

An Olfactory Map of Useless Bay

[first three chapters, rough draft]

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The valley floor ran flat and smooth like a lazy river of earth flowing between the rocky, jagged foothills. The afternoon sun angled into the barn, creating shafts of light filled with glittering, dancing filaments of straw dust. She was tied to the wall with reins, facing the wall, hands above her head, feet shoulder-width apart. Ivy vines had grown in through the gap in the boards and encircled her knees. I untied the perfectly white laces of her perfectly white tennis shoes--shoes that had never skidded across asphalt or kicked dew off of morning grass. The soles of her feet were flawless and smooth. I looked up. A beam of light hit her green eyes and made them sparkle like gems as she looked over her shoulder at me. She said, "If you take what you want, you will not have what you want." I walked slowly to the far end of the barn. I took the knife out of my belt and threw it with the fluid motion of my turning body. It stuck in the plank beside her right wrist, cutting the leather strap in two, but it nicked her wrist and a drop of blood fell. I stepped out of the barn as the horse ran by, and I grabbed her mane to pull myself onto her. She charged down the gravel driveway beside the fields. She leaped over the closed gate, and she never came down. As we climbed higher into the sky and turned, as the barn became small and the barefoot girl standing in front of it was so small that I could not tell if she was holding her wounded wrist or holding her clasped hands over her heart, the horse said to me, "These are \$3.99, right?"

I awoke to the clattering of souvenir key chains on the glass counter. One was blue and white with the Seattle Mariners' logo, and the other was the shape of a clamshell, with the name of the Useless Bay Mollusk Museum in raised gold letters. My left eye was stuck shut because of the way I had fallen asleep on my forearms while reading _____. My first grab at the key chains missed. "Are they cheaper if I buy two?" The woman wore a sweatshirt that tourists buy from the Pike Place Market, which I recognized before she even turned around so I could see the graphic, but the extra-large sweatshirt was too snug for her, and I could see plainly where the edges of her bra dug into her flesh like the upholstery on a couch. As she turned toward me, I looked to see the front of her sweatshirt and confirm my guess about the design. Her breasts were so enormous that they had merged into one large pillow. I blinked my stuck eye open. She gasped as she noticed me looking at her breasts, possibly misinterpreting my astonished revulsion as desire. She glanced down at the bulge in my pants caused by the usual nocturnal penile tumescence that accompanies dreams that are not necessarily even erotic in nature. (That it was happening at two in the afternoon instead of two in the morning was embarrassing but not necessarily abnormal, according to the doctor.) Her face went through a series of contortions that I found impossible to interpret. She stomped toward the door muttering something like, "A boy that age...."

"Two for \$6.99," I called to her well-padded back as it jostled out. As I nervously tapped on my thigh with thumb and little finger alternately—a remnant of the nervous behavior that was expressed as comically flapping hands when I was younger—my companion nudged at my arm with his golden snout,

encouraging me to pet him instead. He looked up at me with his big brown eyes, and his blond, wavy ears flowed down and away, giving him a very streamlined appearance. He was good about checking on me when I had these sorts of stressful experiences, and he fulfilled his function of calming me down and protecting me from myself. I stroked his ear as I spoke to him. "Well, at least she was a tourist, so I will not have to hear about this episode at school in the fall."

I have fantasies about being normal. It would be easy enough to assume I was normal, if you saw me sitting behind the counter of the museum on a summer afternoon, the light angling through the clean front window onto the orderly display cases. I might look like any other kid with a summer job between his sophomore and junior years, a little bored and daydreamy, but not displaying any hostility toward the world with piercings and punkish clothes or hair. My acne is almost gone, and I am starting to fill out after the growth spurt that made me alarmingly tall and thin. One might not notice me at all, but if I caught anyone's attention, I could pass for normal, briefly. After they look a little longer, the initial smiles that strangers give me change somehow into an expression that I cannot decipher. They see that the shop window says *The Useless Bay Mollusk Museum*. Most of them do not know what a mollusk is, but they soon discover it is a family of creatures without the manners to hide their internal organs with fur or feathers. It is a freak show of squishy things that slither around on their stomach linings or have sex through appendages on their faces. My mask of normalcy falls away as soon as they get me to speak. I try to avoid it, but the quieter I am, the harder they work at drawing me out. Perhaps a husband will hang back at the counter while a wife explores the squid display, and he will say something meaningless to break the ice, as they say, but because it is meaningless and has no context for me, I will invariably misunderstand. He might say, "So, you think the m's will fade down the home stretch again?" I will imagine the letter m fading from a page of text, and I will see a house being stretched. I will be very cleverly deducing the meaning of the statement by testing a series of possibilities and discounting the absurdities, but to him I will appear to be having a petite mal seizure or under the influence of drugs. Anyone else would instantly know that the M's are the Seattle Mariners, the baseball team. I would figure it out 47 minutes after they had left, or maybe the next week.

If my clumsiness with conversations were the only odd thing they noticed about me, it would not be so bad.

My name is Funk. People call me that to be derogatory, and I let them think it is because it is the one way to ensure that people keep calling me that. My real name is Wilbur, which I do not like even if it is shortened to Wil. The story of how I got my name is the most complex thing about me, and even that is not very interesting. When I was little and we lived in Brooklyn, my parents, who lived together at the time, used to invent ways to use up my excess energy. They had games in which I would fetch a ball like a dog or find a hidden toy, and I was happy to do it, not knowing that they were trying to get rid of me or wear me out. When I began asking questions excessively, I think around the age of eight, (I asked too many questions from the time I was two, they tell me, but my parents did not really run out of patience until after six years of relentless questioning) they would say, "Go look it up in your Funk & Wagnall's," which was at the library, which was two blocks away. This was in the dark ages, before Google. So I would go to the library and look up the question in mind, or whatever question had supplanted it by the time I got there, sometimes a lot more, and I would come back an hour later and

ask some other question that had been brought up by the answer I found to the original question, and Dad would say, "Go look it up in your Funk & Wagnall's," which apparently is supposed to be a funny expression all by itself, which I never understood even after it was explained to me eventually. It was all supposed to quench me somehow, but it had the opposite effect of making me more inquisitive and somewhat athletic from all that running back and forth. After *the incident*, and after I went to see some doctors, they got a dog for me. He was a specially trained dog for kids without "coping skills," like kids with ADD, ADHD, autism, Asperger's, and that kind of thing. His name was Bart when he lived with the family that had trained him, but Dad said we had to give him a new name for his life with his new family. I wanted to call him Blaster, but people seemed to think that was not a real name you should give a friendly Golden Retriever. He wagged his tail all the time, and he even wagged his whole body. Dad started calling him Wags, and then one day he called him Wagnall, saying it just popped into his head. By that time, we were inseparable, and people said that if he was Wagnall, then I must be Funk. I did not understand why this must be so, but I was happy to be called Funk. I enjoyed the encyclopedias, having read them all and spent many hours with their weight and their smell of ink and oily hands. I liked knowing facts with authoritative certainty; it was a relief from the confusion of trying to sort through the layers of deception that people put forth and guessing at their intentions without much luck. I did not know I could have been called Funk, and I wished I had been called that from the beginning. But my name is not really Funk so much as our name is Funk & Wagnall. We sort of ceased being two individuals, and we were always Funk & Wagnall after that. If anyone ever saw one of us alone, they knew something was wrong and they went looking for the other half of the dog/boy, "As if I had misplaced my right hand," as Mr. Walker would say. That was a long time ago. Now I am fifteen, and Wagnall is six, but we still go everywhere together. He still protects me and keeps me out of trouble, but sometimes I protect him, too. That is the only interesting story there is to tell about me.

