

trucks. That ridge is probably the safest hiding place in the world."

Cub rolled his eyes, and she felt overwhelmed with futile energy, like a dog chasing its tail. She could see this was going the way of all their arguments, poised to step from the ground of true complaints into the quicksand of trivial nonsense. With full righteous outrage intact. "You and your dad ought to lay eyes on your own property once in a while, is all I'm trying to say."

"Why are you nagging me about this all of a sudden?"

"I don't know. There's just reasons. There could be more treasure than you think in your own backyard."

He shook his head. "What you're saying is what you always say. Work harder, Cub, go faster, Cub."

"Is not."

"Well, what am I supposed to do? The ATV busted an axle last month."

"Busted an axle all by itself, as I understand it. With no help from your drunk friends."

"Nobody was entirely drunk."

Here we go, she thought, into the quicksands of stupid. She stood up. "I'm going in the house. I just thought I'd mention that God gave you feet, to set one down in front of the other, if memory serves me. Seems like you'd go up there and look at what you're selling off before it's gone. It's just good business."

"Good business. Since when did you get your business-lady degree?"

The contempt startled her. That wasn't even Cub, he was just parroting his father in some last-ditch attempt at manhood. She made for the stairs without looking back. "I hear you. Good business, and it's none of mine."

A thicket of reasons led them up the mountain, and Dellarobia's insistence was one strand of it. Bear and Peanut Norwood's mis-

trust of the logging company, and possibly of each other, comprised the rest. Four men in hard hats had flagged the boundaries of the section proposed for logging and declared that it was up to the Turnbows and Norwoods to see that property lines were respected. The hard-hat men, who were subcontractors for the real decision-makers in California, came from Knoxville in a panel truck that said Money Tree Industries. Suspicion was only natural.

Cub rallied to repair the all-terrain vehicle so they wouldn't have to make the hike on foot. It took four of his buddies and nearly a week of evenings to replace the broken axle. Dovey observed to Dellarobia that there was no end to the amount of effort a man would put into saving himself some work. On a Friday morning the expedition piled onto the ATV with Cub at the wheel, Bear riding shotgun, and Peanut Norwood in the cargo bucket hugging his knees, insufficiently shaped like a bale of hay to fit in there very well. Dellarobia stood at her kitchen window watching the squat vehicle crawl up the steep pasture slope like a broad, flat toad with three men clinging to its back. Her life had become some kind of fairy tale, in which her family members set off one by one to meet their destiny on the High Road. She couldn't have said what she hoped the men would discover up there, but her distraction was acute. Ten minutes after they left, she found herself folding clothes from the dirty-laundry basket while the clean ones sat in the dryer.

Less than an hour passed before the men came back, astounded, to collect their wives as witnesses.

There was no question of everyone riding in the vehicle. They would have to walk. Dellarobia surprised herself by asking to go along, despite the sticky fact of Cordelia eating cereal in her high chair, and Preston needing to be picked up from kindergarten at noon. She asked anyway. Dovey was off work that morning and could come over to mind the kids. Cub made his parents hold their horses while they waited the ten minutes it took for Dovey to get there. Cub was surprisingly resolute on Dellarobia's behalf.

Her heart raced as they mounted the hill, on various accounts. Mostly for the strangeness of reenacting this walk she'd so recently taken with outrageous intent, this time with husband and family in tow. It felt like a reality show, poised to expose and explode her serial failures. The wife who keeps having inappropriate crushes, falling off the marriage wagon, if only in her mind. They navigated the mud at the top of the pasture where the sheep had beaten down the perimeter, cursed with their certainty of greener grass on the other side. Like herself, she thought, when she'd last slipped through this gate. Like a dog in a yard, pacing the edges of her confines to the tune of "Get me out of here." Cub held the gate open for her, and she couldn't meet his eyes.

Beefy, ruddy-faced Bear led the way, the platoon leader. He'd served in the military ages ago and carried certain vestiges: the haircut, the weight lifting, the blood pressure. He'd held on to a muscular build, despite his weight and age, and the natural su-premacy that went with a frame of six feet, four inches. Hester bought his trousers from a place called Man of Measure, on rare shopping trips to Knoxville. Cub was nearly as tall but managed to fit into regular Wranglers, size 38-36, which to Dellarobia sounded more like the shape of a TV screen than a man. She assumed it was the tour in Vietnam that accounted for the difference in men like Burley Turnbow Sr. and Jr., so similar in their dimensions and opposite in bearing. Like those boxes that guaranteed they were equally filled, but contents may have settled. She could hear Cub huffing and puffing now as he brought up the rear, saying little. The two older men gave him no chance. Bear and Peanut Norwood were talking a lot but failing to explain anything, mostly contradicting one another's accounts or declaring no explanation was possible. Cub was the first of them to say they thought it was insects.

