

As If I Could Assume Your Life

This is a true story. It happened just after I moved to the country and I've held onto the facts of it, coddled them and kept them close, so I wouldn't forget, so one day I'd write them down. It was the day before Halloween and in that sense is a ghost story. It involves me and my neighbor, a woman named Dana Caruthers of whom I expected a fast, urgent friendship, the sort of which I was so fond. Indeed before I'd ever seen the inside of the house I was going to buy, I met her – over her picket fence. She held out her hand and said, “Dana, Dana Caruthers” and turned to tell two barking dogs to be quiet.

I told her I was Caitlin Skinner, introduced my husband Justin, and asked how long she'd lived here in Marysville. I told her we didn't want to be in a village, that we were both decided on a place with twelve acres and outbuildings for Justin's studio.

“We bought land too,” she said. “A farm out in Merridale but ended up renting it out. In the winter you want to be able to pop to the store for garlic or red wine, and just the idea of being there alone –” She shuddered and the way she put it, needing a bottle of red wine sounded sophisticated. It was enough to convince me.

After we looked at the fussy Victorian with its turret and carriage house, we walked towards the realtor's car and Dana got up from her Adirondack chair. She dropped a magazine on the seat. She had a heart-shaped face, flushed skin and unruly russet-colored hair. Gardening gloves stuck out of the back pocket of her jeans. She looked to be forty-five, though later she'd admit to fifty. I was thirty-five that September and full of as much yearning as would fit in my five-foot-four frame. She said the owner of the house we'd seen had left to chair a department at Princeton.

"They can't keep three homes." She flipped over her palms as if to say, of course, doesn't everyone leave a rural village in upstate New York to teach at an Ivy League school? As if she knew I needed to hear there were smart people here doing career-minded things. It was true, I wanted to move to the country but worried no one would hire me to write magazine articles anymore if I left LA. Almost more than my worries about work, though were the fears of loneliness.

She asked if Justin was an artist and I said yes before he could. Anxious that she'd like me, I told her about his galleries in London and New York since he was too shy to tell strangers these things.

"And you?" Dana fixed her gaze on me. Her attention made me feel important.

"I'm a journalist – and then there's the fiction." I tried to laugh, looked down and noticed a rotten plank in the fence. When I glanced up, she was smiling. She brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"You know, I write too. We have so much to talk about clearly." She pressed her business card into my hand, and I never wondered

about how quickly she'd found it as if she had been waiting for this. "You must, both of you must, come by my gallery and have a glass of wine."

The realtor showed us two more houses – a depressing farm that looked as if it were abandoned overnight and a ski chalet, that was yes, modern with lots of glass but totally wrong, too small. And I couldn't forget what Dana said about being lonely in winter.

On the day the sale went through, Justin was in LA at his fabricators' to see something for his show at the end of the month, so I went to the lawyer's alone. Justin sent flowers but still I felt an aching sadness expand in my ribs, and that night stood by myself in the new kitchen. The house echoed with silence except when the furnace shuddered on. I pulled out a drawer with stained contact paper and jumped when the phone rang. I was surprised to hear a woman on the line.

"We must do something to celebrate your closing." She sounded warm and melodious. "It's Dana," she said when it was clear I hadn't recognized her voice. I stood at the window, saw her across the street in her kitchen silhouetted against the light. We both waved.

I suggested a hike, told her I felt like I'd been trapped indoors. She said it would give us an excellent chance to talk, and I asked if ten miles was too much.

"Perfect," she said.

The clocks were changing that night, falling back for autumn and we agreed meeting at eight would allow plenty of time.

“We’ll be done by two, three at the latest,” I said just before hanging up.

The next morning I stood on her porch. It had two doors and I wasn’t sure which she used, so knocked on what turned out to be the wrong one. When she answered, I offered her a new trekking pole.

“I thought you could have the right and I’ll take the left. We’ll break them in.”

She examined the pole, collapsed down to no more than a foot and emblazoned with florescent chevrons. She handed it back.

“We don’t really need those. This is the Catskills, and it’s not like our mountains are particularly high. Plus the snow’s melted off anyway.” Both of us looked at the scrubby hill in the distance, and I agreed it was silly but stuffed them in the orange backpack anyway.

