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The
**RIVER
OTTER**

There's been too much talk of the river otter lately and it's getting under his skin. Or else it's coming from beneath his skin. That's the thing with skin — it's always the surface of something else.

Strangers, men in particular, treat her tattoo like an open invitation, the acknowledgment of which they hope will lead to other, more revealing exposures. She always evades their questions, using enigmatic phrases like, "Oh, you know," or "Otter, ankle, get it?"

They never do, and neither does he. And now, because of everyone else's insistence, he can't ask. That would make him derivative when what he's fighting for is to be an original.

The tattoo in question is a one-foot replica of *Lontra canadensis*, its head tucked behind her knee, its tail wrapped around her foot and in between her toes. Lying on the couch they've admired its sleek form, the way its thousand tiny hairs perfectly comingle with her own to form a single organism. So lifelike, in fact, that he's forever surprised to find it still hanging on. Some day, when she's standing by a pool, barefoot in cut-off shorts, he's certain it'll make its escape.

Pleasurable as they are, these lazy day musings don't get him any closer to the mystery of why. If anyone deserves to be let in, it's him. She's his girlfriend — she's said as much on two occasions — and this alone should impel her to open up.

In so many other ways their brief history has been defined by a willingness to entertain such vulnerable revelations: driving up and down the coast in a borrowed convertible only to stop at a roadside shake shack to clarify their intentions; holding hands to the bitter end of a psychological thriller wherein one of a couple keeps secrets until it's too late; meeting and hugging her mother while still in her bath robe; losing his cool over a younger, less serious friend who nevertheless managed to buy his first house in a neighborhood full of up-and-coming artists; her ongoing flirtation with several forms of addiction followed by his own confession of the stuttering problem that robbed him of his childhood. Why not, then, the one memory that's left a visible sign?

There wouldn't be an issue if the river otter were simply a thing with her — but there're no pictures or paintings in her apartment, no novelty mugs or stuffed likenesses, nothing on her bookshelf to suggest a secret fetish. She doesn't aspire to be a zoologist, but rather, if she ever gets her act together, a singer in an alt country band. Her favorite animal's the leopard or porcupine, depending upon the situation, and growing up in a suburb of San Diego she found herself nowhere near an ottered river, but perennially in view of the sea.

No, this one tattoo appears to run against the broad current of her life and this makes it all the more dangerous — some pocket of autonomy, like a hidden child, thriving under the surface and behind the scenes without his knowledge or consent.

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The one time he meets her extended family — the closest the two of them ever come to normalcy — it's to attend her niece's fourth grade Open House. The eight of them (mother, sister, brother-in-law, niece, nephew, nanny) congregate outside the school before entering as a group at 7. He's the last to arrive, since she's asked him to meet them at 7:15. The classroom theme is The Universe, and each student has been tasked with creating a three-dimensional diorama in contemplation of one of its wonders. Her niece's project is "Cygnus X-1." It features

a black funnel wrapped in a silk stocking, most of which is hidden behind a poster board upon which Styrofoam stars on wires are bent back toward the center of the funnel, thereby giving the illusion of being sucked in.

Her niece's stroke of genius is to correctly predict that passers-by will mistakenly treat the Black Hole as a jeans or coat pocket and that they'll mindlessly pour objects of value into its seam — hence the stocking, which is really a means of collecting these items.

At the end of the night her niece, for whom there is no curfew, takes the stocking to a hidden place in the backyard and empties its contents onto the ground. By flashlight, she sorts through coins, keys, a USB drive labeled XXX, a pocket knife, a stack of lottery tickets secured with a red rubber band (several of which remain unscratched), a business card for a local tree trimmer, another for a mobile pet groomer, and a handwritten note that reads: *I don't want to loose you.*

This last one is his — she gave it to him earlier that day. He'd wanted to poke fun at her, except that the misspelling, in context, basically amounts to the same. But why the note at all, if things were going as well as he'd presumed? Was it an act of vulnerability, or a preemptive strike, a way of putting him on alert? To lose is to have something taken; to loose is to let something go. The fear grew and pulsed inside of him until, in a last-ditch effort to keep his cool, he'd tossed the note into the Black Hole, hoping it would squeeze the doubt into an irrecoverable singularity along with all the rest. This is the sort of thing that happens when you put your faith in fourth grade science.

