

BEWARE MY FRIEND

Around five in the morning, the raccoons came through the cat door, into the kitchen of Eddie Polenka. They leapt onto the counters and got into the cabinets. Breaking glasses surprised them, as did the clatter of pans. They pulled open the door of the refrigerator and pulled out all the food; they sucked eggs dry and spilled milk across the floor, whipped each other with strips of bacon. The raccoons ran back and forth in the mess they'd made, sliding into walls, tangled in electrical cords, bringing the toaster and blender down to the floor.

Eddie lay in bed, listening to them. He lived alone in the house, and he knew all its sounds. The cat door only swung in one direction, he'd rigged it that way, and the raccoons, even with their clever hands, could not escape. He'd counted on that, and also the fact that they wouldn't know windows could be broken.

Slowly, calmly, he got dressed. He took out his pistol, loaded it, and filled his pocket with extra bullets. He'd written his doctor's phone number in black magic marker along his forearm, in case he needed a rabies shot.

When he kicked the kitchen door open, the raccoons looked up, frozen, then tried to make it under the table. Eddie aimed carefully, for he did not want to hit their faces—he wanted to preserve their black masks. He shot them down, but he did not let them suffer; once he'd slowed them all, he put his foot across their bodies, one at a time, across their shoulders, and twisted their necks until he heard the snap. Then he set the raccoons on the chairs, out of the way. He put his gun in his pocket and set to cleaning up all they'd done.

It is true that he had drawn those raccoons in, that he'd stuck marshmallows along his windowpanes and cut the cat door though he had no pets. In the same way, he fed the deer in his fields, all autumn, and then, come hunting season, he'd curl up out there in his camouflage sleeping bag, his compound bow in his hands. That's how he hunted. Some might ask what kind of hunting that is.

Successful, Eddie would say. I hunt with my mind, you see. The stalking takes months—it's more work than it seems because you can't see it all. He'd tap the side of his head as he paused. I'm moving toward those deer since before they were

born. They have no idea, right now, that I've been in their future all along.

Now, sometimes, people wonder what happened to Eddie, when it's certain whatever happened was all his own doing. I can promise you that.

He spent his afternoons at the A.C. Tap, a roadhouse set out alone on the highway between Sister Bay and Bailey's Harbor. His license had been suspended, but it didn't matter much because his car was hardly running, almost altogether finished, at the time. The police and Eddie had an agreement—he drove his tractor pretty much wherever he wanted, just so he stayed off to the side of the highway, the yellow reflective triangles on the fenders. Most afternoons his tractor sat there, parked outside the Tap.

Inside, he rested his huge hands, the thick fingers barely bending, on the bar. His face was bright red, like a mask, his eyes buried. Hours went by where he didn't say a thing, just sat there with a pickled egg and a turkey gizzard set on a napkin in front of him. No one else could eat those things slowly, and certainly not without a chaser.

Harley, the bartender, turned up the jukebox's volume with a switch under the bar when he liked the song. Otherwise—there weren't many left that he could stand and their number was fewer each day—he turned the volume down. He and Eddie understood each other. Some said they'd seen Eddie taking pills, but Harley knew this was not true.

Newcomers to the Tap would sometimes try to engage Eddie in conversation. When he answered them, and this was rare, they struggled to understand the connections of his response.

Looks like the Packers finally got that fool Mandarich, they'd say, full of goodwill.

Eddie wouldn't even turn to face them. You don't see Pabst coming out with a dry beer, he'd say. Or a red beer, or a beer made of ice.

One night he tipped his tractor into a ditch, driving home. The next morning they found him curled up in one of the tractor's back tires, eight feet off the ground. He was asleep, a light rain coming down, his hands folded flat like a prayer beneath his cheek. He said the whole thing had happened so slowly that he just climbed up as it went over, like a tipping sailboat, so he would not be trapped beneath it.

Like I've said, Eddie did not have time for most people. He sought my friendship—he turned to look down the bar and I understood he wanted me to move closer. Lots of folks up here don't like me because I came from New York, but I see their condescension as part of an inferiority complex. They distrust anyone who doesn't live the same place they were born.

You're a mechanic, Eddie said.

I am, I said. With my eyes closed I could tell you what's wrong with every vehicle that passes. Five minutes with a wrench and I can make anything run better.

Engines, he said. Ever do any work on clocks?

What?

You know, really fine things. Small things.

Motorcycles, I said, but it's all the same to me, the size. Sometimes parts are a little harder to get at, is all.

But you're inclined that way, he said. You have a mechanical bent.

We sat in silence as he thought all this over. He tricked a lot of people into thinking he was slow, a little touched. In fact, he wasn't even much of a drinker. He could nurse a beer until it

was room temperature. He let me know that night that he thought I was special, worthy of his confidence.

