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TheAmericano

I wanted nothing more than to be back at home huddled into my couch clutching the TV remote like a handful of rosary beads. Every night that blessed plastic rectangle transported me to any entertaining delusion I chose at the mere click of a button. But tonight I was standing in freezing mud, could feel it seeping through the seams of my boots. The piercing cold had penetrated my three layers within a few seconds of getting out of the car. I'd never seen darkness like this— as if my eyes weren't open. I blinked, searching for any trace of light under the canopy of redwoods. The trees absorbed sound, absorbed light. I panicked and flailed my arms in front of me. Gary switched on a Maglite.

"Chill, Margo." He touched my elbow. "Get a grip. It's just a bunch of trees."

I'd signed up to bring food to the homeless at a fundraiser I'd attended last month with an artist friend-slash-hopeful-love-interest. I'd adored him for years, but could never tell if the spark was only on my part. I'd been trying to go with the flow and impress him that day, but he'd run off with some wench at the bruschetta booth. It had hurt me more than I wanted to admit. Now I was trying to redirect my wounded heart into doing something altruistic.

So here I was— forty, liberal, single, a Californian since my family moved here when I started high school. Back then, I'd aspired to be a hippie, but had never quite achieved it. Now I owned a local art gallery. My social activist sister, who *had* achieved hippiehood, called me "privileged" the other day. Was I? It's not like everything had been handed to me on a silver platter. I'd worked damn hard. I'd invested in real estate at the right time. The word "privileged" rankled. Wouldn't anyone— white, black, brown, take what was offered to them? Was that wrong? Should I not do that?

That tweak of conscience had brought me to this frigid spot beside Gary, a volunteer coordinator, at the edge of a state forest in northern California. It was mid-January at 6:30 pm. We'd got a late start picking up the food and it was already midnight dark under the redwoods. Gary's chocolate brown skin and dark clothing made him hard to see. He had dreadlocks down to his waist and I was shocked to see he was wearing shorts. I zipped my jacket up to my chin and shivered.

"We're bringing soup and blankets to a group of locals who've made a tent camp in there," Gary said. He must have pointed into the dark void. "A bunch of folks were evicted from a building that's coming down."

I knew the rest of the story. A new frozen yogurt shoppe and a mini-mart where tourists could buy Red Bulls and sunscreen was the compelling reason for displacing twenty-seven people. I stomped my feet to restore circulation and tried to make contact with the whites of Gary's eyes. "Absolutely," I said. My voice sounded lost in the wild chill.

He handed me a stack of blankets crocheted by a group of seniors called Warm Blessings, which sounded hokey, but I was grateful for the

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insulation as we trudged forward on the trail. I focused on the flash of Gary's Adidas in front of me, concentrating on where he placed his feet. He pointed a flashlight at the trail in front of him, but the forest absorbed its beam as if it devoured light for breakfast.

"Only ten more minutes," he said. We'd only been walking for five.

The silence was ominous; more than just the absence of sound, it was a vacuum of sound. We stopped when Gary dropped the flashlight, which blinked off. My blanket pile collided with his back. After he picked up the Maglite, he didn't switch it back on right away. We stood there for a moment listening to nothing, dwarfed by trees that towered two hundred feet above us. I could smell the dull marijuana scent that clung to Gary's clothes. Something rustled in the brush and made a breathy hiss. I had a moment. *What the hell was I doing?*—heading deeper and deeper into the woods with this unwashed stranger? I hadn't told anyone where I was going tonight, had left no breadcrumbs behind.

"Better keep going," Gary said.

I looked back the way we'd come and saw only yawning darkness. My only option was to train my eyes on Gary's shoes and follow. At last, we saw a pinprick of light between the trees.

"Who is it?" a voice growled from that direction.

"It's Gary! We brought hot soup!"

I heard a relieved mumble from the group as we approached. Someone was playing the guitar badly. A cluster of cheap nylon tents sagged in a clearing. Thirty or forty people including some kids sat hunched in front of a weak fire.

"If it ain't Grungy Gary," said a fat guy in a hoodie. "Good to see you, man. Can't get a good fire going, too wet out here."

"*Grungy Gary?*" I whispered to Gary.

"Not sure where the nickname came from." Gary tweaked a smile. "Hey," he called to the group, "this here's Margo, she's helping out tonight."

A couple of women near me nodded but avoided eye contact. I stepped forward and held out a blanket crocheted with garish purple daisies. Jeez. I felt like such a Karen. These women looked like they needed a whole lot more than a crocheted blanket.

"We ain't cold," one of them said. "Give 'em to the kids."

Well, clearly they were *cold*. I was *freezing*. I withdrew my hand. "Uh, okay," I said. "Gary's passing out soup."