The weather was supposed to be sixty-five, and indeed it was warm enough that I brought a hat but no gloves. Dana wore hand-knit mittens. We both assumed we didn’t need anything more. There was a whole list of things we thought we wouldn’t need like flashlight or matches and a list of assumptions about ourselves: that we were friends, that we were alike, that we could share things – feelings, work, anxiety.

On the way we stopped off at the Hess station to get Halloween candy. Dana wearily waved her hand in the air and said all the kids

for miles around came trick-or-treating in the village, hundreds of them. But, she always went out to dinner to avoid them. I wanted to be a good neighbor so bought four bags and the Sunday *New York Times*. She joked about bringing the magazine section to read while we ate lunch we'd have so much time.

She stopped by a sign for trailhead parking though the trail didn't start for a half mile more. We walked up a dirt road along a loud brook, past hunting cabins and weekenders' homes, a rickety bridge and storage shed, with its paint peeling and sign emblazoned "forestry service" – or at least that was what it looked like beneath the graffiti. A poster of "Winter Hiking Essentials" was nailed to a board. No jeans, no cotton, but pack extra food and clothing.

I laughed and said, "It's a good thing we're not hiking in winter then."

"Feels like spring, doesn't it?"

When we reached the trailhead sign-in, the last date in the log was more than a month before.

"Guess we'll have it all to ourselves," Dana said as she put down our names and route. Not even ten yards away, though, close enough that he no doubt heard us, a hunter leaned against a tree and smoked. A starkly futuristic bow was propped next to him. Its elegant arcing form made me think of bones.

When he heard where we were going, he said, "I couldn't do that," and shook his head. All of him was lean, wiry but for a belly, which he patted for emphasis. "Not no more I couldn't. That's a long

hike there, ladies, but I've never been far on the trail, here. You don't stick to the trails with deer."

I said bow hunting had to be hard, that there had to be an art to it. He agreed and talked about a one-ness he got with the deer, a feeling, he called it, and it sounded almost Buddhist – except for his killing them.

He stamped out his cigarette and we all wished the other luck.

A discrete distance away I said he seemed nice. I was always apt to like people from the start. It was only after I got to know them that my opinion changed, and Justin would listen to me say, oh god, I can't believe it, did you see what so and so did?

Dana shook her head. "But hunting? It's just horrid. All they want to exercise is their blood lust. If they can't go to war and kill a man, they figure they might as well take a deer."

"But how do you know he's like that?"

"They're all alike." She sniffed, and as if to keep me from asking more said, "In December you'll see. There'll be carcasses strapped to cars, gun racks, the whole nine. Well, Justin'll be horrified." Dana knew he was a vegetarian, but I liked venison and didn't really think there was much wrong with hunting. I changed topics. We were still trying to be friends.

We both laughed when we came on the first patches of snow on the trail. I jumped into a pile of it for effect. Dana threw snowballs at a tree, and I asked why she'd moved to the sticks.

She told me about Ohio, about going when her husband Toby got a tenure track job. “I had to give up on my own PhD — for Columbus, of all places.” She’d planned on finishing her degree in Ann Arbor and driving between the two. “But it felt like too much. The first time I tried to go, it was snowing, and I just couldn’t do it.”

I told her I understood but wondered how she could give up on something that mattered so much to her because of some bad weather.

The snow was so heavy, the weight of it had saplings bent double. I shook the first one and announced they needed saving. We both ran and brushed the snow off the trees, flinging it in the air and down our shirts. Dana laughed and neither of us thought about the sign, the winter hiking essentials, and how we weren’t supposed to wear cotton. Instead we tried to keep track of the trees we saved, and that slowed us down more, that and the snow getting deeper the higher we climbed. She didn’t say anything about how there were always early wet snows and still the trees survived, that we just weren’t there to see.

“You know,” Dana jerked a tree in her hand, “Toby, just wouldn’t do this, all he wants when he’s back is to sleep – or read, and it’s like I have this weekend husband commuting from a teaching gig in the city. Of course he’s at a conference in Montreal now.” She held out her hands in mock surrender. It seemed as if she’d been waiting for this moment to confide in me – as if she was as desperate for companionship as I – only she needed to talk about her husband

and me about my writing. But I didn't. I felt the words well up, I could imagine them in my head, how I'd start by saying that I really wanted a reader. Instead I found myself nodding when she said, "Of course when he comes home the house is always clean. With six animals it's a daily job. And could he be grateful? No."

