

DAWN MUENCHRATH

HIDE AND SEEK

TREY GAGARIN WOKE UP WITH A SHOOTING PAIN in his right arm. The glowing digits of his bedside alarm clock told him it was 4:30am. He remained still for several minutes, hoping the sensation would subside and focusing his attention on a white halo pulsing vaguely in front of him. Today was his fiftieth birthday, and he wondered if he was dying.

When the pain spread down the length of his arm to his fingertips, which smarted uncomfortably with hundreds of tiny pinpricks, he warily pushed himself up into a sitting position. Like everyone else, he had, of course, heard that a shooting pain in one's arm might be the first sign of a heart attack, though he struggled to recall, as many people do, which arm was the one you had to look out for.

He put his left hand (the pain-free one) to his bare chest and attempted to feel for a heartbeat, first casually, and then with increasing urgency. He could not feel anything, so he got up and did ten jumping jacks. Then he could feel it, *thump, thump*, on his left.

He let out a sigh and sat back down on the rumpled sheets, unsure if he felt relieved or disappointed. Either way, the pain was dissipating now, and he was wide awake, so he tied on his bathrobe and padded into the kitchen.

Though it was early, his cat Olivia—named after Olivia Newton-John, the most beautiful woman in the world—was there, pressing her bony back against his calves insistently and mewing for breakfast. Trey gave her a can of tuna fish and lit a cigarette for himself.

Outside the kitchen window over the sink he saw that the moon was full and white, like a halo floating in front of him.

There had been no angel after all.

After a second cigarette, he put on the early morning news and fried a sausage for breakfast. He ate it with a piece of white bread to soak up the grease and gave the skin to Olivia once it had cooled. Against his will,

he found his gaze creeping to the phone on the wall by the microwave. He wasn't in touch with any of his old friends or exes, and he knew his siblings—two older brothers and two older sisters—were all busy with their spouses, whom they hated, and their children, whom they couldn't stand.

He wasn't expecting anyone to remember. He wasn't expecting anyone to think of calling. Besides, if they had, he'd only have the burden of being expected to reciprocate on their birthday.

He lay on the couch and watched the news, which was mostly about the things the American president had said and the things people thought he might say. When they started interviewing a researcher from a nearby Canadian university about the increasing likelihood of severe weather events, he flicked off the TV, softly removed Olivia from his lap, and went into his bedroom to get dressed and get on with the day.

That morning he was scheduled to haul a load of bales for Thomas O'Dowd. He didn't particularly like O'Dowd, but it was easy work that he charged for by the hour, plus gas.

In the backyard, on his way to his truck, he saw his new tenant setting out a wool blanket on the frost-tipped grass. She had a thermos of tea or coffee (he didn't know what she took) and a sketchbook. She turned at the sound of his steps and smiled. She was wearing a yellow toque and a grey sweater speckled with paint.

He knew there were people in town who didn't like her and felt she had no right to carry on as she did, wandering the streets, snapping photographs, and making sketches of odd and private things for her paintings. These were the people who had been in Rockdale for so many generations that they'd forgotten they didn't own it.

Trey had never understood that. In his whole life, he'd never felt he'd truly owned anything. And besides, he failed to see the harm in a couple of paintings.

Once he'd gotten O'Dowd's gooseneck trailer hooked up to his truck, it was an hour's drive south to pick up the bales. The sky in that direction was smeared in shades of neon pink and orange, which dulled gradually as the sun climbed higher. The fields were stubbled and vacant.

Instead of turning on the radio, as he usually did, Trey let his mind wander in the rumbling quiet of the cab. He was thinking that perhaps, at fifty, he might finally be motivated to reckon with the death of his father, who had

driven his truck off the road into a power pole in the winter of Trey's senior year. Or perhaps he might at last consider his brief and baffling marriage to Wendy Simmons with the honesty she'd always said she'd wanted. But those memories felt big and murky, like a tangle of dreams that he could neither quite remember nor fully forget. Instead, he found his thoughts slipping back further to a time that perversely seemed clearer and closer.

