

HEIDI DIEHL

Second Forest

Lydia left with Darren after lunch. They could skip the panel discussion, Darren told her, and make it back in time for cocktails. Lydia agreed, even though a few days earlier, she had circled the panel—*Braille in the Information Age*—in the conference brochure. Darren's car was in a lot behind the hotel, and they were out of the city quickly, up a steep hill and onto a narrow green road. Ocean Beaches, the signs began to promise.

"I thought the ocean would be too cold for swimming," Lydia said. It was August, but she was glad she'd brought a sweatshirt along. The thin breeze from the car's open windows felt new to her. Until now, summer at home in Boston had been heavy and slow. Seasons had meaning on the east coast. She'd been enjoying the lack of definition here; her first week in Oregon had felt more like fall, at least the golden side of it.

"We're going to swim close to the ocean," Darren said. "But not in it."

Lydia watched him instead of the road. His loose steering made her uneasy; so did his foot, too quick on the brake. Trucks hurtled towards them on the opposite single lane, sudden around the bends, carrying stacked logs or hidden cargo. Darren's hatchback was battered and old. It hesitated on each incline as he pressed into the gas.

Lydia did like Darren's large hands on the steering wheel, and the music he'd picked for the ride. The smell of the woods, her body tired in the seat, the pleasant slow feeling that came from drinking too much the night before: all of this was enough. She liked that Darren was taking her somewhere.

"I haven't been out here since I was in grad school," Darren said. That was probably fifteen years ago. Lydia thought he was a little older than she was, in his mid-forties. She knew that he was a one-on-one at a school in eastern Washington, that he'd been there for some time.

"Did you do your Masters in TVI?" Lydia asked. Teaching the Visually Impaired—with Darren, she could skip straight to shorthand.

He nodded. "Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth."

"I hope your swimming hole hasn't been turned into condos," Lydia said. She reached under her collar and untwisted the strap of her bathing suit, a nylon column with no mystery. She used it for lap swimming at home, and she'd brought it for exercise in the hotel pool. But she and Darren had kissed the night before, and if she'd known it was going to happen, she would have packed a different suit.

“Not out here,” Darren said. “This is state land.”

“So no hot tub, then?”

He touched her bare arm. “You need the sweatshirt,” he said. “You want to get toasty.”

“We could put the heat on,” Lydia said. “To replicate summer.”

“This is how I do it.” Darren stuck his thumb into the vest he wore over his t-shirt. “Fleece in August.”

Darren’s confidence with his body was also new to Lydia—the clinging fabric, the vigilant posture. Darren was the kind of guy that Lydia and her husband Scott might make fun of. Too manly, if they saw him strutting through the supermarket. A hippie jock, one who could rhapsodize about his weight-lifting acumen and his hiking boots in the same sentence.

But alone with Darren, the target of his assertion, Lydia didn’t mind it.

There were maps stuffed in the pocket on the door, and a yellowed paper cup. She wondered if Darren’s wife used this car. Like Lydia, Darren wore a ring, though neither of them had offered detail.

“There’s a metal gate,” Darren said. “On the shoulder. That’s what we’re looking for.”

Lydia watched green flicker by. “I’m glad these woods are protected,” she said.

“There were fires here in the ’30s,” said Darren. “This is all new growth.”

But the forest was dense and established, a primeval place that seemed to harbor perfect quiet, deep shade, a promise that mistakes could

be overcome.

Lydia’s husband wasn’t expecting much detail about her trip. Scott hadn’t wanted her to attend the conference, even though it was a routine event—she’d been in the field for seven years. When she met Scott, Lydia was a Special Ed teacher, but when their son Max was born, she went back to school and got a second degree. She wanted to stay one step ahead of Max’s disability—low vision in both eyes. Now, at nine years old, his sight was 20/200, which meant he read with a magnifier and took a bus to his school, half a mile from home. He was pulled out of his classroom once a week for Orientation and Mobility lessons, but he participated in art and gym, and though Lydia knew her son would be limited by his impairment, she didn’t agree with her husband that it was a tragedy.

