

MK Sturdevant

The Spark

Angie has in her hand a hatchet, an old one. She plucks at the blade, then tests it against her hair. She holds it close to her eye. The metal is pocked like a face. Next to a doll, she tucks it in, sure of its nose, its faint mouth. She pulls a blanket up to both their necks. They appear snug in their wagon. She picks up the handle, orients her cargo toward the long yard, and sets out.

Halfway to the barn, she stops. She squints at the enormous white door, rusted ajar. They haven't had animals in decades. The giant rolling hinges are fossils now. She isn't supposed to go in by herself, or touch things in there, or in the workshop where the professors try to figure out everything obvious about the forest. She always tries to tell them the answers. They smile sometimes, or laugh. "Don't touch anything," they say. "Don't ever go away from the house by yourself."

The interior of the barn is vaulted, airy. She parks the wagon near a post that runs from the floor up to a small loft. The wood is splintered in places, along other curves in the grain it's soft. She presses one fingernail hard into the post and leaves a crescent-moon mark. The post sustains another crescent scar for each finger. Then, the child pivots on one heel just like her father does, looking for a place to sit. She finds an overturned bucket and settles in, folding up her legs to her chest. She peers up at a giant rake hung on the wall, then sings with it, and together they sing with the hay, and with the bits of scat on the floor, the load in her wagon, the fuel canister and the soft light: *though the mountains may fall, and the hills turn—*

A raven shoots in. She forgets the words. From the highest window all the way to the floor, dust fills the air as the bird fires its body down against a wire waste-can. The hatchet and the doll fall from her lap, the girl's hair stands on end. Straw and feathers scratch the air, reflect the light, then drop back down.

While the raven scuttles and struggles under the can, Angie picks her children up. She quietly repeats her father. "Don't worry. Those are wild things." Her eyes feast on the hunter and its prey as they lift off. The mouse flings its tail, desperate in the muscled clutch.

When they're gone, she looks at the hatchet and the doll and repeats her mother. "Don't stare."

On the way back to the house, Angie stops to examine the sorrel. She harvests one thin sprig and eats it. She pulls up one more. She assures the hatchet and the doll that a little bit will keep them from starving until they can find a hotel, but too much will make them poop.

Kestrel

She takes a bite. On her tongue is the sour, pickled, familiar essence of her yard. “We’re getting closer,” she says. She makes a sound of chewing as she holds the plant near the hatchet’s mouth.

Doll, blade, wagon. On the planks of the porch, a tapping of shoes. Weathered chairs observe the added weights, something creaks. Her mother appears. Angie asks to speak to a bellhop.

“What are you doing with that axe?” her mother demands.

“Well, we need a room with one bed and two cribs, please.”

“Dale! Dale!”

Her father shouts back at her mother from somewhere inside the house, swearing on the dullness of the blade.

Tracing her fingers down the handle, the girl prepares to sleep the tool on the porch for one evening. “The hotel is sold out,” she tells it. “You can stay here for the night. Don’t go anywhere by yourself! If you do, you’ll get lost. If you get lost, follow the river down to the ocean and I’ll come and get you.” She spreads a blanket out and makes a bed.

The house is old. It’s kept up. Gold and brown dominate. The upholsteries are thick. The side door off the kitchen is always unlocked. Standing at the bottom of the stairs that lead up to her bedroom, Angie wrinkles her nose. She breathes deep.

On an inhale, she recalls pictures she saw in a newspaper. There were bed-frames smoldering, a family rummaging through ashes for metal things. People tying cloth around their mouths. It was in the paper. She remembers.

She jets into the living room screaming. Her father is nestled deep in a recliner swallowing beer.

“Smoke! I smell it! Daddy!”

“Nope. Relax, relax, Ang. I’m drying needles.” He wraps an arm around her. She exhales, then squirms away. Her footsteps rattle the clock on the wall. She barely misses the edge of the etagere stacked with figurines as she rounds the corner into the kitchen and slides to the oven.

“Susan!” Her dad yells to her mother. “Don’t let her open it!”

The oven is set at 200 degrees. A few handfuls of Douglas fir needles are spread out on two large cookie sheets. Her mother turns on the oven light. “Do *not* touch it,” she says, then turns back to the phone. Angie narrows her eyes and observes: where green should be, a color like pennies is emerging. The smell is fearsome.