It was late afternoon at the height of summer, the hottest part of the day, and he was five years old. The Gagarin children had all gathered under the shade of the biggest poplar tree on the farm, and they were bickering about which game to play next. The trouble, mostly, was Trey, who was four years younger than the next youngest, Elise, and who couldn't play most things the rest were interested in. Then someone—probably Kathleen because she was the kindest and most sensible—suggested hide and seek, and, remarkably, everyone agreed.

Kathleen covered her eyes and started counting. Trey could feel the blood pulsing in his ears as he ran. He tried first under the Caragana bushes that grew in the ditch by the main road and then in the tall grass behind the old tractor tires by the shed, but he knew those spots were too obvious. Then he pulled open the door to the basement, where none of the children liked to go—not even Albert, who was thirteen and practically fearless. With each step down the splintery stairs, the air grew colder and thicker with the smell of something fungal. The floor was dirt, lit overhead by a lone bulb on a string, and the walls were crammed with shelves and stacks of junk—broken and redundant things that his mother couldn't bring herself to throw out in the slim chance that they might prove useful one day. In the shadowy corners, where light did not reach and rainwater never fully dried, mice, spiders, and other many-legged creatures were known to lurk. In one such corner, Trey found a wooden barrel filled with ropes and a pair of decaying boots that belonged not to his father but to his grandfather. When the boots were cautiously removed, the barrel was just big enough to fit him with his knees folded up tight to his chin and a few of the ropes thrown on top of his head for good measure.

At first, when they did not find him, it was exciting. He'd never won a game of anything. But then twenty minutes stretched into an hour, which stretched into two, and at some point the task of remaining hidden in the barrel seemed to be about something bigger and more profound than simply winning, though he couldn't have explained what or why.

To continue, he developed a little trick. Every time he was assailed by a feeling of discomfort—hunger, thirst, or stiffness—he closed his eyes and started counting. Invariably, somewhere between two and three hundred, the ailment would pass. Over time, even the smell of horse manure and grease on the ropes, so strong in the beginning, became indistinguishable from the smell of his own body.

When the bouncing beam of a flashlight and the anxious murmur of voices signalling his discovery finally came, he was stirred from a sort of waking dream. Then two sets of clammy hands were upon him, blindly grasping at his armpits, and he was yanked free of the barrel and deposited unceremoniously on the dirt floor. His leg muscles were so numb and impotent that Gregor had to hold his shoulders to stop him from falling over, and Albert had to lift him to his chest like a baby to take him up the stairs.

Outside, the heat of the afternoon had given way to a cool blue evening. Trey marvelled at the feel of the breeze, impossibly delicate, ruffling the tiny hairs on the back of his neck. The passage of time in his absence seemed like no small miracle, but there was no moment to dwell on it, as he was caught in a sudden flurry of kisses, hugs, and prodding, as the girls surrounded him and his two saviours.

Then his mother was there, her hands not much bigger than the boys' but softer and steadier, lifting him and taking him inside to the kitchen. She set him on a chair and wiped the dirt from his face and arms with a wet rag. She poured him a large glass of milk and told him to drink it all. Then, satisfied that her youngest was alive and more or less fine, she shouted at her other children to "get in here now," ready to give them hell.

Fifteen minutes into his drive back to Rockdale, the trailer newly loaded with bales, Trey's pain returned. As before, it started in his upper right arm but then quickly spread to his left as well and down to both hands. As if plunged into an ice bath, all ten of his fingertips were soon throbbing angrily. Unthinkingly, he responded by jerking the steering wheel to the right, causing the front wheels of his truck to veer across the centre line. The whole truck-trailer combo wobbled drunkenly between the two lanes for a minute before he was able to straighten out and ease off the gas. He turned on his signal light and pulled crudely into the shoulder.

He had no phone, and even if he did he couldn't think of anyone he'd call. He saw a car approaching up ahead and fleetingly considered jumping

out and attempting to wave it down, but he failed to move as it got closer, and then it sped past his truck and was gone.

It was better this way, actually. If it had to happen—fine, he wouldn’t fight it. He leaned back in his seat and, without intending to do so, started to count up from one out loud. By the time he reached four hundred, the pain in his limbs and hands had lessened noticeably.

He rolled down the window and fished in the glove box for his cigarettes. He remained parked in the shoulder and smoked two before he turned back on the road.

