

Wilderness Therapy

I am having the dream where I am at a party in the Wilderness. Trees climb to the sky, a waterfall streams with light, cliffs rear jaggedly in the distance. Women I recognize from commercials or sitcoms lounge on sunspotted rocks, nodding at unheard cell phone conversations. My brother Evan dances with Susan from the hospital, Susan with no makeup and hair curled dangling like grapevines. Evan clutches her hand, spotted with freckles like holes in something porous, and swings her in wide circles.

Tiny animals litter the ground, baseball-sized packs of wolves vaulting over pine cones, fleeing deer with toothpick legs. “What’s this one?” I ask Susan, leaning against a redwood tree. A sleek, long snouted animal, marked with a single white stripe. Eyes small as pinheads, nose black and shiny as an ink spot.

“Wolverine,” I lay my palm flat and let it wander up my fingers, long fur tickling my palm. I fold my shirt into a loose pocket and lower the wolverine’s paws to the soft cloth ground. It wanders, stumbling over the loose folds. I pull at the edge of my shirt, trying to straighten out the fabric.

“What’s this one?” A bronze-colored bird, about the size of a butterfly, traces dizzy loops through the air.

“Golden eagle,” Susan bends over, offering one finger, and the eagle perches lightly on her palm. “In real life, the wing of a golden eagle is as long as a man’s arm.” I form a wall with my hand, herding two black bears into my shirt. They sniff and scrape the cloth with overlarge paws, like tiny pigs digging for truffles.

Partygoers leave medication on pine tree limb, dripping thick chains of sap. “I need my anti depressants.” I hover over the tree limb, pill bottles falling over overlapping steps of bark. “I have to take them now. They wake me up at three am,” I dig my palm into the childproof cap, holding my shirt flat with my other hand. “It’s annoying, but what’re you going to do?” The pill bottle solid in my hand, cool as a mug of iced tea. Here I am, searching for answers in the

wilderness, armed with a cure for sadness.

“Which one is yours?” Susan points to an old glass bottle, label the color of an old dirty post it. I hold a pill between my teeth, crack it in fragments like a sheet of ice. By the time I look up, Susan’s talking to a yellow-haired woman with fat, jiggling breasts. She carries a hard black digital camera which looks like the shell of a gigantic beetle.

My shirt sags and sways with the collectively flailing paws of too many animals. “Yes,” Susan nods, almost sadly, in response to the big-breasted blonde girl. “I did attend Syracuse University.” I dump everything out and let the animals limp and squirm. A bear sprawls its clunky limbs over Evan’s shoe, stumbling over untied laces, waddling purposefully.

“My website lists the best governments in the wilderness,” Susan lets out a short, trill like laugh, chewing spongy green gum. “It helps me, personally, get my priorities in order. Everyone wants to see where they are.” I laugh with my mouth open, lean over to see the graphics, titled with red outlined scrawl. “Wilderness” blinks against the white background, flashing from cherry red to apple green, the colors of candy.

“Where am I?” It’s a joke, design a clumsy advertisement from the 90s, poking gentle fun at all the multifarious contradictory best-lists of our time.

“You’re number five, see? That’s not great, but you’re hanging in there.”

“I love it,” I say. “That makes me spill my guts, laughing.”

Susan and Evan are reading about great criminals, an overlarge, ornately illustrated book sprawled against both their laps. I sit on the rock next to them. “I was in jail once,” I say. Evan mouths the words in a stage whisper, Susan bends down to turn each of the pages. Susan went to jail for something more important, I thought, maybe freeing animals from pet mills or factory farms. Before the hospital, Susan worked as an animal rehabilitator. Nurtured baby foxes with bottles of liquified protein, lead muscled hawks by her hands. She left the ward to volunteer at the local dog pound, once bringing a handful of squirming, good natured mutts to group therapy. “Dogs let me love in some of the most difficult moments of my life,” Susan said, explaining the purposes of therapy animals while a saggy-headed bloodhound resting on her lap.

When I look up, Susan's on the waterfall. She slides down the water, perched at the edge as if seated on an invisible ski lift. She howls in wolf-like abandon and flaps her legs against the barrier of water. and I squint, the water sharp and blinding as a computer screen. I made out Mount Rushmore in the distance, dark lines of eyes and noses scratched on blurry white peak.