She climbs up onto her father’s lap and agrees to talk about it only during the commercials. She waits, looking at the screen, thinking how incredible it would be, casting the hot needles into the wind, watching the barn blaze orange all night, digging for the hatchet in the

morning fog.

“Now go turn it down so we can hear each other,” her father says, setting an empty can on the coffee table.

She gets up and goes to the TV and twists the knob. She walks back to the recliner, climbs up her father again, and nests in his middle.

“I’m just trying to test something. Tinkering with oven-dry weights, sweetie. We’re probably gonna take all those needles we’ve got up in the workshop and dry them in the lab at the range station, if this works.”

“Why?”

“Well, we’re gonna try to count all those needles, Jim, Frank, Chuck and I. And weigh them.”

“Why?”

“We’re trying to come up with ideas, for a model. So, that means, little lady, that we want to report cohorts of needles. So people can start thinking about needle recruitment, about infestations, heat, burns, bugs mostly.”

“What’s recru—?”

“Be good and go turn it back up.”

The professors come the next day, late in the afternoon. She overhears them greeting her mother. Frank always speaks nicely to her mother, he always has something to ask her. Jim laughs at his own jokes, and lately everyone else does, too. Chuck is the biggest and the nicest to children. She runs out to the porch to greet him.

“Chuck!” she shouts.

He picks her up. “Angie Angel!”

“I’m not an angel!” she squeals.

“What’s that hatchet doing in your blankie?” Chuck asks.

“It’s a baby. Sleeping.”

Jim walks over and takes a look. “Well, it looks like he has a sharp mind, just like you, Ang.”

Chuck takes a pipe from his mouth and laughs. “Good one, Jim,” he says.

Angie frowns and disappears to her room as the men swarm and say things about the Forestry Department, the health of Jim’s wife Connie, the class Chuck just finished teaching at three. As she listens, she practices flipping the cap on her father’s lighter. She wants to be able to flip it with her thumb in a single swipe, like he does. She pouts, struggling to open it with one hand, and worries that Chuck doesn’t think her mind is sharp, if he laughed about it.

She decides she’ll follow them today. Maybe she can finally see what they’re doing. She pockets the lighter and forgets to put on her shoes.

Kestrel

On the way to the workshop, she pretends to be playing alongside them. Her heels spin on the soft gravel. She passes them, then ducks under a canopy of vine maple while they go inside. Leaf-shadows slip on and off her skin. They close the door behind them.

She hops out and skips to a pile of junked metal stacked against the side of the workshop. The torn side of a washing machine is tilted on a coil of wires. She tips it flat with her toes and steps on it, climbing on to a tractor hood that was recently added.

From the window of the workshop, she watches the men spread out squares of paper and sort sprigs of fir. She stands on one foot while the other cools. She can see Frank sharpening a carpenter's pencil with a pocket knife. She trades feet. They begin to pore over the needles, then they pass them down, dictating, entering numbers. She scratches her calf with her toes.

Frank likes to do the recording. He does most of the field illustrations. He once gave her a sketch of two varieties of horsetail, one with its weird helmet, the other with explosive hair. Even from here, she can see that Frank is extremely careful drawing the numbers, it must be, into each box.

Jim slaps the side of his pants hard and flicks something off. She knows that lately, Jim has to try hard to concentrate. Her mother had said so. It must be because he hasn't figured it out yet, this thing about the trees. He must want to know it. He must want it even more than the others. Perching her nose just over the sill, she strains to see more. The scene is always the same: books and piles of papers are stacked on metal shelves. There is a white bucket and a giant scale, boots and waders numbered along the wall, lamps hanging from the ceiling.

She has often wondered what they will do once they figure out what they're trying to know. She takes the lighter out of her pocket and runs her thumb over the gently serrated grooves on the little wheel under the cap. She rolls it back and forth while she watches them, keeping her eyes on Frank's drawings.

She supposes she could simply tell them she already knows the answer. There is first of all the wind, she will explain, that uses the needles to make a sound, and then, she will add, there is a giant, a monster slug, who comes out at night and puts bugs in the trees, but the morning fairies take them out of the good trees at dawn.

