

HELENE LITTMANN / Small Fires

The fear came upon Miranda midway through the winter afternoon, a closed-in silent silvery day, fir and cedar greenish-black against a white sky. The fear, Miranda had learned, could take many shapes: specific disaster in the here-and-now; panic about the future (where would she go when Louise and Julian finally sold the property?); other people; and swamping guilt for what might be left undone, horses stumbling in barbed wire, or shattering glass up at the main house, locked tight. The ancient horses themselves—hollow-eyed, half-blind, furry and passive as pet rabbits—never scared her, nor did the land itself. And Miranda was never scared of the one thing you'd expect, the disco strobe party lights of the local police lurching down the rutted lane. Miranda and Calvin and Randy had left no path, had never been counted. Nothing led back to her.

Today it was a crackle in the wiring, a flicker, and the shards of a light bulb blowing out with a small pop. Miranda hit the circuit breaker next to the fridge, then stood in sudden dimness unshakably convinced that snakes of blue electric fire were coursing the damp gaps between log walls and jerry-built plywood. She sidled, sniffing, the length of the two darkened rooms, then put on jacket and boots and thrashed through the tall wet dead stalks of things, half garden, half forest clearing, around the foundation of the cabin. Of course nothing was on fire. The fear remained, coiling itself around, looking for something to grab hold of. Miranda locked the door and started to walk.

From the care-taker's cabin, the path led up around a leafless cluster of old fruit trees, and down the lawn past the main house to the ocean. The main house, locked and dead and moss-streaked, was nothing special: wooden, suburban, 1960s era, painted olive green. Louise's father added the sky-lighted painter's studio on the seaward side when he moved to this island twenty years ago, after the divorce. Miranda arrived last year, after he was already hospitalized in Vancouver, and stayed on through the funeral, through the fits and starts of Louise's plans for the property. Summer retreat? Bed and breakfast? Cash windfall? Louise was intermittently sentimental, but in fact the place held for her no childhood memories; her father moved there the year after she left for college.

Today Miranda walked down the lawn past the pocket beach, a strip of gravel at high tide. The cure for fear was movement, one foot in front of the other.

There were sensible, indeed urgent, reasons Miranda was not going to give anyone—not Louise, not Sasha at the health food store in the village by the ferry landing—a full and frank account of the past five years. But her real reluctance went deeper than caution. After all, Miranda didn't distrust Sasha, or even Louise. Neither of them would dial 911. Rather, they'd be impressed, since what Miranda had done with Calvin and Randy only made literal ideas both Sasha and Louise believed in. Sasha once sat down in front of a front-end loader, up a logging road under the branches of towering old-growth spruce. Louise made part of her living writing reports for a PR firm that specialized in getting government grants for eco-friendly small business. But just because of this, they'd want to know the one thing Miranda wasn't prepared to answer: *Why?* Not *why*, as in the politics; they were agreed on that. But *why* as in how you got from here to there, from daily life and its numbing routines to the moment when all past and present exploded in the now of action. Days and weeks of planning funneled down into the ecstasy of the great yellow *whomp* of flame that obliterated front-end loaders, the blunt muzzles of sport utility vehicles on the midnight car lot, half-timbered frames of a half-built forest subdivision.

If anyone had asked Miranda, her answer would have been political. She would have given facts and figures, forest company profits and government connections, statistics on global warming, run-off and desertification. None of this would have been new information to Sasha or Louise. And none of it would have explained the question they'd have wanted answered: *why her, and not me?* How do you step beyond the pale, go underground, take it seriously? Who do you have to be? Insane, or a saint?

Step by step, would be Miranda's reply, if she ever had to answer this question. You see what's wrong, and you try something, and when that doesn't work, you move on to the next thing. If you take it seriously, that's what you do. If you really believe the world is spiraling into collapse, why wouldn't you take the time to fire-bomb a few car lots and subdivisions? Of course, she would have added magnanimously, not everyone's in a position to take direct action. But for those that are...

The weariness would be in trying to explain the obvious to people who just hadn't got there, yet. So this particular conversation was never going to happen.

Walking pushed back the fear, opening a silvery calm in the dull day. Yet *fear* was not altogether the right word. After the first alarm, rather storm surges of anguish and regret, of grief and anger, churned beyond recovery. Useless feelings, not because they didn't point to real events, but because there was nothing you could do with them. Except, as now, put one foot in front of the other on the path along the rocks. Under spindly third-growth firs, the only sound was the *shush* of Miranda's down jacket as her arms swung.