I murmured, yeah, of course, though I wasn't sure I agreed. I didn't even really know Toby. He was a poet, teaching college in Brooklyn now. "Thirteenth grade," he'd said the one time we'd met. I was at the house for the inspection and he'd joked about his remedial English class in the state system.

"His whole idea of cooking is ordering Chinese." She kicked at the snow in front of her.

I wanted to join in and say... what? Tell her I was jealous of Justin's success? Or that I hated how shy he was? Instead I offered up my parents.

"My mom thinks my dad can't do anything either, but she never even gives him a chance to fail. My shrink says she complains because she just needs someone to listen." Dana looked down and pulled off a mitten.

"Isn't it a glorious day?" she said, and I wondered if she was changing the subject.

At the top of the ridge there were no footprints in the slush in either direction. Deer tracks crossed the trail in places, some prints that looked like dog too but had to be coyote, and as we continued on the path, there were bear markings. I wondered how long they'd

been there and assumed they were fresh. If they'd been old, the outlines would have melted into a blur.

Dana didn't notice or if she did, didn't say anything. She walked quietly along the ridgeline with views through the trees, and the sky was so blue, it was as if we could see the outer atmosphere. I was still waiting for a moment to mention my writing, but I couldn't break the silence not till she suggested lunch. I brushed the snow off a boulder and spread on top the two A&P bags that had held our sandwiches. As we ate, I stared in the distance at the mountains and a farm hidden in a valley. The sun looked to be dropping already. I asked which way was west.

Dana shrugged and said she wasn't sure. From where I sat, slightly above her on the rock I noticed the gray roots of her hair. She pointed in the opposite direction.

"It's that way. You can't see the reservoir, and that's west of us. Definitely." It was a relief, but neither of us wore a watch or realized it had gone two already. Our assumptions about time were all wrong because of the clocks' changing. I thought it was noon at the latest, though I couldn't be this hungry so early. I didn't say anything though, just offered Dana some M&Ms.

"I don't do sugar, just wine." She waved like a bored starlet and I told her I had to take a picture of her, just like that. In the shot it looked like she was smiling though it was hard to tell. She was dark against the bright blue sky.

When we started again, Dana said her shirt was still wet, her legs cold and her calves cramping. The water had wicked up the denim

and darkened her jeans almost to the knees. Instead of offering to turn around, I suggested looking at the map. I held it out for us to examine together. Later, I'd remember the way the map felt in my hands, the paper soft like fabric even though it was waterproof, and I'd regret not turning back, just as in another light I'd have heard what the hunter said as a warning.

On the way down from the ridge Dana told me how she got to Marysville. She didn't mention the affair she'd had with a professor, a writer in Columbus. Instead I'd piece that together during the hike, and she talked about the string of homes behind her, her place in Ohio, a miserable apartment back in Brooklyn, where she'd felt isolated after September 11th and announced to Toby that they had to leave the city. They'd moved first to Kingston and that being lonely too, soon to Marysville. While her loneliness matched mine, I also thought about all those houses and calculated that it couldn't have been more than two years in each. I watched her mouth, the lines along it as she described the pool in Ohio, the snake she'd found in it once and wondered what she was running from. I decided to talk to her about my writing. That was really the reason I moved, wasn't it? If I was honest with myself.

The words came out so full of longing I didn't even sound normal. I told her how excited I was she was my neighbor. How much I wanted a friend, someone to share work with, someone struggling too. But I couldn't know that Dana didn't want to hear this. She'd told Toby she'd write in the country, that all she'd needed

was the time and space. Only she'd found herself pacing the house and unable to focus, so she took the job at the gallery and didn't want to get involved with my creative struggles.

"I just can't engage anymore with that kind of pain. The whole thing of trying to write, hoping to be.... Very adolescent," she said.

I focused on the ground, at the rocks we had to climb down and the soggy leaves trapped in the crevices. A loose stone echoed as it fell. The sound reverberated with my own anxiety, and I got out a pole so I wouldn't lose my balance on the steep path.

