

VOICES OF THE KILL

THOMAS M. DISCH

Thomas M. Disch is one of the most highly revered writers of fantastic fiction. He has written a number of brilliant novels, including On Wings of Song, 334, and Camp Concentration, and his short fiction has been collected in a number of volumes. For the last year Tom has been the theater critic for The Nation. His most recent books are a deluxe limited edition of his story “The Silver Pillow,” published by Mark Ziesing, and the children’s book The Brave Little Toaster Goes to Mars.

“Voices of the Kill” begins Full Spectrum with a haunting, mystical, contemporary tale. It is absolutely vintage Disch—which means you should keep your eyes wide open.

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He lay awake through much of his first night in the cabin listening to the stream. It was early June. The water was high and made a fair amount of noise. A smooth white noise it had seemed during the day, but now, listening more closely, surprisingly varied. There was a kind of pulse to it. Not like the plain two-beat alternation of tick and tock that the mind projects on the undifferentiated ratcheting of a clock, but a more inflected flow, like a foreign language being spoken far off, risings and fallings such as an infant must hear in its crib as its parents speak in whispers in another room. Soothing, very soothing, but even so he couldn’t get to sleep for many hours, and when he did, he slept lightly and did not dream.

The next morning he opened the plastic bag containing the wading boots he’d bought at the hardware store in Otisville. *Tingley*, the bag said. *Tough Boots for Tough Customers*. They came up to just below his knees. The soles were like tire treads, but quite flexible. He tucked his jeans inside the tops of the boots and went wading up the stream.

He had no intention of fishing. He fished only to be sociable and had little luck at it. In any case, he didn’t much like to eat fish, and hated cleaning them. He’d got the boots purely for the pleasure of walking up the stream, as his ticket to the natural history museum of Pine Kill. Not exactly the kind of tough customer *Tingley* usually catered to, but that was one of the pleasures of taking a vacation all by himself. There was no code to conform to, no expectations to meet, no timetables, no one to say, “Mr. Pierce, would you explain the assignment again?”

A hundred feet up the stream and he felt he had penetrated the mystique of trout fishing. It was simply a macho-compatible mode of meditation. Even with the help of rubber boots, you had to step carefully, for many stones were liable to tilt underfoot, and even the stablest could be treacherous in their smoothness. Moving along at this slower pace, the mind had to gear down too. The busy hum of its own purposes died away and nature slowly emerged from the mists. Nature. He’d almost forgotten what that was. No one had *decided* on any of this. The complications, the repetitions, the apparent patterning—all of it had come about willy-nilly. The beauty, for instance, of these lichens hadn’t been intended to delight his eye. The placement of those boulders, which looked so much like a monument by Henry Moore, simply one of an infinite number of rolls of dice.

Another hour up the stream and these abstractions, too, had melted away, like the last lingering traces of ice in spring. The city was thawed out of his limbs. A joy in, a warmth for, the ubiquitous hemlocks bubbled up through his genes from some aboriginal arboreal ancestor.

Where the sunlight penetrated the ranks of the high pines, he stood entranced by the play of the jittering interference patterns across the glowing bed of the stream, the wilderness's own video arcade. And there, darting about through the shallows, were the game's protagonists, two nervous minnows who seemed to be trying to escape their own pursuing and inescapable shadows.

He moved to the stream's next subdivision, a brackish pool where water-skates patterned the silt below with spectral wing patterns, six concentric-banded ovals formed by the touch of their rowing limbs on the skin of the water. For as long as the sunlight held steady over the pool he watched the flights of these subaqueous butterflies, continually delighted at how the light and water had conjured up something so ethereal from such unpromising raw material, for in itself the water-skate was not a pretty sort of bug.

And then there were the flowers, high banks of them where the stream swerved near the parallel curves of Pine Kill Road and the slope was too steep for trees to take root; flowers he had never seen before and had no name for. Some grew stemless from the rot of fallen logs, pale green blossoms of orchidlike intricacy, yet thick and succulent at the same time, as though molded from porcelain. There were great masses of pale yellow blooms that drooped from tall hairy stems, and beyond these a stand of clustered purple trumpet-shaped flowers flamboyant as a lipstick ad.

