

ELIZABETH FALCON

## ARTEMIS IN WAITING

CALIS WAITED BY THE WINDOW, watching the road, watching for the truck. He could be home any minute and her stomach was a hard, tight ball. She thought about grabbing her purse and running out of the house, driving away. She could stay at a hotel for the night, maybe two nights, or three. However long it took to avoid it and think through this feeling. She knew she was being irrational. There was no reason for this little bonfire of panic in her chest; this year was no different than every other year.

But it *was* different. She didn't know why, but she felt it with every cell. The picture on her phone showed him kneeling in the grass, holding the head up, the neck sliced and bloody, the round eyes still looking. A black line of blood ran from the corner of its mouth to its chin. Calis had fought the urge to delete the photo. What a horrible thing to take a picture of. But then, she thought, everyone does it. No one seemed to mind except her.

She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth, making an O shape with her lips, like Snoopy when he whistles or a woman practicing for childbirth. She closed her eyes and tried to calm her thoughts the way Dr. Schell had taught her. Feelings are storm clouds, and the storm will pass. She thought about evolution and the natural relationships between predators and prey. This is life. This is natural and normal. And it's better than eating red-dyed meat from the supermarket.

She saw headlights coming around the bend of the road, but they were too low to be his. She was both relieved and disappointed—a familiar feeling. She was always waiting for him to come home from somewhere: work, the bar, hunting, god knows where. Their whole relationship had been years of this: waiting by the window and then running into the kitchen when she saw him so he wouldn't see her waiting by the window. Sometimes she waited for so long that the relief she felt when he arrived, no matter what state or mood he was in, was so great that she longed to wait for him again just to feel it.

The dog whined at her feet. She bit and then chewed a piece of calloused skin from her thumb. A bad habit. She thought she should go and do something, like wash the dishes, bake a cake, or watch TV. She picked up her phone and looked at his text message again. There were no words, just the picture: his left hand gripping one of the small antlers, his gun slung over his shoulder. She put the phone down and looked at the dog's long face and large ears. He wasn't that much smaller than the deer. The dog whined again, and she bent to him, scratched his neck, and kissed his head.

"Don't worry, love. It's not you."

He regarded her skeptically, his eyes round and wet and dark. She stood erect and looked out the window again. Night was falling fast, transforming the neighbourhood in imperceptible increments every time she blinked. The nearly bare trees grew black and strange. The streetlights came on, throwing menacing shadows on the pavement and sidewalk. She saw another set of headlights and recognized them as his. She could see the white nose of his truck below the windshield. She scurried to the kitchen, turned on the light and filled the kettle with water to give her hands something to do. The dog, hearing the truck back into the driveway, barked. He barked again and again, loud and frantic. She yelled at him, went to the door, and opened it. The dog ran out, still barking, and leapt off the porch, bounding toward the truck just as the driver side door opened.

"Heya buddy! Did you miss me?" He ruffled the dog's back and sides with both hands while the dog's tail made frantic circles.

"Hi," he said to Calis, smiling and coming around the back of the truck to kiss her cheek. He smelled like stale cigarette smoke, stale beer, and blood.

"Hi." She wrapped her arms around herself.

"Did you get my picture?"

"Yeah." She couldn't look at him. She looked at the dog instead, who was intently sniffing the truck's tires and tailgate.

"You okay? You seem weird."

"No, I'm good. Just tired. How are you?"

"Great! He's not very big, but I was running out of time. He'll be tender eating, anyway. I need you to help me hang him up."

Her mouth went dry. No no no no. A raspy sound came out of her throat. She coughed.

"Sure. Just let me get a jacket and some gloves."

She went back inside the house, her eyes blurring. She forced air into her lungs, past the fist-sized lump at the base of her throat, and then back out. She dug around under the kitchen sink until she found a pair of rubber gloves. She forced more air in and out of her lungs. She slapped her thigh with the gloves and tried to focus. Nothing is different. It's just feelings. The storm always passes. She rummaged through the closet, slipped on one of his old flannel work jackets, and stuffed the gloves in the pockets. Outside he was rolling the wheelbarrow to the now open tailgate. She saw a gracile leg and a sharp, pointed hoof. She thought of the picture. She thought of the dog.

“Get the garage door, will ya?”

