

## The Meadow

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**She's** mostly quiet, sitting calmly and watching out the window, sometimes watching him drive, with that little smile she has for so much of what he does. Years ago, that smile bugged him a little, till he figured out it meant she was proud of him. He can see the sun stroke across her face as the car turns, even without looking. He can feel the dapples of it across her hands, folded in her lap.

He mostly just drives. It's gotten to be a bit of a problem these last few years, just enough to make him fierce in his vigilance. He's never had an accident, but he watches things more closely now. This is the first time he's had the car out in months, actually.

They used to do this a lot, exploring the roads and lanes around town for as far as they could reach. Saturdays, he only had a half-day at work, and Sundays there was church, but those weekend afternoons were for trying to get lost. They always made it back without without getting lost, without ever even really wondering where they were, but they sure tried.

She'd have packed a lunch, then; chicken and potato salad and pie, books for afterwards, in the big wicker basket her mother made. 'Course, that was the days when you had to be a driver just to be a driver. Not like nowadays, when just anybody can go get a car and get in and drive. No power steering, no power brakes, no automatic transies and power thisses and automatic thats. You had to know what you were doing, back then.

This car, though, loafs along the freeway at a steady sixty-five, leaving nothing for him to do but steer, watch like a hawk, and mutter at the maniacs pouring past him on his left. Seventy, the signs say, and they're doing eighty, at least.

He feels her hand on his elbow, and he turns to her for a second, smiling a bit. "You're right," he says. "You're absolutely right. Again." Eyes on the road again, he lifts his shoulders up and back, relaxes, breathes. "You're right again," he murmurs.

He hasn't really told her where they're going. She doesn't seem to mind.

He's pretty sure he can still find the place, even after all these years. Fifty years. Well, he counts different than she does. She'd say fifty years next April, counting from the actual wedding day. He counts from today, fifty years ago today, the day he proposed to her.

He was a little startled, some years later, to realize she didn't even remember this day, didn't even seem to think there ever was a day he came out and asked her. She sees it more like a long gradual slide toward the inevitability of their love, the union it demanded to match the union it had become. But he counts from today.

Saturday, of course. Saturday again this year, as a matter of fact, but that's not what matters. What matters is Saturday afternoon, the twenty-fourth of May, 1958. He'd picked her up at her parents' place after work, and they'd gone on one of their jaunts. Somehow, they'd found a road they'd never followed, and they drove for an hour, winding up into the hills, slower and slower as the road deteriorated. When the road had been a pair of ruts for a mile, and then even those disappeared, they got out and walked, the big picnic basket on his shoulder, her fingers slipped through his with that special ease they had then, like they didn't even have to hold on.

They came at last to a small meadow, sloping gently down toward cottonwoods and aspens at the far end, and beyond that, the entire world laid out fresh in spring green, just for them. You can see forever, the ground falling away from you like an extension of the meadow itself. There's no fog, no haze, nothing to hold back your eyes as you look down that long vista like you're seeing your own tomorrow, and they settle with their food and books and spread blanket in the speckled sun below a single maple, proud and solemn at the top of the meadow.

She's sitting on a mossy log, he's on the ground at her knees, and he looks up, takes her eyes in his, takes her

hands in his, and in a sudden rush of dizzy, swooping joy, he knows he has to have her forever, and he holds her hands to his cheeks and watches her, waiting for his voice to come back from wherever it went so swiftly.

“Will you—” he begins when he can, and then he can’t anymore, and he just holds on, his eyes never leaving hers. He knows what he wants to say. “Marry me!” he wants to say. “Marry me, be mine, let me be yours, be ours and all of us forever!” but he can’t, and when he can breathe again, he just whispers “Be mine? Please?” and then he’s crying.

Tears in his eyes again, even now, after fifty years, he sneaks a look at her. Would she remember? She’d never remember.