He braved the bees to pick a large bouquet of both the purple and the yellow flowers, but by the time he'd got back to the cabin all of them had wilted and couldn't be revived. He decided, guiltily, to pick no more bouquets.

That night he heard the voices clearly. So perfect was the illusion that at first he supposed there were people walking along the road on the other side of the stream, taking advantage of the full moon for a midnight stroll. But that was unlikely. His was the farthest cabin up Pine Kill Road, his nearest neighbors half a mile away. What women (for they were surely women's voices) would go walking such a distance, after dark, on such a lonely road?

No, it was the stream he heard, beyond a doubt. When he listened intently he could catch its separate voices merging back into its more liquid murmurings, but only to become distinct again, if never entirely articulate. He could pick out their individual timbres, as he might have the voices in a canon. There were three: a brassy soprano, given to emphatic octave-wide swoops, with a wobble in her lower register; an alto, richer-throated and longer-breathed, but somehow wearier even so; a coloratura, who never spoke more than a few short phrases at a time, little limpid outbursts like the exclamations of flutes in a Mahler symphony. Strain as he might, he could not make out a single word in the flow of their talk, only the melodic line, sinuous and continuous as the flowing of the stream, interrupted from time to time by little hoots of surprise and ripples of laughter.

He dreamed that night—some kind of nightmare involving car crashes and fires in suburban backyards—and woke in a sweat. The alarm clock's digital dial read 1:30 a.m. The stream purred soothingly, voicelessly, outside the cabin, and the moonlight made ghosts of the clothing that hung from nails in the wall.

In the morning he felt as though he were already weeks away from the city. Purged by the nightmare, his spirit was clear as the sky. He set a pot of coffee on the stove to perk. Then, faithful to the promise he'd made to himself the day before, he went down the flagstone steps to the stream and waded out to the deepest part, where two boulders and a small log had formed a natural spillway, below which, under the

force of the confluent flow, a hollow had been scooped out from the bed of the stream, large as a bathtub. He lay within it, listening, but from this closest vantage there was not the least whisper of the voices he had heard so plainly the night before. The water was cold, and his bath accordingly quick, but as he returned to where he'd left his towel on the grassy bank he felt a shock of pleasure that made him stop for breath, a neural starburst of delight starting in the center of his chest and lighting up every cell of his body in a quick chain reaction, like the lighting of a giant Christmas tree. *Too much!* he thought, but even with the thinking of that thought, the pleasure had faded to the merest afterimage of that first onslaught of well-being.

That day he went up the mountain—a very small mountain but a mountain for all that—that was coextensive with his backyard, a low many-gapped fieldstone wall being the only boundary between his three-quarter acre and the woods' immensity. He bore due west up the steepest slopes, then north along the first, lowest ridge, and not once was there a house or a paved road or a power line to spoil the illusion that this was the primeval, pre-Yankee wilderness. To be sure, he encountered any number of No Trespassing signs, spoor of the local Rod & Gun Club, and once, at the first broadening of the ridge, he came upon a rough triangle of stacked logs intended for a hunting blind, complete with a detritus of bullet-riddled beer cans and shattered bottle glass. But none of that bulked large against the basic glory of the mountain. The grandeur, the profusion, the fundamentality of it.

On a slope of crumbling slate beyond the hunting blind the mountain revealed its crowning splendor to him, a grove, horizon-wide, of laurels in full bloom, each waist-high shrub so densely blossomed that the underbrush was lost to sight beneath the froth of flowers. Laurels: he knew them by the shape of the leaf. But he'd never seen a laurel in blossom, never understood the fitness of Daphne's metamorphosis. For surely if a man, or God, were to be doomed to love a tree, then it would have to be one of these. They were desire incarnate. You couldn't look at them without wanting...

Something.

There was something he wanted, but he could not think what. To faint away, to expire; to become a song or painting or column of stone that could somehow express... What? This inexpressible wonder. But no, that wasn't what he wanted at all. He wanted to feel this place, this mountain, in his own being. To be a bee, moving ineluctably from bloom to bloom; to be the swarm of them converging on their hive.