"Yes!" falling with an open mouth grin, gulping in cups of waterfall mist, pine dust, flutey birdcalls. I wave fervently, flailing both hands through the mist. Susan leans out and smiles, fluttering a hand in my direction. Susan's friends snap pictures to post on blogs, arrayed across the cliffside to capture the wave from all angles. Susan smiling, lifting an open palm to a thousand anonymous computer screens. Susan reverses direction as soon as her feet graze the water, jolting upward toward the top of the waterfall. Gasping with delight, Susan slides up and down, over and over. When she finally gets off, her breath comes in tired, shuddering releases.

"I went to jail, too," Susan steps off the rocks, river water dripping from her foot. Beautiful drips of water, crystallizing on the tips of her white toes like icicles. "After I nearly drunk myself to death. There were waterfall riding lessons, in jail." Sometimes, I think Susan absorbs and contains the wounds of all her rehabilitated animals. Sometimes, Susan's eyes look like a river carrying thousands of bleeding fish.

"Not in the jail I stayed in." I was in jail for three days, for DUI, until my parents paid bail.

Susan shrugs, frowns. "You don't need a jail to learn how. You probably already know how. It's easy, really, easier than you'd expect it to be. It's like playing a video game, and learning to jump between platforms suspended in the air."

Susan walks towards a woman with dyed red hair, a judge of cake cooking contests on the Food Network. "Why are they taking pictures?" I follow Susan towards the woman, camera bouncing and clattering against her skintight t shirt. A teacup sized husky rests, panting, on the woman's palm.

"It's beautiful," Susan says. The dog looks like an action figure, fur a coat of airbrushed silver, eyes painted waterfall blue. Its paws scrape against the woman's hand, one granite-colored leg collapses like a broken table. "I can fix that," Susan rearranges the leg gently, connecting bones in a straight fragile line. *Like art, I think, Like laying out paper for a collage.*

Evan and I skip toy-sized animals across the pond. I swing my wrist, testing the weight of the little wolf shifting in my palm. Evan bounces rainbow trout lightly across the water. They land and float, bobbing restlessly. I'm reminded of feeding ducks, pellets disintegrating into waterlogged cylinders. Flaking brown clumps and sinking into the water.

Evan runs one hand messily through my hair. "Do you understand? I'm with Susan now, I'm going to catch a fish for her." I hurled trout across the water, pocking the stream with brown floating fish. I remember reading a book about early American colonies. "In Virginia," one pioneer testified, "fish are so abundant, we can pick them up off the water." My body shudders at the image of long-gone settlers, picking fish off the water like flowers.

"I think I maimed Susan's dog earlier. Well, anyway, a dog she helped heal. I'm sorry." I draw Ethan's eyes towards me, like a fish on a fishing line.

Evan brushes my back with a rough hand. He holds a squirming wolf between two fingers. "This was stuck to your back. It sometimes happens."

"That's not the worst of it. I told Susan a lie earlier. My pills aren't even for depression. They're for anxiety."

"Anxiety!" Evan's laugh shudders the pine cones scattered on the ground, the waves blinking in and out of sunlight. "You don't have to worry about that."

I inhale the smell of pine needles, of breathing sweating animals, a tiny chipmunk scratching against my pants. I kneel, I press my face into the pile of animals, pawing and pricking with toothpick claws and teeth like blunt fork tines.

Unknown time of night, details of a dream deflating, pillow twisted around my neck, college application shuddering on my desk. I get up and flick through the pages. There are eight days until college applications are due. On the third stapled page, marked with amorphous stains, I started an explanation of "Why University of Massachusetts Amherst?" "All my life," I had written, "I've known I would belong at University of Massachusetts Amherst." I visited UMass Amherst the summer after junior year, Evan settling in as a sophomore. Fat robins dragged worms out of the green expanses between colonial buildings. A few, preening on the walkways, slid lazily out from under my feet. If I stomped quickly enough, I could trap one under my shoe,

firm and oval as a rolling football. “The campus is beautiful and expansive,” I write, “Filled with ornate colonials and students playing and learning.”

I called Evan six days ago, at 11:30. I felt a twinge of social irresponsibility, calling so late, but Evan always went to bed by midnight at the earliest. “I’m thinking of applying to college, again. Applications are due in two weeks,” When I visited Amherst, Evan was settling into his sophomore year, and I slept in his dorm room. All night, his friends filed in and out, skipping through radio stations and smoking weed. Tall boys with sleek hair and sleek muscles and huge hands swiping at the air, each studying a different subject, playing a different sport. A team of diverse talents, like the crew of a science fiction spaceship.

“You’ll finish next year?”

“If I get in, I only need fifteen more credits. The ones I earned will transfer.” Sketching bird outlines on the application, next to the box for text. Crooked coat hanger shapes, gray against the tea-stained sky.

