

## Fisher of Men

The sun dapples the early summer woods of Maine. The trees are lace made of light, Beth thinks. Like Impressionist painting. Monet, possibly. Or Seurat, where all the little blotches come out like a picture. The trout stream, where she and her stepfather are fishing, tumbles noisily over the rocks, the water cold as ice cubes. Beth's sitting on damp earth that's made an impression on the back of her shorts, and will probably show up like a black hand when she stands up. She's already given up on the fishing, as she can't cast well, the hook gets tangled in the bushes, and that's discouraging. Her stepfather is up to his thighs in the cold stream, in waders, cursing because he's tangled his fishing line for the third time on some invisible claw located underneath the water. No one else is around them. They've driven miles through the back woods.

His US Army Retired baseball cap is green. His legs are long and straight, and he moves stiffly because he's got arthritis. "God damn it!" he yells, yanking the line, and sloshing forward. "God damn you sonofabitch!" Yank. If there were trout around here, they're miles away by this time.

She's trying to get into the zen of the surface of the water, which her boyfriend (who is not reliable) has said makes him love to fish. Jordan, her boyfriend, is far away, in the city, but he haunts her all the time, like a dormant virus that erupts occasionally, ruining her chances at being present in her real life. She's dreamy. She understands that fishing is a chance to be silent, it's all about the surface of the water. Silence and water. Can anyone as sensitive and poetic as Jordan stay loyal to one woman? Apparently not. "There it is, you little bastard," her stepfather

says, as he reels in his line with no fly left on it. She squints at the surface of the stream, the dazzling light, and tries to see what Jordan's talking about. Zen. Zen.

Once she'd gone over to his apartment (he'd given her the keys, first mistake) and found some woman there taking a shower. Beth had stormed out of the building onto the street, and he'd run after in his boxer shorts, telling her she didn't understand, it wasn't what it looked like. Beth had flung his keys down hard on the pavement, so that they bounced, and told him never to bother her again. A group of junkies lounging on the stoop across the street had cheered. "You give it to him, sister!" "You tell him what up!" "You go, girl!" They'd laughed.

He'd waited two months and then called, wanting to know if she'd come over for dinner, he'd really missed her.

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"Bethie," her stepfather says, "are you going to fish, or what?"

"I mess it up," she says.

On the side of the stream, her stepfather sits on a log. The tackle box is open, and scattered across the sand are packages of flies, lures, the drawers from the box. He's trying a different fly, a red and yellow one. The May flies are gone, he tells her; the June flies have arrived. The back of his neck is red. His hair is white; his army cap is now floating in the water, bobbing against a piece of whitened driftwood. She sashes out to get it, with her sneakers on, the sun pure and hot on her face. She says, "Hey, Ted, you mind if I take a walk?"

His hearing aid is off, or broken, and he doesn't answer. She tugs at his sleeve. "I'm going for a walk," she pantomimes, walking her fingers in the air like little legs.

"You sure?" he says, the fierce blue eyes totally seeing her, totally focused. "You be careful, out there."

“There’s nobody for forty miles,” she tells him She lives in Manhattan, how bad can the Maine woods be?

He frowns, and returns to the feathery hook that’s defeating his arthritic fingers and his fine motor movements. She feels the urge to tie the fly on for him, but refrains, and sets off past the oversized SUV Ted likes because it reminds him of the Army, and she wanders down the dirt road, which is really just two ruts.

The road passes through dense firs, and then fluffy birches, and then a dark patch of stunted junipers. It’s magical. She thinks about Jordan, and how he said only last week, before she left, “If I could marry anyone, Beth, I’d marry you.” Surely that was a good sign. Well, actually, no it wasn’t, but it made her feel better. In the future, which is a magical place, as lovely as these woods—all things are possible. She stops at a cluster of white Indian pipes poking out of the moss, waxy and fragile. She wants to tell Jordan about them.