To be a part of it.

To belong, here, forever.

Sleep came to him that night at once, as automatic as the light that goes off inside a refrigerator when the door is closed. He woke in a wash of moonlight to hear the voice of the kill, one of its voices, whispering to him. Not clearly yet, but as though a message had been left on a tape many times erased, distant and blurred by static. Words. Two words, repeated at long intervals: "Come here... come here..."

"Where shall I come?" he asked aloud.

"Here," said the voice, already fading.

He knew that she meant beside the stream, and he went out of the cabin and down the flagstone steps, obedient as a lamb.

"That's better," she said, pleased. "Lie here, next to me. The night is cool."

He assumed a reclining position on the grass, trying to be unobtrusive as he displaced the small stones

that dug into his hip and rib cage. When he lowered his gaze and bent toward her, the stream filled his entire field of vision, a film of blackness flecked with vanishing gleams of purple and pale yellow, neural relics of the flowers he'd seen on the banks upstream.

She did not speak again at once, nor did he feel any eagerness that she should. A strange contentment hovered about him, like a net of finest mesh, an Edenic happiness that did not yet know itself to be happy, a confidence that blessings were everywhere on hand.

"What is your name?" she asked, in the faintest of whispers, as though they spoke in a crowded room where they must not be seen speaking.

He was taken aback. "My name?" It seemed such a prosaic way to begin.

"How can we talk to each other if I don't know your name?"

"William," he said. "William Logan Pierce."

"Then, welcome, William Logan Pierce. Welcome to Pine Kill. To the waters of your new birth, welcome."

Now that was more like it. That was the language one expects from water sprites.

"What is *your* name?" he asked.

She laughed. "Must I have a name, too! Oh, very well, my name is Nixie. Will that do?"

He nodded. Then, uncertain whether she could see him in the darkness, he said, "I don't know how to speak to you, Nixie. I've never had a vision before."

"I am no 'vision,' William," she answered with dignity but no perceptible indignation. "I am like you, a spirit embodied in flesh. Only, as I am a Nereid, my flesh is immortal. But you may speak to me as you would to any mortal woman."

"Of what things shall we talk?"

"Why, we may begin with the elements, if you like. Your views on oxygen, your feelings about complex hydrocarbons."

"You're making fun of me."

"And you no less of me, to suppose that I am incapable of ordinary civil conversation. As though I were some nineteenth-century miss only just liberated from the nursery."

"Excuse me."

"It was nothing." Then, in a tone of mocking primness, as though she'd slipped into the role of that hypothetical young miss: "Tell me, Mr. Pierce, what did you think of today's weather?"

"It was beautiful."

"Is that all? I'd imagined you a man of more words."

So, lying with his head back in the grass, looking up at the moon's shattered descent through the swaying hemlocks, he told her of his day on the mountain. She would put in a word from time to time, assurances of her attention.

“You seem to have been quite smitten with those laurels,” she commented when he was done. She adopted an attitude of wifely irony, treating the laurels as someone he’d been seen flirting with at a party. “They’ll be gone in another two weeks, you know. So, seize the day.” She fell silent, or rather returned to her natural speech, the lilting *fol-de-riddle fol-de-lay* of her infinite liquid collisions.

He rolled onto his stomach, the better to peer down at the silken stirrings of her body. Now that the moon had gone down behind the mountain, the little flashes of phosphorescent color were more vivid and coherent, forming ephemeral draperies of bioluminescence.

“You mustn’t touch me,” she warned, sensing his intention before he’d lifted his hand. “Not till you’ve paid.”

“Paid! How ‘paid’?”

“With money, of course. Do you think we use cowrie shells? I trust you have some ready cash on hand.”

“Yes but—”

“Then it is very simple: if you’re to touch me, you must pay.”

“But I’ve never...”

“You’ve never had to pay for it?” she asked archly.

“No, I didn’t mean that.”