The rest of my life can be summed up in one paragraph. I live in Useless Bay, Washington. Mom says it's the furthest you can get from Brooklyn, but it is not, because obviously there is Alaska or Hawaii if you wanted to stay in the U.S. or China if you really wanted to get away. This summer I am working at the Mollusk Museum, next to the Island County Library, Useless Bay Branch. I work behind a counter, which is fortunate, since it helps conceal the occasional unprovoked erection, which somehow manages to pop up just before a customer walks in even if the bell on the door has been silent for hours. More than anything, I want to have sex, preferably with Raquel Ingram, but any of a hundred or so girls at my school would do. I am never going to have sex, at least not for some indefinite, interminable span of time. In order to get sex, you have to be able to lie. You have to pretend that sex is the last thing on your mind, as if, according to Ty, my friend who has had sex (he says), you were just sitting there minding your own business while the girl of your dreams starts rubbing up against you and you act as if, "You mean, you want to have sex with me? Gosh, this is totally unexpected, and it certainly never crossed my mind, but if you insist, well, I suppose we could do it just this once," as if you have not been resisting an irresistible impulse to tie her down on a four-post bed since the moment you first saw her, since before you knew her name, even since before you ever saw her or knew she existed. But I cannot lie. It is one of the manifestations of my particular form of Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism. I have tried. People have tried to teach me. I will probably never learn how to lie, and I will probably never have sex.

I am writing this as part of a project recommended by my therapist and my school counselor. They say that if I learn to tell stories, I can eventually learn how to leave things to the imagination, “To embellish, exaggerate, color the truth, use euphemisms and metaphors, find nuances and qualifications, omit unnecessary distractions,” etc. For example, my creative writing teacher would say, after reading the above paragraph where I mention that I occasionally have erections in public places when I am supposed to be working, that I could just tell people that I am a fifteen-year-old boy and they would automatically know that I “tend to have more sexual urges than I have opportunities to satisfy them.” First of all, if everyone knows it already, then what is wrong with my saying so? Second, if they also know that fifteen-year-old boys are not getting enough sex, because they did not get enough sex when they were in high school, why will they not do something about it? For example, it seems perfectly practical to me to have a sex class in school, between math and P.E., where they pair up the boys and girls and explain how it is done, show them what to do and what not to do, give them practice drills and exercises, observe them to make sure they have the proper technique, and give them homework assignments, just like any other thing that is important to know. Mostly, they give me a little information, less than I learned from the encyclopedia long before I started having these poorly-timed erections, and they put me in a room full of unbearably beautiful girls with pants that only stay on by defying the laws of physics and red thong panties showing above the belt loops in back, and probably emitting some sort of invisible pheromones that would drive me crazy even if they were wearing black burkas, and tell me not to think about it. To me, that seems cruel and unrealistic. They tell me that, although there is some merit to my argument, my failure to recognize that society is more complex than that is a symptom of my disordered thinking patterns. I need to recognize this and learn when not to act on my own patterns of thought, no matter how logical they seem to me. Meanwhile, pay attention while we discuss the hole in the ozone layer seven thousand six hundred and seventy-two miles away, and ignore that thing in your pants that is directly wired to every neuron in your brain. Anyway, I think I could lie, in writing, even if I did not do it well or successfully. In person, if I ever even think about telling a lie, it eats a hole in my brain until I spit it out. (I am not sure if I meant that literally or metaphorically.) The same thing happens when I write a lie, but sometimes I can just spit out the truth verbally without having to write it down. So I could go back and delete that part about erections, that part I know no one wants to hear. But I did not. I do not know why. Maybe Dr. Anderson will be able to tell me next time I see him.

That is just about all there is to know about me.

Well, there was *the incident*, as Mom refers to it, back in Brooklyn.

The Mollusk Museum is a sad place, or a funny place, depending on your mood at the time I guess. Mollusks in general do not keep very well, in terms of fossilization or preservation for museum display, because they are invertebrates composed of gooey masses that break down quickly after death. Other than the shell, there is nothing very descriptive like a skeleton of a dinosaur or the lower jaw of a 3.2 million-year-old *Australopithecus afarensis*. Mostly, we have a bunch of shells that give the impression of the volume and general shape of the creature, but that can be misleading. Geoducks, for example, do not fit in their shells anymore when they become adults; like an umpire’s chest protector, the shell protects the vital organs while leaving much exposed. We sell dozens of refrigerator magnets

in the form of large green slugs that say Whidbey Island on them. We have a pop cooler in the lobby that gets more careful scrutiny than most of the displays. That is my main function: to sell soda and magnetic slugs and to keep Anna Forman from shoplifting. I would just let her, in order to gain her favor and the miniscule chance that she would become attracted to me, but, as everyone knows, I cannot keep secrets. She eyes the key chains, looks at me, sneers, and leaves. I bought her one once, but she would not take it from me. Our best actual specimen other than the mural of a giant squid, the ten-inch-long shell of a geoduck named Methuselah, sits in a display case in front of drawings of how he must have looked during his approximately 160 year lifespan. One drawing shows him with his neck retracted near the shell, about equal in length to the shell, and the other drawing shows his protuberance fully extended by pneumatic engorgement to its probable length of four feet. One of the many derogatory nicknames I have acquired that I do not like as well as Funk is Methuselah; it spread around the school in less than a day after Sage caught me asleep at the counter while my shirt was not covering one of my unplanned erections. Ty said it was a good thing because the comparison implies that I am "well endowed," but I cannot tell that it has helped my social status at all.

