Loners

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Stepping off a Trailways bus in the Catskills mountain hamlet, my wife and I found Jackson waiting for us beyond the edge of the luggage crowd. Like us, he lived and worked in Manhattan, but he was a country bumpkin at heart, already dressed for the weekend in blue overalls, a red plaid shirt, and an old fashioned railroad engineer's striped hat. Taking my wife's bag, he led us to his maroon Buick sedan, another throwback to an earlier era. "We're having crow wars up at the house," he said enthusiastically. "They're establishing territories." I was delighted. After sixteen years in the metropolis, I was exhausted with urban excitement. The latest news about crows was what I wanted to learn.

Through astrology, my wife knew Jackson's partner, Angela. Although no longer lovers, they remained friends and shared a red cottage that we reached after driving up a long valley towards mountain ridges with conifer crewcuts. After crossing a grated bridge, Jackson parked at the edge of their lawn. A gifted craftsman, he had cut and painted a wooden sign shaped like a raccoon that hung from a tree announcing "Camp Angela." A thin woman in black jeans and gray sweatshirt, she greeted us with a trowel and fresh tomatoes in her hands. Her black hair had crooked bangs as if she'd cut it herself.

While the women prepared lunch, Jackson showed me their stream embankment that had recently been fortified with large boulders after a flood carved ten feet of earth from their property. The stones were bright gray, untouched by lichen stains. Jackson had finished the job by standing another one of his wooden animals, a great blue heron, amid the rocks. As a day hiker, I had visited the Catskills before, but I sensed Jackson was different than the people you meet along the trail. He was a homebody, not a wanderer, a tinkerer, not an explorer. We clambered down the new rocks and sat beside the rippling stream. A former trout fisherman, he had lost the heart for killing fish, but still loved the water. "Have you ever seen the way mayflies fuck?" he asked. I wasn't sure what mayflies were. Imitating them, he wiggled his fingers for wings and raised and lowered his hands until his two wrists finally met and kissed. "They fuck, and then they die."

On the picnic table, Angela had arranged a vase of wildflowers picked by the road, which she now identified for me: viper's bugloss, butter-and-eggs, oxeye daisy. I relished the names as much as the colors. Lacking our own country home, my wife and I constantly fished for weekend invitations, so we had eagerly accepted this offer without knowing Jackson or Angela very well. Over tuna fish sandwiches and sun-brewed ice tea, we shared our stories. Both my wife and I worked as magazine editors. A lifelong Manhattanite, she admitted that even at the age of 42, she didn't know how to drive a car. A child of the suburbs, I had fled to the city after college, but now felt a yearning for the country life. Proud of their cottage, Jackson and Angela showed us photographs of the renovations he had made after she purchased the place with some money from the movie industry a decade ago. Although Angela didn't say so, my wife and I knew that now in her early fifties she was having a difficult time finding work. In everyone's

favorite picture of the cottage interior stripped to raw wood for the renovation, a family of five raccoons huddled in the sunny doorway like pet bandits.

Angela served strawberries for desert. "After we slept together for the first time, Jack heard a mouse in my kitchen cabinet, "she told us. "He said we should let it out because it must be hungry. Jack left a crumpled up Ritz cracker and a jar lid of water on the counter. I knew we were kindred spirits." But after some more mouse stories, she made it clear that the two were now simply friends. "I like animals and nature, but I also like to think," she said. In particular, she was completely caught up in a book by Ken Wilber titled, *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality.* It sounded like the answer to everything.

After lunch, we all tried our hand at a craft project. We made forest masks by drying Plaster of Paris on our faces for molds and then decorating them with birch bark, lichen, fungi, and moss collected from the surrounding woods. While trading witty comments about facials and horror movies, we had a wonderful time with the kind of activity I hadn't done since grade school art class. By the end of the afternoon, my wife finished an abstract pattern of bark and mushrooms that to me resembled scars and tumors, but I didn't say anything impolite. Mine own mask wound up more somber than I planned with a hard elephant toe tree fungi serving as a mute mouth. But Andrew's mask belonged on a forest superhero. With beautiful precision he had mounted a fan of grouse feathers across his forehead. He looked like the Bird King.