Hester wheeled on him. "If you're hauling me up this mountain to look at a bug, son, I will slap you nakeder than what you were born with."

Cub pressed on, despite the threat. "It's not regular bugs, Mother. It's something pretty. Wouldn't you say it was, Dad?" Bear and Norwood, if they could agree on nothing else, both stated that was true, it was awful pretty. Or would be, if there weren't so many they covered up the place.

"You won't believe it," Cub warned. "It's like something taking over the world."

They took the High Road in single file and the men settled down, directing their energy to the climb. A gobbler called from high on the ridge and a female answered, wild turkeys getting down to their family business. Normally one of the men would have wished aloud for his rifle, but today no one did. Dellarobia couldn't remember a sadder-looking November. The trees had lost their leaves early in the unrelenting rain. After a brief fling with coloration they dropped their tresses in clumps like a chemo patient losing her hair. A few maroon bouquets of blackberry leaves still hung on, but the blue asters had gone to white fluff and the world seemed drained. The leafless pear trees in Hester's yard had lately started trying to bloom again, bizarrely, little pimply outbursts of blossom breaking out on the faces of the trees. Summer's heat had never really arrived, nor the cold in its turn, and everything living now seemed to yearn for sun with the anguish of the unloved. The world of sensible seasons had come undone.

At least there was no rain at the moment. Dellarobia was happy to feel warmth on her shoulders through her jacket, and a strength of daylight she'd all but forgotten, even now as they entered deeper woods. The sky was not blue but the cold white of high clouds in a thin reflective sheet. She could have used her prescription sunglasses, if she could remember what junk drawer they were in. But definitely, she was wearing her glasses today. Whatever was up here, she planned to see it clearly. She spied some ribbons of orange flagging tape dangling from the trees, but the men were paying no heed right now to boundaries. Bear kept them moving at a clip. Dellarobia was next to last in the

line, behind her mother-in-law and ahead of Cub. She was dying for a rest or a smoke, ideally both, but would drop dead before she'd be the one to ask. She had barely been invited. Peanut Norwood gripped his chest in a promising way, so maybe he'd make them stop. Forget about wiry Hester in her yellow cowboy boots. Onward Christian soldiers. Dellarobia averted her eyes from Hester's skinny bottom in sagging Levi's, and trusted that Cub was finding her own rear view more pleasing. Whenever she complained of being so small, Cub told her she was a sports car: no junk in the trunk, but all you need for speed. Maybe that's how he was keeping his feet moving. Back before marriage, she'd known the power of being physically admired, changing the energy of a room by walking into it. She wondered if that was her problem, missing that. Falling for guys who flattered her. It seemed so shallow and despicable, she hoped that was not the measure of her worth. She peered off through the woods, seeing nothing altered in the last two weeks except for a greater barrenness among the trees. And herself, of course. Nothing had changed except every conscious minute and a strange fire in her dreams.

They rounded a bend in the trail and could see the whole dark green mountain range laid out above them, stippled with firs along the bumpy spine. Limestone cliffs erupted here and there, gray teeth grinning through the dark trees. Wherever sun fell on them, the tops of the knolls faintly glowed. The color could have been a trick of the light. But wasn't. She turned, risking a glance at Cub's face.

"Is that it?" she asked quietly. "That shine on the trees?"

He nodded. "You knew, didn't you?"

"How would I?"

He said no more. They kept moving. Her guilty mind ran down a hundred alleys, wondering what he implied. He knew she'd been up here? No possibility made sense: mind-reading, sleep-talking, these things happened in movies. She'd told only Dovey, who honestly would endure torture without betraying

her. They entered the chilly darkness of the fir forest. Its density was so different from the open sky and widely spaced trunks of the leafless deciduous woods.

"Why in the world did these evergreens get planted up here?"

Dellarobia asked. She needed to hear someone talk.

"Bear's daddy wasn't the only one," Hester said. "There was other ones that put them in. Peanut, didn't your daddy plant some?"

Dellarobia had vaguely understood it to be a touchy topic, but now she got it. The family joke, a Christmas tree boondoggle. Probably she should not have asked.

"The extension fellows told him to," Norwood said. "The chestnuts was getting blighty, and they's looking for something new to put in. The Christmas tree market."

"Christmas tree market," Bear spat. "In the nineteen-forties, when a man could cut a weed cedar out of his woodlot for free. They couldn't get two bits for them. It wasn't worth hauling them out."