Moon snails are a common shell that I find on Sunlight Beach all the time when the tide is out. They are an exotic species(?), and in Puget Sound they are free from the predators of their home range. They catch juvenile geoducks before they have burrowed into the safety of the sand. Moon snails latch onto the shells of the young geoducks, drill a hole in the shell with a raspy tongue, and then suck out the insides at a leisurely pace. I was talking to Gina, the head cheerleader who is a year older than me, about physics. Ty says she talks to me because she is so obviously out of my league that I am like a stray puppy to her, and she can deflect the usual criticism that cheerleaders are snobs by being seen talking to me, which is something many others would not risk doing. (None of that would have occurred to me, but I trust Ty in this sort of thing.) Whatever her motive, I am buoyed up in her presence, not just because she is a sexy girl, or because of the cheerleader outfit, but by everything about her. Her glistening brown hair, her perfect smile, her skin that you want to touch, her confidence, her kindness, the little motions that she makes with her hands or her hips or feet. If I concentrate, I can avoid staring at her breasts while we talk. I was explaining how gravity could be thought of not as a force that pulls us down but as the continual collapse of space-time into local centers, essentially space-time returning to the nothing from which it came, and that the concentration of matter in and on planets is like the debris on a storm drain getting wadded up and compressed as water runs over and through. She was not really grasping what I was saying, but she seemed to be honestly trying. She had braced herself against the railing above the ADA ramp, and I was aware, in my peripheral vision, that her feet were set apart and her thighs had that slight flex to the muscle that made her legs look especially long and strong and sleek and sexy. I was trying to think about gravity and Newtonian physics versus relativity, and I was trying not to become sexually aroused while I was standing face to face with Gina Winchester, when the strangest thing occurred: she started to get an erection. She was standing there before me, waiting for my next word because I had stopped mid-sentence in my monologue on gravity, with an expectant smile on her face, while her skirt began to rise from what appeared to be a growing penis. She looked down to where I was staring and quickly grabbed what turned out to be a bicycle pump that Billy Monson had slowly positioned so as to embarrass me. I had a sensation of being buried in cotton. My vision narrowed. I could feel that my face was bright red. On the ramp below and behind where Gina had

stood, Billy was alternately laughing and mimicking the stunned expression on my face as Gina hopped over the railing and down and punched his shoulder while trying not to laugh. All of Billy's friends were laughing until they cried. Gina scolded him, and I think she apologized to me, although I could not really hear what she was saying. And then she went off with him. She walked away with him, her boyfriend, the boy who had sex with her all the time, the one who was mean to her and to everyone else, Billy Monson.

Wagnall barked at them, but he was not really prepared to protect me from non-physical dangers such as laughter. I dropped my books and I ran. Nigel threw his apple at me and missed, and I think someone yelled out, "Run, Forrest, run," not for the first time and not for the last time. Wagnall and I ran all the way down Bush Point road past the gas station, toward Useless Bay. We ran through the parking lot behind the library and into the park and into the state forest, up the trail to the top of the cliff on Double Bluff, where the four-hundred-year-old yew tree clings to life, half over the edge. I walked out the horizontal trunk. Wagnall hopped up on the trunk at the rooted end, but he could not follow me out into the open air. He barked, and then he whined. I made it all the way out to the narrow part, past all the carving by kids in love and other kids with sharp objects. I try not to think about suicide because my mom or my therapist or Ty or someone is bound to find out—if not by asking, then eventually because I have a compulsion to tell—and it upsets them. I do not have any friends as it is, other than Ty and Wagnall. I talk to Wagnall a lot, but Ty can only take so much of me, more than his share but only so much. Everything dies. I am a useless boy in Useless Bay. Mom would miss me for a while, but I have to wonder if it would not be a relief for her as well, in a way. She says she does not blame me for breaking up her marriage, but she is capable of lying when she has to. Everything falls. I took a penny out of my pocket and let it go. I could almost see the gridlines of space-time rushing down and condensing as the penny accelerated at 9.8 meters per second per second (minus the air resistance.) If I could just believe, really believe, as the gravelly beach rushed up to meet my eyes, that all of my atoms are over ninety-nine percent empty space, maybe I could somehow relax the atomic bonds for a moment and fall right through the earth like a neutrino, not to come out on the other side, where in China they follow the same inexplicable rules of cruelty that guide the bullies of Useless Bay, but to punch right through the fabric of the universe, through the event horizon of the miniature black hole lurking in the molten iron core, to that place or non-place, whatever it is, that state that the fabric of space is so busy rushing back to, that time before time began, before I went wrong.

My cell phone rang, of course. I had tried to run to the yew tree faster than someone could report my flight from school to the teacher, who would tell Principal Teller, "He's done it again," and he would punch my mom's number on his speed dial, and she would tell her clients, "Excuse me one moment. Feel free to look around the living room and the kitchen while I take this emergency call." I tried not to answer it, but the only way I could really not answer was if I jumped, so that I would never have to explain later why I did not answer her call. The ringing phone and Wagnall's barking were getting to me, and fir cones were falling on me. It was all so annoying and distracting that I had really forgotten about jumping.

"Hello," I said, aggravated.

“Wilbur”—

“Please do not call me *that*.”

“Honey, where are you.”

“I am at the old yew tree on Double Bluff.”

She was silent for a moment. Then, “Why is Wagnall upset?”

“He is worried about me. About my being out on the tree.”

“Are you—Funk, sweetie, tell me what you are thinking.”

“The weirdest thing is that these fir cones keep falling on me, but they are green and they should not be—holy shit!” I covered my mouth with my hand, not having meant to yell that in my mother’s ear.

“What? What is it?”

“Everything is fine. I have to go. I will call you back in bit.”

“Funk. Funk!”

Looking up into the trees behind me while I hit the END button on the phone caused me to lose my balance. Waving my arms reflexively, I accidentally threw the phone up into the air. I caught it as I fell, and I grabbed onto a living branch that kept me from falling one hundred feet, all the while keeping my eyes fixed on what I thought at first had to be an illusion: sixty feet above me in the Douglas fir was a naked woman.

The only logical explanation was that she was an illusion, some new trick that my defective brain was playing on me, but she gasped as she saw me fall, and she clutched at the air as if to will me to grab the branch. When she saw me catch it, she motioned for me to stay, like I would command Wagnall, if he ever needed a command. Then she was leaping and swinging down through the branches to the adjoining maple, and she practically ran down the slanted maple trunk. Wagnall tried to walk out the trunk to me, but I commanded him to stay. He whimpered, jumped down off the trunk, came to the edge of the bluff, then went back to the yew trunk and jumped up again. I held onto the branch with both hands, with the cell phone lanyard around one finger. I tried to pull myself up, but I could not hook my foot onto anything, and I was not as strong in the upper body as, say, Billy Monson, who would have just pulled and then pushed himself up with his arms. I looked down at the clay slope beneath me, and I imagined caroming off it on the first bounce, and then another bounce, and then the gravelly beach. I was just starting to get really scared of losing my grip when I looked up, and she was there.

I said she was naked, but she was actually wearing a pair of glasses. But, they did not have lenses in them. I wanted to look at her naked body, which I knew was fantastically gorgeous even from a distance, but I found that I could not take my eyes off of her eyes. They were brown jewel rims around

black pools, and she was hypnotizing me with her gaze, as if it were an instruction or an affirmation. I would usually be uncomfortable looking into someone's eyes, but with her it was as easy as looking into Wagnall's eyes, and energizing. She stepped past Wagnall with an unconscious stroke to his ear. She glided out the trunk of the tree without ever touching a branch for balance. She kneeled down. She grabbed my wrists. She hauled me up with a strain, and I thought for a moment that she might drop me, but she got me up to where my midsection was even with the trunk. I swung a leg over the tree and made it easier for her to right me. I ended up straddling the tree, facing outward, with her trapped outside of me. Once I was safe, she somehow released me from her gaze, and even though I knew it to be rude to ogle the naked body of the person who just rescued me, I could not stop my eyes from darting down along her body.