“You want to go back?” Evan read classics, dull-colored tomes which smelled like the woods. Evan’s bookshelf fit every tome in snug rows, like bricks of old colonials. It did not even seem like a real bookshelf, but some kind of literary and aesthetic ideal, bookshelf and books specially selected to decorate developers’ model living rooms. I read the first four pages of *The Sound and the Fury*. I liked the frayed corners, velvety and firmly shaped in my hand, like the paw of some mysterious animal. I liked the beginnings of sentences, before trailing off into strings of adjectives. I wondered how long it had taken Evan to read the book. I heard him on the phone, nodding fervently to the receiver, saying, “I love Quincy. Everyone loves Quincy.” I wonder if I could skip ahead and just read the part about Quincy.

“I do, I’m not sure I’ll be able to. But I figure I’ll try. Try to get the applications in at least.”

“Well, you know, it’s your life.” Evan pauses, exhaling smoke. “Don’t let Mom and Dad push you around too much, Ok?”

After the conversation, I laughed and cradled the phone against my armpit. Evan lives in Ohio with his girlfriend, now. I have a picture in my head of Evan’s girlfriend, Allie, can recall a near-photographic image of her face. I imagine her standing in an anonymous kitchen, frying

eggs in a stainless steel pan. I imagine Susan nursing a baby fox, solid bones pressing against her soft stomach. I imagine Evan, releasing frayed bits of smoke out the window of an anonymous house in Ohio. I will never finish my college applications, I think, and feel a sticky peace, like honey, spreading through my brain. I put down my pen, go to the bathroom, go back to sleep.

In the dream, Evan wears his old pajamas, striped red and yellow like some kind of Dr Seuss animal. Evan spent all day in pajamas, in high school, prancing through the house with kitchen implements, math homework, mixtapes burned en masse for friends. He entertained in pajamas, “Why are you still in your pajamas?” I’d ask, carefully dressed in blue jeans, a clean blue or white t-shirt. “You’re not going to be able to go to school in those.”

“You never know when you might get the opportunity to sleep,” Evan ran one hand through crooked peaks of hair. “It’s just a matter of taking the initiative.”

Evan sat next to me on the rock, reeling in a fish for Susan. A huge fish, composed of thousands of tiny reflective trout. *Like in the children’s book, where the school of little fish organize themselves in the shape of a big fish.* Each fish shrinking and stretching the sky, synching together trunks of towering pine trees. As Evan reeled in, little fish twisted and flailed as one body, hundreds of shining trout slamming head-first into the rocks.

“I’m sorry about making fun of you for wearing pajamas, you know, when we were young.” Evan glances up, hands straining against the fishing reel. Hands calloused, thick as bear paws. I want to touch the fish, see if it feels like I think it will feel, smooth as a prism.

“Remember the time I talked about being hospitalized for two months with your new girlfriend? I told stories about my socially awkward therapist all night. She wanted to talk about her art major, but instead she laughed politely, with all her teeth exposed. I’m sorry about that.” The sun slings white light, the ice-sculpture mountains glare with brightness. Mount Rushmore’s faces twist and fade in the distance. I imagine my eyes scraping raw pink trenches into Evan’s back.

“Don’t worry, man. That’s just sibling rivalry.” Evan’s hair shines like the jagged mountain peaks. He could star in an advertisement for hair gel, twisting his hair into ridiculous shapes and spinning confidently corny narration. A girl clutching a camera slides from behind a

tree, finger poised on the shutter.

“We never wrestled, as kids. Aren’t brothers supposed to wrestle? You wrestled the kids in the neighborhood, but you never wrestled me.” Evan seizes my shoulder and twists backwards, pinning my back against the tree trunk. I thrust my head back and forth. I flail both legs against water-slick rocks. I press against Evan’s hand with my whole body, feeling the hard outlines of my muscles.

“Got you,” Evan frowns a little, leaning back to pull in the fish. “I always felt bad, wrestling you as a kid. You were younger than me, and knew I would win.”

“I wouldn’t have minded.”

I remember walking with Susan, a week before she left, the way a memory can sometimes come, details intact, in the middle of a dream.

“We never know how long we’ll be here. We never know how long it will take,” I say to Susan. Susan’s walking somewhere, group therapy, maybe. I don’t know why group therapy’s only available in hospitals. Everyone needs an opportunity to tell secrets to strangers. Maybe that’s what popular people do, the people on sports teams in high school who grinned and hugged everyone like a grandparent. Lean in to whisper secrets to teammates at the edge of the lacrosse field, confess to a classmate lingering outside of math class.

