

Nest

Nest

She knew she would have to kill them. They were curled up all together in the bottom drawer in the back corner of the kitchen, the drawer where she stored root vegetables and the slowly wrinkling apples. They weren't as small as field mice but she didn't think they were rats either; they were mice, but somewhere in between, and it was a nest. They had been there long enough to become comfortable and well-fed. A tightly wound pile of tails and round brown fur bodies, ignorant of her gaze, fast asleep.

Wrapping Peter's old flannel robe more tightly against herself, Willa sat down. The kitchen was pre-dawn chilly, not yet warmed by the smell of coffee, steamed milk or the light against the window. Since Peter had - what? *left?* *vanished?* most days she settled on *gone away*. She had been sleeping only for a few hours at night, succumbing long after midnight to blackout sleep then waking up disoriented in the shallow end of the morning. Without Peter her dreams were a bunch of balloons with no fist to moor their strings.

Nest

Willa's eyes strayed back to the drawer. She had left it cracked open, just as she'd found it. There was no way she would poison them. She wouldn't abide poison in the house. If she had to kill them, she would do it honestly.

Best not to tell Frannie, she thought. Frannie would be upset by the possibility of rodents. Not because of squeamishness, her daughter was pragmatic, but because she would hate the threat to the grains, oats and particularly to her carefully organized baking supplies. Willa went to the cupboard and checked all the shelves, wondered exactly how long some of the breakfast cereal boxes had been there, and then checked Frannie's supply of baking ingredients, her fancy new flours, specific sugars, various types of expensive nuts. There were no droppings, no nibbled bags, no evidence of the comings and goings of tiny paws and teeth.

Poised between high school and college or whatever was coming next, Frannie seemed to have embraced sleep as her one true vocation. She would be asleep for hours yet. Willa didn't mind. As long as Frannie was in the house, Peter's abrupt absence was less jarring. David, her serious child, was already two years into a carpentry

Nest

apprenticeship and living in his own apartment. Though her daughter's total dedication to sleep may well have been a form of avoidance, to Willa it felt like hibernation. A season of rest between high school and all that was approaching. Willa could still see traces of baby in her daughter's flushed sleeping cheeks, but she felt the inevitability of time's pull as tangibly as the pressured air that precedes the arrival of a subway train.

Let her sleep. Willa moved quietly. Still culling cereal boxes, she thought about her twenties: broke, solitary, filled with a sense of urgency to become someone, make something of herself, her fresh degree in design tugging her in various urgent yet directionless directions. He son, so singular, so focused, and Frannie, entirely dedicated to her present moment, were opposite extremes of Willa's own past self. The self whose path sensible, solid Peter had altered forever. *And now he's done it again*, the cruel corner of her mind observed.

Fruit Loops? She unfolded the thick wax bag inside the box. Sniffed. *Stale*. So stale they smelled only of a lingering cloying sweetness, of sawdust and corn, like a

Nest

fairground after the carnival has left town. She reached into the box and pulled out a handful of the pastel O's.

Moving softly across the kitchen floor, Willa carefully sprinkled the Fruit Loops into the partly-open drawer with the mouse nest. Maybe if they were fed they would leave the rest of the kitchen alone. God knows the artificial colours and flavours were poisons of a sort. The mice didn't move. They looked braided, so tightly were their bodies wound.

As she stood still and silent the sun split the clouds, opening seams of livid pink and violent peach. Peter's robe was little comfort against the dawn chill and Willa felt herself shaking ever so slightly, became aware of her back teeth clamped together, her shoulders hunched hard and high. She consciously exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Where was he and when was he coming back?

Coffee. Make coffee.

Keep moving.

Nest

The sun slipped through the seams. Willa leaned back against the counter, cupped her mug and settled her gaze on the little room off the kitchen, now filling with dawn. There was a design on her workbench. It was a pattern of Victorian lampshades in silhouette, black against robin's egg blue. The finished wallpaper was going to be for a window display in a chain of clothing stores Willa had never heard of. But Frannie had. When Willa told her the name of the store, Frannie's had yelped with excitement like a puppy, delighted with her mother's cleverness.