The night before she’d left for Portland, Scott lit into her. She was packing her suitcase; her clothes were piled on the bed.

“You think you’re the only one who can make decisions about Max,” Scott said. “That you know more than I do.” He stalked around, his anger expanding in the room.

Because there was a surgery, still in development, that might help Max. Lydia thought Max should focus on accommodation—Max who played basketball in thick glasses and said he was used to his vision, that he didn’t want to change who he was, though he sometimes also said that it looked as if it were raining indoors. But the doctors, the research, the literature—none of it offered anything concrete. The surgery

wouldn't be tested on actual patients for another five years. And Max didn't want to change, a wish Lydia thought they should respect. A wish that confounded Scott.

"This is my job," Lydia told Scott. "The county is paying for me to go."

Scott didn't respond. He fiddled with the things on Lydia's dresser, knocking into what she'd lined up to take with her.

"The kids I work with are different than Max," Lydia said. An argument she'd made before: she taught babies and young children who had no sight at all.

"You can't even say *worse*," Scott said. "They're *worse* off than Max. You don't have to be so P.C."

"You don't have to be so negative," Lydia said. The wrong thing to say, because Scott was optimistic—he'd found the specialist in Philadelphia who was developing the procedure. But Lydia didn't want Max to spend his childhood visiting doctors when the surgery wouldn't even be possible until he was an adult. And she was afraid that Scott's hope was a false one. Believing in something far off would make them miss what was in front of them.

During the first week of the conference, when Lydia called home, Scott put Max on the phone quickly. Which was fine with Lydia. She'd never spent so much time away from her son. Ten days in all, and she wanted to find a gift to mark her absence, to make sure that Max minded that she was gone. That was the fear, that he would care about it less than she did.

The conference would last another three days,

with lectures and statistics and working groups. Lydia had spent the first week in a cane travel class. Max didn't use a cane, though he might at some point. And a few of her students did, four-year-olds feeling out the shape of the world. Lydia met Darren in the class; it was the walking around with her eyes covered and his hand on her arm that had started all of this.

Now Darren braked hard and pulled into a notch on the side of the road. "This is it," he said. "The best swimming spot in the country."

"I'll be the judge of that," Lydia said.

She gathered her purse and the towel she'd taken from the hotel and joined Darren by the metal fence. Two other cars were parked along the road. She'd hoped to be alone with Darren; she knew that they needed to move quickly, that they'd gravitated towards each other because what they could expect was contained.

The trail beyond the fence led through the trees. When Lydia was teaching, she told her students to see by using their other senses. The smell of fir trees and dried pine. The quiet brush of branches moving overhead, the soft give of damp earth. This was how she coached Max too, to use every bit of sight he had; available vision, it was called, and even a rough shape or shadow was something to work with. But Lydia felt guilty now, because the real beauty in this place was what she could see clearly: the sunlight's lace across the forest floor, the sap stuck in ridged bark, all the subtle texture around her. She wouldn't be able to bring any of it back to Max.

The path sloped down towards a river, its

banks lined with high rocks. The water moved with a slow current. Darren led her to a clearing where other people had set up on one side. Two men and a woman, a little girl darting around. The child was the only one wearing a swimsuit. The suit had styrofoam stitched in, a round floatation device that exaggerated the girl's thin limbs. She seemed too old for it—a little younger than Max, Lydia guessed. The adults lounged with their picnic: gallons of soda and crinkling plastic bags.

“Get back here,” the woman yelled to the little girl. The woman held a cigarette; her hair was too yellow. The context felt all wrong—Lydia imagined her at a bus stop, a shopping mall.