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One thing about her, she's always on the move, forever avoiding capture within a fixed frame of reference — so unlike the otter. Whenever they have the option of taking the elevator or stairs, she always chooses stairs. It'll be four flights and she'll only grow stronger with each one. Her stamina defies what he knows to be true of human nature. He loves this about her. Loves and fears that he can't keep up.

But then one night she surprises him with an instant camera. Let's take dirty pictures, she says. And we'll only develop one set and we'll put them in my bedroom safe. And we'll only look when we look together. Anything goes. What do you think?

He thinks she's desperate for certainty, that this is her way of keeping a record.

He says, I need to free myself from food. The trick is learning to hate it — the look, taste, texture, smell. To get as close to vitamany liquids and pills as I possibly can, only putting something in my body after I've taken something comparable out.

Her hands are clutching the bottom of her t-shirt in frozen anticipation. What are you saying?

I'm saying you look too good for pictures.

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When her own note makes its way back to her via the niece (who unbeknownst to him has made a study of everyone's handwriting), he's surprised to find her inquisitive rather than angry or disappointed. If she's been hurt she doesn't let on, not yet, preferring instead to feign seduction by the odds of it all. That the Cosmos has played such a heavy hand situates her beyond reproach.

Do you believe in the Big Bang?

Of course, he says. Don't you?

But don't you think God could've been behind it?

Listen, he says. It's easier than you think to manufacture a secular miracle. I took a lot of accounting classes in college

**Listen, he says,
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and here's how it's done. You start by sending out 2048 anonymous emails, each promising to accurately predict the rise and fall of a volatile stock for ten straight days. You ask each recipient to put their trust and their faith in you. On the evening before the first day you send out 1024 emails predicting that the stock

will rise and 1024 predicting it will fall. The next day you take the remaining 1024 and divide them into two groups of 512,

followed by 256, 128, 64, 32, 16, 8, 4, 2 and 1. At the end of this process, there'll only be one person remaining. From their perspective, the odds are staggering, to the point of revelation. You've become this benevolent force from on high, a voice to be trusted. At this point they're putty in your hands — bad investments, animal worship, killing-for-hire, truck stop sex, you name it.

Are you calling God a pyramid scheme?

If there are upwards of 2048 independent universes, then yes.

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Shortly after, she plans their first weekend getaway, to Cambria, along the California coast. Otter country. Hearst Castle is nearby and they can always take a guided tour if they run out of other ideas, wink, wink.

It's not until they're in the souvenir shop that she mentions she's been there before, with her boyfriend — she doesn't say ex-boyfriend — only a few months back.

Cambria, that is. She says they never made it to the Castle.

That night, they're lying opposite one another on a motel balcony lounge chair. They've brought out pillows and a blanket. He's massaging her feet like a would-be penitent, rubbing the otter as much as her. The ocean is supposed to structure the moment as one belonging to eternity.

Just look at that view, he says. Oh, to be on a boat with nothing but the deep beneath your pillow.

Yep. It sure is something.

The silence is maddening. They're all talked out with nothing to show for it.

He says, I'm going to tell you a story and if you don't correct me, then it'll mean I'm right, alright?

She crosses her legs in anticipation.

