



Illustration by Alvin Fai

NOVELLAS

# MOTHER NUT

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I was never able to put things together very well or bring them together, but I was always a good researcher, good at scraping at questions, and that summer I was working for Dr. Bran, who was a hippie with a huge gray mustache. He was a hippie named Bran, which created such an obvious opportunity to make fun of him that no one ever really did. It was as if you had met an obese man named Fatperson. His name was Bran, and he had an obsession with the American chestnut, which used to be one of the dominant trees in the eastern forests, central to American culture. “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire,” a Chestnut Street at the center of every town, houses covered in chestnut shingles, etc. People say that the honey made by bees who gathered chestnut pollen was the best kind, but I’ve also read (in a great old magazine called *Gleanings in Bee Culture*), that “it never was eatable—always a rank smell and bitter taste.” The quality must have varied.

All those trees are dead, the whole species. There was a blight, a fungus, and most of the American chestnuts were dead by, I think, the nineteen-fifties. It isn’t technically correct to say that they’re all dead. You still see them in forests, but they only grow to shrub size, and then the fungus kills them off. They can’t grow into real trees anymore. There are several groups of scientists messing with the tree’s DNA to develop a blight-resistant specimen, so we may one day see again what hardly any living person remembers—a blooming chestnut in the middle of an American field—but so far I don’t think they’ve had much luck. I couldn’t completely follow the scientific aspects, but I was really good at historical research, as I mentioned. I loved to sit up all night and look through old books and newspapers. If I’m being fully honest, I was also smoking methamphetamine at that time, not huge amounts but regularly, especially in the morning and late at night, and meth goes really well with that kind of compulsive searching. I had a friend at the Park Service who said that a lot of the archaeological looting cases in the woods involved meth heads, because they would get back there and smoke and start looking for stuff, arrowheads and whatnot, pacing the ground, out of their heads but super inside them, too. I don’t know if that’s true but I can see it.

Also, I was at that time with a woman named Karen, who liked to stay up with me while I did my “scraping.” We’d sit in the same room. She would read, watch TV, and be on the computer, all at the same time. If she saw something funny, she’d make me look at it. I loved her



and still miss her. At least, I tell myself that I loved her, and I definitely still miss her, but am trying not to miss her anymore, and would be trying not to love her anymore, too, but that seems sort of impossible or abstract.

Staying on point: I wound up finding some stuff that changed what was thought about the chestnut blight, or should have changed it, and may change it yet but hasn't, because it has not been absorbed. If you look at a book on trees or on Wikipedia, it will say that the blight was first spotted in 1904, or came over "ca. 1900," through certain Long Island nursery men, but I found old newspaper clippings suggesting—that was a Bran word; he loved to use forms of "suggest"—that the blight had begun much earlier, either right before or right after the Civil War, and had begun in the interior, not on the coast and not in the Northeast but in places like Georgia and Virginia, the Carolinas. The first manifestation I could find of whatever it was occurred in Rockingham, North Carolina, a place where I once ate delicious barbecue. At the restaurant Karen took me to—it was a diner-type place, perfectly preserved from the fifties—the guy at the cash register was wearing about twenty wristwatches, nice gold and silver ones, up and down his arms. It didn't make sense. Maybe he sold them. In any case, I started finding these newspaper stories, first from small-town papers around Rockingham and then from a widening radius. People would be meeting in these towns, having meetings basically to ask, "What are we going to do about the chestnuts dying?" It was as if all the dogs were dying. Nobody knew what was happening. There's an article from the *Marietta Daily Journal*, in Georgia, that I think about a lot. It describes something that took place in Macon in the eighteen-eighties. "The fact of the chestnut trees dying," it read, "was mentioned and discussed in a group at the court house, and the late Judge McManus, being in the crowd, readily solved the question. He said that when the Indians left Georgia"—meaning on the Trail of Tears, in the eighteen-thirties—"they they [sic] pronounced a curse on the chestnut tree, 'that it should die and never do the pale face any good.'" Then there's almost a lamentation. The writer asks, "Cannot someone versed in such matters tell us why the chestnut trees have died?"