Lydia followed Darren to the other side of the clearing, and they stopped next to a steep ledge. The water was ten feet below. Darren didn't stop for explanation or check the temperature first: he took his shirt off with one hand and jumped in. Lydia watched his body tunnel down through the water, which was clear all the way to the bottom. His mouth emerged first, grabbing at the air.

Scott was a phlebotomist. He made bread and brewed beer; he usually beat Lydia at Scrabble. She might have continued like this, able to ride out the occasional waves of outside attraction that lapped against her marriage. But lately, with the uncertain prospect of Max's surgery, Scott's anger cut a wide trench between them. Lydia wasn't angry at Scott. She felt sharp disappointment instead. His hope for the surgery came from a bitterness about Max's condition that Lydia didn't want to share.

Lydia removed her clothes and covered her purse with the towel. She arranged herself, shoulders back and stomach in, while Darren climbed up the rocks. He stood close behind her and a chill came off his body, like freezer draft against her warm skin.

“Don't look down,” he said, cold fingers on her arms. “Just jump in.”

“Not yet.” The surface of the water was too far away. She wasn't going to jump.

Still behind her, he moved forward, holding her arms. “Let me model it for you,” he said. Shop talk. Babies learned by mimicking; the ones who couldn't see had to be taught physically. During home visits, Lydia held small children and repeated life's routine motions, even with toys. Playing was serious work for the brain.

Darren's wet bathing suit dripped on her legs. Infidelity was easier than she would have thought: drinks were helpful. There was abundant alcohol at the conference, plenty of enforced socializing, and the charged, boastful air that came with shared esoteric knowledge: *no one else knows how to do what we do.*

The kiss had happened quickly, in a corner of a bar near the hotel, their colleagues fanned out or already gone. As they walked back to the hotel, Lydia wasn't sure what would happen; guilt was not fully formed yet, only desire, and she thought she would go to his room with him if he asked. But in the elevator, they met someone from the cane travel class, a teacher from Omaha. Lydia got off at her floor and went to her room alone. It was only that morning, over coffee in

the lobby, that Darren asked her if she wanted to go swimming.

Now, in daylight, in her swimsuit, that desire, and her ability to ignore the rest of her life, felt much harder to claim. The other people were right behind her, loud with their junk food and unhappiness.

“Like fuck it is,” the yellow-haired woman said.

“Like you know anyway,” a male voice responded. Lydia heard the two men laugh. A can snapped open, and the sound repeated crisply against the river’s stone sides.

Darren stepped away from Lydia and jumped in. She followed the path, winding down to the water’s edge. The cold was immediate, and her feet struggled for traction against the rocks. She crouched down and tried to enter with dignity, because Darren was waiting for her in the water.

She forced herself to plunge. As soon as she was under, she had to come up. Every breath was an accomplishment, each gasp requiring thought to be achieved. The slow cloudiness of her hangover was gone. She had chosen to come here, to this spot hidden in the trees, thousands of miles away from her husband and her son.

She moved towards Darren. “I’ve never been swimming in winter before,” she said.

“Come over here.” Darren offered his hand and pulled her closer. “It’s warmer in the sun.”

She was right next to him, and she could see a small dimple in his left earlobe, the side that had been turned away from her in the car. The site of an old piercing, something he’d done to articulate

himself, a statement he later felt compelled to undo. An entire history that she didn’t know, a thought that both excited and frightened her.

The current carried them through a wide patch of sunlight. When she looked back at the ledge, she couldn’t see the picnic under the trees. She thought of her purse, with the credit cards she shared with Scott. She should have left it in the car.

“This forest seems ancient,” Lydia said. “Like cavemen might have seen it.”

“It’s a trick,” Darren said. “It’s only been here since the ’30s.”

“It’s better than that windowless conference room.”

“What did you think of the presentation this morning?” Darren asked.

The talk had been given by a teacher who had limited vision herself, who said, with strident conviction, that only the blind should teach the blind. Though Lydia had heard this stance before, it left her feeling wounded, and then ashamed for assuming that hurt.