The garage was dark and smelled like mice. She was always trying to convince him to set traps, but he preferred to use poison, dismissing her protests about the trophic level of mice and the number of cats, dogs, and birds of prey in the neighbourhood. She pushed the faintly illuminated button, and the garage door groaned and rattled open. She groped for the string to the fluorescent light over the butchering table. It made the garage feel like a science lab.

He ducked under the slowly ascending door and joined her by the table.

“I missed you.” He leaned in, kissed her neck, and playfully grabbed and squeezed one of her ass cheeks. The stubble on his lip tickled.

“I’ve gotta take a leak.” He pulled away and pointed to a roll of clear plastic sheeting. “You can start laying the plastic under the rack while you’re waiting.”

The rack was a seven-foot-high contraption he had made out of salvaged scaffolding and two-by-fours. A couple of large metal hooks dangled from the highest rung.

In previous years, she had overcome her aversion to the dead animals he brought home by diving right into the butchering process. She was good at it: meticulously peeling the silver skin from the meat, unrolling muscle into thin sheets that could be smoked and dried over the fire pit, grinding and wrapping the smaller scraps into brown paper bricks that they would freeze and use all winter. She thought about the animals while she cut the meat. She even spoke to them in her head, getting to know them, absorbing them. But that was after the bleeding, skinning, and aging had been done. By the time she touched them, they were long-dead and nearly unrecogniz-

able slabs of red and black muscle draped over the lower rungs of the rack. She had never hung and skinned an animal before.

“Do you really need me to help you hang it?”

He was halfway into the house and using the bottom of the door jamb to hook and pull his boot off.

“Well, I guess I could do it myself, but it only takes a minute if you help me. What’s with you? You suddenly squeamish or something?”

“No, it’s fine. Never mind.”

He stood in the door and looked at her, his face hardening. “Why are you being weird? What’s your problem?”

“Nothing, it’s fine. Just go pee already.”

The door slammed behind him, and she looked at the truck again. His keys were on the tailgate next to the gracile leg and sharp hoof. He hadn’t rolled the bed cover back yet, so she couldn’t see the rest of it, but she knew what it would look like: the bloodied fur at its neck and chest, the gash in its gut, the spilling tongue, the eyes that by now would be glazed, the immature antlers. The dog licked a spot on the bumper where some blood had dripped down. She felt her throat constrict like she might throw up.

“Get away from there!” she hissed at the dog and kicked the air beside him. He scurried around to the side of the truck, shooting a wounded look over his shoulder.

She looked at the hoof. The storm would not pass. She moved the wheelbarrow, grabbed the keys, lifted the tailgate, and forced the deer’s leg back into the bed of the truck. Then she pushed the gate closed and felt it latch.

“You stay here,” she said to the dog. She opened the driver’s side door, and the dog jumped in ahead of her.

“Okay, fine. You can come.” As she started the truck, she looked in the rearview mirror and saw the door to the house open again. She could just make out his confused expression as she pulled out of the driveway.

It was fully dark by the time she got on the highway. She turned the high beams on, not bothering to switch them off when passing other vehicles going the opposite direction, even when they angrily flashed their lights at her. There was no moon, and she wanted to drive fast. She did. The heater fan whined, and the dog curled up on the passenger side of the bench seat and fell asleep. At first she didn’t know where she was going, but then she did. She would go to the farm. She knew those back fields and woods like

her own skin, even though it had been twenty years since she had left and fifteen since the decrepit old house had been torn down. She felt the sickening anxiety transform into excitement. Yes, this was right. She would make it right. The farm would be perfect.

The gravel road was familiar, even in the dark. She found the long driveway, nearly overgrown with encroaching weeds and saplings from the row of poplar trees that lined it. The land was still owned by her uncle, but he hadn't done anything with it for a few years. All the land around the farm was either his own or Crown reserve, so there was no one to complain about the rapid spread of thistle and chamomile or the slow creep of lilac and caragana. The driveway opened up to a large field, and a scattering of outbuildings swept through her headlights at a distance, like ghosts keeping watch. She parked where they used to when the house was still standing. Calis hadn't been back since it was torn down, and the empty space was like a dark gap in the dark landscape. She cut the engine and the lights. The dog had woken up and was standing on the seat, looking out the window.