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Once when she and Jordan went hiking, they had sex on the bank of a stream, because he wanted to. Talk about getting yourself muddy from the earth. They’d been surprised by a bunch of hikers, who fortunately were talking loudly as they approached. One woman had a little bear bell tied to her pack, which had jingled a warning. You could tell by their expressions that they knew exactly what she and Jordan—hastily buttoned and zipped—had been doing. Pine needles on their shirts. Mud on her legs. She’d gotten the giggles. Pretended to be interested in something in her pack, and not even said Hello, as the hikers smirked and crossed to the other side of the stream. “Why do you care, Beth?” Jordan said. He’d been nosing her back down onto the ground.

It was his favorite thing, sex in risky places. The laundry room of her apartment building. His car overlooking the Palisades at night. Sleeping bags in campgrounds full of people (there always seemed to be a root). It wasn't always with her, obviously. There'd been the woman in his apartment taking a shower. She got angry again, thinking about that. Another time, cigarette butts in his ashtray, with somebody else's lipstick on them.

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The sun goes in behind a cloud. Ted's probably still fishing. She suddenly recalls how Ted came to pick her up at the airport, a week ago, and he'd been an hour late. She'd stewed and steamed at the arrivals gate, waiting for him, almost in tears of rage, having gone through her repertoire of curses and imprecations, compared him to a stone, called him dumb as a bag of doorknobs, and then spotted him far away, limping toward her, coming closer and closer, leaning on two canes, forcing himself along, with his gangly legs, because he'd just had knee surgery. Which she'd forgotten. Her mother told her later how he'd bullied his way out of the rehab, so he could pick her up. Her mother beside him at the airport holding a Mylar balloon that said "WELCOME," and looking aggrieved, as if Ted was going to destroy his knee repair. His face constricted with determination and pain, and then lighting up when he spotted her. Her heart had gone into her throat with happiness and guilt, as she hugged him. Then he'd hobbled along the lengthy corridors of the airport, the escalators, across the parking garage. It was what you did. You picked up your stepdaughter at the airport.

I am a shit, she thought. Could she take back a curse about wanting him to turn into a stone? Or that he was a doorknob? This was how heartless you could be, and then you had to live with it. When you failed to understand that you were important.

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That night after dinner she'd made him an elaborate ice cream sundae, with Oreo cookies, whipped cream, jelly beans, sprinkles, hot fudge. Everything he liked. Easy reparations.

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Overhead, a small, sweet-sounding bird calls, somewhere in the birch trees that now line the road. She must be a mile from Ted. In her shirt pocket she finds half an old energy bar, with a bit of lint, which she picks off. She nibbles dreamily, walking down the road. A frizzle of grass grows in the middle, and the dirt tracks dwindle ahead in perfect diminishing perspective along a straight stretch.

Jordan is actually very generous. He's given her a necklace made with lapis lazuli; an antique desk he saw in a window, which he didn't have room for in his own apartment; numerous CDs of Bach and Handel (especially the Pro Musica recordings with the original instruments), and a Caucasian rug.

Right before she'd left on this vacation, they'd just done it on his queen-sized bed, and he was having an anxiety attack because he couldn't sleep, he said, if there was anyone else sleeping beside him. He'd tried, but he couldn't do it. She'd just told him their relationship wasn't going anywhere, and so he'd asked her to stay over, but then he got too anxious. "This isn't easy for me, either," he'd said, as she wriggled out of his bed, stomped across his jogging clothes (still in a pile on the floor), and found her jeans. "Think about me, Beth," he said. "I want to, but I just can't."

Somewhere, deep in her heart, she knows he'll outgrow this diffidence, and she'll be there waiting. His soul mate. Earlier she'd washed her face in his bathroom, and noticed the bottle of Xanax in the medicine cabinet. He was having a hard time. Of course just then she'd noticed the hairbrush on the edge of the sink. Bathrooms have too many secrets. Bathrooms are

dangerous places. She'd looked for hair in the hairbrush and thought the hairbrush could be his sister-in-law's, with whom they'd gone out to dinner the week before. That same long, black hair.

Jordan was smiling when she came out of the bathroom, and he hugged her with that dreadful patting on the back that meant he was dying for her to go. His apartment, as always, reminded her of a stage set: the tall Victorian windows draped by heavy velvet curtains. The German clock with the pewter shepherd and shepherdess who came out of little doors every hour, their arms raised like hostages. As Jordan patted her, the clock chimed. She felt a little tug of sorrow as she left. A little stab of separation.