“My son has low vision,” Lydia said. She hadn’t mentioned Max in the cane travel class; she didn’t want to seem unprofessional. But it felt dishonest to ignore him now. “I’m not sure how he would answer that question.”

Surprise formed on Darren’s face with her mention of a child. But he nodded, and arranged a clinical understanding. They were colleagues again. They might have been in front of a white board, or clutching styrofoam cups.

“I was a special ed teacher first,” Lydia said.

She always felt she had to explain. The irony would be too bitter, that her child should be born with the exact disability she'd been trained to accommodate. "But I went back to school when he was a baby."

"Is he mainstreamed?" Darren was all frowning concern now. The wedding rings had been one thing, she could see, but the kid was another. Disrupting a family, he probably thought.

Lydia nodded. "He's managing fine," she said. "There might be a procedure that could improve his vision, but that's not even in trials yet. And he doesn't like the idea of surgery."

"Is it the risk that it won't work?" This was what Lydia wanted, to talk to people who could consider beyond the cramped confines of expectation and fear.

"He claims not to mind the way he sees," Lydia said. "He says it's part of who he is."

"It's a tough one," said Darren. "I've heard my students talk this way, but they don't know what it's like to have normal vision."

Disappointment registered in Lydia's stomach. Darren sounded like Scott, who thought it was wrong to let Max decide, that it would be criminal for them, his parents, not to guide him.

"I'm proud of him," she said.

Darren looked back at her, quieted by her sharp tone.

"I don't feel it's my right to impose," she said. "As a sighted person. Exactly what that woman said this morning."

Darren nodded again, and she could tell by his detachment—she'd learned it in grad school,

with standardized clients and hypothetical situations—that he did not have children of his own, that this wide, messy thing she'd opened for him was larger than what the two of them had brought out here.

"The surgery is years off anyway," Lydia told Darren. It seemed to her that they should talk about anything else.

She kicked her legs against the deep emptiness below. The conversation had distracted her from the temperature of the water, and she felt numb now, some amphibious shift in her body. Silence settled in; there were only the sounds of the forest, one that had become lush and shadowing in just fifty years.

Lydia moved closer to Darren and put her hands on his waist. His skin felt hard and slippery against her fingers.

"This is a beautiful place," she said.

Darren pulled away from her; his arms cut through the space between them as he moved to stay afloat.

"Maybe we should get out," he said. "Hypothermia would be a real bummer."

She was slower than he was as they paddled back against the current. When the top of the ledge came into view, the yellow-haired woman was standing there with the little girl, close to where Lydia had left her clothes. The woman stared at the water; she must have seen Lydia's failed attempt with Darren.

Lydia went out the way she'd come in, keeping herself low, careful on the submerged moss. She imagined what she looked like, a bear moving in

for a drink. As she went up the path, she didn't want to interact with the other people; she was ready to get in the car and ride with the windows up.

Only one of the men was there. His soaked mesh shorts sagged over his underwear, and Lydia could see the shape of his ass against the wet fabric. It was too intimate, something she shouldn't have noticed. She picked up her towel and wrapped it around her body.

Darren didn't acknowledge the other people. He looked at Lydia with the same collegial blankness he'd displayed in the water. "I forgot to bring a towel," he said. He brushed water from his arms with brisk efficiency.

"Here," Lydia said. She handed her towel to Darren and pulled on her sweatshirt and shorts. Maybe the other people were about to jump in the water, even though the height seemed too dangerous for the little girl.

"Stupid of me," Darren said. He dried his torso, but didn't put on his shirt. His chest and stomach, smooth, almost hairless, were aggressively defined, too loudly fit. Lydia would have preferred to encounter his body in the dark, where she wouldn't be so aware of him. But she was no longer certain she could have Darren. Looking at his body made her urgent; she had to preserve the sense of possibility that had led her out here.