"Hello," she said, in a smooth voice.

"Hello," I said, in a voice less confident than my usual wavering voice.

"Up here," she said, trying to redirect my eyes to hers.

"Right. Sorry."

"That's okay, but if you're sufficiently recovered, perhaps you could let me pass."

"I am not certain if I can get up."

She had an expression on her face that I could not read, but it was not the smile of a moment ago. "Fine. Hold still." She put both hands on my shoulders and cartwheeled over me to the trunk on the other side, her dark brown hair brushing past my face. I turned my head to see her petting Wagnall, who was instantly her friend. He was the one who decided who I could associate with or not, since his judgment was superior to mine in such matters. I was glad he liked the naked woman.

"Why were you throwing fir cones at me?" It occurred to me that I might thank her for saving my life, or ask her what her name was, but only after it was too late to stop the first thought from getting itself spoken.

"You were upsetting your Wagnall."

"How did you know his name?"

"I've heard you talking to him, and calling his name. I know everything about you, Funk."

"Are you an angel?" Why I said that, I do not know. I do not believe in angels, and I would not have thought that I would ever say such an absurd thing.

"You know I'm not," she said, smiling. Her smile was so warm and luxurious. I do not like it when people smile at me because I often get confused over whether they are pleased with me or laughing at me, and more often than not it ends up being mockery that I cannot detect until it is too late. I could not tell with her, either, but for some reason I did not care. I do not think my indifference

was caused by her naked body, but I often do not know what my mind is thinking until I find out indirectly. "Hurry up and get yourself unstuck so I can stop worrying about you."

My limbs felt heavy and unsteady, so I just scooted back along the trunk until I got to a major branch to steady myself. I had walked out on that trunk hundreds of times without ever having a fear of falling, but the close call made everything more difficult. My muscles were fighting themselves and making the simple act of rising to my feet cumbersome and awkward. Before turning around to face her, I checked to see if I was decent, half expecting my unruly penis to be tormenting me since this was the first time I had ever seen a naked female, besides on the internet, and I was surprised and relieved to find it calm and relaxed. I turned to talk to her, with all the questions jammed in the doorway in my mind, but she was gone. Wagnall was happy to have me back on solid ground. He jumped on me as I was looking for her, and I fell to the ground because of my wobbly legs. Wagnall rolled himself into my side and sighed. I knew what he meant, as if he had spoken it in plain English, "I am relieved to have you back," and I did not worry about double meanings or hidden motives. I laid there for a while, enjoying the smell of the dirt in Wagnall's fur, looking about the trees for the Lady of the Forest, hoping she would come back after she had a chance to dress.

It was an awkward introduction, but I was anxious to have her like me. I tried to plan what to say and how not to be myself. I wished I could lie to her and pretend I was normal, but she said she already knew everything about me. How could that be? Then I got worried that she was not coming back. I sprang up. "Wagnall, go find." I gestured in the direction of the whole forest. He paused and looked at me for a moment, and then he started off on her trail, slowly at first. I tried to listen for footsteps over our breathing, but there was a siren in the distance that was growing louder and obliterating the silence.

The dream of the girl in the barn and the incident with the Lady of the Forest both have the character of adolescent fantasy. I believed in the reality of both of them while they were happening, but when the dream ended I was able to accept that it was a lie my brain was telling me in order to exercise certain synaptic connections while my body rested. The heroic rescue at the yew tree is harder for me to accept as an illusion. Wagnall never found her, and Deputy Huffman assured me there was no naked woman running around the woods rescuing awkward boys. I went back and looked for tracks in the dirt. I even took off my shoes to see what barefoot tracks would look like, but the impressions were nothing that would stand up to four frantic dog feet and two running shoes. Mom was delighted by my story because she took it as evidence that I could tell a lie. Dr. Anderson did not call me a liar, but he explained how the mind under stress can sometimes misinterpret the senses and convince itself that impossible things have transpired. Now, people avoid me not only because I cannot keep secrets or because I reveal more about myself than they wanted to know, but also because they think I am a liar on the grandest scale: a liar who lies about a supposed disorder that prevents him from lying. Even Ty is avoiding me lately. Having Wagnall around, I often feel that I hardly need people at all, but it would be nice to be alone out of choice rather than because of wholesale rejection by the community.

I would like to convince myself that the woman with the glasses was an illusion so I could stop insisting it was true every time someone confronts me about it, which inevitably leads to trouble. The

trouble is that I remember how she smelled. In my dreams, I have no recollection of anything having a smell. I dream in color, with vivid detail and distinct, memorable sounds and conversations, even when they are nonsensical. How could someone hallucinate a smell? She smelled like Christmas. Well, she smelled like a fir tree, which would make sense if she had just climbed down from one. She smelled of earth, both the rich soil of the forest and the dust of the well-worn trail. She also had a warm scent all her own: the smell of skin after exertion. I might say she smelled of sex, but how would I know? Wagnall and I have walked through those woods many times since that day, and I often hope, as he darts off into the salmonberry on the trail of a scent, that he will find her. I try not to hope, since hope is really just self-delusion, but as we walk through the vine maples and hazelnuts, I often have this unrealistic but tangible expectation that a fir cone will hit me on the shoulder. Maybe my hope is a sign of progress in my efforts to become a regular liar.

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The young woman sat in Funk's bedroom, at his computer, in the dark, reading his story about difficulties with girls and lies. She looked through her glassless frames, and she moved the mouse with a hand gloved in black cotton. Her dark hair and black clothing made her pale face seem to hover in air in the glow of the screen. At the bottom of his story, she started typing in a red font.

Dear Funk, I can't tell you about myself because I need to keep my personal life private. Almost everything I do is illegal in some sense, and unfortunately, you would draw too much attention to me if people believed I was real. I do want to help you. I admire your honesty, but I can understand why some people advise you not to tell the full truth always. You can tell the truth to me, and I will be your secret keeper. If you tell things to me, maybe it will relieve you of the urge to blurt out things to others, making your life a little easier.

We will communicate by caches. Write me a note and place it in one of those tubes your mom uses to keep real estate flyers dry. Go to the bridge across the northern creek of the park, go under the bridge, and place the tube in the small space at the northern end, underneath, where the joists rest on the stones. I will leave an answer there in three days. You must not try to find me, as it would only cause trouble for both of us.

Take care of Wagnall, and always remember that you have a duty to take care of yourself so that you can always be there for him. Write to me soon. We can figure this out together.

