

Going for Wood

MOLLY VAUX

I.

I would never have chosen a window seat, but there I was, staring at great banks of clouds while the plane, rocked by invisible currents, sailed upward.

“Have your babies now,” I’d wanted to say to Leila. Apricots and plums were strewn across the wooden table. Drying, she told me, so there’d be fruit for the winter. All well and good, I thought. But what was she doing? She was drawing them. Drawing withering fruit, for days, alone inside the casita.

Casita—a little house where a child could play. But the little house, which I have paid for, has betrayed me. Somewhere inside, a pipe has burst and the life has drained out of it.

I wanted to ask, “What is paper? What can those surfaces give you to equal a cord binding you to a child?” I imagine her turning away as though she couldn’t hear me, as though she believes that her life belongs simply to her, when so clearly we all belong to each other.

“How can an artist spend an entire day drawing?” I asked Daniel when he came home from teaching. He was lighting kindling in the corner fireplace. Leila had gone for a walk though the sun had already set and the fire was flickering weakly. I pulled my jacket close to me.

“That’s just what they do,” Daniel said.

“Life needs to have a structure,” I said, and just then Leila came in, half her face covered by a dark woolen hat.

“Well, you two confound me,” I said, although I was feeling more thwarted than confounded. “I need a glass of wine.” Daniel opened the pinot noir that I’d brought and poured it into three glasses. He sat down and began scraping a small piece of metal with a pen. He seemed oblivious of Leila. She was cutting vegetables at the counter and, indeed, she seemed not to need anything from him.

She had given me her sly smile when she came in. She thinks that she’s keeping a secret, but I know what it is. The whole day I was striving to encourage her to be a mother. I thought, she’ll be grateful to me in the end. I didn’t see until the evening that there’s a coldness to her. I was standing with them in the kitchen when I realized it. I must have staggered because Daniel reached for me. “It’s just the altitude—and the wine,” I said. “I’m still adjusting.”

After Leila went to bed, I said something terrible to Daniel. “You have no heart,” I said to him. Out loud, to my own son.

By morning, I needed to give Leila’s coldness back to her. We were looking together at her drawings and I said nothing. What can be said, after all, about scuffed sheets of paper taped to a wall, half-made and half-realized? What can she possibly find in those drawings to pin such hope to? Is it presumption or desperation? Either way, she is stealing my hope.

“You have no heart,” I said to Daniel. I wish I could take it back. It was meant for Leila.

On the plane I thought, I’m afraid of the time to come. I know too much and I don’t want to live with it.

Then we were coming down. I imagined the plane catching fire, just before the tires hit the runway. I almost wanted it. But then the

abrasion of the landing coursed through my body and I put my arms up, as if I could hold back the future single-handedly.

Inside the terminal I pressed against the tide of travelers coming down the passageway, the children clutching their bears and pillows. I dozed off in the taxi, and when it stopped and I opened my eyes, I saw a gray stone building. This is not where I live, I said to myself. But of course it was.

There were signs of something different, though. The elevator door struggled to barricade me as I pushed my suitcase in. Between Seventeen and Eighteen, the car stopped quietly. All I could see through the porthole was a painted steel beam flush against the window. I have always avoided my reflection in the polished metal door. But there I was, inescapable, a stranger to myself, fluid and shimmering in a pewter light, as though a stream of water was passing over me with a cold, relentless current.

Then, as quietly as it had stopped, the car began moving and arrived smoothly at Eighteen. When the door slid open, there was Sherman, my neighbor, minus his partner, who's usually talking vivaciously as they pass in.

"You're back, Ingrid," Sherman said gaily. He stood aside for my suitcase. "How lively you look. Your trip must have done you good."

"Has it?" I asked. There was flirtation in my voice. I turned around quickly, but the elevator was already descending.

I keep seeing myself from the outside now, a woman I do not know. She is old, but still lithe, and she's bending over her one plant—a white orchid given her by a friend. The petals are luminous. She can almost feel their breath, though the soil at the base is parched,

and the papery roots are exposed and reach around the pot as though they're trying to embrace it.

The petals are breathing in spite of my neglect. She draws water at the kitchen sink and feeds it drop by drop into the soil. She sees now. She sees, as the water disappears, that there is no need beyond this necessity.

II.

I like it when life happens to me. I like watching the unexpected unfold. You could say that I'm caught between two women—or perhaps three, counting my mother, and she'd want to be counted.

After three or four glasses of pinot noir, after Leila has gone to bed, my mother gets to the crux of things: "You have no heart," she tells me. "You won't have any heart until you have children."

I checked that out with Chloe, the quote/unquote other woman in my life. She argued with it. "Of course you have a heart," she said. But she hasn't known me for very long.

In the beginning, my mother thought Leila was perfect. She saw that Leila could make anything—a garden, a sweater, a quilt for our bed.

What I like about Leila is she can draw for an entire day. I like to work, too.

But the house is too crowded. "Our life is too comfortable," I tell Leila, and she gets angry. "This isn't comfort," she says, "this is survival." I want to say, "Yours or mine?"

I've been trying not to think. Last week Chloe told me she might be pregnant. Holy shit, I thought, what would my mother say? There

is Leila, walled up inside the casita in Santa Fe, which my mother—thinking “baby”—helped us to buy, and there is Chloe, pregnant in Taos and nowhere to live at the end of the month. I’ve messed up. At this stage that isn’t the point, though.

I was trying to look at things practically, without regard to feelings. Chloe loves living in Taos. That means Leila could have the casita in Santa Fe. I was arranging things in my head and then Chloe called from Taos saying she isn’t pregnant after all but is missing her folks and moving to Laramie for the winter. All of this while my mother is in town.