The little girl was hopping around at the edge, close to Lydia. She was a pretty kid, her brown hair in tangled curls.

"Don't worry," the girl said. "We didn't touch

your stuff."

A strange thing to say—Lydia wondered if the adults had put her up to it. Or maybe the girl was reacting to Lydia, whose suspicion was probably plain on her face.

"Well, that's good," Lydia said. Attempting to be light. The yellow-haired woman didn't break her scowl, and the man looked out at the water.

"I thought you were going to swim a lot farther," the girl said.

"It's cold in there," said Darren.

"I know." The girl giggled.

"You've got a cool bathing suit," Lydia said. Dark stains had formed on her own clothes; she could feel where her wet suit had betrayed her.

The woman looked directly at Lydia for the first time. Her face was a crumpled version of her daughter's, her beauty suggested beneath puffy cheeks.

"Floaties," the woman said. Would she like Lydia better if she knew Lydia was a mother?

"You can see all the way down the river," the woman told her daughter. "See how far the lady and her husband went?" Flesh hung off her arm as she pointed.

"How far does the river go?" Lydia asked.

"Goes on for a while," the woman said.

"To Tillamook?" Darren asked.

"That's probably right," she said.

"No worries," Darren said. "I'm not even sure what this river is called." His voice was too loud, a forced banter that made Lydia uneasy.

The man with wet underwear turned to them. "Wilson," he said.

"That works," said Darren.

"Do what now?" The man took a step towards Darren, and Lydia couldn't watch Darren's face. She looked at the thin chain around the man's neck, the rings on his fingers, this careful decoration clashing with the menace in his voice.

"I just didn't know the name of the river," Darren said. "It's all good."

The man was right next to Darren. If he moved closer, or put his hands on Darren, what would Lydia do? She imagined what Scott would say about this situation she'd put herself in. A stupid choice to come out here. The thought of Scott—his face so clear in her mind—was like a scab her hand kept reaching for, even though she knew lingering there would only make it worse.

The man took a few running steps off the ledge, and entered the water with a violent splash.

Lydia struggled to neutralize the quiet. "It's amazing that this forest grew back," she said. "After the fires."

"Doesn't take that long for a tree to grow," the woman said. Her eyes squinted, her chin was lifted and proud.

"I like trees," the girl said. "I like the forest."

"Be quiet," the woman said to the girl.

Lydia's pulse rang in her head. The woman didn't deserve this sweet kid, one who could run right along the high ledge. A kid who could see exactly where she was going. How easy that would be.

"I like trees too," Lydia said. The girl smiled at her, and adrenaline crowded out Lydia's fear.

The woman made a sound, her tongue against

her teeth. "I bet you do." She went back to her place under the trees with deliberate, heavy steps, and called to the girl.

Lydia turned away from the woman and knelt on the ground, shielding her purse as she checked it. Her wallet and sunglasses and everything else: receipts, gum wrappers, one of Max's toy cars.

Darren crouched next to her, holding his t-shirt. "My clothes are different," he said to her quietly. "I left my sneakers on top."

She didn't want to answer him, because the woman wasn't far away. And the man was out of the water now; Lydia could hear his rasping voice.

She opened her wallet, discreet inside her purse, to check for the cards and folded twenties. Darren put his arm around her shoulder, his breath warm against her face, startling her with this sudden affection.

His mouth was against her hair, pushing for her ear. "I can't find my car keys," he whispered.

Lydia's pulse raced again. What he'd said didn't make sense.

He was holding her, his hands pressed against her arms, a terrible version of the embrace she had imagined hours earlier. "Can you go see if the car is there?" he asked.

She pulled back to look at him—he was frightened, and she really didn't know him.

"I keep a spare key under the mat," he said, his voice low and quick. "On the driver's side. As long as the car is there, we can leave."

She nodded slowly. She would never leave her car unlocked with the key inside, not on

her noisy block in Jamaica Plain. But that was far away from where she was now, the danger entirely different.