Towards dusk, Jackson led me onto the lawn and pointed to a giant linden tree that he dubbed a "wolf tree," a loner that had grown into its fullest form in a sunny yard, unimpeded by a surrounding forest. He outlined the leafy silhouette of the tree crown against the purple twilight. "Rodin's 'Thinker,'" he said, "Right?" I did indeed see the remarkable resemblance, the fusion of nature and art.

That night, Jackson lit a small fire on a stone fireplace built like a round barbecue grill in the yard. After laying long sticks in the flames until the ends glowed with coals, we waved these orange wands wildly in the darkness, drawing figure 8's and hula hoops with shedding sparks. We whooped and yelled like woodland spirits, released from our urban working selves. On a box drum that he had sawed, sanded, and stained himself, Jackson played sweet xylophone music for hours until his wrists finally tired from delicately tapping with the wooden lollipop mallets. Under the band of Milky Way stars, we listened to crickets pulsate in the dewy grass, and watched the orange coals lick themselves with tiny flames. At last, we decided to retreat indoors for a bedtime dessert, a fresh pie made with rhubarb from the garden.

Blinded by the porch floodlight, Jackson tripped over a planter and tumbled to the ground. The box drum still firmly in his hands hummed musically from the impact. Apparently, he had taken a much harder fall in order to protect his instrument.

"Goddamn it, Angie," he snarled. "How many times have I told you to move that planter?"

"Ignore him," Angela told us. "Or he'll ruin dessert."

Her brusqueness stunned me. In an instant, the campfire magic was replaced by bitter tension. While Jackson picked himself up and walked into the cottage, Angela waited by the fireplace, smoking a cigarette. "He always does this when he's drunk," she added. Again, I was surprised. He had been so polite, even reserved during the evening, I hadn't noticed any untoward drinking. The three of us had been the whirling dervishes with burning sticks. But in the orange coal light Angela's tired face showed no pity. Oily and deeply lined, it looked weathered by anger. She had grown up poor, I remembered my wife telling me, the daughter of saloon keepers.

Inside the cottage we found Jackson emerging from the bathroom. He shivered so badly from shock I wanted to hold him by the shoulders. He pressed a white carnation of toilet paper on his reddish brown beard beneath his lips. Bright red blood slowly filled the paper blossom. He lowered the bandage and pulled up on his lower lip to show us a tiny red fish mouth that opened in his bearded skin. "I bit a hole in my lip," he said in a small voice. His ruddy complexion had drained, leaving his face white as cauliflower.

Angela ignored him. Queasy about blood, my wife averted her eyes. But I stood in the middle of the room and closely examined the red fish lips. It was what a doctor would do, I reasoned, although I hadn't the faintest idea of what to do for first aide. Perhaps I was really just indulging a fascination with gore. After a moment, Jackson gave me an embarrassed and guarded look, as if I was a Peeping Tom, and covered his wound again with the toilet paper. Then I had a good idea. I offered to drive him to the emergency room. Rather than relief, he looked at me with more caution and refused: It was too late, too far, too expensive. He didn't have health insurance. His beard would hide the scar. For several minutes, we parried heatedly, as I kept repeating my offer, and he kept repeating his excuses. Easily panicked, my wife shouted at him, sounding on the verge of tears from her own fear and frustration. But our emotions made him more stubborn. For the first time, I understood the humiliation of not having insurance, a circumstance I would one day face myself for lack of money. Dabbing his chin, he returned to the bathroom for more toilet paper.

"Jackson, now that you've ruined the evening, can't we just go to bed?" Angela said. After insisting that we help ourselves to more wine, she gathered blankets for the two of them to sleep out in the shed, giving us their small bedroom. "You should've seen him the night he drove the Chevrolet into the creek below the post office," she added. "That was a beauty." Stumbling, Jackson followed her out into the darkness.

After sleeping poorly, my wife and I caught an early morning bus home to Manhattan, relieved to escape the vicious melodrama. We even chuckled over a few frightening moments safely behind us like a horror movie. Left unspoken was an uneasy suspicion that our own relationship was troubled in a way that encouraged us to accept weekend invitations from strangers. In a happier marriage we would have had better friends.