Not many people know this but there are some surviving specimens. They call them mother nuts. There are about seven of them, or there were when I was working with Dr. Bran. They may have found more by now. On the other hand, there may be fewer. Two of the trees were already sick back then. I don't know, though. It has been a long time since Bran trusted me with information. A few of these trees are in the Southeast, in very isolated places. Two are at the bottom of super-steep coves. Which would seem to suggest that the isolation had something to do with their survival. But that doesn't really explain it, because millions of chestnuts in remote Southern coves did die, and

some of the trees that survived are in places that don't seem special at all—just in fields somewhere. One is next to a Walgreens. No one understands why these specimens endured, or at least no one did when I worked for Dr. Bran. I read some of the papers on the subject, but I'd hit a word like “isozyme” and my brain would sort of flutter away. It may simply have been that, through a mutation, those particular trees had started producing an enzyme that protected them from the fungus. You know how there are some people who just can't get AIDS, even if they try?

Whatever it was, a group of scientists made a hiking trip to one while I was working for Dr. Bran. It was right after I'd found those articles, which had freaked out his colleagues some. I was in the room for some of the phone calls he made. He would use the word “we,” as in, “We've found some very intriguing material here. It really suggests . . .” I didn't take it hard. I wouldn't have been looking for that stuff if he hadn't hired me to do it. Also, he was mostly an excellent, fair boss. Plus a pothead, which you may not need to be told—tree scientist named Bran—but, given that I was using, it made things easier in my life. Not that pot and harder stuff have much in common socially, but you can know that a committed pothead is not a person who's going to want law-enforcement trouble. I never complained about the co-credit thing. But he probably felt a little guilty. Because it wasn't only that I'd found it; it was that he'd missed it. And that was likely why he invited me on this trip to see one of the mother nuts, as a kind of apology—without apologizing.

**W**e went to Alabama, up in one of the mountainous, northern corners. Totally gorgeous place, green and wild, with pure springs and, here and there, rock faces showing through trees. We met up with some forestry people and hiked down into this cove, whose name I'm not supposed to tell you. Not that it matters anymore, and it's a boring name, anyway—not Moonshiner's Holler or anything, just the relatively common name of the people who owned it. The same family had owned it forever, which was probably one of the reasons the mother nut was still there.

At the top of the trail, Dr. Bran had us stand in a circle and put our hands together, like a sports team, and swear a silly oath that we would never reveal the location. We hiked downhill for about forty-five minutes—it was so steep that it was hard to walk—and, at the bottom, we saw it: her—the mother nuts were always referred to with feminine pronouns. Bran actually called her “a grand lady.” He was so strange. He had such a *dense* mustache, as if he had more follicles than a normal person. Salt-and-pepper. He let the hairs of it grow down over his

lips—you know the way some people do, so food brushes the mustache on the way into their mouths? I once sat across from a guy like that and watched him eat a hard-boiled egg, and he did this thing where he used two fingers to part the hairs and create a passageway. Disgusting. Bran never really ate, though. I seriously have zero memories of seeing him eat anything except, every now and then, these ultra-nutritious granola bars that his wife made.

“She’s a grand lady,” he said, about the chestnut. She was blooming. That was why we were there then. It was April. She was bursting with white flowers—actually, “catkins,” bunches of fingerlike stems covered in tiny flowers. The scent choked me at first. It was powerful and sweet, almost nauseating. Mostly, she just looked like a big tree. But, if you’d been thinking about chestnut trees every day, the way we had—I won’t try to downplay it—it was mystical. “Grand” was not the worst word, really. Bran looked at me through his rimless glasses and said, “You are now one of the very few people alive who have seen a fully mature American chestnut tree in the eastern forests.” His eyes, as always, were both rheumy and twinkly. I bit my lip and nodded, staring into the lower limbs. Then he said, “For millennia, this was *the* dominant species in the eastern forests,” and started going on like that, as if I’d never heard any of it before, which was something he used to do—and then did more often after the business about the credit for the possible discovery had come up, or not come up.

It was chilly in that cove. Dr. Bran told us that there was a cave at the bottom of it somewhere—we didn’t see the hole, but we could feel the effects. It was blasting out air that was fifty-six degrees or whatever temperature caves stay at. I wondered aloud (just floating a theory) if maybe that anomaly was responsible for the survival of this particular tree. Had the natural refrigeration made it too cold for the fungus to thrive? It was not a dumb guess. But Dr. Bran snorted. “Tell that to all the dead chestnuts up in Maine!” he said. “It gets pretty cold up there.” He looked not at me but at the others as he said that. A couple of people chuckled.