That’s when I thought I would go for wood. After I dropped off my mother at the airport, I headed across the mountains to cut wood for the winter.

There’s a guy in Gascon who lets me come out to his place every autumn and cut trees. I always leave it too late. By the time I was stacking logs in the truck it was afternoon and snowing. I couldn’t see beyond a couple of feet. That’s usual in November, which is why you should go for your wood in September, or even August, between the monsoon and the frost.

After I’d loaded the truck—perfectly, I might add, without an inch of wasted space—the truck wouldn’t start. I checked the connections. I couldn’t figure it out. My hands ached from trying to get at everything and I was thinking, “Idiot rodents—they’ve chewed up a cable somewhere.” I got into the cab and jammed my hands up under my armpits. I stared at the snow coming down.

Often when people survive a disaster, they’ll talk about feeling blessed. I don’t believe they’ve been singled out, though, or—quote/

unquote—chosen. I think they've only been brought into closer connection with things. After I'd watched the snow for a while, I decided to try the engine and it started with a surprising jolt and I held my foot firmly on the gas and the weight of the logs kept the wheels going along the track.

That wasn't everything, though. Halfway down the slope to the road, a doe was standing in the middle of the track and I had to stop. I could just make out her scruffy coat and then she came toward me and stood absolutely still in front of the truck. I swear, her heart couldn't have been beating. But her eyes looked straight into mine and during those moments—I don't know how long it was—she kidnapped me. I couldn't look away. I shut off the engine—not considering whether it would start again—and sat with my eyes locked with hers. I don't know how to describe the silence and the stillness of it. I couldn't have moved—not so long as she wanted to hold me there.

I don't have any idea how long we stayed that way. In a sense, we're still standing there, facing each other in the snow, because she is with me now as the truck creeps along the I 25. She is in the snow swarming around the headlights and in my tangled thoughts. I can feel her breath mingling with mine. Her musk and woody scent are clouding the air inside the cab and I don't know, really, where I live now. I'll go wherever the truck takes me. After all, she's the one driving. I'm a mere passenger.

Maybe Leila and I will stay together. Maybe we'll move out to the coast or further into the mountains. Who knows if Leila would like to do any of that. All I know is, I have this animal inside me now. I'm going wherever she goes.

III.

I'm afraid of myself, and so I keep moving the crayon around the paper. As long as I can put lines down on paper, I know I will be all right. I don't need to be afraid.

When I was a child, things were not all right. Her shoes would go furiously down the hallway and she'd be gone. Then she'd be back again, as though never missing, her laughter striving to cancel everything. I became two people: victim and rescuer.

On the street there was a price for not keeping up: the bus home ran only once in the afternoon, and there would be harsh words, no matter what. Eventually I'd find her in the line at the bank or choosing vegetables in the market. Perhaps she needed to be found more than I did. Even today I don't like seeing children stray. What if their mother doesn't want to search for them?

Daniel found me in the Plaza. He said he'd been watching me for days while I drew. I was sketching people then—skateboarders, burrito vendors, artists selling their turquoise and silver along the Portal.

Daniel is patient and curious, when he isn't feeling caught by someone. He's feeling caught now. Our house is too comfortable, he says. "This isn't comfort," I told him, "it's survival."

When I came back to the casita, the first thing I heard was, "Well, you two confound me." What was confounding? Now I think I have the answer. The table was covered with apricots and plums. I'd seen Ingrid's ferocious gaze try to sweep them away, as though they were defying her. For Ingrid nature's the only force and it will give her what she's been waiting for—the chance to be a mother again. She entered our casita and looked around, as though the space that we've carefully

tended is utterly inhospitable. For a child perhaps it would be. But there is no child here, which is precisely her point.

Before Daniel took Ingrid to the plane, we were alone together. We were looking at my drawings and she said nothing. I was tempted to say, “Ingrid, why don’t you try painting?” I think that she’d say, “I have made my life. It isn’t complete, but I know the measure of it. I know the things that give my life meaning.”

Will I ever be sure enough of myself to say something like that?

Perhaps I am more like my mother than I realize. I think mostly about where I want to be and the work I want to do. I don’t pay much attention to the future.

But a child can be a danger to a mother—reminding her of something she wants to forget. By that I mean her own suffering. I kept myself safe from neglect and verbal lashings. Now I must keep people safe from me. But that’s impossible; I have hurt Daniel’s mother.

After Daniel and Ingrid left for the plane, a clear winter light came slowly through the window and it warmed my back. I picked up a stick of pastel, a lilac color, and held it in my hand. I rubbed it with my thumb and fingers and my palm became powdered lilac. I pulled up my sleeve, and I spread the color the length of my arm across a large sheet of white paper.

Then I sat up and looked through the window and saw a dormant landscape. I looked at my drawings on the wall and they seemed worthless. What could I offer this woman instead? What gift or what comfort?

Daniel and I have climbed together above tree line. We’ve slept out. We’ve searched for water together and hammered our pots to

ward off the bears. I have believed that the myriad stars visible above these mountains mirror everything that is possible. I wonder if Daniel believes this. I thought he did, but now I wonder.

He's gone across the mountains for wood. He's left it late. He'll be coming home in a snow-laden truck with perhaps a heart as confused as mine is.

Loneliness is my friend but it isn't everything. There is the twilight now, and there is Daniel. I slide the door softly home in its frame. As I go along the road, the stones shift under my feet, muttering, I think, about the heartlessness of choosing. I listen for the patchy idle of an engine and I watch for a waver of headlights and Daniel's truck lurching home along the gravel. □