Over time, we reacquainted ourselves with Jackson and Angela in Manhattan. Having grown up in a tempestuous but loving family, my wife was very forgiving and loathe to abandon friendships. I envied them the Catskills cottage. By New Year's Eve, my

wife and I had reached our own bitter impasse, so we chose separate parties. I went to Jackson's loft in Chelsea. During the course of the night, he gave me the name of their real estate agent in the Catskills, launching me on a search for my own place in the woods. By summer, I had rented a log cabin and ended my marriage, a transition full of pain and excitement, regret and renewal. In this new life Jackson became my closest friend.

As a freelance jeweler who made gold wedding rings for Cartier, Jackson spent the week at his workbench in his loft around the corner from Billy's Topless, which he sometimes visited. "They're sweet kids," he said of the dancers. "They're earning money to get through from college." Several had even visited his loft to see the rings. To them, he was a teddy bear, a short, stocky man with a neatly trimmed beard and courtly country manners. But, aside from the dancers, he hated the city. He believed that the homeless were spitting tuberculosis on the sidewalks, the Blacks were preparing to riot, and the junkies were climbing his fire escape in search of his jewelry. Not until he reached the cottage on Thursday or Friday for the long weekend did he feel safe. On the Thruway, he constantly complained, the Yuppies in white turtlenecks had nearly run him off the road in their race to summer barbecues or winter ski slopes. Each time he described the Yuppies he held his hand to his neck as if the white turtleneck was a strangle hold.

At the cottage in his blue jean overalls and waffle patterned thermal undershirt, Jackson became his happier self, a talented craftsman enamored with old tools and skills. He had decorated the outside of his workshed with deer horns inherited from his father and a rusty chain left by loggers in the woods a century ago. Inside, he carved and painted his wooden animals, made his own kitchen utensils with branch handles, and pursued other practical and whimsical ideas. Whenever I visited, he showed off his project for the week, such as an old lawn edger rescued from the neighbor's trash. He had polished the wooden handle with sesame oil and sharpened the half-circle blade for an ice-chopper. "They were going to throw it out," he said in disbelief. "A new one would cost you $9 in a hardware store."

My favorite was his chipmunk house, a miniature log cabin with tables and chairs, a front porch, a wood pile, and a rocking chair. He had photographed a chipmunk hunched inside this perfect model as if grown up to human size. At times, he announced plans to give the cabin to his favorite bar keeper in the village, whom he called the proprietress, to display on her wall. But I didn't believe him. Aside from Angela, he didn't give away his gifts to anyone.

Jackson devoted the same attention to the critters. For the raccoons, he left food scraps in a hubcap dish leashed by chain to a tree so the animals wouldn't drag it under the cottage. The squirrels he teased by mounting a board on a tree trunk that spun like a propeller blade. By sticking an ear of dried corn on top, he lured squirrels to charge up the board and then spin around for a dizzying ride. He fed sparrows and grosbeaks on a seed tray mounted on a pole to be visible from his windows. For the chickadees, he made feeders from lengths of PVC pipe that hung from high wires to

foil the bears. To enjoy it all, he explored the property with a clipboard and stubby pencil, jotting down nature notes he mailed to Angela. Studying for a new career in data management, she rarely visited anymore. "We haven't fucked in three years," he admitted.

Jackson discovered sights that I wouldn't have imagined. "You know what I care about?" he asked. "I care about the way banana slugs hang down a hundred feet from the trees on tiny threads." He described the scene with such reverence I nearly heard the threads whispering like harp strings in the breeze.

By Saturday, Jackson tired of solitude, so he called me for dinner. "I've got a great bear story to tell you," he promised on the phone. Upon my arrival, he led me to the lilac bushes beside the lawn and pointed to the fresh pile of black dung that would lay untouched and admired for weeks like a trophy left by his midnight visit or. Unlike me, an avid hiker, he refused to venture up his hillside, convinced that bears guarded the cliffs like knights on castle walls. After strolling the rest of the property, we returned inside the cottage, where an iron pot of stew simmered on the wood stove. Every week, he made a new version of meat, beans, vegetables, and potatoes that bubbled in an earthy brown sauce. After a meal, he sliced more ingredients into the pot for the next dinner. He served big portions in blue bowls and provided a brown medicine bottle of an enzyme fluid with an eyedropper cap. By adding five drops to my first spoonful of stew, I helped my stomach digest the beans so I wouldn't spend the next morning farting like a backfiring engine. I drank beer while he worked on bourbon.