Next time she came over for dinner, the hairbrush, which she'd been obsessing about for four days, was gone. She even looked through the drawers next to the sink.

“Of all things,” he said to her at dinner, “I maintain the worst suffering is the inability to love.” He'd made a really great shad roe and asparagus. He was quoting Schiller, she guessed, or some other nineteenth-century poet. Goethe, he said. And she thought, Poor Jordan. From across the table he told her about the new first chapter of his novel he was working on, and the research he's done on German romantic poetry, and transcendentalism. It was easy to pay attention when Jordan talked.

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The sun has gone in. Beth's footsteps fall like whispers on the sandy road. Her calves are beginning to ache. She stops and folds up the energy-bar wrapper into a nameless origami and tucks it into her shirt pocket. Behind her a small animal rustles through the bushes. Then she hears a car, or possibly a pick-up, very far away, and then there's silence again, only the call of the birds.

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“What does this situation with Jordan remind you of?” her University Health Services therapist asked her one time.

“I don’t know.”

“What about your father?”

“I don’t know him,” Beth said. “He left ages ago.”

“You don’t remember him?”

“I never think about it,” Beth said. “He remarried. He lives somewhere in California.”

“You don’t remember him at all?”

“I think he went away when I was two. I stood at the door and cried for him all day.

That’s what they told me. Then I didn’t talk about it.”

“You were two?”

“It’s way buried,” Beth had said. “It’s down in the permafrost.”

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Ted, of course, has never liked Jordan. “He’s all right in his way,” Ted said once, “but he doesn’t weigh much.” This was after an uncomfortable dinner at a French restaurant on West 53<sup>rd</sup> Street. Maybe it’s not being able to hear Jordan talk without his hearing aid, missing all the nuances and wit. Maybe Ted reads the body English: Jordan’s hands gracefully illustrating his point; the spine that bends, without aggression, and without the military posture Ted maintains in spite of his legs. Maybe it was because Jordan kept quoting *The New Yorker*, a habit that Ted viewed suspiciously. He’s noticed Beth’s dreary smiles on this trip. It boils down to Jordan’s inability to say, “This is what I want.” Because Jordan doesn’t stand for anything that Ted understands.

It's true that Jordan is always wanting to be where he is not, and with whomever he isn't with. Even Beth can see that. Although possibly, you never know, Jordan will move in with her in a couple of years. She thinks about living in his apartment, and how she could fix up the kitchen. The dust-bunnies stuck in the grease under the stove. Yuck. She and Jordan could buy those fabulous dishes at Pottery Barn, a really lovely Japanese design that Jordan came across independently and said he liked, too. Which she took as a good sign.

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There was of course the time he slept with her ex-friend, in the name of experimentation. (Who knows how many of his students? What is the payback with this?) She'd been sobbing quietly in her bed, that empty weekend when Jordan was busy "working on his novel," and her roommate had walked by her bedroom, and asked her what was wrong. When Beth told her, the roommate said, "It isn't worth it!" Really? Beth thought. But it just felt like he was the one for her. It was hard to explain. He just felt real.

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When Ted married Beth's mother, the bride had carried stephanotis. Then Beth was eleven, far too old to feel like she had a real father, and far too young to appreciate his affection for her. He had no children of his own. He'd begun his career in the Army in the cavalry. At first it struck her as creepy that her mother was sleeping in the same bed with a grown man, but during arguments he often took Beth's side, which was gratifying. At Christmas, and for his birthday, she liked to give him presents that made his face light up when he opened them. A wooden Balinese horse puppet, which he hung from a rafter in the kitchen. A snow-globe from Lone Prairie, Nebraska, where he'd grown up. A 1:12 scale red metal John Deere tractor, because he'd come from a farm. A red flannel night shirt from L.L. Bean that he'd pretended to



like, but had actually been too small for him, so he'd passed it on to her mother. An aluminum painted owl to hang over his garden to drive away birds; a deck of cards with horse pictures; wind chimes he swore he could hear. When he had an actual correction to give her—such as the time she'd come home two hours after her high-school curfew, and driven her mother frantic—he managed to phrase it tactfully. “Bethie,” he'd said with a little laugh, “you're acting terrible!” And she never did it again.