She sprang to her feet, spinning and whirling like a ballet fairy across the nodding wildflowers, singing “Yes! Yes! Yes!” the tears shining on her face, and he counts from that moment. Fifty years ago today. Years later, he discovered she didn’t even remember that day, and he thought it was funny, finally having a date, after all these years, that he knew and she didn’t. She was forever saying to him “Remember when we went to the beach with Harriet and Segal? Remember the boy by the boat, selling fish?” or “The day we went down to the concert in the park? And it hailed so hard? You don’t remember that?” and she’d look at him with that sharpness he thought was scary until he’d known her for twenty years. Harriet’s racy swimsuit, he remembers that, but he says no, he doesn’t remember, because he knows what she means. If you can’t give the day of the month, the day of the week, tell her what she had on, you don’t remember.

Her pearl grey dress. She had on her pearl grey dress that Saturday afternoon, the twenty-fourth of May, 1958. When he called it pearl grey, she laughed at him. “Pearls are white, ninny! It’s dove grey,” touching her forehead to his cheek. He had the last laugh, though. Two years later, coming home from some concert or theater outing, she’d slipped that same dress off over her head. “Wait for me!” she laughed at him. “Don’t you go anywhere!” tossing the dress on his face as he sprawled on the bed in his tux, watching her. She slipped away to the bathroom, and he just laid there, breathing the scent of her from her dress. When he gathered it up in his hands and cupped it to his face to coax the last of her warmth from it, the tag caught his eye. “Pearl grey,” it said. “Size 4.”

He tried to catch the twirling fairy dancing in the wildflowers, tried to snare it in his old Kodak, but it was too swift for him. The dress is a pale blur, her face above it strangely sharp, looking over her shoulder at him with that look in her eyes. He has that faded sepia fairy in his pocket now.

He leaves the freeway, smiling at her like there’s nothing wrong, like this is where he wants to get off, but he was going to stay on for another exit. He can’t handle that stress anymore, though, and this’ll do. Out here past the chocolate factory, past the graveyard, take a left on Orchard Road, and keep going. This’ll do fine, and now he can spare a hand for a quick caress, her fingers slipping reluctantly from his as he pulls away too soon. Even here, the traffic’s a little frightening. After today, he’ll let John take the car. He’s been after him for years. But he had to have it, for this last trip.

He’s planned so long, so hard. He studied the map till he had it memorized, and now, even bailing out of the freeway too soon, he’ll be fine. There’s a long hard wooded ridge of granite here, thrust up like a wall on the far side of the river, and it’s kept the tide of commerce from washing away their meadow. Ten years ago, there was a time it looked like there might be some high-priced houses built over here, but nothing ever came of it. Too far away, too far from the comforting screams of the city for the sort of people who would have been able to afford it.

“Do you remember yet?” he asks, not looking. “The chocolate factory’s new, but the graveyard? Surely you remember that?” and he sounds so much like her, testing him on some memory, that he grins a little, turning to the window beside him to hide it. He can feel her shaking her head, puzzled. She still hasn’t figured it out. She’s very quiet, but he’s used to that now. He’s done most of the talking for both of them for the last dozen years. She’s struggled more and more with her voice as her strength goes, and it’s just easier this way. He knows her thoughts as well as he knows his own by now.

“Remember when we lived upstate for a while? Remember how odd it was to look out and see nothing and no one for as far as the eye could see?” She’d found that a whole lot harder than he had. He’s always regretted having to give that up, but she needed the city around her the way he needed her. She’d gone so sullen, so silent, and he had no idea what was wrong. All that one summer that they lived on the old farm, she’d gotten farther and farther away, never moving an inch. That final night, when she began to scream at him, slamming doors and throwing things, he’s never been as scared in his whole life as he was that night. Not scared of her; scared of life without her. He thought he’d lost her.

He’d been so wrapped up in restoring the barn, like they might ever need a barn for anything. He’d work all day, come home, and go to work on his barn, and he got so far away from her he didn’t even see her slipping away. John would follow him around the yard with his little lips puckered, trying to whistle like Daddy, and Daddy would catch him up out of nowhere and spin him through the air, and he thought life was so good that when she began to shriek at him about not caring about her anymore, at first all he felt was the shock of injustice.

