

Fishing for Elephants

Smooth black stone. Reflected in it are dead flowers, in which lasagna-coloured mold grows. Also dead: a fern, with a rake stuck in it, tines akimbo, leaning against the rock. Its final resting place.

Cold snowless blue. Liongrass at the bus stop, there I see her. Tomato soup girl—loose white shirt, simple, brown slacks. Perhaps a touch of embroidery somewhere, green... A lake in her eyes, floral. I listen to her lips pour. I call her tomato soup girl because every day she eats tomato soup. Maybe that explains her orange hair.

She can talk about nothing forever on the bus. Once she tells everything about fishing and camping at Killbear: “An’ your sleeping bag’d always be cold at first,” she says, “but it’d warm up as you go, only you have to take your clothes off, because if you keep ‘em on, they trap the heat an’ not the bag.”

“Don’t tell me,” I boast; “I camped so much I know everything about it.”

“Didn’t.”

“Did!”

“So you been camping? What’s the biggest fish y’ever caught?”

Faded mustard dripping unsurety. Tongue fetches a fat fish from my mind’s eye. Painting pictures with arms stretched wide as they can go—very large canvas. The fish lands on the dock bigger than me. Tomato soup girl’s sides are kind of moving, suddenly loud laughter comes from her trachea.

“Sounds like you were fishin’ for elephants,” she finally breathes, bronchitic. My missing puzzle piece confusion, I forget to step on the bus until the tall driver’s seat scolds me with my mother’s voice.

“Fishing for elephants”: Unsure if it means exaggerating or trying to do a very impossible thing.

Same day lunch, we two in the cafeteria. Curry accident. The normal people banished me. Can’t have curry or pickles, also marmalade. Worst case: mum makes sick combination, like vomit. Secret of mine: five dollars in my pocket, saving for real money lunch at the counter. Me and my curry walk maimed hippo walk to the table nobody sits at. Lonely silence flickering light shows me trying to shovel curry into garbage can while nobody sitting at watches.

“Hey, you,” tomato soup girl announces over the loudspeaker. Which is my ear if you’re close enough. Plans foiled so I sit at the table. “What, your mom makin’ your lunches?” she coughs heartily.

“Sure. Yeah.” Clever responses escape me like watery curry sliding off your spoon. I scoop again at my curry. “You have tomato soup. That’s real stupid. Why do

you gotta have tomato soup?"

"I use' to bring san'wiches," says tomato soup girl, "but Josiah Sinclair kept stompin' on 'em."

Nodding comes over me, I nod for twenty seconds. My curry disappears in twenty seconds. Floundering back from trash can I mutter, "Why ain't I never seen you before, you crazy?"

"Folks don't like to see me," she replies faintly smiling. "My hair—thinkin' I'm up to mischief."

"Maybe it's the tomato soup makes it so red."

"Want some? I see you lost your lunch." Two fingers in my pocket. Kleenex-box coloured fiver bill appears and tomato soup girl smiles.

"You got somethin'," she says, "—you should blow your nose."

My lips deceive me, and the sound escapes me, "Aw, fish," then I stupidly grin.

Same day classes behind us the bus in front of us. Somehow I look for her carrot head as I climb on and find her in a crowd, spot her out of a school of fish. "Hey."

Tomato soup girl gives a Cheshire cat toothy smile which stays in the air after. On lumpy leather we sit together, talking first of weather. A bus ride lasts the time you're in a dentist's waiting room. That's O.K. Red vegetable stain on loose white shirt on Cheshire cat smile girl. I offer a granola bar, and we share, stuffing the wrapper between seats.

"What's your name?" I ask, a breath of granola bar somewhere in the back of my throat. "What do you like?" Question fumblingly inane like the bumblebee at the stick it thinks is a flower.

"Like swingin'," says tomato soup girl, glad-eyed. "I like readin' an' campin'. I got a tree house, out in the woods by the pond. No one comes there but me, an' I read an' pretend I'm somewhere else."

"It's winter now," I stupid, "do you go there in winter?"

Like hearing there's no Santa Claus, tomato soup girl's mouth turns corners at the edges, and her head gets a bit heavier. "No," she says sadly. "I don't." And she coughs a bit more, and turns her back. Five minutes of purgatory later she smiles and whispers, "Y'know, I don't really like tomato soup."

Mystified, discovering ancient secrets: "You don't?"

"Nothin' doin'," she finds this very funny, and stretches her neck to laugh high and loud.

Girls! Tomato soup girls!

Wheels spin past a golf course and when they pass, so do we, watching out of a window.

"I been thinkin'," freckly female announces catlike, "I been thinkin' we could be friends."

"Well don't tell the whole bus," I say, fearing tides break over dikes. "You're a girl, after all."

Giggling girl stands suddenly and hits me in swinging a backpack to her shoulder. "Sorry," says tomato soup from inside her backpack, and "Sorry," I reply, and her stop urges her to leave. She coughs a bit, then turns to grin goodbye.

"See you tomorrow," I call, words echoing on cheap grey material.

All that's left of her, beside me on the seat, is an imprint on the leather, which slowly levels.

Phone rings me out of a late night dream, strong male voice beckons me hold it to my ear.

"Sammy told me you was a friend?" he asks.

"Who?"

"Sammy. Sammy Simmons."

Familiar familiar familial. "Oh! Tomato soup girl."

"Who?"

"Tomato soup girl. Sammy Simmons."

"Sammy's in the hospital," says the rhinoceros over the phone, "she asked if you'd see her."

"Well, I'm sleeping now."

"So's she. Didn't make no difference to her."

"What's she there for?"

"Doctor says, 'Bronchitis'," deep voice terrifies me, "says she oughtta be alright." Oughtta?

But: "I'll come by tomorrow, Mister Simmons, if that's O.K." It is. Click. Onto the receiver.

Guess what the stupidest decision of my life is. But I hardly notice. I sleep in warm rainforests.

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I visit it from time to time to tell it "Sorry." My dad told me I could bring her back, she'd be there, living in my heart, if I tried to remember her every day. So I bring tomato soup and see what she does. But I think maybe I'm just fishing for elephants.