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On the dirt road, the trees ahead of Beth are swamp dead. She is startled that suddenly behind her an engine in third gear rumbles, and a large black pickup, an old rusted-out Ford, is suddenly approaching, going fast enough to ping rocks and kick up dust. It's too late to dive into the bushes so she won't be seen. Which would be stupid anyway. The truck hits a dip in the road that scrapes the bottom with a bang as it roars and bounces forward. She steps aside, into the bushes. A slight depression in the grassy bank causes her to stumble for a moment. The pickup gets close and the driver slows, and stops, and stares at her out his open window. The truck has rusted out around the wheel wells. The man is alone, and has eyes black as ink. His long hair falls in strands around his face.

He says in accented English, “You coming from where?”

“Down the road,” she says. He glances back. Forward, as if calculating. Still dreamy, she is not afraid of him. He's scowling and silent, and probably, she thinks, can't even read English. Then something strange happens. To her he suddenly seems absolutely primeval, as ancient as the woods, as if she has stepped through a door to where there is no time, and not a written word to be seen. She is struck with a deep, gut-pulling sense she can't even label as desire. There is

only forest sound, forest light, the trees, the slant of light on this man with his dark eyes and beard. He glances up and down the road again, obviously thinking. He says, “You walked here?”

“Yes,” she says. She feels recklessly unafraid, and he looks at her with such a sense of mastery, of complete dominance, that she wants to give him anything he wants. It’s as if he’s come from a foreign, ancient country that doesn’t exist any more. His body seems utterly powerful, the shoulders, the neck, the arm resting on the window.

“You want to take a ride?” he says.

“I came fishing with my father.”

“He down the road?”

She nods. He glances behind him, and then drops the truck in gear.

“Wait!” she says. She wants him with every cell and glandular system in her body. The woods echo with the noise of the truck. He’s waiting. Okay, suppose this could be some horrible rape, she could catch some disease, but that won’t happen here. She leans her hip against the fender of the truck, knowing that her censors aren’t working. He jerks his head toward the empty passenger seat, and she walks across the grassy middle strip of the road around to the passenger’s side, and pulls open the door. Inside smells like raw pine lumber. Recently smoked cigarettes, and musky sweat. She sits.

He lights a Marlboro and offers her one.

“You work around here?” she says.

“I cut the trees. I do them here and in Canada.”

“You like it?”

“It’s okay.”

She lights it off his disposable lighter, with the logo for the Montreal Canadiens. “I was fishing,” she says between exhales. She is fiery with desire for him, his bare, muscled arm rests across the back of the seat, behind her. The air is electric. He says, “We come down from Calais. This morning. Me and my friends.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“My wife is up there. My kids.”

“You got kids?”

“Yeah,” he says, and points the cigarette at two dark-haired children in a vinyl envelope on the sun visor.

“They’re beautiful,” she says. And then suddenly, far away in the distance, comes the sound of Ted’s horn, three long blasts. A space. Three long blasts.

He says, “You father?”

She nods.

She gets out of the cab, and slams the door, and he drives off noisily in the truck, which disappears in the distance, remote and suddenly shabby seeming, with its tailgate rusted out to metal lace. The woods become silent; her ears are still echoing with the noise. Wow, she thinks. This is probably what it felt like to be a hominid, a cave woman. You didn’t have all this marital concern wrapped around your dating. No one needed to worry about buying your dishes at Pottery Barn. This father of children, this lumberjack. God. Jeez. She trudges along back toward Ted, between the birch trees, her heart pounding. She knows the dark-haired man won’t come back, and eventually she sits on the dry roadside, near the birch trees, and catches her breath.

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When she gets back to the stream, Ted has finished fishing. He's peeling off his intractably clumsy waders and cursing the buckles.

"Where've you been?" he says irritably.