**E**ventually, he fired me—I had messed up pretty badly. Or not that badly, but I had messed up with the college that he worked for, or we worked for. I was at a party I shouldn’t have been at, with students, where two kids overdosed. I didn’t have anything to do with it, but in the investigation it came up that I’d been there “doing drugs.” I wasn’t even doing them with the kids, but the parents were on a rampage. Dr. Bran gave me the news himself. It was one of those firings where, if he hadn’t done it, I would have had to quit anyway, out of

shame, so he knew I couldn't hate him for it. We hugged. He said, "You've made a real contribution to something that's going to matter after we're dead." I thanked him.

Karen left me almost exactly a year later. I've never been sure whether her leaving had anything to do with the firing. Not being sure is part of the pain. Of the firing and of being left. The two things spin around in my memory of that time, and they won't cancel each other out; they just rub up against each other and make each other hurt.

She was from Oregon and she looked to me like she was from Oregon, insofar as she had bushy, wavy hair and claimed to like the outdoors and wore sweaters. I have never been to Oregon. I met her when we very briefly overlapped at a job. She was probably the first Jewish person I ever met who I knew was Jewish, so I asked her a lot of questions about it, which, now that I look back, probably annoyed her, because she didn't really know anything about Judaism, and that was also a revelation to me, the existence of Jewish people who didn't know anything about their religion. On television, they were always obsessed with it. I thought she was gorgeous. She still is, I imagine. Her shoulders and her armpits. I have to work not to think about them. She was the woman who, if I'd understood even the tiniest little thing about men and women, I'd have married, except that I sort of thought we *were* married in the important ways.

The very week that Dr. Bran fired me, Karen and I were in the process of moving to an organic farm. That was a decision we had made together. It was the kind of place that would have been called a hippie commune in the sixties, but it was the nineties, and we shied away from that language, even though it was literally a commune populated by hippies. For a lot of people, though, "commune" equalled "cult." Whereas this place was as suburban as it was utopian. Well, it was rural. I mean, we did all actually work together, raising crops to eat and sell, so, in that sense, too, it was a commune. With about fifteen households. We called it the Land. A woman named Brett, from Atlanta, had been married to an ultra-rich guy who'd died and left her this huge piece of property in north Georgia, and she gave it to a group that was like the Nature Conservancy but smaller and local, and they managed it. The local group had been started by an old friend of Brett's named Humphreys.

Notes on Humphreys: his favorite expression was "Wise as serpents, harmless as doves." He had once been a sexual adventurer, but during all the time that I knew him he lived alone and manifested a monkish vibe. He had been a potter for ten years, a painter for ten, a sculptor

for ten, etc., abandoning each craft at the very moment that he achieved mastery. He had first come to know the Land just by camping there. Then he'd met Brett, and they had enjoyed "a brief thing" that turned into a long friendship.

At some point, Brett said to him, basically, "If you take care of this property, I'll let you live here forever." And he said, "What if we invite some other people to live here, too—people who would agree to be good stewards of the land, protect it from developers, etc." She said yes or passed away before she could answer, I can't remember. Now Humphreys was seen as the leader, though he didn't actually "run" it. We did things Quaker style. Everybody met to discuss everything. There had to be consensus for anything to get done. Consequently, not much got done, which was how Humphreys said it should be.

Karen and I lived in one of the smaller houses on the Land. It was straw bale, meaning the walls were made of stacked-up bales of straw and, on the outside, stucco to hold them together. The straw was a good insulator. I had grown up in the suburbs and had depressing associations with stucco, but the folks on the Land had different ones. They associated it with old New Mexico, indigenous things, and good environmental practices. One of the other guys on the Land was named Geoffrey, and he knew how to work with stucco. He had one of those beards that birds can live in. Very intense sparkly blue eyes. There was something old-fashioned about him that went beyond even his obvious effort to look like he came from the nineteenth century. It was something about his trim frame, what people call "fine-boned," and the quiet courtliness of his manners. One day, in the weekly group meeting, Karen and I announced that we wanted to go with straw bale for our new house—we had until then been living in the old "main house," where they put new people—and everybody said, "That's awesome! You can get Geoffrey to help you with the stucco. He's amazing with stucco." Briefly, I tried saying something about how I had been looking forward to learning to work with stucco myself and sort of wanted to build the whole house "with my bare hands," but everybody seemed so happy with the Geoffrey plan. Then he looked at Karen and said, "I'd be most glad to help," in his courtly way, and, after that, it was as if discussion became unthinkable. In fairness, he did a great job. But it meant that, every time I came home and looked at our walls, I had to think about Geoffrey. I had to think about Geoffrey's skillful bare hands, and it limited my enjoyment of the house. Geoffrey's walls: that's not too far from "Geoffrey's house."