When she finally ran out of air, sobbing and sobbing like the world was over, she let him take her in his arms again, and they stood there in the moonlight in the roofless barn and he swore to himself, to God, to everything there is or was or ever will be, that he’d never let her get that far away from him again. He’d never take his eyes off her and her needs again, and he never has. He didn’t tell her any of that, all he told her was “I love you.”

“I love you,” he told her, over and over, counting silently to himself. “I love you,” he told her one hundred times in the silver moonlight, pacing himself, spreading them out like dripping water. When she began to giggle, he almost lost count. When she began to cry, he may have, but he kept going. When he was done, she was silent for a long time. They moved back to the city the next day.

These last few years, when he takes her hand, her grip is so weak he can only feel it in his soul, her fingers lying in his like something he’s holding. Those first years, there was an ease and a confidence in the way she’d hold his hand so casually that it shook him every time.

The last time they climbed this trail from the end of the road, it was a slow and gentle slope, and she swung his arm between them, watching the sunlight filter through the trees around them, humming some tune he’d be teased for not knowing. The last time, the first time, the sun was warm and silken, slipping through the leaves to fondle her face. Now, the trail has grown a hill, and the sun is thin and aloof, barely warming them at all. Perhaps it wonders why they’re back. Perhaps it wonders why they took so long.

He can feel the cold, not the cold of a spring day in the hills, but the cold of his age. He feels it in the sandy gritting of his knees and in the icy coppery blades pricking his spine, and he hugs her a little closer. “Are you warm enough?” But she just smiles at him.

Now he can see the woods begin to open up a little, up ahead, and the slope finally peaks, turning over to run down away from them, so when they come at last to the meadow from so long ago, they can see forever again. Now they’re seeing someone else’s tomorrow, though. Their own tomorrow has come at last.

The same old mossy log still lies below the maple, more moss now and less log, and when he gentles her down onto it, he can see it settle even under her tiny weight. Stretching his back like a cat, like a man half his age, ignoring the pain, he looks around. He can see in her eyes that she remembers now.

“Fifty years ago today, right here in this little meadow with all the world stretched out before us as witnesses,” he says to her like he’s memorized it, “I asked you to be mine forever.” He has. He knew he’d never get it out without losing his voice if he just left it up to chance. He should have practiced his last speech in this meadow, and he would have, if it hadn’t snuck up and blindsided him like that. But that’s all he has to say, and now there is no more at all. They’re silent a long time, him standing there where they had the blanket spread, her sitting on the settled old log. He sees so much.

He sees her eyes closing, darkened, her lips parted, a thousand times. He sees her lying, sweat-soaked, nursing

brand-new John. He sees her giggling in the silver moonlight; heaving hard on a mainsheet in a hard blow down east a ways; swaying gently, eyes half closed, in a concert hall. He sees her standing with her elbows on the railing of their balcony. He sees her whirling over these wildflowers; slapping cards down, laughing like a maniac, at the family-reunion rummy-fest; rocking in a creaking chair at two am. He sees her. He sees her.

He's been a little concerned, all the way up the hill, wondering if he'd be able to get the lid off when the time came. He'd decided that, if he had to, he could just leave it wedged among the roots of the maple they sat under so long ago. It's a nice urn, artificial stone, they told him after the service last month, and he's pretty sure that means cast resin of some sort, but it would have looked fine sitting there through the years. When the time comes, though, the lid slides out with the waxy smoothness of the candle stubs from the tops of the wine bottles that lit the dinner table in their first place in the city, and with tears on his face, he sifts his beloved out onto the lilting breeze. She spins and whirls away like a ballet fairy in pearl grey, dancing across the nodding wildflowers, singing in his mind. She hasn't moved with this much ease and grace for many years, now. He'd tried so hard to catch that fairy in his old Kodak, and now she's still caught up in his heart, her face strangely sharp as she turns to gaze across her shoulder at him.