

BONNIE NADZAM

ON LONGING

Mundy had no parents, no birthday, and no idea from whence she had come. She simply noticed one day as she was filling a wooden bowl with steaming boiled eggs that—lo and behold—there she was. On two legs with hands and an appetite and things like apples and cheese and pickled fish to eat. And company, too—for there were others like herself. Indeed, there was plenty of company in those days. People and plants and animals crowded the house and breathed and chattered and shifted about like a circle with no inside and no outside. That moody Woodsman, for example—the one with the rust-colored beard and eyes the color of river water—was he carrying in piles of oak to feed the fire, or was the armful of oak carrying the man into the house and the company? Impossible to say.

The Woodsman was often there, just off to the side in Mundy's view, tall and still, or stooped and tending the fire. When he was in the house, her head hummed, her eyes relaxed in their sockets, and she felt a clearing—a field of high grass and clear light—open up inside her forehead. Nights, the Woodsman carried a small bundle of cloth to the fire, where he knelt before the hearthstone and unwrapped a small, dead rabbit, or a bird, and skinned it and strung it over the flames. The fire sawed gently. The conversation of people Mundy had long known purred in the shadowy light around her. She knew just how the fire warmth felt on the Woodsman's face, cold from the fine drizzle outside. It was a face she had known at least as long as she had known her own. How still and quiet and fat all of creation seemed in such moments. Then one day, everything changed.

It all changed the day when, in the front room, a child nobody seemed to know knocked a tall bottle-green vase off the mantle. It crashed onto the stone floor where the Woodsman was kneeling, splintering into innumerable shards of broken light and spilling petals and river water. In the moment of silence afterward, Mundy heard a clock ticking slowly in a back room. As if summoned by the sound, the very devil himself—who'd been reading quietly in a rocking chair in the corner—stood up in his blousy pants and clean white shirt and floated across the room, a flat little prayer book tucked under his arm. He stooped low, leaned close, and whispered in Mundy's ear.

Just who exactly did they think she was? he said.

And in whose house, exactly, did they think they all were living?

Wasn't it her house?

Wasn't it her fire, and her food?

Isn't there a single thing in this world, the devil asked her, that you don't have to share with everybody all the time?

It was so true. Day after day, year after year, the people kept coming. Mundy couldn't remember ever having invited any of them, or ever having been alone in the house. And she liked him there, yes, but then there was everybody else.

They crowded in the doorway, filling the kitchen and the library and the sitting room. Lines of them roped around back and filled the yard and patio. The old men pissed into the river. The boys upset the honeybees. The girls picked the chokecherries from the trees and in the pantry—Mundy's pantry—their mothers boiled and sugared everything into a cordial that they all drank endlessly, laughing, purple-mouthed and noisy and sick. Sometimes even the grown men and women forgot to clean the dirty dishes or to flush the toilet. They just talked and argued and flipped and swam and turned before the mirrors and waded in a swarm into the creek like a big fat happy beast with a thousand teeth and greasy fingers.

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Years before—so many lifetimes ago, it seemed, or had it been just a moment ago?—Mundy had felt such longing. Such a gorgeous ache. For what, she no longer knew. But she couldn't feel it anymore. It'd been crowded out with chatter. With cracker crumbs, with beer, and so much bullshit.

As if he'd heard every bit of the devil's hushed advice and Mundy's secret heart, to boot, the Woodsman stood slowly, facing the fire. You could hear his bones groaning as he rose, like tall trees creaking in a cold wind. He was easily the tallest man in the room. There was silver in his hair, thin shining strands of it. He turned slowly round, looked at Mundy, looked at the devil beside her, and in three long easy strides left the house, forever.

The devil kept talking. Send them all away once and for all and lock the door, he said. There's hardly any room left anywhere in the world for you. So little good cheese, so few blackberries. Only so many brick houses. Only so many clear nights and empty fields.

Mundy listened.

You only get this one life, he said. You got to take what you can.

So she lured the crowds outside, down the hill to the riverbank. She brought out all the remaining jars of cordial, all the berry wines and wheels

of cheese and little pickled fish. Leaving even the devil drunk and dancing in the tall grassy shadows, Mundy crept back up to the house, covered the door with branches and leaves to hide the entryway from the people, then locked it fast from the inside and sat down. She leaned back and let her joints go slack, let her tongue go loose inside her mouth, and disengaged like a key that now hung impossibly about its own neck.

But Mundy was a little uneasy. Her gaze fell to the floor beneath her feet. It was blond wood, smoothed by footsteps and dirt and rain boots and scuffling and mud. Oak? Hickory? She didn't know. Because, a small voice whispered up from the smooth plate of bone where her ribs gathered, you did not build this floor. Nor did you build the house.