“Visions—to use your term—don’t come cheap, William. You must pay now—and pay again each night you come to call. Those are the rules, and I’m afraid I have no authority to set them aside.”

“Very well. I’ll have to go back into the house to get... your pay.”

“I’ll be right here,” she promised.

Dazzled by the glare of the overhead 100-watt bulb, he dug into the sock drawer of the bureau, where there would be quarters set aside for the laundromat. Then he thought better of it. In classic times coins might have served his purpose, but nowadays quarters were worth little more than cowrie shells. He took his billfold from the top dresser drawer. The smallest bill was a twenty. It was probably the smallest she’d accept in any case.

He returned to the stream. “I’ve twenty dollars. Will that do?”

There was no reply.

“Nixie, are you there?”

“I’m always here, William. Just put it under a stone. A large stone, and not too close to the shore.”

He picked his way carefully across the rocky streambed till he came to the middle. The water sweeping around his ankles did not seem different, except in being less chilly, from the water he’d bathed in yesterday morning. Even so, as he knelt to pry up a rock, the shock of immersion was almost enough to dispel the enchantment and send him, shivering and chagrined, back to the cabin. But as he placed the bill beneath the stone, another kind of shock ran up his wet forearms and connected right to the base of his spine, deep-frying his nerves to ecstasy.

He cried out, such a cry as must have brought every animal prowling the night woods to pause and

ponder.

“Now you have touched me, William. Now let me touch you.”

Helpless, enslaved, and craving nothing but a deeper enslavement, he lowered himself into the stream, careless of the stones on which he lay supine.

She ran her hands over his yielding flesh. “O William,” she whispered. “O my sweet, sweet William!”

After that second night, he ceased to take count of the time elapsing. Instead of being stippled with the felt-tip X’s that filled the earlier pages of his wall calendar, June’s page remained blank as a forgotten diary. His days were given to the mountain or the hammock, his nights to the Nereid’s ineffable, evanescent caresses, of which he could recall, in the morning, few particulars. But then what bliss is sweeter for being itemized? So long as our delights are endlessly renewed, what harm is there in taking the days as they come and letting them slip away, unchronicled, to join the great drifts of geologic time? As Nixie said, the thing to do was seize the day—and not look either way.

Yet a day did come, toward the end of June, when he lost his grip on this immemorial good advice. It began with a phone call from Ray Feld, the owner of the cabin, who wanted to know if he meant to continue renting for the rest of the summer. He’d paid only to mid-July.

He promised to have his check in the mail that morning—\$875, which was almost exactly half of his bank balance. Even eating frugally and borrowing on his credit cards, it was going to be a tight squeeze to Labor Day. And then...

And then it would be back to Newark and Marcus Garvey Junior High School, where, under the pretense of teaching English and social studies, he gave his young detainees a foretaste of their destined incarceration in the prisons, armies, and offices of the grown-up world. On the premises of Marcus Garvey, he was usually able to take a less dismal view of the teaching profession. If there was nothing else to be said for it, there was at least this—the freedom of his summers. While other people had to make do with two or three weeks of vacation, he could spend the entire season by the stream, with the hemlocks perfuming the air. All he need remember—summer’s one simple rule—was not to look back or ahead.

And the best way to do that was to take up the cry of the pines: “More light! More light!” For always a climb up the mountain was an antidote to his merely mental gloom. He’d got lazy about giving the mountain its due; that was the only problem. He’d come to rely too much on Nixie’s nightly benefactions. Earth and air must have their share of his devotion. So it was up to the laurels, up through the green, hemlock-filtered light to that all-sufficing beauty. The sweatier, the more breathless, the better.

But even sweaty and panting, gloom stuck to his heels as the counterminnows of the streambed kept pace with the living minnows above. A line from some half-remembered poem haunted him: *The woods decay, the woods decay and fall*. It was like a sliver firmly lodged under his thumbnail and not to be got rid of. Every fallen log repeated it, as it lay rotting, devoured by mushrooms or by maggots: *The woods decay, the woods decay and fall*.

