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Rachel

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Rachel · Cheryl L. Dragel

THE SCENE IS ALWAYS one of cinematic detachment. If it were a novel, I would be the self-effacing narrator, hovering somewhere over the action but never coming into view. The scene is predictable. Its appearance in the back of my mind comes when I am feeling wretched about one thing or another: the book review accepted for publication when I could bear reading little more than half the book, the words shouted over the phone at G. and the crackle of the connection between us, the sun slanting in a broken arc over the bureau when I am not sure it would be in my best interest to wake up that morning.

We are standing in a sandy clearing in coastal Virginia. By we I mean my brother, some other children, and a few counselors at the day camp where our parents deposit us before going to the Sixth Annual Health and Wellness Conference in the hotel across Atlantic Avenue. At the day camp we practice the “wellness” philosophy: play volleyball, massage each other’s feet with almond oil, bury one another up to the neck in sand on the assumption that we will benefit from the healing properties of heat.

In this particular scene, we are playing volleyball while our parents gather on the beach for an end-of-the-week lobster boil. The counselors have built a campfire. Later we will roast marshmallows and tell stories. But for the moment, the counselors are out of earshot and two boys have taken down the volleyball net. They are using it to tie up one boy’s sister. She is small and thin, probably no more than seven years old, and she looks like a rag doll as they flop her this way and that, tying first her arms and then her legs. At one end of the clearing is a steep, rocky hill. The boys carry the girl, who by this time has ceased screaming, to the edge of the slope. We all gather to watch her roll down the hill, her head bobbing curiously as it hits a rock or a branch.

How the girl gets back up the hill remains a convenient blur in my memory. She is not seriously hurt, but badly bruised and shaken. The camp counselors are stunned. After all, we are good children. Guilt is the dominant expression on our faces as they demand to know whose idea it was. No one comes forward to take the blame and a heavy silence settles over the remainder of the evening. Staring into the campfire, I replay the scene over and over in my head: the struggle, the going-limp, the descent.

I do not notice that the marshmallow at the end of my stick has erupted into flames.

That night, I cannot sleep. "Who could have thought of such a thing?" demands the faceless counselor in the back of my mind. "Me," I whisper into the darkness. The single syllable rises on air.

Under sins of commission, the Virginia incident is linked closely with another. At an idyllic resort called Shetek secluded in the woods of Wisconsin, I spend a week with my family doing idyllic things: spending sunny days on the lake, walking through the woods at dusk. One day before dinner I meet a little girl named Dawn. She has yellow hair the color of sunlight and a soft pretty laugh that floats on the wind. Holding out her thumbnail, she points proudly to the dot of red polish that her mother has applied.

"Look how it shines in the sun," she says, holding her hand at an odd angle to catch the slanting rays. "My mother gave me these." She pulls a pair of white lace gloves from the pocket of her shorts. She pirouettes in the circle of grass that lies between our cabins. "I'm magic," she whispers in a voice barely audible, even though I am standing less than two feet away from her. From that moment, I am entranced.

In the intensity of days spent away from home, Dawn and I become fast friends. The hour just before dark is ours to mold as we will. A loon on the lake calls out, the voice of another loon answers back. If we carry a flashlight down to the water and hold its beam directly perpendicular to the surface, fish take flight in every direction like the sparks from a fire on which another log has been thrown.

One night Dawn's father gives us a kit for a small paper house. Paper and glue and match sticks are our building blocks, and soon the house begins to take shape. It is a tedious process, for we must be careful to glue the paper walls together exactly right the first time or the house will be ruined.

"There are two little girls who live in the house, just like us," Dawn says. "And a dog like Red." Red is her family's Irish setter.

"Don't forget the mother, the father, and the grandfather," I say. Dawn's grandfather lives with them at their home near Milwaukee. He has not come to Shetek. Dawn says she is glad.