Geoffrey's actual house was directly across the road from ours, and it was a lot like ours to look at. A bigger, nicer version. The stucco was slightly better done, slightly smoother and more creamy-looking. That never sat well with me. It seemed to me and still does that if you are going to volunteer to do someone's stucco, or allow yourself to be held up as amazing at that sort of thing, you should do your best, but his best was clearly across the road. We had his second best, which was still good, so we couldn't even complain. Things just did not begin right with Geoffrey, in my view.

Karen loved him. I'm pretty sure she actually *admired* him. And he was the kind of guy who makes a thing of being loved and admired by women. I'm not saying that in an unfeminist way. I worry plenty about what women think and feel proud when they like me. But there's a certain kind of guy—other men will know what I mean—who just has his eye on that, even though he goes out of his way not to seem to. Either his mother didn't love him or she loved him too much or I don't know. My own was clinically narcissistic—the reality of other people could be moved up and down on a mixing board, based on whether they bolstered her hero narrative—and that has, no doubt, given me my own problems, but it did not turn me into a seeker of women's attention in the way that Geoffrey was. A deceptive way, because he presented as so self-sufficient. That was part of his Amish shtick. Walking around with an axe on his shoulder, and it was, like, Why? Why do you have that axe? You're not even going to use it today. He would actually wear an axe as an accessory. And the whole time he was angling on a woman, on *my* woman. Well, not mine, but—not his!

I know the night it happened. We had invited him over for dinner, to thank him for the second-tier stucco job (belatedly—the work had been done months before). For me, it was just something we had to do, but Karen got excited about it. I could see the excitement in her. She asked one of the other women on the Land—Ellen, who was an illegal midwife—for cooking advice, which was immediately *off*. I had never seen her ask for advice on anything. For that matter, I had never seen her cook anything. We ate crap if left to our own devices, and had even laughed about how self-conscious this made us, when faced with the other Land folks' leafy-green diets. That night she served some kind of spinach-and-cheese dish—they were growing spinach that year on the Land, and they were always making goat cheese there, so everything was super fresh. Geoffrey smacked his thin little lips. I don't remember what we talked about. Whatever you talked about with him, he was talking about himself. I brought up the chestnuts—the research, not the part about the firing (everyone knew)—and he made an interested face but changed the subject quickly. That told me something, because I knew the chestnut material was fascinating. I



mean, I'd had an effect on the historical understanding of an American scientific mystery. If he had been blasé about some story from my childhood, I would have assumed that the story had been boring, but the chestnuts were the one story I had that I was sure wasn't. When he blew past it, I knew I was in the presence of a lack of depth. He had already pointed his antenna at Karen, and that was all he had time for.

Our table in the straw-bale house was very small, so we were all sitting uncomfortably close together—my legs kept hitting his bony knees—and Geoffrey kept beginning his sentences with “So, Miss Karen . . .” For instance, I would say, “Anyway, that was how we knew that the blight had started not just years earlier but decades,” and he would say, “That is remarkable, John. So, tell me, Miss Karen, where did you get your freckles from?”

He always called her Miss Karen, performing (I thought at the time) his courtly-manly number, but emphasizing (I see now) that she was not a Mrs. And he went on calling her Miss after he had her, after she was his Mrs., which, when I think about it, makes me want to slide a darning needle into my eye.

Humphreys was the only person who saw what was happening. I know that now, from remembering certain looks he gave at meetings and meals. But I didn't know him that well yet. He wasn't aloof—he was warm and like an uncle—but a lot of people wanted his attention. And what could he have done to help me? Humphreys was in general a “Hands Off Love” kind of person. He liked to quote that, the old Dada slogan. His other motto was “burned and learned.”