As Nixie had foretold, the laurel grove had become a tangle of green shrubs. The blossoms had shriveled and fallen, exposing the russet-red remnants of their sexual apparatus, and the bees had absconded, like satiated seducers, to another part of the summer. Somewhere on the periphery of the grove a thrush, pierced by its own sliver of poetry, reiterated a simple two-bar elegy: *Must it be? Must it be? It must! It must!*

He did not linger there, but headed northeast on a course he knew would intersect the higher reaches of Pine Kill. He'd never followed the stream to its source; he would today. He followed paths already familiar, past an abandoned quarry, where great slabs of slate were stacked to form a simple foursquare maze, a tombstone supermarket. Then along a fire trail, where a few stunted laurels, shadowed by the pines, had preserved their maiden bloom. Already, here, he heard her voice ahead of him. Almost intelligible, despite her insistence that her powers of coherent speech were limited to the hours of the night; almost herself, until the kill became visible, twisting down a staircase of tumbled stones, and shifted gender from she to it. Yet even now, as it zigzagged among the boulders and spilled across the ineffectual dam of a fallen log, he thought he recognized, if not her voice, her bearing—headlong, capricious, intolerant of contradiction.

As he made his way upstream, he was obliged to climb, as the kill did, using its larger boulders as stepping stones, since there was no longer level ground on either side, only steep shoulders of crumbly scree. He slipped several times, soaking his sneakers, but only when, mistaking a mulch of leaves for solid ground, he'd nearly sprained his ankle did he yield to what he supposed to be her will. For some reason she did not want him to reach the source of the kill. If he defied her, she might become still more ruthlessly modest.

By the time he'd limped down to Pine Kill Road, his knees were trembling, and his swollen ankle sent a yelp of protest at every step. At home he would fill the tub with hot water and—

But these compassionate plans were blighted the moment he came within view of the cabin and found, parked behind his yellow Datsun, a blue Buick with Pennsylvania plates. *No*, he thought, *it can't be, not all the way from Philadelphia, not without phoning first.* But it was.

It was his cousin Barry, who came out the back door of the cabin, lofting a can of Heineken as his hello.

"Barry." He tried not to sound dismayed. Barry had had a standing invitation to come up any weekend he could get free from the city. This must be Friday. Or Saturday. Damn. "It's good to see you."

"I was beginning to worry. I got here at three, and it's getting on past seven. Where you been?"

"Up there." He waved his hand in the direction of the mountain.

Barry looked doubtfully at the dark wall of hemlocks. The woods did not look welcoming this late in the day. "Communing with nature?"

"That's what I'm here for, isn't it?" He'd meant to sound playful, but his tone was as ill-judged as an intended love-pat that connects as a right to the jaw. He might as well have asked Barry, *And why are you here? Why won't you go away?*

"Well," said Barry, placatingly, "you're looking terrific. You must have dropped some pounds since Bernie Junior's wedding. And you didn't have that many to drop. You got anorexia or something?"

"Have I lost weight? I haven't been trying to."

"Oh, come off it. When I got here I looked in the icebox, and I can tell you everything that was there: a can of coffee, one stick of Parkay margarine, and a bottle of generic catsup. Plus part of a quart of milk that had gone sour. Then I tried the cupboard, and the situation wasn't much better. You can't be living on nothing but oatmeal and sardines."

"As a matter of fact, Barry, sardines and oatmeal are the basis of the Sullivan County Diet. I'll lend you the book. You're guaranteed to take off ten pounds in ten days, at a cost of just ten cents a serving."

Barry smiled. This was the William he'd come to visit. "You're putting me on."

"You laugh—but wait till you've tasted my sour-milk-oatmeal-sardine bread. It's indescribable."

"Well, you'll have to starve yourself on your own time, 'cause while you were off communing, I drove in to Port Jervis and got us some *edible* food. There's spare ribs for dinner tonight, if I can get the damned charcoal started. Bacon and eggs for breakfast, and a big porterhouse for tomorrow night, plus corn to roast with it. And some genuine hundred percent cholesterol to spread on it, none of your mingy margarine. Plus three six-packs—two and a half at this point—and a fifth of Jack Daniel's. Think we'll survive?"