Over dinner we discussed books. His favorites were Cormac McCarthy's Faulknerian novels about young men and their horses. I cherished Edward Abbey, the desert curmudgeon who wrote wilderness essays full of humor, romance, misadventure, and righteous condemnation of our heedless concrete civilization. Now supporting myself as a freelance writer, I viewed him as my mentor. Some day, I planned to write a book, *In Defense of Cabins*, that would prove the Unabomber wrong.

From books, we turned to life. Since the age of twelve, when Jackson lost his father, he had become self-reliant, learning cooking, plumbing, carpentry, car mechanics, and many other skills that made him a gifted craftsman. In that way, I was his opposite, a word smith who didn't possess any practical talents beyond changing light bulbs. But we shared our reverence for artistic creativity. Earlier in his life, Jackson had played guitar in a rock band on the New Jersey shore. He had made sculptural jewelry for fashion magazines before choosing the steady income of wedding rings. He had even written a manuscript of autobiographical stories about a period in his twenties spent living on a remote island in British Columbia. At times, his cabin shook when whales in the nearby straights rammed the sea cliffs to scratch barnacles from their sides. Such moments of natural grandeur were what we both lived for. By the end of the evening, we stood on his porch, pissing into the earth and admiring the stars.

By spring, I was anxious to meet more people in the Catskills. At my prodding, Jackson and I wondered whom else we might invite to dinner. In the village he only seemed to know the proprietress. His neighbors across the stream were out. He said

they watched too much television, burned their yard lights too brightly, and had too much of a reputation for being swingers. Along my stream I rarely saw anybody. Alone in my cabin writing for national magazines, I found it much harder to meet new people in the country than expected. Or perhaps I had lived too long in a marriage in which my wife arranged our socializing. Too often, I went to the movies alone, spent Saturday afternoons at the laundromat, or searched the Web for outdoor pornography. Finally, I overcame my former urban aversion to outdoor clubs, and began joining weekend day hikes and bird walks. They still didn't solve the problem of dinner plans, but at least I began meeting new people.

One night over stew, I persuaded Jackson to join me the following Saturday for a duck walk by the Hudson River. I reminded him of his dream of marrying a wildlife biologist. As uneasy as he was at the prospect of this trip down from his mountain cottage, he admitted, "I've had it with makeup artists and astrologers. My first wife spent the whole morning worrying about her shoes."

A week later I picked him up in the village, dressed more like a whaler than a birder in rubber boots laced up his shins and a green raincoat. For a moment, I thought he had forgotten binoculars, but he carried a pair in his coat pocket. After helping him strap on the seat belts, I pulled onto the county highway that led down from the Catskills. After several minutes of silence, he told me my rear calipers sounded shot. I didn't hear anything odd and didn't know what calipers were, but let the comment pass. I didn't want to spend the drive listening to a dissection of my car.

Following the club newsletter's directions, we reached a river front park at the end of an old industrial road, where Jackson had warned me away from potholes filled with black water so I wouldn't break my axles. We parked by a small beach with a swingless swingset and an empty lifeguard stand. It would be several months before beach weather brought any swimmers. Like many bird walkers, our leader was an older woman who care how she dressed for the morning chilliness in a green army jacket and pink knit bonnet. In the large cove before us she identified the scattered ducks: golden eyes, canvas backs, mergansers, immature herring gulls. She also identified the rusty metal-and-brick warehouse across the cove with a green metal cactus standing by the door. It was a former brick factory that later failed as a Mexican restaurant. With her telescope I scanned the ducks and was immediately smitten by the goldeneyes. Their black-and-white plumages looked as sharp and exotic as costume ball tuxedos and gowns.

Jackson didn't bother with the ducks. He combed the beach for good bricks among the smooth river stones. Kneeling, he chose them as judiciously as someone squeezing tomatoes at a farm stand. "People don't make things out of brick anymore," he said. "They can't afford to." No doubt, he already planned his new project. But I stood with the handful of birders. In this group Jackson seemed odd in a way he hadn't at the cottage. He seemed like an eager and naive teenage inventor, a Tom Swift, unwittingly inhabiting the body of a fifty year old man.