Here I am meant to tell you how it “went down”. . . . O.K. if I don't?

**T**here's a certain kind of crying you do when that happens, when somebody you love actually up and turns her back. I don't think you do it at any other time in your life—at least, I haven't. Maybe when my father died, but that was different, because it was right or felt right. With Karen, I have this little five-second movie in my head. It's a distillation of all those nights, after it happened. I'm sitting alone in my bathrobe at that same small table, and my bathrobe's open, and I look down at myself, at my pubic hair and everything, and I'm

slapping the table and saying, “Why? Why?” I’m howling. I think that was the only time I ever howled. The film comes with no context. It’s just a clip. But it has the whole experience in it.

A trip: that’s a detail. They went on a trip. A bird-watching trip out west. I don’t remember the endangered species of bird—I could figure it out, but to focus on the memory at that level would let other things spill in. It was the kind of trip where you take actual scientific notes, to help a researcher. The professor organizing it had put out some kind of ad for volunteers, and they had volunteered together. Or Geoffrey had volunteered and then asked her to join him, because they had talked about birds and he “knew she was interested” in them. He did not ask me. It was true that I had never talked about birds with him, but who is not interested in birds? They are one of the major life forms. That would be like having no interest in outer space. It just *is* interesting; you don’t have to “be interested.”

Was it messed up that he invited her, that she said yes, that I passively watched it happen? That was the Land. It was so free and easy there, on the surface. If you’d complained about something like that—if you’d said, “Honey, I’m not sure I feel good about you going on a two-week trip with this other Land member, who is a heterosexual male and flirtatious with you and whom you seem to become newly energized around”—you would have been made, politely, to feel monstrous. They would have surrounded you like a buzzing hive and done therapy on you. This was how I wound up living in a scenario that every person I ever told about it or who was exposed to it—even just casually—said was “very weird” or “seriously intense,” or else they said something like, “Are you sure you want to do that?,” as if I’d been offered the situation as a life choice by a door-to-door salesman. I was living with it. I was living literally across the road from my ex-partner and the man she had decided to marry. They were in the straw-bale house across the road, with superior stucco. Many mornings, many evenings, I would go out and they would be in the yard. Many nights, I saw their lights going on and off. I didn’t sit and watch and stare. But, when you live across the road, you see.

Illustration by Alvin Fai

Would you believe that she and I almost never spoke about it? She never even really told me that she was leaving, not in clear terms. We had one huge fight, which ended with her saying, and I quote, “Leave me alone.” At the next Land meeting, when we arrived from separate houses, we both acted basically friendly. I was being friendly in hell (I am the type). On her end, it wasn’t so much that she didn’t seem to know me but that I had turned into a benign acquaintance, which was worse. She was horribly friendly.

August of 2002, Karen moved out of our house and in with Geoffrey. Across the road she walked—she literally walked—carrying her stuff. He helped her, I imagine. I wasn’t there. Humphreys had thoughtfully taken me on an excursion that day, but I can still see her walking. Past the bee boxes in the field to the right, past a sourwood tree where the bees loved to get pollen, past the large solar array that provided most of the power on the Land, and through the door in those smoothly stuccoed walls.

December of 2002, Karen’s breast cancer was diagnosed. The doctors gave her a prognosis of twenty months.

The whole night after hearing the news, I lay awake and waited for her to walk across the road to me. I thought, This will do it. This will burn away the bullshit, the paperwork. She will come to the man who loves her. Fuck moving on. There are things that do not move, and you obey them. I lay there in the loft and truly believed that I would hear her come through the front door. I fell asleep and dreamed that she had walked in and climbed into bed with me. In the dream, we made love, and then she cried. I woke up, realized that it was a dream, and then I cried. I see now that I should have walked across the road to her. If only to show her that I would, if only to let her have the gesture, whatever it was worth to her. But I did not want to violate their marriage bed. Those were the words that came to me: “violate their marriage bed.” Those were the words I used in place of a much more painful one: “chickenshit.” Or maybe I *was* being respectful? I hate that about life, how in the end you can’t really tell. There are these places in the script of the morality play of your memories that say “[unintelligible].”