There was no way he could get out of the cabin to be with Nixie that night. Even though he turned in early, using his ankle as an excuse, Barry stayed up drinking and reading a thriller, and finally just drinking. William could hear the stream, but not Nixie's voice.

He didn't dream that night, and woke to the smell of frying bacon. At breakfast Barry announced that they were going to rent a canoe in Port Jervis and paddle down the Delaware to Milford. And that's what they did. The river seemed impersonal in its huge scale. William was aware only of what was unnatural along its shores—the power lines, the clustering bungalows, the clipped lawns of the larger houses, and all the urgent *windows*, jealous of their views. With every stroke of the paddle in his hands, William felt he was betraying the stream he knew. He imagined Nixie lost in this metropolis of a river, murmuring his name, ignored by the hordes of strangers hurrying along on their own business.

Barry, a law-school dropout, tried to get a political argument going, but William refused to take up the challenge. What was the fun of playing straight man to Barry's right-wing one-liners? Barry, balked of that entertainment, proceeded to analyze his relationship with the vice president of another department of his company, a woman whom he'd offended in the elevator. After a while he got to be as ignorable as a radio. William paddled stolidly, seated at the front of the canoe, letting Barry do the steering. Halfway to the goal of Milford, as they came upon a stretch of rapids, William's end of the canoe lodged against a rock and the flow of the river slowly turned them around till they were at right angles to the current. Barry said, "What are we supposed to do in this situation?" just a moment before the canoe overturned.

The dousing was delightful. William came out of the water grinning, as though their capsizing had been one of Nixie's broader jokes and the look on Barry's face, his stupefied indignation, its punch line. They got the waterlogged canoe to the nearer shore without much difficulty, for the water was shallow. Once there, Barry's concern was all for the contents of his billfold and the well-being of his wristwatch, which was Swiss but only water resistant, not waterproof. They didn't even realize that Barry's paddle had been lost till the canoe was bailed out and they were ready to set off again.

That was the end of all *gemütlichkeit*. The rest of the trip was a slow, wounded slog, with Barry exiled to the prow seat and William maneuvering, carefully and unskillfully, from the bow. At each new stretch of white water they were in danger of capsizing again, but somehow they scraped through without another soaking. The six-pack had been lost with the paddle, and Barry's high spirits declined in proportion as his thirst mounted. By the time they reached Milford, they were no longer on speaking terms. While they waited for the van that would retrieve them and the canoe, Barry headed into town for beer and aspirin, while William spread out on the lawn above the beach, numb with relief. One day with his cousin and he felt as wrought up as if he'd finished a year of teaching.

The beach was full of children. Most of them were younger than the children he taught. There must have been another beach in the area that was reserved for teenagers. There was, however, a single black girl, about fourteen or fifteen years old, in a one-piece pea-green swimsuit, who was intent on digging a large

hole in the sand and heaping up an oblong mound (it could not be called a sandcastle) beside it. She had a small, darker-skinned boy in her charge, two years old or even younger. He might have been her sibling or her son. He spent most of his time at the edge of the water, hurling stones at the river with as much satisfaction as if each stone had broken a window. Once he tried to participate in the girl's excavation, but she swatted him with her pink plastic shovel and screamed at him to get away. Some minutes later he toddled out into the water till he was chest-deep, at which point he was retrieved by the lifeguard, who led him back to his mother (William was sure, now, that that was her relationship to the boy), who swatted him a little more soundly, but hissed instead of screaming.

Hers was a type that William was familiar with from his years at Marcus Garvey—severely retarded but able to survive without custodial care, destined for a life as a welfare mother as sure as God makes little green apples. A child abuser, most likely, and the mother of other welfare mothers yet to be. Usually, William regarded such students as a problem that the officials of state agencies should solve in some humane way that researchers had yet to discover. But here on the beach, with the first premonitory breezes of the evening floating in off the water, the pair of them seemed as beautiful in an elementary way as some Italian Madonna and Child. They seemed to have sprung up out of the landscape like the trees and bushes—a presence, and not a problem at all.