A younger brunette arrived and opened her telescope tripod. Perhaps six feet tall, she dominated our small crowd and dressed lightly in a blue fleece jacket and jeans. She pushed her raybans up on her short hair, licked her pinkie, and rubbed her viewing lens. The other birders obviously knew her. Before long, she and the leader were debating whether one of the gulls in the beach flock was a Thayer's gull lost from the Arctic. Jackson had stopped collecting bricks to admire her. When she finally glanced at him, he offered her one.

For the rest of the morning, we caravaned by car to more lookouts along the river, including an old pier by an oil tank farm, the banks of a condominium development, and a nature sanctuary. On each leg of the drive, Jackson waxed poetic over his new love, praising her green eyes, her scientific background, her graceful walking, and her age, which he convinced himself was thirty two. But at each stop he had trouble charming her. At the pier, he described a stringy plant floating in the murky water as a weedy species that had escaped from aquariums. She dragged it up from the cold water and identified it as a common river plant. At the nature center, he stopped for two teenage boys swinging scythes at vines encroaching our path. "Look," he said. "They've got kids doing convicts' work."

If the brunette heard his joke, she ignored it. In fact, she seemed preoccupied, even prickly. Our group wasn't finding the expected variety of ducks. And she spent much of her time huddled with the leader, carping about the politics of her job at an ecology center. At the end of the morning, we stood on a bank at the nature sanctuary overlooking a glassy cove with a distant raft of big black ducks. After a moment of excitement, we saw in our binoculars that they were hunting decoys. "I like duck," Jackson said. "Especially with wild rice and roasted potatoes." The brunette didn't smile at this joke, either.

In the car, I cracked my window for air and helped Jackson with his seat belts. "Did you get her number?" he asked before I turned the key.

"No," I said. "Why would I?"

"She's perfect for you," he said, his enthusiasm finding a new mission. "I wish I could do it myself. Really, really, call her and invite her over for dinner. She's a gem. Go get it now before she leaves."

I studied her through my sunlit dusty windshield. Tall and thin, she vaguely resembled a foot soldier with her telescope tripod hoisted over her shoulder. Not once this morning had I entertained an erotic thought about her. But maybe I was afraid. Now Jackson was calling me on my fear.

"I'll do it later," I said. After reversing out of the parking lot, I drove home in a funk.

Days later, I did call and left a message, perhaps to prove to myself that I wasn't a coward about dating. Whatever she heard in my voice, she didn't return the call, to my relief.

For several months, Jackson mentioned her over dinner, relishing his image of a goddess in blue jeans with a Ph.D. in biology. I nodded dutifully at his fantasy. In

truth, I paid less attention to his stories, which had be come familiar reruns, and watched his drinking like a hawk. His plastic gallon of Jim Bean on the counter was my hourglass. Once he reached the bottom third I thanked him for dinner and left.

My mother had been a Jekyll-and-Hyde drunk. For weeks at time, she maintained her chatty cheerfulness through all of her social activities: garden club meetings, school car pools, League of Women Voter coffees, tennis dates, and town hearings on recycling, her favorite cause. She was a friendly and supportive figure, a bit proper perhaps from her Bostonian family heritage but always ready to smile, even at my terrible teenage puns. In the face of bad news, she seemed quite stoical. Part of her routine was to deliver food dishes to several elderly women whom she knew about town.

Then the pressure value popped. She started her bottle of sweet vermouth before dinner, and by desert she was denouncing my father as a sniveling failure in his career at the bank. In her wildly inflamed imagination, he had been a brilliant graduate student who then settled for a position hardly above a clerk. To some extent, she was right about his limiting meekness, but she tore into him with grandiose claims of failure and betrayal. She even swore for the only time in her life. "You think all women are shit!" she said. I stared at the red lipstick ring on her vermouth glass. Soon enough, my father threw his napkin on the table and marched out the door to buy fresh milk, an errand that lasted him until midnight. By then, she was fast asleep, snoring loud as a horse.