From the bottom I watched Dana descend. She was hunched over, to keep her center of gravity low. Her hands and face were clenched in concentration. I wanted to talk about Justin, his collectors and dealers, and the waiting list for his work as if his success would protect me. Only before I could, she stumbled.

Her arms cartwheeled out from her, her right hand flung towards a boulder to break her fall. Her mouth was open, as if about to yell as I ran towards her. I helped her up and when she was standing, asked if she was okay, if she wanted a pole. She brushed her hands together no doubt to get the ice off, but the gesture seemed designed to dismiss me.

"I'm sure I'm faster without that thing."

She took it anyway. I extended it and said if it weren't the right height I'd fix it.

"How would I know the right height?" She stabbed at some moss with the sharp tip.

The trail plunged until it reached Ploutz Road, a dirt track that dead-ended in the woods. The air smelled sweet of rotting leaves and pine needles and the ground was wet.

I suggested trying to hitchhike and said, “I’m sure if we walk down the road, we’ll get a ride.” Dana didn’t respond and I asked if her hip still hurt.

“It’s fine. We have to be near the end.” A small muscle in her cheek throbbed, and I pretended not to hear her say under her breath how she’d wished we’d turned back before lunch – or after the hunter.

“Yeah, and who knows how long it’ll take us to find a car?” My voice curled up, and Dana looked down as if she was studying the Christmas fern that remained green despite the cold. She turned to me and smiled.

“You know, I taught in Columbus at Ohio State, creative writing and intro comp, and this girl, a junior, wrote about me. In her story I was having an affair with someone else in the department, Jack, Jack Tilton.” She paused while I registered the name. He’d been nominated for a few book awards a decade ago.

“He was teaching there, so she had us having an affair. Oh, we’d ride around in his pickup and meet secretly at his place, she said. As if she could know, as if she could assume my life. So I called her into my office and said, ‘Look around, you’ve never been to office hours, never taken a step in here the entire semester. You got the details all wrong, honey. Now don’t you go and try to steal my life again.’”

Dana looked at me as if I and the girl, or at least my image of her in a baggy OSU sweatshirt and tight jeans, were one and the same.

“You see, I don’t take well to people appropriating my territory.” She seemed to study my face, and it was clear she meant this as a warning even if she didn’t recognize it as such. In that moment, though, I could see the story I needed to write – not about Dana and this man or her student but about the two of us. She’d be jealous and disillusioned by me, her new neighbor who was so similar it was ghostly. We’d both be involved in art and writing. Yes, I could see it. I’d write it from her point of view. It would be perfect.

The sun was just above the brow of the hill, and silver light raked over the trunks of trees as we climbed up. It would disappear soon. At the top it would be okay, but the sun was setting, and there was no question now which way was west. Dana seemed untroubled though, glancing down as if absorbed in her own thoughts.

“Dana, it’s getting late. We’ve got to get out of here. We need to run.”

“Stop being so dramatic.” She shook her head with disgust and plucked a twig from her mitten.

I marched ahead and looked back, wondered what I ever saw in this woman dawdling as she stopped to adjust her pole. It was as if she was going slowly just to make a point. As we started down the hill, the light faded. The color drained from everything.

“Look, were not even near the end, the path has a steep descent where it zigzags down. We need to try and make it out.”

“Okay, okay, whatever you say.” Despite her exasperated tone, she looked relieved.

We both ran. She had on boots like sneakers with no ankle protection but a beefed up sole, and the path was rocky. I knew if she fell, she could twist her ankle, maybe even break it. Still we sprinted, panting, and my backpack chafed against my lower back. Dana slowed and I told her to hurry up.

“But we need to make a shelter, a bivvy or whatever they call it. We need a plan.” Her words were breathless and choppy.

“Yeah, to get out of here. We need to keep going.”

In the last moments of waning light she stopped and stood there. Said she couldn’t see the markers anymore. She closed her eyes for a dramatically long time and rubbed her brow. “You can’t kill me, I cannot die out here. My death will be on your hands. And I just wanted to do something nice. Brunch would have suited me fine.”

I didn’t respond, just said quietly, “Do you think the hunter will check the registration log, to see if we signed out?” I didn’t think she’d heard.

