LEAVING

Around eight o’clock the next morning I took my first steps outside the house on the hill. Doctor’s orders prevented me from getting behind the wheel, so Sadie had to drive me over to the zoo.

She dropped me off at the main gate, which I unlocked with the key Brook had given me. I relocked the gate and turned to find Roy the peacock standing before me, his grand tail unfurled and quivering. I answered his greeting with a bow. Next I set off looking for Brook, with Roy in tow. The main building was locked up tight so I started down the nearest path, expecting to find her hard at work on the other side of every bend I entered. I passed Myrna the fox and her pups, the dog-wolves Gilbert and Sullivan, Alfonse the bear, and stopped to pay my respects to Laurel and Joshua as they munched their morning grass. It was good to see the old gang again.

But where was the boss? Not in the main building, not on any of the paths, not in the pasture or barn. That left the cottage. I was a little nervous knocking, since I’d seen Kyle’s car in the parking lot. Could they be in bed at this hour?

No, but it was almost as surprising to find Brook at the kitchen table this late in the morning. Usually she had several hours of work behind her by now. She was in her zoo clothes, Kyle in a robe, and the breakfast dishes were still on the table. My arrival seemed to spoil some kind of lovers’ trance. As soon as I came in Kyle glanced at the clock and started fretting about how late he was. He flew off toward the bathroom and Brook, also shifting into a different gear, asked me if we could walk and talk.
I accompanied her up the hill, trying my best to keep up. I answered all her inquiries after my health and said I’d seen her letter in the *Bee*.

Verity’s conjunctivitis had pretty well cleared up, but he was still getting his drops. As on our first meeting, Brook held him while I squirted. It amazed me how much he’d grown in such a short time. When we got him back in the cage I told her I wanted to ask a favor.

“Shoot,” she said.

“I’m interested in volunteering here, on a long-term basis. Think you could use me?”

“You’re always welcome here, Charlie. I’ve told you that before.”

“I won’t be able to start for a while.”

She gave a curt nod. “You just concentrate on getting better. We’ll be here when you’re ready. But you have to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“No more hero stuff. You’re lucky to be alive, you know.”

She spun then and darted off toward her next task. But after a few short steps she stopped and spun back. “I feel lucky too, Charlie.”

“For what?”

“Lucky you showed up here in the first place.”

“Why, because I brought you Kyle?”

“Yeah, but even before that. I’d forgotten how good it is to share meals.” She darted back toward me, popped up on her toes, and kissed my cheek. “Get better fast.”

My heartrate was back to normal by the time I reached the cottage. Kyle was out of the shower and hustling to get dressed. No suit today—just jeans and a sweater. When he said he was heading back to the house for some desk work I asked if I could bum a ride.

“Hey,” he said, “sure thing. You know Mom’s teaching today, right?”
“Why wouldn’t she be?”
“I thought maybe you were planning to talk to her.”
“Just chucked my plan. I’m improvising.”
“Okay then,” he said. “Hope you don’t mind if I do some business on the road.”

Actually, I preferred it. I could use a little time to think before I had to face the implications of my recent snap decision. I was in no hurry to get to the house, so the traffic didn’t bother me at first. I didn’t fight the slow pace of the heavy, viscous stream. Instead I reflected on our Sacramento traffic, how it had always irked me so deeply even when it didn’t impede me, how I would rail against this horde of hill-dwellers as I whizzed past in the opposite direction on my morning commute. Kyle knew perfectly well how to go with the traffic’s tarry flow. He worked his phone incessantly, wheeling and dealing as the car inched forward.

His busy energy made me aware for the first time all morning of my own fatigue. Last night I hadn’t slept much at all. Jean’s visit had bothered me profoundly. I had spent a perfectly peaceful week in little Ruth’s bedroom, but when I returned there after bidding Jean goodbye, the whole setup suddenly struck me as deeply embarrassing. I cast my gaze about the room and it all seemed absurd to me, a grown man in a child’s bed, seeking solace amid stuffed animals and dainty things. Grown man? Scarred child, scared lover, regretful father rooming with his son’s ghost. The only way I could convince myself to get into the bed again was by vowing that this would be my last night on the hill. In recent weeks I’d given my past a good going over. The time had come to knock some kind of future into shape.

It took me about five minutes to decide I wanted to work on a regular basis at the zoo, and another five to be sure I wanted Jean to be my wife. The rest of the night, when I wasn’t tossing and turning and watching the clock, I entertained a long series of erotic scenes, all of them set in the kitchen downstairs and featuring myself and Jean, her silky collar unfurling...
My plan had been to call Jean at the end of this day, once she’d returned from school, and arrange my relocation. But when the prospect of riding over with Kyle suddenly appeared, it seemed too convenient to pass up. Now, as we sputtered along with the sun at our backs, Kyle stopping and starting, conducting his frenetic business by my side, I let my bleary eyelids dip, let my chin get heavy, let my mind lift all the other cars off the road so we could whiz without pausing to our destination. The ride I dreamed us was pleasant as could be, but the arrival was different. When we pulled into the driveway of the house I knew instantly something was wrong.

“Wait a minute,” I said, wondering why the driveway seemed so awfully bare. “The fruitless mulberry. It’s gone.”