He was wrapping a single potato in foil for dinner that evening and contemplating death and the God he used to believe in, or at least used to *think* he believed in, when there was a knock on the door. It was her again. No toque, but the same paint-spattered sweater. It had the name of a university stitched in red across the front.

“Good afternoon, Trey,” Renata said. Coming from her mouth, the name sounded so new and unexpected that it took him a second to remember it belonged to him. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but our sink won’t drain. It’s probably my fault. Could you take a look at it tonight or tomorrow, if that’s better.”

He looked down at his hands and then up at her waiting face. She looked very young—at least ten, maybe even fifteen years younger than him. Plus, she probably took care of herself and didn’t smoke or eat sausages for two meals a day.

Trey said he could be over in a few minutes and then, embarrassed by her gratitude, closed the door before she could finish her sentence. He went into the kitchen to switch off the pre-heating oven and then out to the garage to fetch his toolbox. He double-checked that all his wrenches were accounted for and, on second thought, emptied a plastic detergent bucket filled with old rags and brought it along too.

Outside, he followed the concrete path leading from his front door to the sidewalk and then up the identical walkway to Suite B ten steps away, even though the grass in the front yard was already dead, and rapped twice. After three minutes, when no one answered, he let himself in.

His first thought was that the previous tenant, Elena Cheever, would have rolled over in her grave at the sight of such anarchy. The living room, which she had kept in fanatical sterility, down to the plastic covers on her

sofa cushions, was virtually unrecognizable. With the couch and lamp shunned to the far wall and the coffee table turned into a paint shelf, the room was now unambiguously an art studio, complete with a five-foot tall easel set in the middle and draped mysteriously in a bedsheet, like a child for Halloween.

The only light in the place was spilling out from the kitchen, where two voices could be heard over the sound of oil spitting in a pan and a love song by The Beatles that Trey had never much cared for.

He was about to turn and leave when the girl saw him.

“Hey, Mr. Gang—Mr. um. *Mom!* The guy’s here for the sink!”

Renata appeared, apologized for having missed his knock, and started talking about the sink, leaving Trey little choice but to follow her to it.

“It stopped draining completely yesterday, and it’s been like this all day,” she explained. The three of them peered solemnly into the basin, which was two-thirds full of hazy grey water.

“Dinner will be ten more minutes, if you want to stay!” Renata shouted to Trey when he was lateral on their kitchen floor with his arms and head under the sink. “You like tacos?”

He ignored her, gave his wrench one final turn with a grunt of effort, and set it aside. Then he used both hands to force down the beige PVC trap, with the detergent bucket ready underneath. Water rushed from the open pipe into the bucket, and he shook out a lump of something black and foul-smelling from the U-shaped piece of pipe he’d just removed.

He stood up and held out the bucket for Renata to see. “It’s fat that’ll do that,” he said, indicating the black mass, which looked like some kind of primordial sea creature. “You don’t want to put fat down the sink if you can help it. Or paint,” he added, though he did not actually have any experience with paint clogging sinks.

“Hey now, I never do,” Renata said, but she laughed and thanked him again. “You’re sure you can’t stay for a bite to eat?”

He glanced at the girl behind her, who was standing by the stove using a spatula to poke at a tortilla on a black cast iron pan next to a skillet of beef and onions.

He thought of the lone foiled potato, still raw, sitting on the counter at his place.

“No, I’m set.” After he reassembled the pipes and disposed of the water,

he added, against his better judgment, “I’ll pick up a new faucet, though. The one you’ve got there leaks, and it’s damaging the countertop.”

Elena had been nagging him to replace it for a year before she died, and he’d assured her it was on his to-do list, though he’d never had any real intention of doing it.

On Tuesday he woke up at midnight with pain electrifying both his arms and hands, and he once again waited patiently for death to take him. When it did not, he got up and had a cigarette and a piece of toast. At eight he left to get another load of bales for O’Dowd.

That evening, he thought he might hear Renata again at the door, and he even turned down the volume on the made-for-TV movie he was watching in case he missed the knock, but it never came. If he was still alive in the morning, he decided he’d get that new faucet. He didn’t have any work scheduled, and the leaking water was damaging the countertop, which he’d rather not have to replace.