“He won’t even consider it – all he wants is his kill. And to think you liked him. That should have clued me in. I should have turned around right there and then. My loss, I guess.” She laughed for a second and sobbed. “I am going to die here in the cold and wind. Alone.”

I could barely make out the trail markers. They were no longer red just gray in the twilight, but if I squinted I could see them. It was too dark to run, so we walked slowly till one came into view. I

wondered about Justin. I was cold, wearing two damp t-shirts and a fleece. I tried to walk with my hands in my pockets, but that only made me less stable. How long would it take him to realize I was lost? I remembered the day we got married at a friend's house in Los Feliz by the pool. At the party after in Chinatown, I'd worn a red dress and purple patent-leather heels. My mother got drunk and upbraided my father for his toast.

Soon it was too dark to see the markers or path no matter how much I squinted. Dana panicked and I walked ahead feeling each tree for the two-inch disk that would say we were going the right way. When I found one, I'd talk Dana to where I stood, guiding her with my voice and I'd leave her clinging to the tree while I tried to find the next. It wasn't long until there was no next one. I'd walked what – twenty, thirty feet, I couldn't even judge the distance anymore. I groped each tree. I thought about how soft the moss was on one and how I'd heard as a kid about the Underground Railroad, that the moss grew on the north side of trees and slaves used it to guide them. I wondered if it worked, if we could navigate that way.

We had a quarter bottle of water left, four, maybe six ounces, and one packet of M&Ms I'd taken from the bags of Halloween candy. I was hungry. Dana must have been too, but I knew I had to save them. If we were still here at six AM, we'd need the sugar then.

I crossed a small stream and suggested following it down. Had it not snowed that week the creek would have been dry and even now it was barely a trickle. "It has to join that brook we cross to reach the

road,” I said, only Dana protested, insisted there was a reason the path had switchbacks.

“Who knows what’s down there, rocks or boulders? If it were passable it would go straight.... Oh god,” she said after a long pause. She clutched her stomach and coughed. I could just make out her hunched form as she retched a few feet away. There was no moon that night, only ambient light from the stars.

I offered her the water, and she said she’d get some from the stream instead. Her voice was imperious, haughty even after throwing up, haughty in the face of all this. She wiped her mouth on her sleeve when she stood up and demanded my camera.

“We can use it to see the map, and maybe the trail.” I had to agree it was a good idea.

She held the map and I took the pictures. I wondered if she too found the paper soft, surprising, but didn’t ask, just said, “Look I’ll go first, I’ll lead. It’ll be fine.”

“Fine? You’re going to take us off the trail into god-knows-what, and you’re saying it’s fine?”

I couldn’t admit how frightened I was; I just said, “Give me your hand.”

She did too, didn’t put up any more struggle, even gave me a mitten to wear. I wondered if that little gesture of intimacy could make up for everything else. Her skin felt dry like paper against my fingers, and her bones were so fine they made me think of a tiny animal – and the arcing curve of the hunter’s bow. I could feel her knuckles and wondered about the joints. I didn’t remember what her

hands looked like, but thought of the base communion in trying to save our lives, walking in the dark, lost, terrified. My mouth tasted of fear.

I speared the ground in front of me with the pole and described each thing I found, the stumps, roots and rocks. “There’s a stone here and a tree down and another just past that. To your right’s a rock. Don’t step on it, it’s loose.” Repeating each detail was calming. My voice was level as if clawing our way down the side of a mountain was normal.

The strategy was fine for the deciduous trees, which had lost their leaves. The thin starlight let me see a foot or so in front of me, but when we came to the stands of pines, even the stars were blotted out, and the low boughs, the bare branches at the base of the trees, scratched my face. I held Dana’s hand tighter and wondered if we’d survive. A pile of rocks I hadn’t noticed slid out from under me, and I nearly fell, but caught my weight on the pole. My throat hurt with the tension and the cold air burned my nostrils. I wondered how long it would take someone to find my body here and remembered that hypothermia was supposed to be peaceful. It felt like falling asleep when you died.

“It’s below freezing. We need to make a plan!” Dana yelled about shelter and help and her husband. I told her to shut up and apologized quickly.