The old firs stood fifty feet tall now, ghosts of Christmas past. An image landed in her head with those words, the hooded skeleton pointing at gravestones that scared the bejesus out of her in childhood. A library book, Charles Dickens. But that was the Yet to Come ghost, and these were just geriatric trees. Ghosts of bad timing, if anything. She wasn't going to bring it up, but she knew some farmers were planting Christmas trees again, hiring Mexican workers for the winter labor. Presumably the same men who showed up in summers to work tobacco. They used to go home in winter and now strayed year-round, like the geese at Great Lick that somehow quit flying south. She'd seen these men in hard-luck kinds of places like the Cash Rite, which she and Dovey called Ass Bite, a Feathertown storefront where she sometimes had to go for a substantially clipped advance on Cub's paycheck if the bills came in too close together. Christmas tree farms were just proof that every gone thing came back around again, with a worse pay scale.

Conversation ceased while they mounted a steep section of the rutted trail, then came to the flat section she recognized as the spot where she'd stopped for a smoke. She scanned the ground, knowing Cub would recognize the filter of her brand if he saw it. She felt strung out from nerves and exhaustion. Soon they would round the mountainside and gain the view of the valley, and then what? Several trees along the path bore the bristly things she'd seen before, the fungus, if that's what it was, but the men seemed not to notice. They looked ahead, picking up the pace.

Hester seemed increasingly put out, to be dragged from her routine. She hummed steadily under her breath in a thin, monotonous way. Some hymn. Or a show tune—with Hester there was no telling. Dellarobia could not imagine humming or anything else that required extra oxygen. They were all out of shape except Hester, who stayed miraculously shipshape on her regimen of Mountain Dew and Camel Lights. Dellarobia counted steps to make the time pass, watching her feet. She noticed little darts in the trail, first one and then more, scattered on the ground like litter. They were the same orange as the flagging tape but made of something brittle that crunched underfoot. Little V-shaped points, like arrows, aimed in every possible direction, as if scattered here for the purpose of sheer confusion. To get people lost in the woods.

They rounded the bend to the overlook and came into the full sight of it. These golden darts filled the whole of the air, swirling like leaves in a massive storm. Wings. The darts underfoot also were wings. *Butterflies*. How had she failed to see them? She felt stupid, or blind, in a way that went beyond needing glasses. Unreceptive to truth. She'd been willing to take in the run of emotions that stood up the hairs on her neck, the wonder, but had shuttered her eyes and looked without seeing. The density of the butterflies in the air now gave her a sense of being underwater, plunged into a deep pond among bright fishes. They filled the sky. Out across the valley, the air itself glowed

golden. Every tree on the far mountainside was covered with trembling flame, and that, of course, was butterflies. She had carried this vision inside herself for so many days in ignorance, like an unacknowledged pregnancy. The fire was alive, and incomprehensibly immense, an unbounded, uncountable congregation of flame-colored insects.

This time they revealed themselves in movement, as creatures in flight. That made the difference. The treetops and ravines all appeared in strange relief, exposed by the trick of air as a visible quantity. Air filled with quivering butterfly light. The space between trees glittered, more real and alive than the trees themselves. The scaly forest still bore the same bulbous burden in its branches she'd seen before, even more of it, if possible. The drooping branches seemed bent to the breaking point under their weight. Of *butterflies*. The verity of that took her breath. A million times nothing weighed nothing. Her mind confronted a mathematics she'd always thought to be the domain of teachers and pure invention.

"Great day in the morning," Hester said, looking stricken.

"There you go," Bear said. "Whatever the hell that is, it can't be a damn bit of good for logging."

"I'd say it would gum up their equipment," Norwood agreed.

"Or we might run into one of those government deals. Something endangered."

"No sir," said Bear. "I believe there's more of them than we've got people."

The numbers could not be argued. Butterflies rested and crawled even on the path around their feet, giving the impression of twitchy, self-automated dead leaves marching across a forest floor. Dellarobia squatted down and waved her hand over one, expecting it to startle and fly, but it stayed in place, wings closed. Then opened wide to the sudden reveal: *orange*. Four wings, with the symmetry of a bow-tied shoelace. Preston had spent all of a recent morning trying to tie a bow, biting his lower lip in concentration, but here was perfection without effort. He

would love to see this. She let it crawl onto her hand and held it close to her eyes. The orange wings were scrolled with neat black lines, like liquid eyeliner, expertly applied. In almost thirty years of walking around on the grass of the world, she couldn't recall having spent two minutes alone with a butterfly.

It flew, and she stood up, meeting the unguarded eyes of both Hester and Bear. They seemed expectant, or even accusing, as if it might be up to Dellarobia to arrange this nonsensical sight into something ordinary and real. She couldn't imagine it. Cub stared at her too, through the moving light, and then startled her by pulling her to him, his arm around her shoulders.

"Mother, Dad, listen here. This is a miracle. She had a vision of this."

Bear scowled. "The hell."