Miranda had always understood her gift as clarity, seeing words and ideas as real and taking them to their logical consequences: *struggle, resistance, global collapse, the military-industrial complex*. These, for Miranda, were concrete entities. To mouth them merely as figures of speech was the worst kind of dishonesty. She never understood what it meant to say things that you didn't believe.

For instance, last summer, on the lawn overlooking the sea. "Ah, the sylvan retreat," Julian had said. "How about an upscale holistic health farm? High colonics? Or fasting holidays? You could charge them double and feed them nothing. Louise, figure you could get a development grant for that?"

"You can do the colonics," Louise said, and laughed.

Miranda had already registered Julian as jittery and vaguely malicious. A trivial and untrustworthy person. Mocking your own side: what was that all about?

You couldn't say Calvin had led her into it, or the reverse. They met in their late twenties, no longer idealistic college drop-outs. Both had done years in protests and grass-roots community groups. And in all those years, nothing had changed, or not fast enough, while the people she knew slid away, some to jobs (rarely good ones), others to marginal lives on disability payments. By the time she met Calvin, Miranda saw clearly that it made little difference to save one tree or even one forest. You had to change the system. You had to *hurt* it. And surely many people lived with that secret knowledge, knowing they were cogs in a wheel, mice in a maze, turning round their days and nights at the service of the machine. Surely all they needed was a spark, a sign that revolt was possible.

Miranda said all this to Calvin on long electric nights in her tiny basement suite. By then, she was living out at the southeast edge of Vancouver, among immigrant families that looked past or through her; she wanted anonymity and cheap rent,

and no longer had any use for the expensive coffee and threadbare community of Commercial Drive or Main Street.

Electric nights, with Calvin's broad, serious brow crinkling up and then flashing open to meet her mind. Calvin supplied pragmatism: the belief and the explanation of how it could be done. They intoxicated each other. You couldn't even call it love (they didn't) because love was too small and weak a word.

There's no greater ecstasy than knowing, in the small hours, that you are absolutely right, intellectually and morally. The false front of the world rolls up and you stare right through the glass into the eyes of the machine. The unbelievers, with their weightless, compromised lives, shrink to broken plastic dolls bobbing in the tidal current.

Many people have access to moments like this, at certain times of their lives: all random details dovetailed for an hour in a seamless grid of reality. But Miranda took things literally. That was her gift. She got up late the next morning, ready to act. And she had Calvin to show her how it's done.

Randy linked them up with the Americans. They drove across the border, three clean-cut kids down for a day's shopping at the Bellingham outlet malls. In a backyard near Portland, they put an Oregon plate on the car and disappeared off the map. When they slipped north again a week later, stopping to pick up a half dozen cut-rate towels as cover, no-one noticed. This they repeated several times.

In the end, Calvin left. That was at the very end, days of fear after the Americans were raided and he thought the FBI was on his trail, when it made wrenching sense for him to board a spring break charter flight to Cancun and disappear into Central America. In the end, no-one was after any of them, but since Calvin never wrote, Miranda could never tell him. That day at the airport, amid the college kids clumsy in parkas and flip-flops, giddy with hopes of package-holiday debauchery, Calvin's eyes were firmly set on the horizon of the future.

Miranda, on the other hand, at a deep unarticulated level, had never felt she would survive into that future. Not that any of the firebombings involved much personal risk; they were too well planned for that. And not that she saw herself going down in a hail of police bullets, or even doing twenty to life in maximum security. What she couldn't see was going back to life inside the machine. The sift of daily life, the weight of history, sins of the past chaining down the future. If you asked Miranda "why," she'd give you a political answer, all the facts marshaled. But in her heart,

she saw herself, she saw the whole world, stepping out of the cogs of time. Not into the future, not even into Calvin's version of the future, which, if he ever got that far south, meant sweeping the Chiapas highlands in the train of Commandante Marcos. Calvin's future was more of the same: it was history, it was cause and effect. And Miranda wanted to get out of that go-round altogether: to step beyond time, into the heart of freedom.

The closest she ever got to that, herself, was the moment when months of planning went up in the golden whomp of flame, the explosion of the possible obliterating the hard lines of what actually existed.

And in the end? Well, in the end, nothing had changed. No widespread revolt. Nothing like that.

Miranda came to earth here, her past silent and the future clouded in. Welfare, and free rent in the caretaker's cabin, and free groceries for clerking two days a week at the health food store.