The hardware store in the town thirty minutes from Rockdale was bigger and had a better selection of faucets than the one on Main Street. Trey spent a long time crouching in the “Sinks and Accessories” aisle as ambient jazz played over the intercom, weighing the pros and cons of this faucet to that one, always with the thought that maybe he’d never even have time to install it, which oddly made it seem even more imperative that he get exactly the right one.

After he paid, he decided to turn into the doctor’s office, as he was driving by anyway. He didn’t have an appointment, but the lady at the desk gave him a clipboard to fill out and told him to have a seat. Ten minutes later he was called into a room, where a nurse drilled him with questions, and he remembered why he’d avoided going to the doctor’s office for the better part of his adult life.

“And you’ve been experiencing this pain for how long, did you say?”

“I couldn’t say for sure.”

“An estimate’s fine.”

“A week.”

The nurse scribbled something down on her clipboard. “In your right arm?”

“And my left.”

“Your left *and* right arms?” She put down her pen. “On your form here, you only indicated right.”

“It usually starts there but then spreads to both. And my hands, too.”

“How would you rate the intensity of the pain?”

“Come again?”

“On a scale from one to ten, say, how would you rate the pain you’ve experienced?”

“Uh, six. Seven.”

“Do you regularly consume alcohol?”

“Sometimes.”

“How much?”

“Most nights I’ll have a beer or two.”

“Are you a smoker?”

“Yes.”

“How often do you smoke?”

“Maybe a pack or so.”

“Is that per week or per day?”

“Day.”

“Do you regularly partake in any other types of recreational drug use?”

“No.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”

“Is there anything else you’d like the doctor to know?”

“No.”

“He’ll be in shortly.”

The doctor was big man with a big red face. He snapped on a pair of gloves, spread a thin sheet of paper on the examination bench, and told Trey to hop up. He shone a light down Trey’s throat and into his ears. He held a stethoscope to Trey’s chest and listened as Trey took five deep breaths. He rapped Trey’s knees with a tiny hammer. He told Trey to unbutton his shirt and poked his gloved fingers around Trey’s abdomen. Through all of this, he said nothing of what he saw. When he was finished, he stood up and looked at Trey flatly as he peeled off his gloves.

“Everything looks fine,” he said.

Trey felt all the energy that had animated him as he picked out the faucets seep out of his body. “Fine?” he repeated. “What about my pain?”

The doctor shrugged, his meaty hand already on the doorknob. “I can

tell you again, but I'm sure you've already heard it before from every doctor you've ever spoken to: stop smoking."

Trey slammed the front door shut and chucked the new faucet on the table heavily. Surrounded by the familiar shabbiness of his home, he could now see that it was of such quality that it would only serve to highlight the decrepitude of the sink and, indeed, the entire kitchen in Renata's suite.

He pulled the living room curtains closed and lay down on the couch in the dark. Olivia came to lay on top of him, which usually cheered him but today only irritated him. He got up to put her outside and then lay back down. At 5:45pm there was a knock at the door, but he just smoked a cigarette. Another knock came at 6pm, and he thought he heard the faint whisper of voices on the stoop, but still he did not get up. He thought she might try a third time, but she did not.

He remembered how his brothers and sisters had shifted on their feet guiltily in the kitchen—Albert with his hands shoved deep into his pockets, Kathleen teary-eyed, Gregor chewing on his nails, and Elise sucking on a piece of her blonde hair—none of them able to meet their mother's flashing eyes. Her face was flush, and her right arm was raised, her outstretched finger roving between the lot of them.

"Did you think this was some kind of joke? A funny trick?"

They shook their heads fervently.

"Imagine how frightened and alone your brother must have felt!" she went on. She turned to Trey, and he hastened to take another big gulp of milk. "Weren't you scared?" she asked. "Tell them!"

Trey wiped his mouth with his hand and nodded because he understood that this was what a normal child would have felt, but he had not felt either of those things. In fact, what he had felt was so quiet and so deep within him that it had not registered as a feeling at all.

"Don't worry, it's over now," his mother said, seeing his face and misunderstanding his anguish. She stooped to kiss his hair and grabbed his near-empty glass to refill it.

He did not know how to tell her that he had not wished it to be over. He had not wished to be found because it meant that his hiding place had been discovered and its usefulness was thereby nullified, and he knew with a dreadful sinking certainty that he would never stumble upon such a good spot again.