Then he told me he had a bunch of raccoons he was working on. He said he might be interested in seeking my assistance. That's how he put it. He told me how he was a taxidermist, and then went into a description of a place there'd used to be, a park with otters in a pond and a bear that drank bottles of soda, where chickens played tiny pianos and ducks did arithmetic. All this had made money, Eddie believed. He saw an opportunity.

I don't get the connection, I said.

That's where you come in, he said. And you can have all the money.

What he wanted was for me to work on the raccoons and the other animals he'd taxidermied. He wanted me to put motors in them, to see if we could make them twitch and walk, wash food they'd pretend to eat, climb trees in slow motion.

I'm not in it for the money, he said.

Why, then? I said.

Human kindness.

What do you get out of it? I said.

I want to see it, he said. That's all.

I'll think about it, I said.

The way he spoke of his work was something to see. He pulled at my shirt, jabbed his finger on the top of the bar, his whisper rising smooth as he told me that he wanted to get back the feelings, like when you see an animal you've never seen before. Some piece of that, he'd say, and the whole time he talked he leaned toward me, really wanting me to understand, to share his excitement. The words came fast—diluted borax cleaned out body cavities, preserved them, and a frog's whole

body could be taken out through its mouth, the frog turned inside out, and he wanted to try that with something bigger, so the skin and skull would kiss each other, joined at the lips, the eyes in one head and missing in the other.

At the time he first told me all this, I believed he knew something, that he possessed some skill. The truth was he'd just take the guts out of animals and fill them with sawdust, if you call that taxidermy. He'd lose track of a wing in the midst of doing a duck or pheasant and just leave the wires poking out in hopes he'd find it again; he used actual marbles, the kind kids play with, for eyes, and often they didn't match—one kitten's eye would be clear with a ribbon of colors inside, the other solid red; he'd stitch a snake from tip to tongue when you should be able to turn them inside out and back again with no need of thread. Turn any of those animals over and they'd vomit sawdust. You'd be hard-pressed to identify what you had left in your hands.

Still, his words were catching, full of excitement, and the better I got to know Eddie, the more we talked, the more questions I had about myself and where I was headed, what I was willing to do and what I wanted. I listened because he took the time to talk to me—it started that simply.

Skin without sensation, Eddie would say, laughing as if I understood. That was one of his favorite sayings, and I would nod, swigging at my beer. It was less about combustion, which I knew, than electronics, which I had to learn. All wires and batteries, hybrid appliances, but that's not what I want to talk about here.

Eddie slowly won over every pet within five miles of his house; don't ask me how many of them disappeared. He claimed

natural causes, roadkill. He had no pets himself, except his chickens, and they were not merely for experimentation. The pickled eggs behind the bar at the Tap are all his—he gets a percentage of every one that's sold.

Sure, there are a few things I'd like to tell him now. Little things I'd like to say to someone, you know. I remember how I was sick one time, laid up for almost a week, and as I lay in bed I heard the tractor's engine, from a distance, coming closer, stopping just outside my window. I listened to Eddie walk in and out all the rooms of my house until he found me.

You're alive, he said, and when I nodded he just turned around and walked back out.

What were you planning if I wasn't? I said, but all I could hear was his footsteps, in and out of the rooms as if he had to retrace his path.

In a moment he was tapping at the windowpane. Know where to catch some bats? he said. I'd sure like to work on some bats.

I waited until the tractor started up, I listened to it fade away in the distance. I climbed out of bed to check on my dog, out in the yard. She was all right, my dalmatian-girl, watching me. If she's not chained, she'll run away from me, perhaps all the way back to New York. She cringed when I waved at her. It was not until I went into the kitchen that I saw Eddie had left me a dozen hard-boiled eggs.

True, his chickens had all seen him do it a million times, but they always trusted him when he went out among them. Then his arm would jerk out and he'd have one by the neck, caught between his thumb and forefinger, the rest of his fingers over its eyes. Windmilling his arm, he'd get the chicken's body going in

a circle, its feathers a blur of white, and then he'd snap his wrist back against the momentum—the body would roll kicking along the ground, the chicken's severed head in his fist.

Sometimes he dislocated his shoulder killing a chicken, and he'd have to pop it back into its socket. It was one of these times, when he was already in a foul mood, that the woman showed up. She was driving one of those new convertibles; she pulled up and parked right next to his tractor. He was certain, as she got out of her car, that she was lost and needed directions.

That thing hanging on the wall of your barn, she said.

He saw that she was wearing rubber beach sandals and some sort of poncho. Probably, he conjectured, she wore nothing but a bathing suit beneath it. She was pointing to the wall above him, where a line of dark shadow ran diagonally across the rake. The rake was fifteen feet wide, to be pulled behind a tractor, covered in rust. It had not been used for twenty-five years.

