

KEEPING TRACK  
[a short story]

*Remember*

"Will you help me?" the girl asks. Kneeling on the mossy ground, she opens the top of a shoebox. Pale gray body, white head topped with yellow feathers, circles of blush on both sides of the beak. The only visible sign the bird is dead, besides the box, is its pose, a too-still flop.

I had followed the girl to the edge of the forest thinking she was Charlotte, but she wasn't.

She is a kid, I am an adult.

"That's a good-looking bird," I say. "What's its name?"

"Billy."

"Billy the bird."

"I didn't bring anything with me to dig with."

I help her look around for a spot to lay Billy the bird to rest. We find a place in the middle of a copse of Douglas Firs where the dirt is soft. The girl who is not Charlotte sets down her box and the both of us kneel and begin to scrape with sticks. After not much time at all, we have a nice hole.

"She was a good bird." The girl sets the box carefully into the hole.

"I'm sure you gave her a happy life."

"She probably won't remember me."

*Take your pills*

Julia sweeps into the room carrying a bag of groceries. She kisses my cheek and sets the bag on the kitchen counter.

"Jesus, Dad," she says. "It feels like a sauna in here."

"Does it?" *Sauna*. Steam and skin and the smell of cedar. Sex.

Right after Charlotte passed. What was her name? A silly name. Piper. Bunny. JoJo. She was a good friend of Charlotte's, they used to play mahjong together every Sunday afternoon. She had just lost someone, too, her husband, a Roger or a Richard, a big blur of a man. But our bodies didn't go together, her skin didn't smell right. It had been a short, humiliating endeavor, after which both of us decided that was that.

"Did you take your pills today?" Julia asks, has been asking, will ask again.

"Yep."

"Let's take a look."

We both knew I probably didn't take them. Julia reaches for the plastic thing with the days of the week labeled where she sorts my pills. I appreciate that she doesn't chastise me, just empties the pills into my palm and hands me a glass of water.

*Feed the dog*

The dog is barking. The dog is barking. The dog is barking. The dog is barking. The dog's name is Crystal and she is barking. She is always barking. If she heard someone walk past the door: bark. If she wants to get me out of bed: bark. If she sees me getting on my jacket: bark. If the heat clicks on or the phone rings or the dishwasher runs: bark bark bark.

*Do not smoke inside*

Cigar nights are on Fridays. Cigar nights I take a cigar down to the bar and sit at a table outside. No matter the weather. There's a roof that keeps out the rain, and they'll turn on the heat lamp if I ask, but mostly I'm fine keeping my coat, hat, and gloves on. In some ways I prefer it. The way the smoke puffs thickly into the night air. A portal for my thoughts. The bar is the only bar on the island open year round. The locals hunch on their barstools, and though I'm not quite one of them, they've mostly accepted me as a local, or at least the seriousness of my intent to become one. I can usually get a couple of them to come out with me to smoke a cigar or two. I wouldn't call any of them friends, but we're friendly. When I first moved to the island—ten years ago, fifteen?—the locals weren't so friendly. I was not a local yet. I was tracking their deer, helping sterilize them. The locals have many feelings about the island's deer. Some of them don't believe humans should interfere in restoring balance to the ecosystem like that. And others believe they're capable of managing the population of deer themselves, with their rifles and revolvers—not that I object to hunting, when I was younger the only animals I ate were the ones I'd killed myself. These days I don't eat much meat, but I'm not too picky either. Convenient calories over moral objections.

Lately I've been waking up in the middle of the night, unable to recognize where I am in space and time. This used to happen when I was younger, too, but it's changed, as if that moment, between dream and awake, is stretching longer and longer. Sometimes when I wake up like that, I think about the deer. I see a pair of soft satellite ears and quivering nose, eyes like pools of night sky. The doe is before me asking me something. I need to do something. I need to do something before it's too late.