She thought of the Woodsman, the clean, sturdy chairs and tables he built for each room. The stoop of his head and shoulders as he'd walked out. Without noticing, she touched the sides of her face, as if to feel where her own rust-colored beard had once been. She heard muted voices behind the locked door. First polite, then hectic, then pleading, then mournful. Mundy plugged her ears. Put her head beneath a pillow. After a while the voices stopped. But Mundy got no rest that night, or again, for a long time.

Outside and above the house, stars swarmed like bees. The moon pushed its clean face above the oaks, and its light descended like pale foam upon the grasses below. The wind shrank and grew and pushed against the house; she lifted her head from the pillows and watched a line of lanterns swinging in the dark as all the people wandered off. She peeled an egg, drank a dark beer. When at dawn three men and four enormous brown dogs came through the door without knocking, she was ready for them, pulling on her cowhide boots then smoothing her skirts. The men had silver stars pinned to their chests and wore cowboy hats set low over their eyes. The shoulders of the dogs came up to the men's ribs, and the dogs' eyes were full of fury and grief, and they howled and circled the men, who themselves never spoke. Didn't have to—Mundy gave herself up and went without any trouble.

In the small stone jail in town there was nothing to do but feel the weight of her own hands, feel what it was like to have teeth inside a head, guts inside a belly, long bones inside feet. She imagined the countryside and the city covered with as many private little barred cells as there were people. Privacy. This was what she'd wanted.

For a long time the newly homeless crowds that had been locked out of the old house wandered hungry and cold, but eventually they set their grief aside and went to work. Each day they walked to work together with their heads hung beneath a curdling sky, a sad assembly of question marks marching slowly backward across a page. They crossed the fragrant fields of buckwheat to the west until they came to a great span of smooth, thick asphalt. Beyond this, beyond the cemetery gate and across the boneyard, stood the massive glittering refineries where everyone worked. It was where they refined oil, and refined wheat, and refined sugar, and refined flour, and refined vegetables like carrots and tomatoes and peas. The refining process mostly consisted of boiling everything to hell in steel and iron vats. Blue sparks shot up from its tall narrow smokestacks. Inside, the women and men worked with gloves that went up to their elbows and safety glasses and helmets and rubber boots. They worked twelve-hour shifts to keep one thing separate from another—like green peas from motor oil and cut daisies from dried noodles.

At the jail in town, the long-faced female Warden watched Mundy lay herself down across the cool hard cement and stretch out like a young cat, interlacing her hands behind her head.

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“Do you always keep these sliding bars locked?” Mundy asked.

“I have to make sure you don’t get out.”

“Get out?” Mundy waved her hand. “Please. I ask you only to make sure no one else gets in.”

Even though this new prisoner would traditionally have shared the cell with anyone else who happened to be arrested in town, the young Warden gave Mundy her word. “No one else gets in,” she said and nodded curtly, pleased that in her imagination she was setting herself apart from the former Wardens (her older sisters) who had always done everything they were told. But the devil had been sitting outside the lone window, and he heard the whole thing. He snatched the Warden’s word, intended for Mundy, and crept out to the street.

In nothing but a pair of coveralls, he hiked casually through the city’s houses and factories and utility plants, across the recreational parks and through the ragged edges of diminishing trees, until eventually he came to the last house on the farthest edge of the world. Here lived the Woodsman in a little old house he never quitted. Here the devil released what it had brought from the jail, right into the surrounding woods, where of course—

now hundreds of miles from the jail cell—the Warden’s promise failed to hit its mark.

Instead, it reverberated among the trees and off the highway and against the logs of the Woodsman’s home as a promise never to let anything in, anywhere. The trees sealed up in their bark and the birds in their tubes of feathers and hollow bones and the young Woodsman looked up at the sky from the single window and felt something harden in his temples, and then in his chest, and just like that, he, too, was all sealed up. His long, tall back curved, his spine sank, and he sat down. His eyes dimmed.

Weeds reclaimed the floor and walls of Mundy’s old mud and stone house where once everything and everyone had gathered. Hairy vines curled around the chairs and opened the refrigerator and took the last of the boiled eggs and barley bread and gooseberry jam. And the good dark beer, of course. Every now and then a hopeful or desperate wanderer would wander through the empty rooms. Check the closets. Thoughtlessly wipe away furry creepers and black crepe of dead plants hanging from the doorways. Stare wistfully where the wall met the floor, thinking what? What am I forgetting? What?