You couldn't do anything with these storm surges except walk them out, wait them out. Make your mind blank and let them go. Here the trail began to climb, bending away from the rising cliffs, the forest opening up into patches of turf and alder. The hill tugged at Miranda's thighs, raised a gloss of sweat under her clothes, the body asserting itself against the mind. *Let it go, let it go*, she had learned to tell herself over the long summer and fall. The alternative was to collapse, raging and ripping, on the wet turf. Let it go, she told herself now. One foot in front of the other.

By the time she reached the hill-top, the emptiness had come on, the hollowing out. No past and no future, just the present moment, and no mind, either, just the body here and alone in the nothingness of the damp mild air.

And then, a great opening out to the world. She saw details normally hidden: a crumble of orange fungi, garish as dyed cheese in a supermarket; reddish-black withered hips of wild roses; a purple flush in the alder branches that told, distantly, of spring. Out below her, the long fog-horn blast of the ferry echoed, and in a few minutes the flat white boat edged out past the headland. From this height, the water was uniform silver, and Miranda stood watching until the boat was swallowed up in mist.

From the hill-top, the view resembled certain of Louise's father's canvases, still hanging in the sky-lighted studio. Louise gave her a tour last summer. These paintings

were big, six or seven feet long, fog-bound seascapes reduced to wide bands of pearly grey. Miranda rather liked these paintings, though with no covetousness, since she could not imagine treading a world that had room for such cumbersome artifacts. She found his other paintings more disturbing: tall canvases each filled with a nude woman, legs discreetly crossed or tilted to avoid a full-on crotch view. From a distance, these women appeared flesh coloured and blurrily realistic. Up close, Miranda could see they were composed of short, visible brush-strokes in harsh colours: reds and greens, yellows and purples. Which was worse? At a distance, the realistic objectification of pornography; up close, the painting itself revealed as object, dissecting the woman it captured and displayed.

Sex with Calvin, at least in Miranda's reading, had no such objectification, because it had no distance. Sometimes they came together with workaday humour, other times with a rush of need and desire, but always without artifice, two bodies beautiful in their youth and strength and health. The siren chitter-chatter of the glossy magazines, of glassy boutique windows, of primping and fixing and fiddling the outer self, never held much allure for Miranda, and with Calvin any last yearnings that way disappeared forever. She didn't dress up for him, she dressed down, she walked naked; she was wholly desirable in and of herself, and so was he; for Miranda to put on lipstick and high heels would have been as absurd as Calvin coming to bed in garter-belt and stockings. Such things only allure if the man stands back and looks, takes in a full view; and Miranda and Calvin never had the distance for that.

But Calvin had left. That was the one thing that changed.

Let it go. Let it go.

On the downward slope to the ferry landing and the village, the path bled into a narrow gravel road through dense older fir and hemlock. Under the trees, daylight was already failing; Miranda, disembodied, floated downhill on shadows.

At the bottom of the hill, the gravel road joined the two-lane asphalt of the main island route. A half-mile further, the small lights of the village glinted. For the first time today, washed clean and buoyant, the idea of other people suddenly appealed to Miranda. She could go to the café beside the health-food store, have a cup of tea, catch a ride home with Sasha or else hitch-hike.

Under twilight, the pavement held a lingering silver glow.

“Peppermint tea,” said Sasha. “And try one of these carob muffins. Sure, I’m off in half an hour, I can run you back.”

Sasha went back to the till, and Miranda sat at a wobbly table behind the vitamin supplements, in the nook that functioned as a café. Sasha had pale skin and dirty brown dreadlocks under a bright bandana; her unvarying manner was a forceful open-faced good-humour, an intense interest in everything. Miranda sipped her tea, noting the quality of the heat in her throat, the mixed odors of spice and musty flour, the steam condensing on the lower halves of the plate glass windows. Still bodiless, mindless, stretched out across the white sea.

Sasha came back with the muffin on a plate.

“So Louise is selling her dad’s house for lots? To a developer? I heard,” she said.

Buoyant in the present, this could hardly matter. “She might be,” said Miranda. “She hasn’t told me that, exactly. It’s possible.” Something would happen. The future would take care of itself. The future was just the present, repeated. And so she was entirely unprepared for what Sasha said next.

“People won’t stand for that, here,” said Sasha. “That place has been a farm since the 1890s. What they should do if someone tries to subdivide, is torch it. Like that earth action group down in Oregon. That would show them. It really would.”

Out on the road, a pickup revved uphill, a dog barked; inside the light hummed. Miranda sat silent.

“Torch it,” said Sasha. “I know people that would. For sure.”