It's an act of desperation, some feeble attempt to piece together a passable narrative he can cling to in the absence of any alternative; what amounts to a tattooing of her tattoo:

You had a dream, woke up shaking with the aftereffects of a love lived and never lost. In it you were a French trader travel-

ing through the interior of the country in the time before the land was claimed, before it appeared on any map or had a name. You were a man, and adventure was in your blood. Still, you never traveled alone but part of an expedition canoeing one of the newly discovered rivers, a mainline into mystery. You were in charge of the equipment — food and supplies were strapped to the back of your canoe and the weight was far from evenly distributed. You had difficulty steering but you were afraid to let on. One morning, while rounding a bend between two mountains, you got stuck against a fallen branch and the rest of the party disappeared. By the time you freed yourself they were out of sight, taken by the current. You were all alone and they ahead, somewhere, waiting. But then this river otter comes up to you, curious, playful, not in the least bit hesitant, though it keeps its distance. It accepts you — messy, unshaven you, with no food in hand. The attraction is mutual. This innocent, trusting thing — how could you abandon it? You drag your canoe across the river to the bank where it makes its home. That first night is the scariest. A billion stars above, no light on the ground, not even a fire. You refuse to start one yourself, not wanting to draw attention. Over the next several weeks you build the foundation of a life together, a meditation on the topic of give and take. Always a dance. Come winter you're living together in the burrow the otter built for itself. The space is cramped and wooden and warm, a womb. You live this way for years, decades even, unencumbered, unself-conscious. You lose your humanity and gain something in the exchange. So, too, with the otter. It learns to stand upright, to lean against a tree in repose. For a while you convince it to wear a hat. The two of you share in the daily duties — fishing, housekeeping, the devising of new games to play. The turning point comes one afternoon in early spring, when another expedition happens upon you by surprise. The otter, Penelope, sees them first and dives in the river to meet them. You go in after, grabbing and holding her underwater for as long as your breath will allow. When you surface, the party is almost upon you. One full breath and down you go again. Penelope stops fighting you this time. After it's over she holds you at arm's length for at least a year. She can't understand your hesitation

and you have no way of making her see. You're in the process of developing some explanatory pantomime — you've begun contemplating children — when you're awoken from the dream by a loud bang coming from the apartment next door.

In the interim she's rolled onto her side and she pretends to have fallen asleep, but her breathing is too shallow. He could place his hand on her breast or shake her awake by her ribs, but this would only rescue her from the stillness she always seems to equate with death. Instead he turns over, relieved, finally, to have won.

The next morning he suggests a walk along the beach because it's raining and she says no because it's raining.

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On the long drive home she admits that *Godzilla* (2014) awoke a fire inside of her. Why can't there be other predators of man than men? She finds all interpersonal drama to be as predictable as it is benumbing. Why no worthy adversaries? Giant creatures from the sea, the earth, the sky? She's convinced she'd be a better person if only there were a 50/50 chance she wouldn't make it through each day.

He knows, he knows. Some nights he's so bored he wakes up yawning — and isn't the otter, in light of what she's just said, such a pedestrian choice? The days aren't much better, though they are brighter and more apropos of the future he's trying to make for himself. Yet he's constantly disappointed about a great many things, one of which is that there aren't more varieties of birds. Can this be all there is? What about birds with four wings? Or birds with two heads? Why don't more birds eat big game? Would it be such a bad thing if a bird or two had the sentience of a human being and could convey to us the fluid beauty and the awful tedium of flight?

They don't fight outright until later that evening, in the middle of a busy seaside street and in front of strangers who are wary not to invade their space, even as they slow to dig in. Finally, the audience she craves, the one he's loathe to acknowledge.

She says, You're nothing but a blob. Why can't you just come out and say what you mean, or at the very least mean what you say?

You're right, he says. And then he lets go. I give up. Please just let me give up.

* * *

A month later they sit down to dinner at a newly renamed restaurant by the water — her invitation, completely out of the blue. The hostess guides them through a maze of furniture to a sunken table near the window. She orders water and then he orders water. This is never a good sign.

She fidgets under the table, discussing plans to go back to school, and just when he's convinced that things are back to normal she pulls a positive pregnancy test from her purse.

But we used protection every time but twice.

Was it that few?