The windows of the house are dark. Outside, a sudden wind comes up, whipping dust and leaves. Dawn imagines her grandfather moving through the rooms of the house, looking for someone who is not there. He is wringing his hands in the dark when Dawn decides the house should have light. From her pocket she pulls a book of matches. "Lakeside Diner," the cover says, "Open 24 hours, day and night." Her father got these in Milwaukee, she explains as she drops one lit match onto the roof. Flames spread quickly to the upstairs bedrooms. The windows curl inward like rotting paper teeth. We watch the walls crumble until there is nothing but a weightless soul of white ash where the house had been. By the time the firemen arrive, a crowd of neighbors has gathered to watch as the last thin ribbons of smoke curl themselves upward toward the nighttime sky. The firemen are sorry, they tell the family returning from a school choir concert. Grandfather did not have time to escape.

A rusty glider lies not far from the cabins. We are co-pilots of an airplane one day, passengers on a dog-powered bobsled the next. Though many other little girls are spending their time with their families at Shetek, Dawn and I do not meet them. We are Ladies of the Secret Order, a society of two, until an older woman dressed in a blowsy, flower-strewn dress approaches us, a brown-eyed girl in tow.

"This is my granddaughter, Rachel. We see you out here and think you might like to have another playmate, yes?"

Dawn and I stare at each other. The woman's accent is thick and strange. We cannot very well say no, for it would be disrespectful. Out of necessity an introduction is made.

"This is Cheryl and my name is Dawn."

"We're both in second grade," I add.

"Rachel has only five years. You will all play nicely, I'm sure." At this the woman in the flower-strewn dress lumbers back to her cabin, leaving her granddaughter behind.

We begin to glide again, this time the weight of the glider uneven, for Rachel is sitting on Dawn's seat. I must pump harder to equal the height they can reach with the strength of two.

"My grandfather lives with us," Dawn says to the girl. "Does your grandmother live with you, too?"

Rachel says she lives with her grandmother. Her mother and father are

dead. When she speaks, she does not look at us, but at the floorboards of the glider. She has a slight lisp. Maybe she is self-conscious about it, I think. Or maybe she dislikes talking about her mother and father and that is why she does not look at us. Either way, I cannot resist asking the question.

“Do you always talk like that?”

The girl looks up at me, confused. “What?” she asks softly.

Dawn picks up on the question, a peculiar spark in her eyes. “Do you always talk with that funny sound in your voice? Listen,” Dawn says, “we pronounce our words correctly.” She recites the beginning of *Beauty and the Beast*, her favorite fairy tale: Once upon a time there was a man with three daughters, the youngest and fairest of whom was called Beauty. . . .

Rachel looks from one to the other of us before running all the way back to her cabin. Dawn and I laugh with malicious glee at what we have done, both of us agreeing that we did not want another companion. Besides, she was only five.

The following afternoon we are not prepared for what happens. Once again, Dawn and I are gliding in the glider. Rachel’s grandmother approaches us, clad in the same flowered-print dress. From where we sit, Rachel is visible behind the screen door of her cabin. We stop the glider.

“You girls,” Rachel’s grandmother begins accusingly. “What right have you to say such things to my Rachel?” Was it not enough, she asks, that we were older and that Rachel was shy? Neither one of us can say anything. Suddenly the intricacy of the pattern on that flower-strewn dress demands more attention than what Rachel’s grandmother is saying.

“Because someone is different a little does not make it right. What kind of girls you are?” she asks, shaking her head in disapproval of us both. Her accent prevents neither one of us from knowing exactly what it is she wants to say. “What kind of girls,” she says again before walking away.

After the things Rachel’s grandmother says, Dawn and I are guarded with one another. We do not speak of the incident, but it remains as an undercurrent that determines the tide of our conversation. After I return home, the image of the girl rolling down the hill in Virginia and the pattern of haphazardly strewn blooms on the dress Rachel’s grandmother wore

become intertwined chaotically in my memory. For a long time afterward when I close my eyes at night, I see a girl tumbling down a slope strewn with gross caricatures of flowers.