

I can hear the jays, crying and crying as if they've found an enemy or food. They are near the cabin, I walk towards them up the hill. I see them in the trees and swooping between the trees, the air forming itself into birds, they continue to call.

Then I see her. She is standing in front of the cabin, her hand stretched out, she is wearing her grey leather jacket; her hair is long, down to her shoulders in the style of thirty years ago, before I was born; she is turned half away from me, I can see only the side of her face. She doesn't move, she is feeding them: one perches on her wrist, another on her shoulder.

I've stopped walking. At first I feel nothing except a lack of surprise: that is where she would be, she has been standing there all along. Then as I watch and it doesn't change I'm afraid, I'm cold with fear, I'm afraid it isn't real, paper doll cut by my eyes, burnt picture, if I blink she will vanish.

She must have sensed it, my fear. She turns her head quietly and looks at me, past me, as though she knows something is there but she can't quite see it. The jays cry again, they fly up from her, the shadows of their wings ripple over the ground and she's gone.

I go up to where she was. The jays are there in the trees, cawing at me; there are a few scraps on the feeding tray still, they've knocked some to the ground. I squint up at them, trying to see her, trying to see which one she is; they hop, twitch their feathers, turn their heads, fixing me first with one eye, then the other.

Chapter Twenty-Five

It's day again, my body jumps out of sleep. What I heard was a powerboat, attacking. It's almost too late, they were pulling around into the bay and slowing and nearly to the dock when I woke up. I scramble on hands and knees out of my den, blanket over me, brown plaid camouflage, and run stooping further back among the trees and flatten, worming into a thicket, hazel bushes, where I can see.

They may have been sent to hunt for me, perhaps the others asked them to, they may be the police; or they may be sightseers, curious tourists. Evans will have told at the store, the whole village will know. Or the war may have started, the invasion, they are

Americans.

They can't be trusted. They'll mistake me for a human being, a naked woman wrapped in a blanket: possibly that's what they've come here for, if it's running around loose, ownerless, why not take it. They won't be able to tell what I really am. But if they guess my true form, identity, they will shoot me or bludgeon in my skull and hang me up by the feet from a tree.

They're hulking out of the boat now, four or five of them. I can't see them clearly, their faces, the stems and leaves are in the way; but I can smell them and the scent brings nausea, it's stale air, bus stations and nicotine smoke, mouths lined with soiled plush, acid taste of copper wiring or money. Their skins are red, green in squares, blue in lines, and it's a minute before I remember that these are fake skins, flags. Their real skins above the collars are white and plucked, with tufts of hair on top, piebald blend of fur and no fur like mouldy sausages or the rumps of baboons. They are evolving, they are halfway to machine, the leftover flesh atrophied and diseased, porous like an appendix.

Two of them climb the hill to the cabin. They are talking, their voices are distinct but they penetrate my ears as sounds only, foreign radio. It must be either English or French but I can't recognize it as any language I've ever heard or known. Scrapes and grunts, they're getting in, through the door or the open window, crunch of their boots inside on the broken glass. One of them laughs, spike scratched on slate.

The other three are still on the dock. Then they shout: they must have found my clothes, one is kneeling down. Is it Joe, I try to picture what Joe looks like. But it makes no difference, he wouldn't help me, he would be on their side; he may have given them the keys.

The two come out of the cabin and thud down to the dock again, their false skins flapping. They cluster, they chatter and sizzle like a speeded-up tape, the forks and spoons on the ends of their arms waving excitedly. Perhaps they think I drowned myself, that would be the kind of blunder they would make.

Keep quiet I say, I bite into my arm but I can't hold it back, the laughter extrudes. It startles me, I stop at once but it's too late, they've heard me. Rubber feet stomping off the dock and bulletproof heads moving towards me, who could they be, David and Joe, Claude from the village, Evans, Malmstrom the spy, the Americans, the humans, they're here because I wouldn't sell. I don't own it, nobody owns it I tell them, you don't have to kill me. Rabbit's choices: freeze, take the chance they won't see you; then bolt.

I have a good start on them and no shoes. I run silently, dodging branches,

heading for the path to the swamp, the canoe is there, I can easily reach it first. On the open lake they could cut me off with the motorboat but if I go into the swamp, among the dead tree roots, I'll be safe, they'd have to wade for me, the mud is soft, they'll sink like bulldozers. Behind me they crash, their boots crash, language ululating, electronic signals thrown back and forth between them, hooo, hooo, they talk in numbers, the voice of reason. They clank, heavy with weapons and iron plating.

But they've half-circled and are closing, five metal fingers converging to a fist. I double back. Other tricks: up a tree, but no time and no tree is big enough. Crouch behind boulders, at night yes but not now and there are no boulders, they've pulled themselves back into the earth just when I need them. Flight, there's no alternative, though I'm praying the power has deserted me, nothing is on my side, not even the sun.

I swerve toward the lake, there's a high bank here, steep slope, sand mostly. I go over the edge and slide down it, on a knee and elbow it seems, gouging furrows, I hope they won't see the tracks. I keep the blanket over me so the white won't show and crouch with my face against the treeroots that dangle over the eroded side. Twisted: cedars. One of my feet is gashed and the arm, I can feel the blood swelling out like sap.

The clangs and shouts thrash past me and continue, further away, then nearer. I stay unmoving, don't give yourself away. Back in the woods they group: talking, laughter. Maybe they've brought food, in hampers and thermos bottles, maybe they thought of it as a picnic. My heart clenches, unclenches, I listen to it.

The sound of the starting motor prods me. I pull myself up onto the bank and squat behind the hedge of trunks, if I stay by the shore they might see me. The noise surges out from behind the point and they rocket past, so near I could hit them with a stone. I count them, making sure, five.

That is the way they are, they will not let you have peace, they don't want you to have anything they don't have themselves. I stay on the bank, resting, licking the scratches; no fur yet on my skin, it's too early.

I make my way back towards the cabin, resenting the gods although perhaps they saved me, limping, blood is still coming out of my foot but not as much. I wonder if they have set traps; I will have to avoid my shelter. Caught animals gnaw off their arms and legs to get free, could I do that.

I haven't had time to be hungry and even now the hunger is detached from me, it does not insist; I must be getting used to it, soon I will be able to go without food