“I think you learn,” Susan plucks a leaf off the Japanese maple, symmetric in an almost human way, like architecture. Susan takes walks under the artistic landscape, finding butterfly chrysalises tucked between groups of unnatural pink flowers. “You never think of your problems as dependent on time, as time-sensitive. But you get an idea, the longer you stay.”

“But, I mean, lots of people think they’re cured and relapse again. Not to say that’s normal, or that will happen to me, but I just don’t know.”

“Yes. I relapsed twice. But I thought about relapsing all the time. If I didn’t think about it as much, I don’t think that would have happened to me.” Susan might bring up alcoholism at a dinner party, tell a relevant anecdote of sleeping on a stranger’s floor, fuzzing between life and death. Susan could have been one of the popular girls, spinning dirty, personal secrets into revelations, wholesome and connective.

“I thought about killing myself. I mean, I never attempted, but I made preparations.” Susan pulls a dark red feather off the ground, beautiful, the same color as the Japanese maples. Beautiful! I want to touch it, hold it fluttering on my palm.

“Come with me,” says Susan, “Do some art. Abstract painting. A lot of famous depressives did abstract painting.”

“I’m still not sure I’m cured. I mean, I could relapse again.”

“You’re still in treatment. I don’t think anyone here’s sure if they’re cured.”

“I kept a bag of pills in a pair of socks, from senior year of high school all the way through sophomore year of college. I used to cut myself with my brother’s swiss army knife, and clean the blood off afterward.” I told the same secrets in group therapy last week, but Susan wasn’t there; she brought dogs to a stress-relief session that day.

“I can’t help you with that,” Susan turns away, moves towards a doorway. “I think you’ll learn.”

“I don’t know if anyone can help me. Depression’s all chemicals, maybe no one can control them.” During group therapy, another patient told a story about a family trip to Niagara Falls. Volcano eruptions, tornados, hurricanes explode all at once, spreading destructive force, and afterwards go dormant, dissipate, use up all energy. But waterfalls never stop breaking to pieces on the rocks, diving between the shapes of trees. She talked about standing at the edge of the falls, the fast ferocity of the water turning regular, monotonous, a tap left on for a long time.

“I can’t help you,” Susan says, “I know you like me, but I can’t help you.”

“But what if I do relapse? What will happen?” I’m tearing up, but I don’t cry.

“Good bye,” Susan disappears into the building, “See you tomorrow.” I lied that day, I know I’ll never relapse. That was the last time I saw Susan, before the group goodbye, everyone exchanging email addresses and unearned hugs. But I’m afraid of waterfalls like machines left on, spitting out and hurling down again and again.

“Hey, do you like riding on those waterfalls? Want to do it again?” Evan slings the fish over one shoulder, half-running towards Susan. I am in the dream again, same place, same scene.

“That’s all I can talk about these days,” Susan clutches Evan’s hand. She wades into the

river, dragonflies as small as dust particles skimming just above the waves.

“Teach me,” I say. “Come on, teach me.” I lie on the ground, pressing wads of pine needles into my face.

“I left the hospital and got a job in Pennsylvania,” Susan says, trapping about twenty five emerald green dragonflies between both hands. She relaxes slowly, letting bugs spin out between her fingers. “You’ll never see me again.”

“Just one lesson.”

Evan laughs. “Come on, you know what the first lesson is.” He musses my hair and follows Susan into the stream.

“We have to go now,” Susan splashes across the water, waves swelling and diminishing with each of her footsteps.

“I’ll go back to the hospital,” I say inaudibly. I pick off a wolf clinging to my neck and crush it underfoot like a cigarette. I feel bad, and wonder if I should apologize to Susan, and realize I’m never going to see Susan again.

Ravens tear ragged pieces off the body, uprooting long strings of veins. One utters a tiny, throaty cough, beak shiny as a bobby pin, feet like crescents of copper wire. A v of geese soars under my chin, and hundreds of other vs follow, scattered across the plane of air between my waist and shoulders, rushing south. An anthill of badgers, strung with tunnels, streaming with animals. At the entrance, three pups play, rolling over and over in a quarter-sized deposit of muddy water, releasing otherworldly barks of happiness. The waterfall lunges, gulping out hundreds of gallons of water. I walk to the edge, and step off. Thick wires of wind twist under my body. A flock of chattering geese veers to miss my head. The first lesson, and it is easier, easier than I would have ever imagined.