Love, Marginal

She minimized the document so it would not be on the screen if someone besides Funk walked in. She looked around his small room. The stone wall, the concrete floor, and the drafty fireplace chilled the

room, and yet the draft did not clear out the smells of a dog and of a boy's shoes. She looked out the window into the great room, looking through an array of organ pipes. Stepping quietly down the stairs, expertly avoiding the wooden steps that squeaked, she stepped onto the large oriental carpet and looked around the unlit room. She ran a gloved finger over the piano keys as if she might sound them, but the room remained deathly quiet. Avoiding the dusty corners where she might leave a footprint, she made her way to the low table between the ancient candelabras, near the massive stone fireplace beneath Funk's room. She picked up an antique silver plate, examining and appraising it, and then she put it back. Hearing a door close in the far end of the house, she flew up the steps silently to a small wooden door. A knife flashed out of her pocket with a small snick. She opened the door, which had an iron latch, wedged herself into the small space inside, and pulled the door closed with her knife holding the latch up, quietly letting it down into place. In the pitch dark, she closed the knife with one hand and slipped it into her pocket. Then she pulled out her cell phone and opened it so that the screen illuminated the area around her feet. She had to scoot sideways past a bank of old relays, and then the space widened into a room full of pipes and instruments connected to the pneumatic organ console in the great room.

Hundreds of metal pipes of varying sizes stood in row after row in wooden frames. The wires from the relays ran to solenoids at the bottom of each pipe, and a leather valve body would inflate if the organ were turned on and the proper key were depressed. Marginal looked at the horns and the xylophone plates, the drums and the tambourines. She carefully opened another door and entered another room full of more pipes and different instruments. Voices grew nearer, so she closed her phone and extinguished its light.

She heard a large door creak, a few footsteps, silence, several light switches flipping, and then a woman's voice: "Oh my God!"

After a short silence, another woman's voice said, "Yes, it is pretty impressive at first sight. It's best to view the room from up here. Down there is the organ console. The Steinway is by the windows and the Bosendorfer is by the tapestry."

"And that's the fireplace way over there? It's big enough to stand in. Do you ever build fires?"

"No. It fills the room with smoke. That's part of the reason the room smells funny, I think."

"Yes, I did notice a distinctive smell. How long did he say you could live here?"

"Until I sell the place."

"I'll bet you aren't trying very hard."

"Actually, I'm ready to move to a normal house. Half the electricity and most of the plumbing doesn't work. It's drafty and cold and full of mice and rats."

Marginal opened her phone and used its faint light to look around the floor of the organ chamber at the rat droppings and bits of chewed leather on the floor.

“It’s been an unforgettable experience to live here, especially for Funk, but I think it is time to lead a more normal life. Let me show you the lower library.”

“The lower library? This house has two libraries?”

The footsteps of the two women grew louder, hit an especially squeaky step, sounded on the expansive wooden floor, and grew quieter as they walked behind the organ console to a wooden door. They fell silent as they stepped onto the carpet of the lower library. Faintly, Marginal could hear another “Wow.” She made her way softly through three more rooms full of instruments. She stepped up through an open door into a small workshop with large, two-man saws hanging on the wall. She admired the antique tools briefly, and then let herself out through another wooden door with an iron latch. Of the fifteen doors of the mansion, she knew this one was never locked. Marginal made her way along the east side of the house, past the large stone chimney, to a field on the north end. Half way across the derelict lawn, she looked back at the west face of the house with its thousands of window panes. Suddenly she turned her head to the right and saw she was being watched. A dog, it seemed at first, but as her eyes adjusted she realized it was a coyote. This odd coyote stood there looking at her, not inclined to scamper away. She took a few quiet steps toward the coyote, and still he held his ground. He stood in the middle of the faint trail that many little animal feet had made, and he looked directly at her as Marginal slowly advanced to within reach. She knelt before him and held out the back of her hand. The coyote did not sniff at her hand. He just looked at her and...nodded. It was a distinct nod. A gesture. Marginal gasped.

“Who do you belong to?” She spoke softly, glancing at the windows of the house where she glimpsed the two women continuing the tour. The coyote just looked directly at her. She asked, “Do you have a home?” He glanced around the woods and then back at her. “You understand what I’m saying?” The coyote nodded. “Holy fuck!” Marginal’s eyes grew wide inside her glassless glasses. “Am I having another psychotic break?” The coyote slowly shook his head no. “Can I touch you?” The coyote, looking a bit bored, held up his left paw, and Marginal gently touched the fur on top of it. “This is amazing. How.... What.... Why are you here?” The coyote put his paw down and pointed, with his nose, toward Funk’s room at the north end of the house, inside the massive stonework of the chimney. Marginal followed his gesture and then looked back at him. “You belong to Funk?” He shook his head. “You are his friend?” The coyote made no gesture. Marginal remained silent for a few moments, and then her face lit up. “You watch out for him!” The coyote nodded his head. “Me too! I think Funk is great. I just left a note for him telling him to write to me so I could help him with his problem, you know.” Marginal’s voice had grown louder with her excitement, and the coyote glanced at the windows to remind her to remain quiet. She understood, saying softly, “Oh. Right. Thanks.”

The coyote carefully stepped around her and bumped his nose against her back pack. She took it off, carefully avoiding bumping his nose. “You want some food? All I have is a few crackers.” She opened her backpack and retrieved the plastic bag. The coyote ignored the crackers and inspected her pack. “What? You’re checking to see if I stole anything from Funk? You are just the sweetest coyote I have ever met. No, I didn’t take anything from Funk. Anyway, I don’t steal things. I borrow them, put them to good use, and then return them.” The coyote looked at her, skeptically. Something about the slight

shift of his eyebrows indicated very clearly that he was questioning her. “Okay, occasionally I take things and don’t give them back, but only if they won’t be missed. It’s my philosophy to live in the margins, using resources that would otherwise go to waste—like a coyote!” The slight tilt of his head seemed to perfectly convey his conditional acceptance of her statement, pending further investigation. “Oh, you are the cutest thing I’ve ever met. Can I pick you up and give you a hug? Can I take you home? I live in the woods. You’d like my home.” The coyote took a step back and gently shook his head. Then he made a motion with his nose as if pushing her off on her way down the trail. “You’re dismissing me? But, but... we simply *have* to be friends. We were made for each other. Everything I do is to help the environment, to help animals. We both look after Funk. I understand if you like to work alone, but, still, you aren’t going to meet many people who are as glad as I am to find a coyote that understands English and doesn’t want to put you in a circus. Just walk with me a while. I know you’ll like me.” The coyote rolled his eyes.

She stared at him with her mouth agape, stunned into silence for several moments. “Did you just roll your eyes at me? You are a cute, sarcastic, English-speaking coyote?” She jumped when a barking noise emerged from her pocket. She pulled out her phone, and the caller ID read COYOTE, whose ringtone was a barking coyote. She looked from the phone to the animal. He nodded at her phone, impatiently. She answered. “Hello?” She looked around the woods and at the house to see who was playing a trick on her.

“What are you looking for?” The voice sounded like a small person, but older and educated, a smooth and playful tone.

She said, “I don’t know how you are managing this, but it’s a neat trick. Where are you? Who are you?”

“I’m sitting here in front of you, and I often go by the name Trickster.”