"Sorry," she says. She offers to undo the buckles in the back, and he accepts. He stands as patiently as a horse waiting for someone to take off his saddle. When they are picking up the tackle, Beth realizes her morning coffee has made its way through her kidneys, and yells loudly that she needs to make a pit stop. He points over the rushing stream to the other bank, and offers his hand to help her walk across a fallen log. Her sneakers get wet again, and he laughs, and so does she. The other side of the stream is mossy shadows, and she heads into the fir trees. Soon she's deep enough in the woods that he's out of sight.

She bushwhacks, and finds an old roadway, only two ruts; a tiny stream, and she follows it until she comes to a clearing under balsam fir. The glen is cool.

The firs fold their long branches almost to the ground, as if she's come to a wild shelter, with a sense of primeval comfort and closeness. There's no need for a path over the moss. She's still carrying the feeling of the man in the truck with her, as if he's touched her genitals, her back. She feels exalted, as her feet press into the thick moss, temporarily depressing its careful growth. Here is a place, a quiet grove, out of hearing of the stream.

This is what it's like to be a cave woman, she thinks. The sense of the lumber man's presence strong on her flesh. Primal and clear. She goes to loosen her shorts, and as she crouches down, realizes she is looking at a six-foot-long rectangular depression. She feels the breeze on her buttocks, and knows she is doing something terribly weird, even if it's accidental. She straightens up, surprised. Next to that depression is a second long one. Clearly, they are buried wooden coffins. Their tops have collapsed. She kneels, alarmed, knowing they must be family

graves, side by side like married people—wouldn't they be married, to lie like that?—from some abandoned farm. Some hamlet that no longer exists.

She imagines them lying there next to each other under the moss. Their faces, fallen aside to stare at one another, even out here, underground, lovers, she is sure of it, here in a final place, where no one will ever see. The moss dampens her legs, her thighs, her buttocks. They've been sleeping out here together for a hundred years. Maybe even longer, in the damp earth. *Our time is over*, they seem to say. *Our time is always here, in this place where we spent our lives*. Her eyes fill with tears, she's deeply grateful that they've shown themselves to her. It's as if they've given her a pep talk, or someone has put an arm around her shoulder, in reassurance. Simple peace. This is so far from what she and Jordan will ever have, she thinks. We would never be like this.

In the distance, like a lodestar, Ted is blowing the car horn, whose sound crosses the air like a predatory bird, a raptor of civilized family behavior.

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When she finds him, he's sitting in the front seat of the SUV, ready to go, eating a salami sandwich. He offers her a beer, and they chew together, watching the noontime sun, and the stream which now has tangled nylon filament in wads dangling on the shrubs around it. His hearing aids are drying on the dashboard, like mildly disturbing little pink animals.

"You doing all right?" he says. He speaks loudly, because he can't hear, probably not even the distant muttering of the stream on its rock bed.

"Sure," she tells him. Vigorously nodding her head. He offers her another sandwich, and his eyes are kind. She will never tell anyone about the place in the woods. The lovers, lying with each other.

“You’re awful quiet, Bethie.”

“I think I’m finished with Jordan,” she hears herself say.

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

He nods, looking secretly pleased, as if he doesn’t want his approval to show. “You won’t break my heart over that,” he says.

“It isn’t going anywhere,” she says. Somebody else will have to save him, she thinks. It isn’t going to be me.

“Sometimes you just have to get up off your knees, honey pot,” he says. There’s a dab of mustard by the side of his mouth, and she points to her own cheek with her finger, to indicate he should wipe it off. He scowls, and does. Then he brightens up. “I can’t believe we didn’t get a single goddam fish,” he says. “Not a single goddam one.”

It was the noise, she wants to tell him. Or the fate of the fish to be saved. Or you can’t even hear that you sound like a tractor trailer. It was only true. He pats her arm and limps down to the shore to collect his tackle boxes. Together by the water’s edge, they pick their clusters of tangled line off the bushes, to leave the stream pristine. She is thinking about the man in the truck, who still hovers around her like some electric communication that will not go away. Some gift of possibility. She does not dwell on the two mossy places in the woods, the lovers who smile at each other under ground. That is some other message she will take up later.