

Liked and Similar

by Joseph Young

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They had to move the rock out of the middle of the campsite. That's what he kept thinking, *That rock sits there covered in lichen. It should move.* Of course, there was no way, it was ten thousand pounds. He stared at it, the spiders and pill bugs crawling its surface, flakes of it exfoliating into the sun. Though it did seem almost possible, if he could get his palms situated just the right way on the rough belly of it, if they could wedge beneath it a hundred branches in just the right configuration. Across the forest floor, to the bright stream, they would complete it.

She stared into the fire of the camp stove, flame pale and thin in the vivid morning. He wondered what she asked the flame, to come and shroud them, burn up the words they always said. She was always never speaking, picking out a day or a weekend to fall into a silence that was supposed to say something. Her eyes as she watched the stove were wet with whatever beauty she imagined, the red fire that would take them where she wanted to be.

"Would you like to go hike?" he asked. He picked up his canteen and raised it against the sky. With the leaves gone from the trees, the forest floor was new and warming.

She smiled. "Sure. Let me change first." She sat on her stone looking at him, eyes damp and thinned, and then she went to the tent. With the sun on the walls, he saw the dim shadow of her lift off her sweatshirt, pull off her pajama bottom, rummage for her jeans and t-shirt. When she re-emerged, it stabbed at him, the length of her hair on her shoulder, his view of it across her neck.

"What?" she said, and he shook his head.

By early afternoon they perched at the side of the mountain, boots hanging into the air. The mountain continued to climb above them another thousand feet, although already to him the atmosphere was weak. Looking into the swell of blue mountains, beyond his knees, he knew it was only his idle thought, but he savored the idea through his teeth, his lungs with a need to be filled. She sat and rested, hand on her thigh, the slight plump of it rounding in his sight.

"We should quit," she said. "When we get home."

"Well."

"We're forcing it now."

He looked across his shoulder, lids half shut, the sun bright and she in a blur. "But all of it is forced. Everything. Is there something that's not?"

"Yeah," she said, pointed at the wide rolling of the trees.

He frowned toward her and turned away.

They got to their feet and began to climb. The bare trees left off and were replaced with the long, waxed leaves of the laurel. A hive of something seemed to hum in the sky, he felt it over the sunny faces of the stones. It felt good to put his boots in front of each other, make the grade upward. It was an accomplishment, a realization. His feet knew the way, found each hold without thought.

At first she was a pace behind, then five, then lost around a switchback. He heard her at times scraping across a boulder, her long breath as she drank from the canteen, but he could not see her.

After a while, as the day grew longer, he forgot her for minutes at a time. She would return to him with a bump and a tightening of his veins, and then she would fade into the climb, the sky that was so high.

He reached the top. He sat on a ledge and looked at the view. He closed his eyes and for a moment slept. Her hand on his chin was what woke him.

“Hi,” she said.

He smiled at her and grabbed at her arm. For only a moment she held back. He smelled her hair, the scent of the camp stove and the trees and the stream. There was the heartbeat that he might have thought that he forgot.

“When we get back,” he said, “We should see what happens.”

“Well,” she said. “We can say that.”

She scooped a beetle from the dirt and held it in her palm. It got to the edge of her thumb, waved its antennae, opened the carapace that kept its wings.

“Anyway, it's too nice here to care.” She bent her head to kiss him, touching her teeth to his. She moved against him, he against her, her hand in his lap, his hand in her shirt.