She looked down at him, skeptically. His voice sighed into the phone as he shifted his weight.

“People often have trouble accepting this, and they want proof that I am really talking to them. I’ll start by way of explanation. I am an experiment. A local family didn’t take kindly to me killing their cat, so they set a very clever little trap that I fell for. The owner of this house, Mr. Brooks, offered to take me to the wildlife group PAWS, the Progressive Animal Welfare Society. Instead, he performed an experiment on me, without my permission, of course, but I’m glad that he did. He implanted a small computer in my brain that connects to the outside world by various radio frequencies. This computer performs many of what you call the higher brain functions, such as language, certain types of logic, moral decision making, image processing, and the necessary mental pathways for telling lies. It also connects me directly to the internet, so I can talk to him at any moment, and I have encyclopedic knowledge at my ‘fingertips’ at all times. I can also manipulate electronic devices quite easily, so, if you will hold the phone away from your ear, I will switch it to speakerphone and show you a few things on your phone’s video screen.”

Marginal pulled the phone away and looked at it, dumbly. An image of the coyote popped up, and then a rotating diagram of his brain, the small computer implant, and an accompanying schematic that showed the correlations and connections.

He narrated the image. "In humans, additional brain functions are essentially overlaid on the simpler brains of their ancestors. Instead of giving me a larger physical brain, Mr. Brooks was able to replicate these functions in a computer simulation. I am still the same old coyote I always was, in many respects, but I now have the capacity for communication with whomever I please, and I have access to infinite information via the internet. I know everything there is to know about you, your bank balance, the passwords to your accounts, the results of your last physical, and every book you've ever checked out from the library, including, interestingly, a boring textbook about petroleum chemistry."

Her eyes grew wide while she watched the screen flash images of her passwords, her account records, and an x-ray of her broken collarbone dated two years earlier.

Trickster continued, "All of this information could have been gathered by a person, and they could simulate that I am the one speaking to you. Of course, the voice I have chosen is synthesized, and much of my persona is synthetic in many respects. You won't believe that I am me unless I can show you something that only I would know. So, here is the image of what I see through my eyes."

Her phone screen showed Marginal looking back and forth between her phone and the coyote. Her knees buckled and she sank to the earth. The image seemed to be in false color. It was almost black and white, but her brown eyes appeared hazel, and the red berries on the huckleberry bush behind her appeared gray. The coyote moved close to her, and her image increased on the screen. He nuzzled her hair and she saw a close-up of her own ear. The coyote pulled back and sat, looking at her patiently, waiting for some of the shock to subside. She finally managed a smile, but she couldn't say anything. Trickster's phone voice said to her, "Set the phone down, there, on the trail, and lean over and whisper something softly in my ear so that only I could possibly hear it."

She set the phone down, but she remained still and speechless. Finally, she decided what to say and bent toward him. Her soft breath moved the hairs inside his ear as she whispered, "You are the most amazing, fantastically beautiful creature I have ever met." Then she kissed him, softly, between his ear and ear and his eye.

He pulled away, slowly. "Now, now." His voice emerged from the phone as his eyes watched her. "You must not get carried away. Being the trickster that I am, you won't be able to gain my confidence with a few pretty words."

Marginal looked puzzled. "But, if you know everything about me, you should know that we belong together. I can help you, and you can help me."

"Yes, I'm sure we can help each other, but I already have a job, looking after Funk. And Wagnall."

Marginal picked up her phone and stood up. "I can help you with that. I'm always watching out for them."

“Okay.” He took a step back from her.

“Really, you don’t need to be afraid of me. I’m on your side.”

The coyote nodded, but then he tensed up suddenly and looked beyond Marginal’s right shoulder. When she turned to look, he sprang away, and in a few bounds he had climbed up onto the roof where it came near the hill to the east. In seconds, he was standing on top of the mansion, three stories above the stone terrace and pond in front of the west windows, and he looked at Marginal. He motioned with his head for her to take the trail away to the north. His voice came to her through the phone. “I appreciate your desire to help, but let’s take this slowly. You tend to become overly enthusiastic about certain things, and I really work best when I work alone. Good bye.” The phone call terminated without any action by Marginal.

She stood there with her mouth open wide, her hands hanging at her side, the back pack gaping open. She shouted, “You little fucker! You’re going to be my friend whether you like it or not!” The coyote disappeared as the women came to the glass doors to investigate the shouting. Marginal ran north into the woods before they could get a good look at her. The women stood on the large stones, looking north toward the sound of rustling branches. “Well,” said Funk’s mother, “I suppose it’s good that some girl wants to be Funk’s friend, even if she’s shouting at him when he’s not home. He’ll be disappointed he missed her, whoever she is.”

Marginal emerged from the wooded acreage of the mansion wearing a blue jacket from her backpack. As she walked along the road, she stopped several times and looked back in the direction of the mansion and the coyote, as if she might go back to look for him. When she heard a car coming, she dropped into the woods on the opposite side of the street. Through a series of trails and greenbelts, she made her way to town invisibly. She popped out onto Sunlight Avenue as if from nowhere, walked quickly past the high school, and entered the library. She found a computer station in the corner, with her back to the last row of shelves, and checked her email as she plugged her phone’s charger into an outlet. After twenty minutes on the internet, she took her backpack to the restroom, where she washed her face and hands. She looked at herself in the mirror, through her glassless glasses with the thick, heavy frames, as if that were perfectly normal. She used a paper towel to dry underneath the plastic band on her wrist. The faded printing read, Margaret Ellsworth, Dr. Karen Chapman, Western State Hospital, 9601 Steilacoom Boulevard SW, Tacoma, WA 98498-7213.

From the library, Margaret headed straight for the State Park. It was a long walk from the parking lot, along the beach, past the education building, up the gravel road, past the yew where Funk nearly fell, past the stream and the bridge where Funk would leave his messages, into the deep ravine at the center of the park. To leave the trail, she stopped and removed her shoes, putting them in her backpack, and climbed a young maple swiftly and effortlessly, like a lemur. This led her to the horizontal trunk of a large Douglas-fir with deeply textured bark. This trunk connected to a live slanted maple that she walked right up while steadying herself with branches growing as if placed for convenient handholds for her. Without hesitation she leaped into the branches of a cedar and climbed nearly to the top. Through a window in the branches she could see a large portion of the old gravel road and the public trails, those

trails worn down by the constant foot traffic of park visitors, unlike her own trail network. Marginal saw Funk and Wagnall coming down the gravel road. Funk looked around the woods, up into the trees and into the bushes. Wagnall looked at nothing; he just plodded along beside his boy, happy and oblivious. When they took the trail and reached the point where she had left it, Wagnall snapped out of his daydream and sniffed the ground, following her trail away, toward the direction she had come. Funk watched as he darted off and then came back with his nose nearly in the dirt, following the scent to the tree she had climbed. Funk looked all around through the trees, even looking directly at her twice, but she held perfectly still and much of her body was obscured by cedar branches. Funk took off his backpack and pulled out a notebook. Marginal could not distinguish what he was writing, but his motions seemed to be drawing rather than writing words. As he drew, he paused several times to look up and down the trail at large trees, possibly landmarks for his map. After Funk made several notations, he packed away his notebook and continued toward home with his dog.

