

## The Smell of Danger

The lagoon at night is a rapacious dream. Framed by weeping willows and large leaf maples, the primeval call of raccoons, coyotes, ducks and geese pierce the air as predator and prey play out their lives. It is nature's version of a soap opera: stolen eggs, impregnated mates and violated territory, all headline events for the evening's story. I could never tell if these squawks and grunts were indignant responses, exaltation or cries of terror. One night we almost ran into two men having particularly aggressive sex. I couldn't move, couldn't stop staring. Sarah carefully pulled me back and we went around another way. *What are they doing?* I asked breathlessly. Sarah just looked at me and kept on walking.

Sarah was an indomitable walker. For years her nocturnal rambles took her over bridges, through wooded areas and down train tracks. A strident figure in Sally Ann work boots and long woolen coat, she was my Virgilian guide to the midnight shadows. We had known each other for several months but these strolls together were new. And while I was definitely not her Dante, I was still a babe in the woods of my own forest dark.

We didn't talk much that night once we passed the lagoon and entered the seemingly infinite realm of ocean and sky. The seawall was quiet, only our footsteps whispering to the murmuring surf. Time wandered by leaving no trace, the two of us self-contained within the black veil of a moonless canopy. Up ahead, a shadow tore at the evening's shroud. Sarah shifted, her hands no longer in her pockets. The man passed. Several minutes later, the darkness once again our sole companion she said,

*He was dangerous. I could smell it.*

## The Smell of Danger

I waited for her to say more. The waves pushed against the rocky beach and receded in an incessant, not-quite-soothing lullaby. The rock cliffs to my right smelled of moss and slight decay. There was a whiff of guano from the cormorants' nesting grounds up ahead. Is that what she smelled? Anxiety crept up my spine. I wanted to know what she sensed but I couldn't ask without looking ignorant or more naïve than she knew me to be. Sarah must have felt my unease. *Its okay*, she said, *he's gone*. But it wasn't. What does danger smell like?

We strolled through those cold and wet months into the hot, humid summer that followed. Moon shadows languished over conversations of politics and philosophy. We skipped in the rain under aubergine umbrellas, swam naked in pools with jewel-toned starfish, and told each other dreams meant only for our ears. Our minds melded into one as we walked the stygian paths between friendship and intimacy. Walking beside Sarah was like standing on a cliff edge, the whole world below inviting me to walk forward and accept its embrace. By September I'd made a decision.

Outside our local café the setting sun illuminated the mountains to the north. The downtown high rises glowed golden as seagulls called out above the din of rush hour traffic. A crimson leaf flirted with a warm breeze as it danced slowly down the street. Sarah was looking out the window. I knew without having to see that her eyes would be intense, peering far beyond the busy intersection, drilling into the twilight of the gathering dusk.

*What are you thinking?* I asked.

She turned towards me, eyes refocusing on the space between us. It didn't seem like she was going to speak. Dishes clanged in the kitchen, a car horn blared; sirens screamed in the near-distance. Finally,

## The Smell of Danger

*Oh, just how much I like this little corner of the world, watching the people go by, the ....*

She paused as the server refilled our coffee. I didn't think she was going to finish her thought. She stared into her mug, mechanically stirring in cream. My watch ticked by with investment. Someone laughed. Uninvited doubt crept into my belly. I began wishing for our meal to arrive. Then,

*The busy-ness. I like that. Makes me feel a part of everything but also removed. I can watch the traffic, accidents even; see couples walk by with their pantomimed angst, witness drug deals ... all of it, yet, not be involved.* She paused again, spared me a glance and almost whispered, *I can take it all in, but not be affected.*

*Safe?* I ventured.

She didn't answer, her eyes once more on the theatre outside the window. I watched her as she watched the exterior world, marveling as ever as to the mysteries of her mind. I fantasized of yet a third person coming to the glass and looking at me, completing the circle. But no one looked.

Our food arrived and with it my voice. *Sarah, I want to tell you something.* She turned my way once more. I met her eyes. Something shifted.

*No, Ann, no, you don't.*

It was like a door slammed shut locking all my thoughts on the other side. A whirlwind of emotions swept through me — confusion, disbelief and something unexpected and old, shame. I wanted to speak from the heart, tell her my truth, but my mouth was dry and throat too tight. Tension filled the vacuum where sweet words should have been.

## The Smell of Danger

*But*, I finally managed. She cut me off with her hand. *No*, she said, and took a bite of her grilled cheese.

I ate my sandwich. The toast was hard and the tomatoes soggy. Did it always come like this? My heart raced; sweat dripped down my arms. I glanced up and caught her eyes. They were mirrors to the street, strangers running through grey-green pupils, an incessant stream of haphazard connections lost and found. And something else behind those apparitions, something primeval as if I had cornered her in her lair. My nose twitched. It was then I caught it. Even now I can't describe it, but like the quarry sniffing the air before venturing out I knew what it was. It was the smell of danger.