Barry returned from town in much-improved spirits, and soon afterward the van arrived and took them back to Barry's Buick and the known world. By the time they were back at the cabin, the sun had sunk behind the pine-crested ridge of the mountain, but there was still an hour of shadowy daylight left. William undertook to cook the steaks, but he didn't adjust the air vents properly and the charcoal went out. Barry insisted that was all right and that the steaks would be better blood rare than too well done. The meat was dutifully chewed and swallowed, all two and half pounds of it, and then William, unable to take any more, asked Barry if he'd mind leaving that night. "The thing is, I've got a girlfriend coming over. And the cabin just doesn't allow any privacy, you know what I mean?" Barry was obviously miffed, but he also seemed relieved to be clearing out.

As soon as the taillights of the Buick had been assimilated by the darkness of Pine Kill Road, William went down to the stream and, kneeling on a flat mossy rock, touched the skin of the water. Quietly, with no intention of waking her, but as one may touch the neck or shoulder of a sleeping spouse, simply for the pleasure of that near presence.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "It wasn't my fault. I couldn't come to you while he was here. He'd have thought I was crazy."

He hoped she could hear him. He hoped he could be forgiven. But the water rippling through his fingers offered no reassurance.

He went to bed as soon as it was dark, and lay awake, like a child being punished, staring at the raftered ceiling. The day with Barry kept replaying in his mind, keeping him from sleep—and keeping him from Nixie, for it was usually only after his first dreaming sleep that he would rise and go to her. Was it a form of somnambulism then? Could she summon him only when he was in a trance? That would explain why he could remember so little of their conversations now, and nothing at all of the ecstasies he had known in her embrace, nothing but that there had been, at such moments, consummations that a Saint Theresa might have envied.

He slept, but sleep brought no dreams, and he woke just before dawn to the bland, unintelligible purling of the stream. It was like waking to find, instead of one's beloved, her unhollowed pillow beside one in the bed. He felt betrayed, and yet he knew the first betrayal had been his.

What did she want? His tears? His blood? She could name any price, any punishment, as long as she let

him be near her again, to hear her again when she called his name, *William, dear William, come to my bed, come rest your head beside mine.*

He was made to pay the penalty of her silence for most of July, and grew resigned to the idea that she might never return to him. To have known such joys once was cause for lifelong gratitude—but to suppose himself *entitled* to them? As well ask to be anointed King of England.

The ordinary splendors of the summer remained open to him. Where the laurels had bloomed, blueberries now were ripening. Cardinals and nuthatches offered their daily examples of how good weather could best be enjoyed, as they darted back and forth from his feeder, skimming the stream, living it up, taking no thought for the morrow—or for next year's lesson plans on such suggested topics as Problems of Family Life or the Perils of Drug Abuse. No wristwatch, no calendar, no mealtimes or bedtimes, no tasks to finish, no friends to remember, no books to read. He had three classical music cassettes—one symphony each by Bruckner, Mahler, and Sibelius—that he listened to over and over at night inside the cabin, while a single log burned in the fireplace. He learned to float through his days and nights the way he would have in a dream.

And then, as the blueberries peaked and the huckleberries followed close behind, she spoke to him again. Not in the same voice now, however. It was the alto who, in a tone of maternal reproach, addressed him: "William, you have been too long away. Come here—explain yourself."

"Nixie!" he cried, pushing himself up from the wicker chair in which he had fallen asleep. "Goddess! Forgive me—my cousin was here—I couldn't come to you. Yet I should have, I see that now. I didn't understand, I—"

"Stop babbling, William." She spoke sternly, but with a kind of humor, even indulgence, that set his hopes leaping like gazelles.

"Nixie, you've returned. I always knew you would return. I always—"

"Is your ear so poorly tuned to our speech, William, that you cannot tell my sister's voice from mine? I am Nereis. Nixie has gone elsewhere, and she will *not* return."

"But *you* will let me worship you? And lie beside you? Do you want money, too? I'll give you all I have. Anything."