Well, he said, coming through the gate. That there's a very important implement.

I'd just like to lay that thing down in my garden, the woman said. Plant some flowers around it.

Eddie saw the money in her hand. Let me show you some of the other things I have, he said, opening the door into the barn. Leading her in, he touched her arm just above the elbow, probably with the head of the chicken, which was still in his hand.

Old machines lie broken, rusted and tangled on that end of the barn. Eddie switched on the light and it was cut by spiderwebs, the bird's nests plastered around the bulbs. The teeth of swathers shone in the light, the long-necked blade of the plow, the weighted section of chain-link fence that, dragged behind the tractor, would break up the cowpies that covered the fields every spring.

How tall would you say you are? he said.

Five-seven, about.

Good, he said. Have any children?

Three, she said. Why?

Pretty good, he said. Pretty good.

For now, she said, speaking before the silence could grow, I'll just take that one outside on the wall.

It's a rake, he said.

I wouldn't know.

We rural folks use it for raking the fields, he said.

I told you I didn't know, she said.

There's a difference between joking and making fun, he told her. He told her that all the fields around his house were his, that he needed all his tools, which was a lie—he'd been selling his land off in circles that closed down tightly around him. There were only a few acres left, and he'd had to crowd his junk closer with every sale.

Maybe you could come back another time, he said, and we can discuss that rake.

I'll leave you my number, she said.

Give me your address, he said. You'd need it delivered, in any case. Not that I've made up my mind.

I can come by again, she said. I've driven past lots of times, you know, before I stopped today. I've seen you out in your yard. I've been planning this.

What's that supposed to mean? Eddie said.

Nothing, she said. Only that it wasn't just an impulse, coming here today.

Eddie leaned against the wall of the barn, uneasy, the chicken's head still hidden in his fist.

Call it whatever you want, he said.

I will, she said.

And so the woman left empty-handed, not even having seen the other side of the barn, where his animals were, hidden in the darkness, always ready to leap from the walls at the flick of the light switch. He showed it all to me—the squirrels with shrunken heads, their lips stitched tight, the pickling jars afloat with baby animals. He was making animals with mismatched heads and bodies, with multiple heads, with heads and hands that were parts of machines. There were dogs with green glass teeth, badgers with butcher knives for legs, deer with antlers of wrenches and screwdrivers, and he could get them all going on pulleys and lines, flying through the air and fighting with each other. Sometimes he would play his records as he did it, set it all to music.

Or perhaps he did take the woman further, he did show her his animals. I can just see her transfixed face as he went on about how an artist might see a person or place and imagine them in paint—all color and form and estimates of materials, necessary techniques—and how that's how it was, how he practiced by imagining the shapes beneath the skin, trying to tell what it would take to make an animal be itself, to have the correct impact, make a true emotional impression. Yes, I'm sure she'd be taken in by that, though I really doubt that he did show her, that he would; he was so careful about who he shared that with.

I'd go out there, driving him home if he got rained in at the Tap, then I'd pick him up the next day, so he could recover his tractor from the parking lot. Sometimes I'd have to search for him. Once I found him down in a ditch, picking over a dead horse that was half rotted away, plants and flowers growing through its bones. He looked up at me, just pulling his suspend-

ers of orange baling twine up over his shoulders. It seemed impossible he could breathe down there.

That horse is too far gone, I said, standing upwind.

The skeleton, he said. I can do something with it, make it dance. The worms will help me. You'll make a little engine, a kerosene burner.

I could hear the bugs from where I stood. Looking out across the fields that Eddie once owned, I could see the wooden boats, abandoned and rotting in the trees. I'd heard people sold drugs out there.

Those days, I'd get Eddie away from his house, from whatever thing he was doing, and we'd go out driving. Now I drive by myself, cruising in my Datsun. Some mechanics drive the best cars possible and others get their kicks from those that are just making it, on the edge of total failure without giving in. I go to the beach up at Europe Bay, or just to Appleport, and try to skip stones through the chop. Or I throw them so high, end over end, that they hit the water silently with no splash and slice straight to the bottom without losing momentum. I think about all the money I'm saving and consider moving west or getting more settled here. Ships line the horizon, on their way to Michigan, or north through Huron and Erie, back to the dams and locks, the canals of New York. I realize I don't know as much as I once suspected, that I cannot go back there, where I came from. I've lost some bluster.

If I find children on the beach I challenge them to contests. Usually they don't dare. I tell girls to watch me and they pretend not to.

When Eddie was with me, we didn't stop at the beach. We just drove back and forth across the peninsula, laughing and talking, a six-pack on the seat between us. There's a hole rusted

in the floorboards on that side and the ground slides by. Eddie would pretend his foot was stuck, then he'd get serious and confide things to me. I was in his confidence then.