"We already ate," the other one said.

My eyes sought out Gary as he worked the crowd passing out cups of soup. He gestured to me with a wave of his wrist, encouraging me to mingle. I headed toward a woman and a little girl leaning against a tree. The woman looked young, but hollowed out. She couldn't be more than nineteen. How could someone this young be destroyed by life already?

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"Would you like a blanket?" I tried.

"Look, Mommy, purple!" the little girl said. But instead of taking it, she looked at her mom with a hesitant wince that broke my heart. "My favorite color..." the child's voice trailed.

"What do you say," the young woman said with a nicotine growl.

"Please?" the girl whispered.

"Fine, take it." The little girl reached out and took the blanket with arms as thin as willow twigs. "WHAT DO YOU SAY!" the mom spat out again. I leaned away.

"Thank you?" the girl whispered. When she looked up her eyes were full of tears.

"You're welcome, sweetie, stay warm." I said. My hands were shaking. I was trying very hard not to take it personally. These people were pissed. They'd been kicked out of their homes and the world was offering them a cup of soup and a blanket. A bunch of kids ran out of the darkness and circled me.

"Can we have blankets?"

"Sure." I held one out. Then they were all grabbing until the pile was gone, running off and howling, flapping the blankets in the air like trophies of war. I wrapped my arms around my waist, wondering if this was what the ladies from Warm Blessings had envisioned. I saw Gary sitting beside the guitar player, laughing and smoking a joint. He was gonna hang out and party? I felt out of my element. To make matters worse, I had to pee. My bladder wouldn't wait through Gary's joint and that slow walk back to the porta-potties in the parking lot. I turned around and headed into the woods.

Within ten paces I was swallowed by darkness. My foot snagged a root. I tripped onto the forest floor and let out a muffled whine and laid there, defeated, inhaling the damp moss smell. A squirming insect crawled onto my face. I swatted it away, then pushed myself up to a squatting position and pulled down my pants to pee.

I went rigid when a hand clamped over my mouth and a forearm locked against my neck. My scream muffled into his palm.

"Shut up!" a man's voice hissed. My pants were still down. Urine trickled down my leg. "Pull up your pants," he said. "You're coming with me." He dragged me down an overgrown trail he must have been familiar with. I could make out nothing. His hand still covered my mouth, but his grip felt almost apologetic. His fingers smelled of cheap soap. A few minutes later he thrust me into a hollow formed out of the base of a giant redwood.

"Listen, I'm not gonna hurt you," he said, kneeling us in the dirt. "Don't scream, okay? I just want to talk to you." He took his hand from my mouth and switched on a Coleman lantern that hung from a snag in the wall. I didn't know whether to call out or not. If I did, would he snap? Maybe he had a weapon. A ratty sleeping bag and some charred pots covered the ground. It looked like he'd been there awhile. He wasn't part of the other group. Catching my breath, I swiped the hair from my eyes and

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looked at the man. He was brown-skinned, maybe Mexican, with an intelligent face— an expressive mouth and clear, honest eyes that looked at me through scratched designer eyeglasses. His grimy hair was combed. But the oddest thing was, he looked familiar; vaguely, distantly familiar.

"I just need some money," he said. "I'm no criminal. I just need some money. *Please.*"

I took a shaky breath. My gut instinct told me he wasn't dangerous, more like desperate and unspeakably sad. It seemed better to stay calm and go along with whatever was happening than to run off screaming hysterically into the tangled woods. "I don't have any money with me," I said. "I'm just out here bringing soup to the tent camp. I don't have any money, I have nothing with me." I absurdly reached my jittery hands into the pockets of my jacket and turned them inside out. "I left my watch at home. My phone's in the car."

He rubbed a hand down his face, then let it drop to his lap. "I am such a *fuck-up!* I can't even find the right person to rob." He laughed in a disturbed, fatalistic way, then became quiet. "Hey, I'm sorry I scared you. I've never done this before. It was a stupid idea. I'm just...really hungry. I haven't eaten in four days. You'd be amazed what hunger will drive you to do. Don't give me away, okay?"

"Why don't you come get some soup?" I figured it was a way to get back to the camp.

He scoffed at that. "We have territories out here. There are homeless people all over these woods. Your group doesn't know I'm here. If they did, they'd force me out and who knows what else. Some of those folks are pretty wrecked from meth."

They had *territories*? I looked around his tree cave. A paperback book was splayed on the floor next to the guy's sleeping bag— John Muir's *Wilderness Essays*. Its cover was familiar. I'd read that book in high school. I'd loved the old-fashioned tone of it, the majesty of it. So did my first boyfriend, Fernando. We'd taken turns reading it out loud to each other lying head to head on my parents' nubby couch back in the '90s. I pivoted my eyes back to him. *No way. No. Fucking. Way.*

"Fernando?" It was him. It was him.