"We're here, love." She scratched behind his ears. He ducked away from her hand impatiently.

Outside it was cold and black. She left the truck door open so that the cab threw a soft half-circle of yellow light. The dog wandered off, sniffing the ground. She could hear his body shuffling through the dried grass. She opened the tailgate, and the weight of it dropped out of her hands with a clang. She rolled back the bed cover and then remembered the rubber gloves, glad for their brushed interior and the residual warmth from her pockets.

The deer was small—a yearling. His little antlers made her think of adolescent boys. She was glad for the dim light that prevented her from seeing his eyes and the cuts on his throat and belly in any detail. She grabbed his hind legs at the elbow joint and pulled. He was heavy but moved with the discomfiting passivity of a dead body. She pulled again with more force, and his chin caught on the wheel well and folded back awkwardly. She grimaced.

"Sorry," she whispered.

On the last pull he slid off the tailgate. She stumbled and landed on her back, still holding the hind legs, the ankles at her shoulders, his rump on her shins. She lay there with the deer on her and caught her breath. The stars were out. She could see Orion's belt and scabbard. She opened her eyes

wider and let the dark settle into them until tiny pinpoints of light emerged. Now she could make out the shoulders, the raised club, and the outstretched arm holding the bow—or was it a shield?

She heard the dog approaching, then saw him trotting toward her. He licked her face and went to the deer's torso, sniffing and then licking the long gash.

“Stop that!”

She wriggled out from the deer's legs and stood up. The dog pretended not to hear her. She pushed him away.

“Out! Go!”

He took a few non-committal steps back and stopped, waiting.

“No! Not for you.” She waved him away. He sat down slowly, his paws politely and perfectly aligned.

Calis picked up the deer's hind legs again and started dragging it away from the truck toward where the house used to be. There was a dense copse of trees on the other side of the yard. She wanted to bring him there. It was harder to drag him through the long and dry grass than it had been to drag him from the truck bed. She had to jerk and tug each time the body snagged on a thick weed or a rut from some long-ago tractor tire. She was soon out of breath again and began to sweat. The dog walked jaggedly beside her, his interest divided between her and the deer. The darkness was thick. Her eyes strained to see the deeper shadows of the trees ahead. Finally, they arrived at the end of the yard. The saplings and suckers were thigh-high, and she couldn't drag the deer further in. She stopped and sat down next to it, placing her gloved hand on its rump. The dog came up to her and tried to lick her face. She pushed him away, but gently.

“Go explore for a while.”

He sniffed at the deer but didn't try to lick it again. She sat, her breath loud and raspy. The dog wandered away. Eventually her breathing slowed and quieted. She began to feel chilled, her sweat drawing the cold to her skin. She looked at the deer's indistinct form. She stroked its rump, removed her hand from the glove, and stroked it again. She sat there a long time, petting the deer, listening to the night deepen, shivering in the cold. The dog came back and broke the spell.

“Let's go get warm, hey buddy?”

They walked back to the beacon of the truck's interior light. She closed the tailgate, and they climbed inside the cab. She turned the key in the igni-

tion, and the engine roared before settling into a comforting rumble. She cranked the heater and rubbed her hands between her legs. She thought about her next move and realized she had left the house with nothing—no wallet, money, food, or water. But she didn't want to go home. She didn't want to go anywhere. She was exhausted. She leaned forward and groped under the seat until she felt the hard glass of a bottle. He had so many hiding spots—in the truck, in the house, in the garage—but none of them were very good. She knew about them all.

“Vodka or whisky?” she asked the dog while wriggling the bottle out from under the seat.

It was two thirds empty. She tried to read the label by the glow of the dash but couldn't make it out. She unscrewed the lid and took a swig.

“Ugh! Gin!”

The taste of pine lingered in her mouth, growing warmer. She took another swig.

“How about we stay here for a while?”

The dog looked at her expectantly, then turned an awkward circle and flopped down into a tight ball on the seat. She petted his head, and he raised his nose to her hand before settling back again. Calis took another drink, switched off the truck's headlights, and waited for her eyes to adjust. She had left the farm when she was seventeen, unhappy and eager to get away, but the bitterness of her teenage years didn't taint how she felt about the place. In many ways, the farm was her best parent, the one who was never angry or sad, who continually had secrets to share and mysteries to reveal. She always felt safe in its back fields and gullies. She looked out into the night. The faint light from the stars was enough for her to see the line of trees where she had left the deer. When she was little, she had built a forest house in those trees, piling deadfall and field stones into a crooked demarcation of her own space. Sometimes she would just sit in her little house with its half-walls and wait for birds to land near or for some industrious little rodent to resume its work in the grass and leaves.