This lack of memory is further evidence of her unnerving ability to make him disappear and reappear on a whim, as though each time were not some minor miracle, given the contentiousness of their coupling.

What are the odds?

He's still staring at the plus sign when the server comes to take their order.

We'll start with an appetizer, she says. Your choice.

My choice? Oh, good. Mine. Okay. He contemplates the menu like a spiritual exercise. Calamari?

Boats, in a variety of sizes and shapes, are coming and going in the channel outside the window. In each one he finds passengers enjoying the paradox of liberation, freely moving around a space of confinement.

What are we going to do?

She smiles. There is no we, and you can't *loose* what you never had.

The appetizer arrives like the mock-up of a massacre. In it he finds a hidden strength.

So who's the other guy?

You are. What's it going to take to convince you?

The otter.

She stares out the window, past the boats, beyond the harbor.

It's going to be a long meal. He begins to tell a story about something funny that happened to him recently, but when he realizes it happened to the two of them together, he pretends to choke on squid.

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He takes an unexpected drive downtown, not going anywhere in particular, not looking for anything definite. Just driving. His reason, when it's ready, will reveal itself.

He parks in front of a theatre and balks at seeing a show. The last thing he wants is to be held captive by someone else's imagination. What he's after is his own and it can't be found in the comfort of a darkened seat.

He takes to the streets on foot, minding the storefront windows but ignoring the signs.

Awash in a slipstream translucency of clothing and gelato and trade paperbacks on the other side of reflective glass, it isn't until he reaches a crosswalk — with its image of a ghost, at first solid, then telegraph-

ing its disappearance in flashing white — that he locates the opening line of his truth: I'm going to be a father.

He breathes in the revelation, but he can't seem to exhale it.

Then the halcyon days, the restless nights. Somewhere, another of his face is forming.

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On April 1st of all mornings she comes to see him one last time, looking skinny and radiant as ever.

The apartment is spotless, shamefully so, as though no one's been living in it. As soon as he's able, he rumples one of the pillows.

She's moving to the Bay Area with another guy, whose characteristics remain a mystery. Absent any particulars, all he can do is conjure the image of the French trader.

What do you want from me?

Nothing.

Then why are you here?

I want to give you something, she says, her eyes darting all around the apartment so as never to settle on his. Call it peace of mind.

He waits out the silence while she backpedals to the open doorway.

There is no baby and there never was. It's just a thing I do when I get cold feet and want to know for sure.

The sun is directly behind her, its light bending around her face, stinging his eyes.

Hold on, hold on.

He places his hand on the doorknob, partly to support his knees, partly to regain some sense of control.

And the otter?

Enough, she says. You know your problem? You act like you invented the universe. Or like my niece's project gave you special access. You think you have sway over what happens here? That it's your dumping ground or, I don't know, some secret oasis?

No.

Life is surface. Me, you, Trevor, the otter: we're all points on a line, not flues to some secret fire inside of you. Things are what they are.

Except when they're not.

She takes a step toward him, and he presses his back to the door.

You remember that odds game you told me about, the secular miracle? Well, you're forgetting something. You can also make a person lose ten times in a row and at the end of day they'll feel like a fool.

That's not how it —

No more games.

She glances over her shoulder toward the street.

I have to go.

I knew you'd run away.

She gets as far as the stairwell before pausing at the first step. You still don't get it, do you?

He comes onto the landing, away from the sun, and when she turns to face him the otter disappears behind her leg.

I've been doing a high wire act ever since we met. Your head is always up here, she says, motioning to the sky. For all your talk of honesty, you leave a person nowhere to fall.

He looks over the railing and spots her car in front of a hydrant. A large figure reclines in the passenger seat.

I'm not the one keeping secrets.

Secrets? She laughs. Anything you don't understand. You're the otter, you chicken shit bird, always flying around the room and never landing. Not even to gauge the temperature of the wire. Not even to get the feeling back in your poor, blue feet.