His head snapped up. "How do you know my name?"

"It's Margo," I said meekly. I touched his knee. He jerked away.

He squinted, grabbed the lantern and held it closer to my face. The light threw looming shadows of our heads against the burl walls. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. He hung his head. I was being held hostage by my boyfriend of twenty-five years ago inside a redwood tree and I didn't know what to do. When he looked up, his eyes pooled with tears.

"Margo? Oh, God! *Margo?*" His shoulders shook. His face crumbled. "I'm so sorry I did this to you."

My fear lifted. I knew this guy. I had *loved* this guy. To be honest, no other man had ever quite measured up. "What happened, Nando?" I

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asked gently. "How'd you end up here?" He just cried harder. He'd been the valedictorian of the Class of 2000, had received a college scholarship to Cal Poly, I recalled. He'd wanted to major in Forestry. But his father had died and his mother had fallen ill the year we graduated. I'd gone off to college and lost track of him after that.

"God, Margo." His dirty finger tapped the sole of my boot. "Do you have any idea how much I loved you back then?" His face went soft. "You were my first."

I felt my cheeks flush. "What happened to you?" I whispered again.

He shifted. His jaw twitched. "My dad died back in 2000 and then my mom got cancer. I had to delay school to take care of her." He winced and scratched his forehead. "I guess I never told you my parents were undocumented. We had no health insurance, so our savings got wiped out. After Mom died, I tried to get back into Cal Poly but my scholarship had expired. I got a job building houses. I did that for years until I injured my back and got hooked on pain pills. Then a few years ago, I got a woman pregnant I slept with once. She gets half my paycheck for child support. I was behind on payments and living in my car when her brothers beat me half-dead and stole my car. I've been living out here for three months." It was a quick, shameful speech. "I eat from the garbage cans." His voice sounded strangled.

"But...but can't you go to your family for help?" I asked. "How could this be your only option?"

He looked outside where a light rain pattered the soft forest humus. "You don't get it, do you? My other family—they're all in Mexico, struggling with their own lives. I was supposed to be the Golden Child, you know? The *Americano*. They think I own a thriving construction business. I can't go begging to them."

"What about your friends?" I felt ashamed asking it; I had been his friend.

"I screwed over a lot of people when I was an addict. I owe them money too. A lot. I burned all those bridges." His eyes dropped to the packed dirt. "I know one guy is looking for me."

It was sinking in what a perfect storm of disaster had descended on him. "But you're a smart guy, an educated guy..."

He heaved a sigh. "As far as the world is concerned, I'm just a poor Mexican man with a high school diploma. A deadbeat dad. I'm an American citizen because I was born here, but that doesn't get me much but the right to pay income taxes... which they're after me for too."

"But what's your plan?" I pressed, incredulous. "I mean..."

"There's no *plan*, Margo! I needed a place to hide. I'm just staying alive. Waiting for something, I guess...."

Help. I finished the sentence in my mind. He was waiting for *help*. Footsteps and scattered flashlight beams broke the forest hush. I heard Gary's distressed voice calling through the trees. "Nando, you're coming with me," I said.

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I saw the pride in his eyes as the flashlight beams crisscrossed his face.

I softened my voice. *"Please come with me!"* In that moment, I got it. How a life could veer off course by a string of bad luck or bad choices or prejudice or addiction, and have too many doors closed on it to reverse direction. All the breaks I'd passively accepted in my life, taken for granted, expected even... *that* was privilege.

"C'mon, let's get out of here," I said with a toss of my head, like we were two strangers in some seedy bar. He smiled that dimpled half-smile I remembered meaning yes.

"You sure?" he asked. "I tried to rob you."

"You're a lousy criminal." I stuck my head outside. "It's okay, Gary!" I shouted. "I'm taking a pee! I've got a flashlight. I'll meet you back at the car!"

"Jesus, Margo, you scared the shit out of me!" Gary's voice called through the trees. "I'll wait for you by the trail, okay? Careful of the poison oak!"

Fernando and I gathered up his possessions and crawled outside. He stood and faced the tree where he'd hidden like some woodland creature, hibernating, waiting for winter to pass. He laid his hand on the shaggy bark and muttered something in Spanish. My heart rose to my throat. It was tragic and poignant and awful how Fernando had retreated to the womb of this giant redwood as his last refuge. This thousand-year-old forest had brought us both to our knees. In a way, we were just two creatures stumbling around in the dark trying to survive, fighting against all odds to hold our hearts open. That's all any of us are, really.

We walked together into the night.