"I want only you; William. Come, enter me. Let me touch your cheeks, which Nixie has told me are so soft and warm."

He stumbled through the darkened cabin and down the flagstone steps to the stream. There he paused to remove his clothes. Then, his heart in a flutter, his legs trembling, he splashed through the water to where he used to lie with Nixie.

But as he reached that spot, Nereis spoke out loudly: "Not there! Summer has wasted us, it is too shallow there. See where that larger boulder lies, where the moon has broken through: come to me there."

He made his way toward that farther boulder with, it seemed, enchanted ease, placing his feet as firmly as if he'd been wearing his Tingley boots, as confident as a bridegroom marching to the altar.

She received him not as Nixie would have, with a single, singeing blast of joy; it was rather, with Nereis, a sinking inward, a swooning away, a long slow descent into the whirlpool of an ineffable comfort. When

she had wholly absorbed him, when her watery warmth was spread across his face like the tears of a lifetime all suddenly released, he knew that she had taken him into her womb and that he had become hers, hers utterly and for all time.

In the morning he awoke atop the boulder she had led him to, his body bruised, his knees and feet still bleeding. A low mist hung over the stream, as though she had veiled herself. He groaned, like a shanghaied sailor, a bag of sexual garbage dumped in the gutter and waiting for collection. *No more*, he told himself. *No more visions*. It was all very well for William Blake to be at home to spirits: his dealings had been with angels, not with water nymphs. Clearly, Nereids had behavioral traits in common with their cousins, the mermaids. Clearly, a man who continued to answer to their solicitations would be lured to his destruction. Clearly, he must pack up his things and leave the cabin before nightfall, before she called him to her again.

Again: the word, the hope of it, was honey and he the fly happily mired in its fatal sweetness.

I will be more careful, he told himself, as he wound gauze about his lower legs. Then, in earnest of this new self-preserving attitude, he made himself a breakfast of oatmeal and sardines. It tasted, to his ravished tongue, like ambrosia.

The sun swung across the sky like the slowest of pendulums, and the shadow of the cabin's roof-tree touched, sundiallike, the nearer shore of the kill. Four o'clock already, and then, as it touched the farther shore, five. As the shadows lengthened, the birds became livelier and more contentious. The nuthatches stropped their beaks on the bark of the trees and made skirmishes against the chickadees, who panicked but kept returning to the feeder, emblems of the victory of appetite.

The colors of the kill shifted from a lighter to a darker green. Where the shadows were deepest he could glimpse the first restless stirrings of her torso, the undulations of gigantic limbs. How long the days are in July. How caressing the sound of rippling water.

Once, in the summer before his junior year at Wesleyan, William had worked in the violent ward of a psychiatric hospital. He'd been premed then and planned to become a psychiatrist. Three months of daily contact with the patients had convinced him, first, that he must find some other career, and second, that there was no such thing as insanity, only the decision, which anyone might make, to act insanely—that is, to follow one's whims and impulses wherever they might lead. By the time they'd led to the violent ward, one had become a career patient, as others were career criminals, and for similar reasons, the chief of which was a preference for institutional life. Only by behaving as a lunatic would one be allowed to live in the eternal kindergarten of the hospital, exempt from work, freed of irksome family ties, one's bloodstream the playground for chemicals available only to the certifiably insane. Those who chose to live such a feckless life were not to be pitied when their grimaces of lunacy froze into masks that could not be removed.

And so it was that when she arose and came to him, at dusk, the water running in trickles down her dark legs, shimmering iridescently across the taut curves of the pea-green swimsuit, he did not resist. He did not tell himself, as she unknotted him from the net hammock to which he'd bound himself, like some hick Ulysses, that this was impossible, could not be happening, etcetera. For he had yielded long since to the possibility—and it was happening now.

"Come," she bade him, "follow me." And the smile that she smiled was like a door.

He opened the door and entered the mountain.

His body was never recovered, but the boots were discovered, where he'd left them, beneath a ledge of

limestone close by the source of the kill.

The End

Scan notes and proofing history

Scanned with preliminary proofing by FTL Vision

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