She takes her nose down and replaces it with her ear.

"Foliated area?"

"Got it. Chuck?"

"Eight."

Then—something she can't make out, something about the *topmost whorl*. She replaces her ear with her eyes and sees that they are

working harder than usual on something very small, a secret maybe, in each needle. Frank scrawls something, gets more paper. She hears them talk about presenting life tables. She wants to have a life table.

She leans in a little farther, trying to see what Frank is drawing. Frank pauses and looks up over the dark black edge of his glasses, but only at the wall, not quite to her window. She shrinks down, quietly. Now, the metal is merely warm. She sits and rests her legs, shaping the word *whorl* in her mouth.

Far up the slope to the north, the wood of two giant snags knocks together. The sound is a weak echo, a familiar beat. She puts the lighter back in her pocket. Her dad will be looking for it soon. She hears the knock. The wind, she thinks, is something that can't be hunted, doesn't die. *Whirl*, she says to herself, wiggling her toes. *Whorl*. There is nothing to do now. She watches a fly crawl upside down. She knows the sun is setting though she's never seen a sunset. The high crowns of the old-growth trees occlude the horizon. At dusk, the smell of the air simply gives up cedar and takes on moss. From the lowest depths of the forest, she watches the jade ground-cover turning gray.

Angie stands up to look in the window one last time, when a wound of yellow appears on the darkening yard. It comes closer. It's her mother, still in her apron, who sees her but does not seem to care that she is perched barefoot on top of rotted scrap-metal strung with webs, spying on the professors. Her mother runs into the workshop. Jim emerges first, ahead of her mother, then her father and Frank.

Chuck walks out and turns directly to her secret perch, with no expression of surprise and tells her to come down. They leave all the doors and windows open. She starts running. "No," says Chuck, grabbing her hand. "Let's give them some space."

As they walk, Chuck loosens his tie. Then he scratches his sideburns. After a while he lowers his head and just subtly shakes it, as if to say 'no.' She is sure, the way she is sure of the wind, the smell of moss, that she should say nothing.

The sound of a man crying is new. He doesn't want to cry, she thinks. She pokes her head in the kitchen and sees Jim sitting at the tiny desk built into the wall under the phone. He works hard to collect himself and listen, then chokes somehow and groans. The spiral cord of the phone is wrapped around his fist. When he wipes his face, he presses the cord against his cheeks leaving marks, until Chuck comes in with a box of tissues and helps him untangle his hand.

"Back up, come on," her mother says.

They all sit in the living room, making plans for driving Jim to

Kestrel

town, for going into the hospital with him. For staying with him for a few nights until his son arrives, and for teaching his classes.

Angie worries she has caught Jim's cry. It must have been while she was standing in the kitchen. She feels it rooting but doesn't know what has happened or what's wrong. She buries her head in her mother's jeans and finally lets it out. The lighter falls to the floor. Frank hands it to her father, and they give each other a long, dark look. "I'll talk to her," her father says. Angie hears his tone. It's low, like the growl of a dog that knows of a bear. She weeps, hard.

When the men leave, the silence and the darkness are severe, serene. Angie follows her mom to the porch, sure she is in trouble. They sit next to two flashlights but Angie doesn't dare ask where they are going. Her mother just smokes. After a while she squashes the butt hard in a tin can, and asks, "Well, you want to stay up late, Ang?"

Angie nods. They walk, occasionally singing something at full volume but without any real desire for music. They shine their flashlights on the rocks closest to their shoes. Then, they train them on the entrance to the workshop and scan the sides of the building. Under their white beams, the scrap-metal pile looks like a cougar, or worse, some force of silver and darkness, a thing, alive. She squeezes the sleeve of her mother's shirt. They enter the shop.

"Aw jeezus." Her mother sighs and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of her back pocket. They survey the mess.

The paper the girl wants most is no longer on the table. It isn't inside the professors' boots, not in the scale, not on the floor. But the needles under her palms are crisp, delicate; they make the slightest crackling sounds as she swipes and stirs them around. She cannot resist shuffling a trail through the piles on the floor. Then she sees it, plastered against the legs of a chair. She pulls it up and shakes it clean.

