry.

I got up, started walking.

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Lightning in the far-off. Wind picking up. It was seven or ten miles to Highway 90. It was sixty or eighty or ninety miles to home. I walked in the rain in the dark. I walked in the mud.

I walked and I cried and I cursed my father for dying. And I cursed James and his father and everyone who saw victory in dead people. We chase these ideas, sometimes, but what are they?

Headlights.

They were coming for me; I was being hunted.

I got up. I got up and ran into the scrub. The truck sloshed past. Brake lights. The driver called out.

“Tessie!”

It was Junior.

“I’ll get you home.”

#

We listened to AM radio in the truck. He called his boy a noob. He called his boy a dope. I was cold and tired and past everything.

He told me a riddle. He said, “What can travel the world without leaving a corner?”

What travels, I thought, and what stays home? Who lives well and who dies with meaning? I thought about men with their night vision, dead men in the scrub. A creeping darkness over all of it.

“A shadow,” I said.

He shook his head. “A stamp.”

It was late, rain coming down in torrents, when he pulled up to our house.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I made a mistake.”

I opened the door and paused. “Why do you hunt immigrants?” I asked.

“I want people to do it the right way. I don’t mean no harm.”

“But you *do* harm,” I said. “You know that, right?”

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I got the key into the latch but before I opened the door it was torn from me. My mother, her make-up a mess. I fell into her. She pulled me close.

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“*Mija*,” my mother said. It was morning, a week later.

I came out to the porch where she sat on the wrought iron bench. Rain fell in a white sheen. Monsoons.

“Look,” she said. I followed her eyes to the garden.

Tiny green leaves. A sea of them. I sat, looped my arm around hers. His skin was cool, soft. I felt it all inside me. It swelled, and I broke. My mother touched my hair, my ear, my neck.

“*Todos son chiles*,” I said.

Across the street, James’s house stood empty.

My mother had seen the photo—Charles and I on the front page of the *Southern Front* newsletter.

She wanted to sue.

I said no.

She listened, though I bet it was hard to listen.

The rain filled the divots that my knees had once made in the garden soil.

“Your father loved to garden.”

I wiped my tears on her blouse.

“Yeah,” I said.

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