"No, Dad, she did. She foretold of it. After the shearing we were up talking in the barn, and she vowed and declared we had to come up here. That's why I kept on telling you we should. She said there was something big up here in our own backyard."

Dellarobia felt a dread of her secrets. She recalled only her impatience, speaking to Cub in anger that night, telling him anything could be up here. Terrorists or blue trees.

Hester peered into her face as if trying to read in bad light. "Why would he say that? That you foretold of it."

A movement of clouds altered the light, and all across the valley, the butterfly skin of the world transfigured in response, opening all the wings at once to the sun. A lifting brightness swept the landscape, flowing up the mountainside in a wave. Dellarobia opened her mouth and released a soft pant, anticipatory gusts of breath that could have become speech or laughter, or wailing. She couldn't give it shape.

"Here's your vision. I see a meddling wife." Bear shook his head in weary disgust, a gesture that defined him, like the dog-tags he still wore after everyone else had given up on his war. A large and mighty man among the trifling, that was Bear's drill. "You all need to get down off your high horses," he said. "We're

going to spray these things and go ahead. I've got some DDD saved back in the basement."

"You've got 3-D in your basement?" asked Norwood.

"DDT," Cub told him. "Dad, that stuff has been against the law for more than my whole life. No offense, but it must be something else you've got stored."

"Why do you think I saved it up? I knew it would be hard to get."

"That stuff's bound to go bad on you," Hester argued. "After this many years."

"Woman, how is poison going to go bad? You reckon it'll get toxic?" Bear laughed at his own joke. No one else did. Cub normally covered like a cur under this tone from his father, but was strangely unyielding now.

"There's not enough spray in the world to kill that many bugs, Dad. That might not be the thing to do."

"I guess you've got money to make the equipment loan, then." Bear's eyes were the color of unpainted tin, and exactly that cold. Dellarobia kept her mouth shut. She knew they had received a down payment on the logging, already forwarded in part to the bank and the taxes. Two places, along with the grave, that didn't give back if you changed your mind.

"Listen, Dad. There's a reason for everything."

"That's true, Bear," Hester said. "This could be the Lord's business."

Cub seemed to flinch, turning to Dellarobia. "That's what *she* said. We should come up here and have a look, because it was the Lord's business."

Dellarobia plumbed her brain for what he might have heard her say, but came up empty. Once, in bed, he'd asked what she was smiling at with her eyes closed, and she'd mentioned colors moving around like fire. Only that. Cub now gazed at the sky.

"It's like the tenth wonder of the world," he said. "People would probably pay to see these things."

"That they might," Norwood agreed.

"We should wait till they fly off," Cub declared, as if he'd made such decisions before. "I bet we can get that much grace out of the company, Dad."

Bear exhaled a hiss of doubt. "What if they won't fly off?"

"I don't know." Cub still held onto Dellarobia by the shoulders. "Y'all just need to see the Lord's hand in this and trust in His bidding. Like she said."

This boldness was so unlike him, she wondered if Cub was play-acting, tormenting her as a reprisal. But deceptions were beyond her husband's range. He just held her there like a shield in front of his chest. Hester and Bear were scarcely more than an arm's length away, and even that small distance between them filled now with butterflies, like water through a crevice. In every inch of the air they were moving down-mountain along this path, tumbling, a rush of air, a river in flood. She observed something like a diagram of wind resistance around her father-in-law's great bulk, made visible by the butterflies that followed smooth, linear paths over and around him. The people, she and the others here, were human boulders in the butterfly-filled current. They had waded into a river of butterflies and the flood gave no heed, the flood rushed on to the valley, answerable to naught but its own pull. Butterflies crossed her field of vision continuously at close range, black-orange flakes that made her blink, and they merged in a chaotic blur in the distance, and she found it frankly impossible to believe what her eyes revealed to her. Or her ears: the unending rustle, like a taffeta dress.

Hester's eyes dropped from her son's face to Dellarobia's, and what could possibly happen next, she had no idea. For years she'd crouched on a corner of this farm without really treading into Turnbow family territory, and now here she stood, dead on its center. She felt vaguely like a hostage in her husband's grip, as if police megaphones might come out and the bullets would fly. Looking down at her feet made her dizzy, because of butterfly shadows rolling like pebbles along the floor of a fast stream. The illusion of current knocked her off balance. She

raised her eyes to the sky instead, and that made the others look up too, irresistibly led, even Bear. Together they saw light streaming through glowing wings. Like embers, she thought, a flood of fire, the warmth they had craved so long. She felt her breathing rupture again into laughter or sobbing in her chest, sharp, vocal exhalations she couldn't contain. The sounds coming out of her veered toward craziness.

The two older men stepped back as if she'd slapped them.

"Lord Almighty, the girl is receiving grace," said Hester, and Dellarobia could not contradict her.