Marginal waited nearly ten minutes before moving again, and then she climbed down to the horizontal trunk and followed it away from the trail, deeper into the forest. She pulled herself up into the arching branches of a hazelnut, and dropped down on a narrow path that appeared to be an animal trail. This led her to the side of a steep hill, beneath a massive cedar, to a small, level clearing furnished with junk. Marginal had her home in the woods laid out with the entrance by a short stump. Upon this stump, an old dictionary lay open, like one might in a library, but this dictionary had seen many days of rain and sun. She removed her backpack and set it by the stump. On hooks screwed into the stump hung several old skeleton keys. In her living room sat a single wooden chair with one leg fabricated from a galvanized pipe. She sat there and pulled out a book from a plastic pouch taped underneath the chair. Chemical Engineering and Petrochemical Processes was the title of the heavy blue book. She opened it to her bookmarked page about transforming oil into plastic. She sat and read beneath an orange shirt on a hanger on a wire strung between two small hemlock trees. The shirt was positioned so precisely and formally that it appeared to be a decoration rather than an item of clothing. She faced her bedroom, a twin mattress on a stack of pallets with a brown tarp suspended above by another wire between two other small trees. A broom rested in the corner of her bedroom, and the floor of her house was made of dirt swept clean of debris and tamped by bare feet into a smooth, even sheet, like linoleum. With no roof, her house was bathed in soft light. Everything seemed orderly, domestic, and perfectly normal. It was not a hovel, a shanty, or even a camp site. It was a home, a work of art, as if Martha Stewart had decided to live in the woods with no possessions. Marginal read her textbook in her broken chair in her roofless home, reading through her glassless glasses, and her face look utterly calm and relaxed and normal. [she should check her phone for messages from Trickster]

003

Funk and Wagnall came to the bluff with the old yew tree. He did not step up onto it and walk out over the edge of the cliff, like he used to. Instead, he sat well back from the edge, on the thickest part of the trunk, where some dead roots projected into the air and a few remaining live roots anchored the massive horizontal tree to the ground. He got his notebook out of his backpack, opened it to a hand

drawn map, and closed his eyes. Wagnall looked up at him, alert. Funk opened his eyes and looked at the Golden Retriever. "It smells like mushrooms," he said. He dug a pencil out of his pack and made the notation on his map. Within the outline of the State Park he had drawn the network of known trails, including the old gravel road that had been closed to vehicles for decades. Near the Y in the gravel road, where it separated into two roads briefly before rejoining itself a little way down the hill, Funk had drawn a pond, and written Skunk Cabbage, Spring. At the beach, south of the educational building, he had written, Septic Tank Leak at Low Tide? Near the parking lot: Oily. In the ravine: Cedar. In the northeast corner he had written, Elderberry and Indian Plum.

Funk looked at his hound again. "What did she smell like?" He closed his eyes again. He slid off the yew trunk so that he sat on the ground with his back to the tree. With his eyes still closed, he grabbed a handful of loamy earth and rolled it in his hand beneath his nose. He threw the dirt away and opened his eyes. "She smelled good," he said, softly. He lifted Wagnall's left ear and smelled it. "You smell good, too, but not like she smelled good." Wagnall turned his eyes toward Funk, showing white crescents at the sides of his eyes. He set his chin on Funk's knee and slumped against him, settling in for a rest as Funk thought long and deep. Funk stroked the dog's neck absently. Some of the maples had begun to turn color, but the alders remained solid green. The sun angled close to the horizon, hovering over Port Ludlow, instead of Nordland, where it had set in the summer. Flickers called to each other with sharp, bright notes. A pileated woodpecker hammered on a hard, dry, dead branch of a maple, using it as a sounding board to mark his territory. A cone of some sort fell to the ground several yards from Funk, but his attention snapped to it. He got up and walked over to it, examining it like a clue to a homicide. It was a pine cone, not a fir cone. He glanced at the shore pine nearby, and saw plainly that it did not contain any mysterious woman. He returned to the yew, collected his backpack and his dog, and started for home.

Funk usually came home down the long, steep gravel driveway, but on this day Wagnall dragged him along what appeared to be an animal trail. Funk noticed the lack of spider webs. Usually, he was the first to walk the many trails through these woods, so at this time of year he automatically walked with his arms in front of his face. After a hundred feet or so, when he noticed the absence of webs, he paid attention to Wagnall for early warning in case they should come upon a trespasser. The house where Funk lived had gained a mythological status in the town. Although it was a fascinating old mansion, it always grew larger and more elaborate in the stories people told about the place. People often snuck onto the property to get a peek, and when found, they would say they didn't know they were trespassing, even though they would have had to climb a fence or walk past a No Trespassing sign. Everyone did it. Obvious criminals hoping to break in, nosy mothers wanting something to gossip about, and real estate agents seeing dollar signs all were willing to be caught trespassing and then lie about it. Funk could not easily tell when people were lying, but these people were obvious. It seemed that they could get away with anything as long as they pretended to have good intentions. For a while, when the house sat empty, people would break in and steal things, and when they were caught on rare occasion, they would say they didn't think the house belonged to anyone. Their curiosity and greed seemed to make them implausibly stupid. So, the owner of the house, who was always away on business, found it simpler to have the house occupied. One day, when he happened to strike up a conversation with

Funk's mother at Ruby's Café, he discovered that she had walked past the driveway to the old mansion and never gone beyond the No Trespassing sign, even though she was a realtor. He was so impressed with her self-restraint, a quality he found lacking in most realtors, that he chose her as an agent to sell the place. The house never sold, in over a decade of trying, for several reasons, including the massive amount of repairs needed and the condition that the buyer not subdivide and develop the ten acres of woods surrounding the house. Since Funk's mother, Allison Saxton, had the keys and came and went all the time with people pretending to be interested in buying the place, the owner, Calvin Brooks, one day asked her if she wouldn't mind staying at the house in order to make it look lived in and keep the burglars away. So Funk lived in the great mansion for several years, and he became accustomed to finding strangers walking in his woods, but he never stopped feeling intruded upon by these people. If he ever seemed to be upset by their actions, they always acted as if he had some sort of personal failing if he took offense at some stranger merely walking through his woods. This was not unusual for Funk, for people to suggest his personal failings were the source of all his difficulties in life. It was not because people lied, of course. That's just what people do, and to get upset about it is just silly, they seemed to say. Funk followed after Wagnall, dreading meeting yet another of these lying trespassers, but also hoping that Wagnall was on the trail of the Lady of the Forest.