"I'll wait here," he said. They silently exchanged what had happened: the third man there when she and Darren arrived, and the inexplicable menace from the other people. She understood that he didn't want to leave her there by herself, that he was protecting her. And despite her alarm, there was the surprise of a little pleasure snaking in.

"Be right back," she said, as though she were going off to pee behind some glorious redwood, as though Darren really were her hippie jock husband, and this was a regular L.L. Bean outfitted day trip. Good thinking, she told herself, but her reasoning seemed absurd.

She didn't know what they would they do if the car wasn't there. She jogged up the trail, everything too sharp and too bright. She might be trapped here, in this place quiet enough to absorb violence and unlikely to get more visitors. She could still hear the water gurgling below, and the birds and insects whose noises were just barely there.

The metal fence came into view, and then Lydia could see the scratched grey paint of Darren's car. Her relief was instant. They could leave now. They would be safe. Lydia leaned against the car, letting her breath slow down. In the filtered light, the woods were majestic. She imagined what it was like before the second forest grew in—vast emptiness and burnt stumps, the sun beating down on the timber's charred remains. Her gaze moved over plants whose names she didn't know.

She took in the varieties of fern and moss, and that's when she saw the silver things, distinctly unnatural. The keys were right there in front of the hood, held on a ring with a worn piece of leather. He must have dropped them, so intent on swimming, still eager for her then. She hadn't noticed either.

She smiled as she picked them up—the threat overturned so easily. But she liked the weight of the keys in her hand, and the stillness there beneath the trees.

All of it around her, in shades of green and brown and gold. A place she wouldn't tell anyone about. But she wanted to. There was so much she could describe to Max. And even that wasn't enough. She wanted him to be able to see it. But if Max could see perfectly, what would that leave her to tell him? The thought startled her, too loud in this quiet place.

"You can't even say *worse*," Scott had said to her while she packed her suitcase. And he was right, she knew. Max wouldn't have noticed the keys. He wouldn't be able to drive a car, or leap into a cold river. Even though Lydia had told herself that Max could thrive despite his impairment, he'd always be unsure of rocks hidden beneath the surface, even if the water was completely clear.

The sounds in the woods grew louder the longer she stood still, and Lydia knew she had to go back to Darren.

She heard his voice just as she came into the clearing.

"Take it easy," he was saying.

He stood at the ledge with the other man. The woman and the girl watched them from under the trees. Darren looked back at Lydia, expectant, and she nodded, to tell him yes, the car was still there.

“Yuppies aren’t supposed to be here,” the man said. He had his hands balled up, his arms hanging at his sides.

“That doesn’t mean you can take my stuff.”

Darren’s voice was pitched up, and Lydia felt the weight in her pocket, the keys to his house and a bike lock, all the unseen parts of Darren’s life.

He looked at her again and she saw both his fear and his proud sense that he was protecting her. She held his responses, testing out the feeling of each one. There was a place for her there, with the light on moving water, and the vital scent of mud and wet stone. Time seemed still; the breeze, cool against her bare legs, was the only thing marking any change.

But then the man lifted his fist and hit Darren in one quick movement.

Lydia could see blood trickling from Darren’s nose as he reached for his face. The man moved toward him, and his silver ring sliced into Darren’s cheek as he struck him again. Darren stood and his jaw tightened under his skin. Lydia willed him not to fight back—there would be no return from where he and the man were headed. But Darren was completely separate from her, and he swung his arm, responding to the man’s force.

The man tripped backwards, his motion

surprised. His limbs tangled, and he fell against a large rock jutting up near the ledge. The side of his head slid against the stone.

The man was laid out. He didn’t move, but his eyes were open. There was blood on his face and a gash on his arm, the color bright against the rock’s dull grey.

The woman was suddenly there, kneeling over him. Lydia found her towel and gave it to her; she met the woman’s panicked gaze. And she knew, with an awful certainty, that it was too late to say anything about the keys.

