

Prologue

She had been sitting on a small folding stool for almost an hour, and now her back was seizing up. That was one of the things she missed the most: a real chair. But a chair wouldn't fit. She struggled to her feet and, holding the tent pole for balance, bent at the waist to stretch her muscles. Last week, one of the guys helped her lash the tent to the shipping pallet on which it sat. Since then, she hadn't worried that the tent would blow over in the winds, which she had seen happen. As your world gets smaller, she thought, small things become bigger.

She couldn't make up her mind whether to do it. For the longest while, she stared at the aluminum foil cigarette wrapper inside the clear baggie. She reached a decision. Rummaging through the clothing and boxes of crackers and water jugs scattered around the tent, she found her jacket under an old blanket.

The rain had started some time ago, plopping on the roof and on the bags and lawn furniture and charcoal grills and the fifty-five gallon drum that served as a fire pit out near the center of the clearing. Drops had started to soak through the seams of her roof; soon they would begin to drop steadily onto her things.

She slid on her jacket and carefully sealed the plastic zipper on the baggie. The bulge inside the foil wrapper felt like three or four good-sized hits. Crouching, she made her way over to the flap. She emerged from the tent and zipped up the flap.

The guys who had been sitting in the lawn chairs around the drum had left a few minutes ago. The fire in the drum, already hissing in the drizzle, would last only a few more minutes.

Off to the right, the lights from the trailer park illuminated the sky. Three of the trailers shone brightly, their residents not bothering to hide the reflections of the grow lights off the foil-covered walls. Off to the left was blackness. She stepped off her pallet, her feet sinking slightly into the damp dirt.

The clearing was a rough circle about thirty yards in diameter. Lights bled from four of the seven tents and makeshift huts of wood, sheet metal, and tarps that ringed the clearing. She walked slowly and deliberately past the plastic buckets, old tires, toys, shopping carts, and bikes, past the hissing drum and the weather-worn redwood picnic table. The plastic bags hanging from branches on the spruce, pine, and junipers glistened in the rain. Wet laundry hung from a rope

clothesline that spanned two thick branches outside a tent.

She approached Lake's tent, which was as small as hers. She didn't know how he maneuvered inside; he was a few inches over six feet tall. The rain had already darkened the stained, threadbare quilt stuffed between the roof of the blue nylon tent and the bowed aluminum poles that held it upright. His tent sat on the bare ground; soon the floor would be wet through.

She unzipped the flap, crouched, and entered the tent. She tried to breathe through her mouth until she became acclimated to the stench of the rancid foods, the soiled clothing, and his body odor.

"Hey," she said. A slender black man in his late twenties, he lay on the wadded-up blankets and foam padding that served as his bed. His head and feet distended the sides of his tent. His hair was uncut, with small grey tufts along the temples and in his beard. He wore a ragged gym-grey sweatshirt over a black T-shirt, navy sweatpants, and mismatched tube socks. He lifted his head slightly to see who had entered the tent. She lowered herself onto the overturned plastic bucket that served as a chair, then held up the baggie and smiled.

"What the fuck are you doing?" He raised up his trunk and leaned on an elbow. "I told you I don't have no money."

She shrugged. "Maybe I'm not asking you for no money."

He looked wary. "Yeah, well, that'd be the first time."

She started to lift herself off the plastic bucket. "If you don't want any, I'll find someone else."

He smiled. "No, no, baby, that's not what I'm saying." His tone was gentle. "That's not it, at all."

She returned his smile. "I didn't think so."

"You wanna close up the flap?"

She stood up halfway, grabbed the tent pole for balance, and duck-walked over to the flap to zip it up. When she turned back to him, he was sitting up, cross-legged. He had removed his sweatshirt. In his hand were a tiny spoon, a butane lighter, and a syringe. He pointed to the baggie. "You just get this?"

She frowned and shook her head. "Had it a while." She opened the baggie and removed the foil wrapper. She unfolded the wrapper and tapped the grey powder into the spoon, then leaned over and dribbled saliva onto it.

He lit the butane lighter and held the flame under the spoon. Almost instantly, it began to bubble and turn a darker grey. He loaded the drug into the syringe and slid the needle into the flap of skin between the index finger and middle finger of his left hand. His blood snaked into the syringe. Then, with a steady motion, he pushed the handle down. Within seconds, his eyes clouded, his eyelids drooped, and the syringe slipped out of his hand.

“This is good shit.” His voice was low and slurred. He looked at her, confused that she was on her knees, next to him, staring at him. “Ain’t you gonna do any, baby?”

“Maybe I will. Just a little.”

He smiled. “That’s it. Take a little pop, and we’ll see if we can get something going. I ain’t got any money right at the moment,” he said, “but you know I’m good for it.”

“I know that. I know you’re good for it.”

She picked up the syringe and held it up to the lantern hanging from a nail in the pole. There was still some hit mixed in with his blood. She pulled up the right leg of her sweatpants and raised the syringe to her calf. Pretending to shoot a little into the muscle, she closed her eyes and made a low moaning sound, as if she were feeling the warmth. She dropped the syringe and crawled over to him.

He had collapsed back onto the dirty foam pad. He rocked to one side, then the other, pulling his sweatpants down in small, slow movements. He wore no underwear.

She removed her jacket and pulled up her sweatshirt and her T-shirt, exposing her breasts. Then she lowered her trunk toward his face. But his eyes, half-closed, did not focus, and his head did not move.

Lowering her T-shirt and sweatshirt, she raised her trunk. She glanced at his groin and saw that his penis was flaccid. She put her ear to his mouth to listen for his breathing, straining to hear it over the tapping of the rain on the tent and the breeze rustling the leaves and the brush. He was already gone or soon would be.

Suddenly, fatigue swept over her. She lay down next to him, snuggling close to get onto the foam padding. Shivering in the cool night air, she tried to grasp some bedding to pull up over herself, but there wasn’t enough. She didn’t have the strength to move him even an inch to free up a tattered blanket. In seconds, she fell asleep, snuggled against his still-warm body.

Sometime later, she heard a distant voice outside the tent. “Lake, we’re going into town in the morning. You want to come?”

Trying to crawl back into consciousness, she saw a man's face shadowed against the tent flap. The zipper started to move, and the face came into view. "Sorry, man, didn't know you had company." The mouth twisted into a smile and then disappeared. The zipper on the flap closed.

Lake was motionless. She touched his cheek, which had already begun to cool. She picked up the syringe lying next to him on the quilt. She held it up to the lamp and thought for a moment. She pulled up the leg of her sweatpants, bent her knee, and raised the syringe to her calf. This time, she inserted the needle into the muscle and squeezed the handle, just a little. After a few seconds, the warmth began to spread through her body. As she lay back down, her fingers relaxed, and the syringe slipped out of her hand. She drifted off to a dreamless sleep, far away from the still body next to her. She did not feel the cold drops that had begun to drip onto her right hip from a pinhole in the roof of the putrid nylon tent.