When the gin was finished, she stretched her legs out under the steering wheel and leaned her head back on the seat. The energy of the last couple of hours was rapidly leaving her body. She thought about going home, but what would she say? Even if she could explain it, he wouldn't understand. He couldn't understand. He might try, but she was like a different species to him. He would think that she was being too sensitive again—that



she was judging him. And it was true—she was judging him, but no more than she was judging everyone else. Dr. Schell thought that her judgment was the source of all her problems, but she was beginning to think that Dr. Schell wasn't as smart as he thought he was. She closed her eyes. The heater whined and whirred.

She didn't know how long it took for the truck to run out of gas. She woke up to the sudden silence after the engine died. It was still dark. The truck was warm, the dog didn't move, and she was too groggy to worry. She readjusted and fell asleep again.

The second time she woke it was early dawn and very cold inside the cab. She pulled the flannel jacket tight around her torso, sat up, and smeared the condensation from the windshield with her sleeve. The light in the eastern horizon was muted but distinct. She could see the outbuildings, their roofs silvered with frost. The dog sighed and tucked his nose further into his tail. She toggled the key in the ignition. Nothing. She looked again at the dog.

“Well, love, what do you think we should do?”

He watched her as she rubbed her arms. She was thirsty, and her head throbbed. She wondered if her uncle might have left some gas in one of the outbuildings but dreaded leaving the cab; as cold as it was inside the truck, it would be colder outside. It was always coldest just before the sun rose. She looked at the place where the house had once stood and felt a tug of sadness. All that remained was an uneven patch of tall dry weeds where her uncle had backfilled the foundation. Then she thought about the deer and felt slightly better.

“C'mon,” she said to the dog, “let's go see if we can find some gas.”

The dog raised his head and looked at her wearily. He stood up and stretched, his front legs reaching out and scratching her thigh as he did. Outside, it was below freezing, the grass stiff and crunchy under her feet. The dog leapt down and trotted a few paces before lifting his leg on a hump of dead chamomile that had folded under its own weight. They walked toward the outbuildings, the cold causing Calis to shiver. She walked past the chicken coop and the woodshed, the rough doors held closed with a bent nail. From the exterior, the storage shed was a proper building with a proper door and a cement foundation her dad had poured himself. Inside, it was just as chaotic as she remembered—a jumble of old machine parts, half-empty quarts of oil, rolls of baling twine, some old buckets, and yes, to her relief, a nearly full jerry can of gasoline. It was probably rancid, but she



thought it would be worth a try. If she wrecked the truck motor with it, then she'd deal with that later. For now, all she wanted was to go home and have a long, hot bath and maybe a cup of hot tea. Her heart sped up erratically as the looming confrontation and inevitable questions flashed through her mind. But he was probably dead asleep right now, somewhere in the liminal space between drunk and hungover. That would be to her advantage. She could wake him with coffee and eggs. He would be docile.

She emptied the jerry can into the gas tank and tried the ignition again. The engine coughed and then started. So far so good. She called the dog back into the cab and let the truck warm up for a couple of minutes before putting it into gear and turning it around. She drove slowly down the driveway, half-expecting the engine to choke and stall, but it ran smoothly. The gas light was on, but she probably had enough to get to the co-op station on the highway. She wondered if there was enough loose change in the console to get her home. The sun was almost cresting the horizon, the gauzy clouds above it on fire with orange and pink.

Just as they got to the base of the driveway, a deer leapt out in front of them. Calis stomped on the brake, and the dog was thrown forward into the dash. He let out a yelp and scrambled desperately to right himself on the seat.

She stared at the deer standing in front of the truck. It met her eyes, nostrils flaring, pushing out clouds of breath. Then it flicked its tail and bounded into the field. She watched it, breathless, squinting to be sure of the dark stain on its belly, the adolescent antlers, the black line from the corner of its mouth to its chin.