Her mother takes a drag and exhales. "What's that?"

"The life table."

"You might as well take it. There's nothing we can do. They're gonna start over if they can, before the end of the month, hopefully."

"Why?" the girl asks.

"Because now's the short time between when the firs push out new needles, and before they shed."

"They what?"

Her mother exhales again then speaks the technical term into her plume of smoke. "Winter needle fall."

In her bed that night, Angie cuddles a stone with two flecks of mica for eyes. The life table is carefully laid out on her floor. She lays awake seeing nothing.

On moonless nights, one is better off not trying to see. In the

darkness, she traces her fingers over the smooth pocks of mica, then over the stone's rough granite back. She pulls it into her chest and rolls onto her side. If they had known the answers, nothing bad would have happened. The pictures from the newspaper occur to her again. If she had never touched the lighter, maybe Jim wouldn't have cried. Her eyes fill up.

"Trees," she whispers, imagining the answers Jim would want, "the wind needs them to make sounds." She wipes her nose on her sleeve. She must finish their project for them. "If you're a good tree, the witch of the morning mist comes and takes out all the bugs. There are ten-hundred-hundred needles." She counts, barely sleeping.

On the day they gather with Jim to remember Connie, the vine maple is already blood red. Angie has a purse now, and in the purse is something Jim needs: the life table, finished. She has added more color, printed her name, traced her fingers.

Her mother pulls her along. They are trailing the others as they walk up a familiar road. Angie stops. She makes her mother stop.

"What's crem—"

"—ation," her mother says quietly. "It's just something people do, you can put a person who has passed away in, well, a casket and bury the body, or instead, you can cremate it, them. Him or her. Connie."

Her mother takes a deep breath and tries again. "So, when they cremate someone, honey, they take the deceased body and, I guess, transform it, into ashes."

The word *transform*, or was it *ashes*, it strikes like a stone on a swimming hole. She crushes gravel under her shoes. She opens her mouth, but her mother pulls her close.

When Jim and his son open the jar of Connie, everyone around them holds hands or closes their eyes. From out of the jar cascades a current of white and gray, like pollen, feathers, or ash. It all lays down on the river below, without a sound.

Angie rests her head on the bar attached to the concrete guard-rail on the edge of the bridge. Trying to conceive of how long it will take for all that to get to the ocean, she flicks some leaves and a pebble off the edge to watch them fall. Her mother gives her a gentle tug.

"Stop."

They start walking back to their cars. She whacks a sign with a stick, hard.

"Stop it."

At Jim's that night there is food, drinks, a bonfire. There are a couple of speeches, guitars. One man is called a Provost. Her gift for

Kestrel

Jim crinkles in her purse. All this seriousness, it can all be fixed with the answers she's been keeping to herself. She observes the adults as she tries to eat baked beans with a fork. She knows it's not the kind of night where kids can ask for other things.

She wants to go up to Jim, but he's surrounded. She wanders out to the backyard. A narrow but deep, rushing creek slicks through the property. The edge is hard to see. She strolls alone in the dark, thinking it would be hard to approach Jim. He looks different than he used to. She stops to listen to the water, though she can't quite see it. She walks toward it and stops again.

The merest orange ember, aloft and bright, travels toward her on the breeze, approaches her nose, then swerves. It hovers over the water, then disappears. She turns and walks back toward the fire. She takes the life table she had completed for Jim out of her purse, unfolds it, and lays it in the heat, watching it curl.

In her bed that evening, she inspects her baby—a doll—and fiddles with a tag behind its neck. It is and it is not a baby, she thinks. She stretches out, curls up, and sleeps.

In this house, on this property, about two green acres now black in the night, she was conceived and one day will conceive. Their house is small and brown and there will come a day when they will make it blue, bigger. The tallest tree, the oldest Douglas fir just beyond her window—the one that was there in the centuries before they dug and poured a foundation—will feel it all like a fly passing its cheek. In the centuries after the river takes the girl in her old age, her ashes as crystals on a winter morning, after the fire-line sinks lower with each passing summer, after the house is consumed and returned to the sea, it will still just shiver, hold the light, lift the rain.