The girl stood and watched while her mother held the towel to the man’s arm. The girl’s thin shoulders shook as she cried, and Lydia moved to her, desperate for some way to amend what she’d done.

“Don’t touch her,” the woman said. A simple instruction, frightening to Lydia because the woman was so certain. Lydia could have interrupted the men, but she hadn’t.

She felt Darren’s hand on her shoulder, warm through her shirt. She followed him and when she looked back, the man was sitting up, watching her. His chest moved quickly with his breath, and she knew that even with the keys in her pocket, the risk was still immediate, the danger still there.

At the top of the trail, Darren opened the car door and lifted the mat.

“Oregon style,” he said after he extracted the key. “You’ve always got to prepare for the worst.” He laughed, a thin, false sound that echoed in Lydia’s ears, incongruous with the blood on his

cheek.

He handed her the key and she drove while he held his shirt against his face. Her hands were tight on the wheel, and she watched the rearview, waiting for what she'd done to catch up with her.

Neither of them spoke; they kept the radio off.

"They'll be OK," Darren eventually said. "We had to get out of there."

His voice was loud in the small space. "They could have stolen the car," he said. "We could have been trapped out there. Who knows what they would have done."

Lydia tried to keep her hands from shaking. The car's steering pulled to the left, and the trees seemed to lean in, too, the branches making heavy shadows over the road.

She didn't want to talk about what might have happened. She remembered the other woman's panic, and the man's angry breath. The little girl sobbing in her bathing suit. The keys were right there in her pocket, and if Darren found out, there was no way she could make him understand what she'd done.

"I feel bad for that kid," Darren said. "With parents like that." He leaned against the door, his body far from hers.

"She'll be OK," Lydia said, though she didn't believe it.

They stopped at a gas station so Darren could clean his face. There was a tiny store, and in the ladies room, Lydia wrapped the keys in a paper towel and pushed them to the bottom of the trash can. At the sink, she washed her hands with pink soap that left a film on her skin.

She checked her phone—it was after eight on the east coast, and Max would be getting ready for bed.

Max was watching a movie, Scott told her. She could picture it, Max in the big chair pulled close to the screen.

Scott would never know where Lydia was calling from. She would go back to the hotel and drink cocktails and chat about depth perception and loss, and whether Darren was part of it didn't matter now.

"Mr. Wheaton wants to take him off the basketball team," Scott said. His voice was garbled; the connection was bad.

"Why?" Lydia asked, even though she knew the answer.

She leaned against the bathroom's cement wall. Her swimsuit was still damp against her skin, and she thought of the other people coming after them, finding Darren's car in front of the empty gas station.

"He can't keep up," Scott said. "But he wants to be on the team."

Even with the bad connection, Lydia understood what he was telling her. This place where she had found herself—a concrete room with a drain on the floor, a small building in a thick forest—was not far from home, where her son sat right next to the screen.

"I'll be back in three days," Lydia said. "I'll talk to Mr. Wheaton about the modifications the therapist suggested."

"I already spoke to him," Scott said.

"Maybe it would be safer for him to do track

instead.”

“Max doesn’t like running.” Scott was right—too boring, Max would say. Max liked the energy of the games, and being with the other kids when the ball went through the hoop. He’d never made a basket himself, though Lydia still cheered with him from the stands. But these victories weren’t really his.

Scott was right, but Lydia couldn’t tell him that, because his voice cut out and the call clicked off, her phone’s signal weak this far out in the

woods. When she tried to call again, she had no service at all.

She went back to the car, where Darren leaned against the hood, waiting in his stained shirt. He’d put two band-aids over his wound.

“I can drive now,” he said, and Lydia agreed. It wasn’t late, but the light already seemed to be fading from the sky. They must have passed this spot hours earlier. There was just one way back to Portland, a winding road that cut a clear path through the trees. 