Did you ever, he'd say, see people that look so familiar that you begin to suspect maybe they're someone you've known before and they're in a very slight disguise, trying to trick you for some unknown reason?

That's too much, I'd say. Horse-poisoner.

Up here we know what's going on, he said. People come up from the cities and think they understand.

I'm from the city, I said.

Case in point, he said, and we had a good laugh over that. I've never had a problem with people acting superior, just so they count me as one of their friends. That's how it was with us, and it was because from the beginning I could see he was lonely like I was, and that we were together out there with the winter always coming.

At the A.C. Tap, the level of pickled eggs in the jar hardly changed. Harley stopped telling people not to sit on Eddie's stool, when it used to be every day he'd listen for that tractor coming. I still wait for him in there, some days; I tell Harley how Eddie called the woman foolish when he told me the story. As I drink, I wonder if she makes him bathe, if he turns the water black in the tub—there was dirt deep in the lines of his face, after all, not just around his mouth, like someone who chews, but up on his cheeks, around his eyes and, I suspect, all under his clothes. Like the arms of old wooden chairs, how dirt gets down in the grain. I drink Pabst, though there are other beers I prefer.

You look familiar, I say to people. I know you from somewhere, and they let me know I'm mistaken and swivel away. They show me the backs of their heads.

I've been told there's a woman for me, somewhere, made just for me, and I'll let her seek me out, for a change. If she finds me I'll put my dirty hands all over her skin, I'll mark her up good. The fact is, there's something about me that people don't like. I know that, I'm no fool. Eddie saw past it, though, and I know he was honest, that he held no false sentiments.

Once, sitting at the bar, I said, Let's stop acting so stupid, and after a long time he set down his beer and looked at me.

Good idea, he said. You start.

That's how he is, exactly. He didn't even smile when he said it. The thing is, it's quiet around here in the winter. Business slows down and you have to make up ways to pass the time. I've taken my car apart piece by piece and reassembled it; I've walked all the way down the peninsula, out on the frozen lake, from island to island. I'd go and visit and he'd show me what he was working on, maybe like the bass he caught ice fishing, a wire running in its mouth and out its anus so it could slide great distances, out of trees, so it could carry messages or frighten visitors. When he showed me these things, he kept checking my reaction, and I saw the looks he gave me, beyond disappointment and into anger or pity. While I got a vicarious kind of thrill from seeing him so excited, I fear that I didn't understand his animals like he did. This was enough for me, this half sharing; perhaps it was not enough for him.

At the gate to Eddie's drive, the sign simply says BEWARE—the bottom half, whatever it said, has been torn away. The time I went over there, when I finally decided to check, was a couple weeks after his disappearance. I missed him. I miss him.

Something had gotten in and finished off the chickens. All that was left were white feathers in the fence. I was careful in his yard, fearing traps, springes left for animals. Any piece of

ground might hide a pit, covered over, sharpened stakes pointing up from the bottom. No, I did not underestimate him—it's wrong not to respect a friend, and I know how he hunts.

I pushed the kitchen door open and stood on the threshold. The strange handprints of raccoons marked the walls, the ceiling, in jam and molasses. I saw the shattered plaster of the walls, the holes where the bullets had gone, and on the table were pieces of raccoon and other parts—wires and switches, batteries, an egg timer with its cover ripped off—strewn all together. A raccoon's face had been stretched on a circular knitting needle, flat and tight, its eye sockets empty.

Standing there, I decided it was unwise to search through all the rooms. I know the sound of an empty house. Instead, I went around the outside, fearing the whole time that this was what he'd expect from me, that he'd thought it all out, what I'd do, and he'd planned for it. Through the window, sunlight slanted across his empty bedroom. Two beat-up ducks hung above the door; one had wire for a beak, the rest torn or fallen off, lost behind a piece of furniture. The walls were solid yellow, *National Geographics* stacked five feet high.

I warn Harley of my suspicions. Eddie might poison the woman slowly, dress her again so you wouldn't see the stitches, rig her up somehow, all full of sawdust, chipped marbles for her eyes. I say all this, but I don't voice the other possibility—that the two of them are keeping company, driving somewhere together, shoulders touching in the sharp corners. Talking to each other.

Harley says the only thing that's certain is that Eddie's disappeared. He hardly even listens. Sounds to me, he says, like this is all about you, something going on in your head. He just moves further down the bar.

All I know is I crossed from Eddie's house over to his barn and stood outside. A chicken with razorblade claws would slice out of the darkness on a piece of fishing line, slashing at my face if I swung that door open. The horse skeleton, an insane marionette held together by wire, hooves sharpened like knives or coursing electricity, would gallop after me. The barn was full of the faintest sounds. I stood outside that door and I could not stop shivering.