But all these wanderers eventually found their own homes and spread themselves across the countryside. One by one the men and women who knew Mundy as a young woman grew old, got sick, and died. Only tales of her remained, and in them, no one could quite remember her real name, or what crime she had committed, or where she had gone in the end, or, if, indeed, the story had ever properly ended.

The people kept little statues of the Woodsman in their homes and spoke often and quietly about him. They told stories of having locked him up, stories that included feats of daring. Tales that warned the brave and future progeny that if the Woodsman ever got out, the stars would burn up and river water would turn to black hair and everything would die. They told stories of the imperative that he sit there—interminably staring out his window—for the sake of everyone, everywhere.

The Woodsman himself paid little attention. He thought it odd that everyone behaved as though he were a prisoner. Sometimes he would open his window and look out at the people working and planning and hurrying, their eyes like bees and the bees themselves like small bright eyes, the moon like water, and the silver disk of a pond just like the moon—and he would call out to them, Hey, you guys, where do you think you’re going?

There were some people who lamented his captivity, and were grateful for his captivity, because he—and no one else—looked at his own hands and the trees outside his window with such wonder that it made them believe there was something beautiful happening. And there was.

In certain November light, the rust-colored leaves on the pin oak looked a little like waving human hands, but nobody noticed. Just before dawn, white moths flickered out with the frosty stars. In winter, the field pinned with four dark trees was a brown and white beetle on its back. Was the grass fur? Was the waning moon a rusted can? When it rained through the green canopies of fat maples, cats in the window turned themselves over like the pale veined bellies of leaves, but nobody noticed.

In the jail in town, Mundy would sometimes look down at her hollow prison belly and remember having been something else, someone else, somewhere else. Occasionally she would raise one hand to each side of her face. She was no longer sure that leaving the house and coming to this little jail had been the right approach. In the next instant, there was no memory of any house, or of any approach.

148 Everybody, including the long-faced Warden (who was by then a dying old woman) forgot that Mundy had been arrested, forgot what for, or when, and began telling themselves that she had always lived in the jail. The Warden passed away, and there was no one to feed Mundy or tend her human needs, but she persisted. Always in that window. Her white hair like a ray of light in an otherwise dark place.

But there is nothing in the world like a witch in a window, nothing like a ghost story, to gather the children, who, in their play, would pass the jail where Mundy now slept and be reminded of the Woodsman, his long white beard, the shadow of his own cabin window. And when they passed the Woodsman gazing under the eaves, they thought of Mundy.

“What Woodsman, where?” Mundy asked them, wrapping her old fingers around the bars of the prison window.

“She’s been locked up how long?” the Woodsman inquired, looking back at the tick marks in the cabin wall that marked the many years since he’d moved in.

After years of knowing each other only as a nagging forgotten thought, or in a sense of incompleteness after each meal and night’s sleep, Mundy and the

Woodsman slowly began sending each other messages. They embedded their words in brown bats at twilight, in gum wrappers, Kleenexes, periwinkles, black and silver houseflies.

“Who are you?” Green lightning.

“I don’t remember.” Tiny white flowers on the buckwheat. “How long have you been there?”

“A long time, but not forever.” A weed cracks the grocery store parking lot. “There was something before.”

“Was it good, or bad?” An old man falls down at his mailbox, his hand over his heart. “The thing before?”

“Neither.” A dog barks. “I don’t know.”

They wrote in weather patterns, bad news, hunger, houses and streets and bridges that needed repair. In the flatness of a concrete floor, in the wideness of a fat woman’s backside. In the line of numbers and the alphabet. They wrote through the devil himself, in the pretty words in which he crouched, each one a feature of the tremendous spell he’d long ago cast over all the world and all its people.

Don’t listen too closely to *that* old story, Mundy told the Woodsman in a spill of stars above his little wood house. The Woodsman looked up at the smoke sifting from his chimney through the starlight, and he agreed. His pen got tangled in his long, long white beard as he wrote. Outside his window small families were gathering together, the men and women setting out bread, blackberries, and dark beer, the children tying up swings from the tree branches and sitting in circles in the dirt and grass. The last birdcall of the day shot through the dark, and Mundy’s eyes filled with tears. She had to ask: Did he, by chance, when he was a younger man, have a rust-colored beard?

If ever again they meet face to face, the Woodsman will stand before Mundy and say, You know, I don’t think I am who you think I am.

And she will say: Who do you think you are?

And he will say: Who do *you* think *you* are?

They’ll stand before each other, just like that, tossing this question back and forth like a pair of children playing a game of catch when the light outside is changing and the birds are calling back and forth from tree to tree to tree to tree.