For years, I avoided her wrath, but after graduating from college, I became her target, too. Lumbering drunk, she needed several minutes to plod and bump up the stairs to my small bedroom on the third floor. When she finally made it, driven by bitter determination, she lashed into my as her reward. I had once been one of the three or four smartest prep school students in America, she said, and now I couldn't even find a job. Her fresh lipstick, reapplied at the bottom of the stairs, was smeared beyond her lips. I shoved my way around her, nearly tipping her over like a wooden statue, and trotted down the stairs to hide her address book, so she wouldn't next start calling my friends' parents and raging at them. Then I drove over to a buddy's house to listen to Grateful Dead albums and get stoned. Years later, after she died, I found my graduation program in the bureau drawer in my old bedroom and was startled to read that I hadn't even graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Her alcoholic delusions had supplanted my own memories.

As a drunk, Jackson was her opposite. Rather than mean and nasty, he grew more formal, like a butler trying to hide his condition. He served larger heapings of stew, thanked me repeatedly for lending him new books, kept asking if I wanted another beer. And I reacted as if all was normal, even if he staggered for a moment while carrying our dirty plates to the kitchen sink. The only obvious change was that he now smoked in doors. But the drunker he got, the more uneasy I felt. In his wooziness, he repeated his favorite conversational openings, such as the beauty of Cormac McCarthy's horses, or the superiority of V-6 engines. What scared me wasn't his boorishness but the way

he sounded delighted, as if he'd just realized these insights. He seemed deeply afraid of venturing into new ideas.

After a silence, Jackson put down his bourbon glass and announced he needed to split some fire wood. In the twilight dusk, I followed him out the door and up the garden path, where he tripped over a loose rock and fell to one knee. He cursed, stood defiantly, and marched to his shed. I felt an urge to tackle him, to stop this whole charade, but I did nothing but watch. By now, he wasn't speaking or noticing me. He stood a round log upright on the ground, raised his ax high over his head, swung, and somehow hit his target each time. The logs busted neatly into halves and quarters. But I left before his built his fire.

In time, I developed the bad habit of arriving late. Sometimes I wondered why I even went. But Saturday night remained a hole of loneliness that needed to be filled. After dawdling at my cabin, I rushed down to the village market for a bag of chips, salsa, and a six-pack of beer, then sped up the long valley towards the wall of mountains catching the late golden light.

One evening, I pulled in to find Jackson staring under the open hood of his Buick. A sweaty bourbon glass stood on the radiator. He wasn't working, simply admiring. His clean hands held a balled rag like a Kleenex for touching anything oily. He wore spotless blue overalls with loosened shoulder straps over his white waffle undershirt. Maybe he'd grown impatient waiting for me. Maybe, given his low opinion of my Japanese compact, he wanted to impress me with the sight of his American engine. Holding my grocery bag, I nodded while he identified the V-6 engine block, the bolts capping the spark plugs, and the alternator belt he had changed earlier in the day. He liked cars to ride smooth as an elevator. I knew mine squeaked like a mouse. But I kept stealing glances at his face. It was so white I wondered if he was sick.

Jackson folded down the prop rod and let the hood slam shut. "A deer got killed this week," he announced, looking at me for an extra moment, as if judging if I had the moral character worthy of hearing such news. "It was the young buck that grazed in my yard all the time. He was starting to grow his little horns." Heavy footed in his boots and overalls, Jackson walked over the bridge up to the county highway. A descending car raced by, blowing ripples through the dried roadside grass.

"I wanted to drag it into the woods for the ravens, coyotes, and bears. Those guys are hungry," Jackson told me. "But my neighbor said it would stink. The cop came and took it away." Like someone on a subway, he swayed and staggered just to stand in place, so drunk he had to concentrate on the simplest things. His bourbon glass hung so loosely in his hand I wondered why it hadn't dropped.

The asphalt didn't show any dried blood spots. But candy red plastic shards lay scattered around the gravel and sand on the road shoulder. I picked up a piece the size of my palm, studied it from several angles, and wondered what it could be.

"The fucking motorcycle that hit it," Jackson said. "The asshole broke his knee."

For several years now, I've driven by the red cottage without visiting. The maroon Buick remains parked by the edge of the lawn. In winter smoke wisps off the top of the

chimney. In summer I imagine Jackson seated on his favorite stream boulder watching the mayflies hatch onto the swirling water surface, ride for a moment, and then skip free for their aerial dance of lovemaking. With his stubby pencil he records this small miracle on his clipboard. But I keep driving up the valley and through the narrow pass where the birch trees all lean slightly downhill. People are complicated. I'm glad to live back among them.

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