“What about the animals – coyotes, bears? What about them? I’ve heard coyotes hunt deer now, in packs with a pincer action

around them. I just think –” She stopped as if trying to consider what she thought. “I need to sit a second.”

I was relieved. I’d wanted to sit but was too scared to suggest it. She settled on a damp tree trunk and sobbed, no tears, just violent dry huffs.

“Jack was a hunter.”

I realized what she was saying, the small admission in her words, and reached for her shoulder.

“Don’t fucking touch me!”

“Okay, okay.”

“He was so tough. He smoked and drank whiskey – and was a total shit. I loved him.”

I nodded though she couldn’t see me. I felt sad and sorry and thought I knew why she’d left Ohio and ranted about the hunter earlier. I wanted to tell her I understood, and when she stood up again, I took back her hand. She didn’t fight me. I remembered when I’d met Toby he was driving a pickup. I could picture Dana insisting he get it as if it could bring her closer to Jack. I wondered if Toby knew and described the branches at my feet. Dana interrupted me.

“Water, can you hear it? It’s the brook. We’re getting closer.” We both stood still and listened. It sounded like a fan or an engine from where we were. When we reached the edge, I asked if we should walk upstream to find the bridge.

“Yeah, we’ve come this far to fall on an outcropping of rocks?” Sarcasm cut through each word.

“What do you think we should do then?” I turned to her but no doubt she couldn’t see my disgust. My sympathy for her was gone.

“I don’t know, how am I supposed to know? You brought me here.”

I slapped her. “Can you just be quiet?” The sound of the stream seemed to echo in the dark, and she held her hand to her cheek where I’d hit her.

“Well, I’m crossing. You can stand there and make your own decisions.”

I squatted down at the edge, on a rock that seesawed under my weight. I got out the camera to take a picture so I could see how deep the water was. The flash lit the streambed, and the first shot reflected off the bottom but gave no sense of depth, the next captured the white water on top, and the third was only a smoky blur.

“Let me try.” She ripped away the camera.

It fell in the water and I jerked around to face her. “I don’t believe you. Fuck it, I’m going across.”

“Wait, I’m coming too.”

The water was shockingly cold, it seeped over the top of my boots, all the way up to my knees. The current was stronger than I’d expected, and I slid on a rock but hauled myself out. I didn’t consider the danger, not until I was on the other side. If I’d realized, maybe I’d have stayed there all night.

“Grab onto my pole,” I said and thought about letting her fall in. I didn’t tell her if she slipped, there was no way to see her or save

her. Her arms flailed above her head, and as I hoisted her out, headlights appeared on the road above.

She scrambled onto the bank and up to the road. She waved her one pole in the air, and the red taillights glowed as the truck drove past. It never even saw us. Illuminated in the headlights though was the bridge. I laughed at what was lost, what might have been. My wet feet squished in the waterlogged boots. We walked in silence maybe a half-mile more looking for her car. Inside, I apologized for hitting her. I handed her a bag of Halloween candy. She stared at it, sniffed in disgust and turned on the ignition.

Over the next few months Dana turned into a specter of herself. She gained weight and let her hair go gray with a line halfway down her head where her natural color met the fading red dye as if that marked the moment of her change. I started to assume her friends and heard she got fired from the gallery. One week there was an ad in the local paper for her replacement. Someone suggested I apply, said it'd be a good way to meet people, but I couldn't do it.

I'd told myself her deterioration wasn't my fault and wrapped myself tight in self justification, only I kept returning to the moment when I'd slapped her and she'd confessed about Jack. I wanted to change those things, to take them back. Instead I moved my office to the other side of the house so I wouldn't have to see her. At night when I stood in the kitchen, I'd see her turn on a light and watch her silhouetted in the window and could feel her haunting me. It got worse a few months later when I stopped seeing the lights at all.

I ran into Toby one Sunday at the A&P. “How are you. And – how’s Dana? Tell her I asked about her,” I said, but he was already gone, pushing his cart up the aisle with its stained linoleum floors.

A few days later I went to apologize. I couldn’t take it any longer. I took some flowers from my garden, tulips and daffodils that were in bloom, and knocked at her door. No one answered. I left the bouquet there on the porch and watched over the next week as the petals fell off the tulips and the daffodils shriveled and turned brown.