“That tree?” Kyle said. “Mom had me chop it down.”

“For godsake, why? That was a pretty tree.”

“Those leaves were a mess on the driveway. Besides, Charlie, it was fruitless.”

“So what if it was fruitless,” I protested. “That tree gave great shade. The leaves were pure gold in the fall. I used them to mulch my roses.”

“Yeah,” Kyle said, “about your roses…”

“What about them? What did you do?”

Kyle’s phone rang and he winked at me, asking me to hold on for a second. Exasperation rose in me like the froth in a boiling pot as I waited for Kyle to finish his call. The phone rang again, and then came a hand on my shoulder. I awoke to Kyle shaking me, saying that Sadie was on the phone.

I shook my head vigorously, fighting off that ugly daymare, quelling my desire to sock the dream-Kyle in the jaw.

“She checked her EnCompass and saw you and I were riding together,” Kyle said. “Does that mean you don’t need her to get you from the zoo?”

I nodded and Kyle relayed the message to Sadie.

The sky was all clear and scoured for the second day in a row. Yesterday a stiff breeze had brought a first taste of winter and
chased the haze away, promising views of the coastal mountains from the bridge over the Sacramento. I looked forward to this sight. But about what lay beyond it I was not so sure. That little dream had left me with a queasy feeling, like when you see that first tuft of mold on a loaf of bread. Doubts and questions spread through me now like colonies of green. What was I doing going back there this morning? I hadn’t even consulted with Jean. Yesterday’s meeting had felt like making up, but no specifics had been discussed. If she wanted me back, wouldn’t she have invited me? Maybe she wasn’t ready to have me back. Was I really ready to be there?

My incision began to burn a little as I peered past car roofs into the backyards of developments that bordered the highway, the half-bare branches of the deciduous trees bringing to mind the fruitless mulberry from my dream. By now half its yellow leaves might have fallen. Kyle would never notice them. Jean probably would, but I doubted she had raked them—not this soon. She was enough of an optimist to leave them for me.

Or was she? Did she expect me to come back? Did she really want me back?

Now I hoped very strongly Jean had left those leaves. They would be my omen. I could read the leaves like gypsies do after they drink their tea. Also, gathering them up would give me a nice solid chore to place at the top of the day’s agenda. I would have to find a way to do it without strain. How about this? I would rake them onto a tarp and have Kyle haul the bundle out to the compost heap. Except for a few, which I would use to mulch my rosebushes.

Once again, my rosebushes! Had anybody thought to water them? My incision stung worse at the thought of how dry it had been since I left, the stitched wound flared as I inventoried all my thirsty plants. Ten years of planting and tending—could all that be undone by my recent lapse? An awful thought, not the kind of thought you want when sitting in traffic, especially when the person next to you is getting a great deal accomplished.
I interrupted Kyle’s work, asking if sales had increased any since the _Bee_ article mentioned that Don had used the PNS to direct the paramedics to me.

“That’s hard to track,” he said. “But hey, every bit of advertising helps.”

“What if I wrote up a testimonial?” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, I could tell the story of how your gismo saved me. Promotional material.”

“Why not?” Kyle said, his tone tepid, but still warm enough to put another task on my day’s agenda. One, rake leaves. Two, water everything. Three, write out my story.

As we oozed along I pondered how to tell it. Where would I begin?

_The EnCompass saved my life. I was out in the middle of the night trying to disable a mountain lion trap, and..._

How could anyone appreciate that without knowing how I’d gotten there?

_I wanted to do this crazy heroic thing because I blamed myself for my son’s death..._

_Because my daughter was angry with me..._

_Because I’d made a big blunder with my ex-wife..._

_Because I had a crush on a young zookeeper..._

_Wait a minute. A zookeeper?_

_I met her after this big fight I had with the woman who wanted to marry me..._

_You see, I had rescued this mountain lion cub..._

_What mountain lion cub?_

_Its mother was killed by the authorities because she attacked a woman, a jogger, on the bike trail just upriver from where I used to work..._

_Who was this jogger?_

_A good question. I had no idea, I didn’t even know her name. That seemed wrong to me. After all, she was the first link in the_
chain of events that had brought me to where I was now, to this place that was precarious as hell but also quite an improvement on where I was that day several weeks before, the day after the jogger’s death, when I was all alone driving the opposite way on this road, hurling scorn upon deaf ears, pickling in my own bitter words. That woman had died and I had come more fully to life. It didn’t seem fair, but what could I do?

At the very least find out who she was, what exactly happened to her. Don had been on the beat at that time. He would have the information I needed.

And so the agenda filled...

I settled down a bit, the traffic thinned as downtown exits began to siphon off cars. We sped up and soon my stomach was dipping against the rise of the river bridge. To my right the downtown buildings, hugging the river’s shore. In the distance up ahead the coastal mountains, their rounded humps crisply outlined against the definite sky. Closer in our neighborhood, the house, hazier prospects.

Here was our exit. Here were the lights, the stops and yields, the turns I knew by heart. Here was my heart, its rhythm picking up with each intersection we put behind us, skipping lighter and lighter as we left the last crossing, as we rounded the first bend and the second, as we coasted, curling into the mouth of the driveway where the leaves lay yellow and thick, ripe for the reading.
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