The boy and the dog walked down the steep grade, over fallen trees that had begun to rot as the ivy swallowed them. The leaves of the Indian plum had started to turn yellow. His feet crunched on the dry leaves of madrones and alders. He came around a corner of the trail to a level spot, where a grass tennis court had once been, according to the old pictures in the big chest. He remembered seeing the black and white picture of a white haired man in white tennis clothes, holding one of those tennis rackets with the small heads, standing on the far side of the net, with the house in the background. He had never seen the house from this angle before, and he stopped as he compared the image in his mind with the scene before him. What had been a small rhododendron beside the court had grown into a thirty-foot giant, obscuring most of the house. The stone chimney, which made up most of the north end of the house, looked about the same as it did fifty years ago in the picture. His mother had paid him to peel the ivy off, as a summer job, a couple of summers ago, and the handsome stones of warm colors seemed neither old nor new, unchanging as the grass tennis court deteriorated beyond recognition. Moles mined the soil and logs rotted away to nothing, leaving a lumpy field where it had once been perfectly flat. A laurel shrub had turned into a laurel tree and taken over half the court. The only place one could now walk on the old tennis court was this small animal trail past the tool shed.

Funk liked this approach to the house. He walked up to the old wooden door with the small glass window and unlocked it with his skeleton key. If he were a normal boy, living in this small room isolated from the other seven bedrooms, with its own outside access, and a trail leading away out of sight of all the windows, he could sneak out in the middle of the night to experience all sorts of misadventures. Since he could never lie, or even keep silent, about anything he did or even thought of doing, this teen boy's dream situation was wasted on him. He jumped up the three stone steps in one leap and threw his backpack on the bed, where Wagnall hopped up and made himself comfortable. Funk sat before his computer and moved the mouse. When the computer finished waking up, he opened the last document he had been working on. As he read the latest addition, his eyes widened in amazement. He stood up

suddenly and walked over to the windows of small, leaded diamond panes. Wagnall perked up, sensing his agitation. Funk walked over to the computer, standing with his hands resting on the back of the chair, and read it again. He walked over to the window again, and looked out into the woods. He thought he saw a coyote, but when he smeared away the dust and spider webs from a pane to get a better look, he saw nothing, no coyote, no naked woman. It was silly, he thought, to always imagine her naked. He tried to imagine her wearing clothes, but he could never settle on the right clothing to dress her in. It might have struck him as odd that, with this mystery woman, he tried to imagine her with clothes on, whereas with most girls at his school, he tried to imagine them with their clothes off, but like most ironies, this one eluded Funk. He walked over to the desk, pulled the cell phone from his pocket, dialed number two on speed dial, selected Speaker Phone when it began to ring, and set it on the desk as he read the words again.

On the third ring, Ty answered. "Sup." Ty could say this and not sound stupid, quite.

"Hey," said Funk. "She left me a note."

"Who?"

"The Lady of the Forest."

"Naked lady who climbs trees without using her hands and vanishes into thin air without a trace after lifting a hundred and forty pound kid up from certain death at the top of a cliff?"

Funk looked at the phone for a moment and then back at the computer screen. "Why don't you ever believe me?"

"I used to believe you. Now I think I shouldn't have."

"Come on. She signed it, 'Love, Marginal.'"

"Sure. Whatever. What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's her name, I guess. A nick name. You know. Like I'm FunkmasterW on WOW, and you're Tyrant."

"You couldn't make up a more believable name?"

"What would I have to do to convince me that she's real?"

Ty sighed into the phone. "Show me a picture. If she's like bigfoot, or something, and she sneaks around the woods, you could set up one of those automatic cameras that hunters use, and snap a picture of her."

Funk stood up straight. "Hey. That's a good idea. Except I'd have to tell her about it."

"Tell her how?"

"She said—why don't I just read you what she wrote?"

“Sure,” said Ty in the tired but patient voice common to many of the people who had to deal with Funk on a regular basis.

Funk read him the note. At the end, he read, “Love, Marginal,” with the breathy voice of a lover. “What do you think that means? Does she really love me, like, *love* me, or is it just one of those things that people can say casually, but it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Funk....” Ty remained silent for several long moments, and Funk turned to look at the phone, expectantly. “Funk, someone is playing a joke on you. Probably Billy Munson. You go leave your note, and he answers it. He builds you up to some romantic moment, and you’ll probably be asked to meet her in a certain clearing with no clothes on, because, who knows why, and you’ll walk into this clearing naked and half the school will be waiting there to laugh at you.”

Funk considered this for a long time. “But, what if it is her?”

“Do like I said, then. Let’s get one of those cameras—I think Alex’s dad has one we could borrow—and we’ll set it up by the bridge. We’ll catch Billy on film, or whoever it is, and then we’ll let them think they are fooling us, but we’ll be fooling them. We’ll set a trap, and bombard them with... I don’t know, pig shit from Carson’s farm, or something.”

Funk sat in the chair and considered this. Wagnall relaxed when he saw Funk come down from his agitated state. “You really think it’s a joke?”

“I know it’s a joke. The only question is whether you are playing a joke on me, which is a little unusual, or someone is playing a joke on you, which is almost always the case.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I’m always right.”

“When can you get the camera?”

“I don’t even know if I can get the camera.”

They talked for half an hour about the letter and their plans for revenge, until Ty said his phone battery was dying. Funk had no way of knowing if it was true or if Ty just wanted to get off the phone. Ty was Funk’s best and only friend, but Funk was not Ty’s only friend, and possibly not even his best friend. It was hard to tell. Funk had no choice but to let him go and accept his statement of the dying battery as true, although, if he thought about it, it would seem to make sense that Ty could just plug his phone into the USB cord from his computer and talk all night. He said goodbye and tried not to think about it, knowing he might have to tell Ty he thought he might be lying, which always ended badly. To stop his mind, he pulled the map out of his backpack and plotted various courses of action around the bridge over the north creek. He got out a marker and began to write a title on his map. An OI—he put down his pen and Googled the word olfactory. The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary said:

Main Entry:

ol·fac·to·ry 🗣️

Pronunciation:

\əl-ˈfak-t(ə-)rē, ōl-\

Function:

adjective

Etymology:

Latin *olfactorius*, from *olfacere* to smell, from *olēre* to smell + *facere* to do

— more at [ODOR](#), [DO](#)

Date:

circa 1658

: of or relating to the sense of smell

— **ol·fac·to·ri·ly** 🗣️ \-t(ə-)rə-lē\ *adverb*

He picked up his marker and continued to label his map: An Olfactory Map of Useless Bay. He carefully placed it in a drawer in the old desk. Funk picked up a text book, turned on the lamp, as it began to get dark, and settled into the bed next to Wagnall to do his homework. Just as Wagnall got comfortable, with his chin on Funk's thigh, Funk hopped up and went to the computer again. Wagnall only sighed. Funk printed out a copy of the message and took it to the bed with him. He slipped it into the pages of his school book and got into place beside Wagnall once more. The golden dog positioned his snout on the boy once more. As Funk started to read, Wagnall began to dream in no time at all. His whiskers trembled and his paws twitched. Funk read several pages of Environmental Science before pulling out the message and reading it again. "Love, Marginal," he said softly to himself.