The moment had startled Willa. She didn't remember the last time she had felt clever. Or even particularly noticed. During the past two years Peter had seemed too far to reach. Willa felt perpetually taut, sensitive to sudden changes in the wind, like a suspension bridge stretched impossibly over a vast crevasse of running water. To all of them, only a means of getting to where they were going. Now she was left vibrating with Peter's just-gone footsteps, tethered to Frannie on one end, and uncertainty on the other.

More coffee.

Find clothes and slippers.

Nest

Stop shaking.

Willa shoved her feet into the felt-lined boots she had kicked off yesterday running to answer a ringing phone. It hadn't been Peter. She considered her workbench, squeezed into this tiny glowing room, surrounded by corkboards and the detritus of inspiration perpetually disrupted. She shrugged out of the dressing gown and pulled a soft, hooded wool sweater off the back of her chair. At a glance her slight and disheveled hooded form might have a passed for a teenager, but only the crows outside the window could see her. Willa cradled the coffee mug's warmth against her breastbone and watched the morning crawl in orange streaks like fingers across her sketches.

A distant engine sound. Each time a car's tires crunched the gravel in the lane, Willa felt herself contract in apprehension. One breath. Two. The car passed.

Not him.

Goddamn it.

She sat down. Was it possible to send Frannie to cooking school or college or to Europe with wallpaper

Nest

designs? He had halved their savings. How was she going to manage? The coffee turned cold in her stomach.

Did he plan this?

Was he sick and had never wanted to tell her?

Her mind kept moving back and forth over the same terrain of questions. She sketched a mouse. Who would buy mouse wallpaper? Maybe for a child's bedroom. Or whimsical bathroom in a French café. When had she last been to a café? It was too hard to go out right now. She made more mice and gave them delicate oval ears.

Was there a woman? Several? An affair that had gone on for years and years while she, blind, had busied herself with volunteer boards, groceries, and shuttling teenagers?

Did they meet in fancy restaurants? The ones Peter had always told her were a pretentious waste of money?

She gave the mice bright eyes like onyx apple seeds. A black cat, with a question-mark tail.

The calendar above her desk needed to be turned to a new month. Five weeks now. Five weeks since he had said

Nest

he'd be gone for one. A fishing trip. Time to get some perspective. And she had understood! Wanted that for him too. Packed power bars, the ones Frannie had learned to make so well with the coconut, made sure he had his good socks, clean warm shirts. She had felt him struggling for so long, like he was carrying a bag of eels inside himself. Felt his withdrawal. But two years were small compared to all that had gone before. So she kept things going, hoping a perfect family dinner or a quiet Sunday morning might bring him back. It was so much easier to focus on the everyday pulse than to take the temperature of the hurt in Peter's complicated silence. Still. Love does not go gently.

Apparently it goes fishing. That voice again.

Stop.

The one week had turned into two, the worry into fear, then panic and confusion. He had deactivated his cell phone account during the second week. Sold the car for cash to a dealership a four days' drive away. So that ruled out dead. The police were no longer involved. When they returned his phone, recovered from the fishing lodge where he'd been seen - *alone, alive!* - they implied over friendly coffee in

Nest

her kitchen during which they did not quite meet her eyes that he was having some kind of mid-life crisis. Leave him alone and he'll come back, they had advised. Only one of them had seemed ashamed.

Sure. He'll come home.

Of course he will.

And then what?

She added extravagant whiskers to the mice. The sun had passed over the desk and she was shivering again. Frannie would be up in a while. And hungry. Everything was so vital to her right now, so immediate, she was a constant demand. Yet Frannie had shrugged off her father's betrayal - *no don't say that to her* - her father's absence with surprising lack of apparent hurt. What was she thinking?

What will this do to her?

Keep going.

Breakfast.

In the day-lit kitchen Willa got out the small pot with the sturdy handle and heavy copper bottom. Perfect for oatmeal.

Nest

Halfway to the baking cupboard for the oats, Willa turned on her heel. Checked the drawer. The mice were still there, slightly rearranged. She reached quietly for the tea towel draped over a nearby chair and in one swift motion she scooped up the nest.

Their bodies were warm, she couldn't think about their softness. All of them still wrapped in the tea towel and cupped in her two hands, she placed them gently in the sink. Then, knowing this was what she had to do, *now, right now*, she brought the small pot down with all the force of a mother's love. There was a yielding, a hollowness just before she felt the popping. A sound like a moan escaped her and she brought the pot down again, certain this was the right way, breaking their tiny bones with all the mercy she could bear.

Nest