I never went; she never came. Geoffrey got her through those days. At the group meeting that weekend, they announced as a couple that she had “decided to fight.” Geoffrey said that they were driving out to the Mayo Clinic. There were doctors there who had stopped thinking of her kind of cancer as untreatable. They weren’t using that word, “untreatable,” anymore. It seemed wishful, but who knew. It was one of those times when foolish hope became the only rational thing to feel. It was going to cost a lot of money, Geoffrey said. I had

always assumed that his family had money—because of how he spoke, and, in a funny way, how he dressed, which though plainspun was so carefully curated—but it turned out that he had none, which gave me a fleeting feeling of liking him that I did not want and quickly let wither. He said that anything the other people on the Land could do to help with expenses “would be very, very deeply appreciated right now,” and people did give, but, after they were done giving, I think Humphreys counted something like four thousand dollars in the basket, in checks and cash. Four thousand would barely get them to Minnesota and pay for their room and board while they were there. She didn’t have insurance. Geoffrey had the kind you paid for yourself, and he was working to get her added to it, but that was “not going to be easy.” They seemed fucked. They were sad and they loved each other. I loved and hated her and I hated him, but because she loved him and I loved her, and also probably in part because he hated me, I’m sure I sort of loved him. Flick the emotional spinner that many times and you’ll have loved everybody involved by the time it stops. I lived across the road from them. None of it was healthy.

**W**e called him King Park. I have no idea why. His name was Roger Park, and someone had once called him King. I think he liked it. He subtly perpetuated it, as a nickname. Never just King, always King Park. He was tall and thin and wiry. A very elongated person. Long nose, long, narrow face and head, high forehead, long chin, long, strong arms. His penis, which I saw plenty of times—there was nothing we did more often on the Land than skinny-dip in the swimming holes—was long and thin. He moved slowly, in a spidery way, though he probably could have beaten you in a race from one end of the field to another. I only saw him move fast like that once. Geoffrey had confronted him about something. It was a dispute about the land. Not the Land but a piece of land, a half acre that each of them thought he controlled. They disagreed about what should grow there. I never got involved in arguments like this. Everyone knew I understood nothing about agriculture. I could work hard, though. If you pointed to a row and told me, “Pick all the bugs off the leaves on those plants,” I would go nuts on it, in that meth-head way. Not that I was using at that point. I had stopped instantly after getting fired. It was unusual, maybe, but simple, too: I got so depressed that I was afraid to smoke. Your thoughts can go so many places when you are spun, and it felt like if they were to start sliding there would be no bottom. The fear overpowered the urge. This also meant that I was super grumpy for our first months on the Land, which probably got me off to a bad start with some of the others. That day, I was on my knees picking bugs off the undersides of leaves, and Geoffrey came marching up to confront King Park about whatever their farm trouble was. He sort of pointed his finger at King Park and shook it—he gave him the old shaking finger, Amish style—and King Park did one of

the strangest things I have ever seen somebody do in a fight scenario like that: he ran away laughing. He ran—not jogged, but ran. Fast. And Geoffrey was yelling after him, “Don’t turn your back on me!” And King Park was laughing over his shoulder, as if he just couldn’t believe that Geoffrey was acting so foolish, even though he had been plenty mad at Geoffrey just minutes before. It was amazing. It was conflict avoidance taken to an extreme that was almost physically beautiful.

You only had to meet King Park to know that he was not going to last long on the Land. I don’t know how to say this, but . . . People were good there. They were good people. Oh, they were annoying in all sorts of ways, passive-aggressive the way hippies are. But they were planning to spend the rest of their lives on the Land, or that was what they all said, and, as I’m writing this, most of them did or have. Humphreys was a gentle and effective shepherd. He didn’t ask anything except that you participate and not fuck things up.

King Park was not a true hippie. I think he came to the Land at least fifty per cent because he needed a place to live. Which was at least fifty per cent of why Karen and I had come, too, but we wanted to grow into hippies, whereas he just wanted to go on being himself but among hippies. He wasn’t good, though. He wasn’t evil, either, but he was about himself. He had a girlfriend who was too young. She had gone to a school near the Land and worked on the farm as an intern. He kept her high and seduced her and got her pregnant and talked her into getting an abortion but only paid for half of it and just basically squatted on her soul until she was spinny-eyed. She was a chubby girl with a potato-shaped head and a pretty face, always smiling, with hair down to her butt, in the style they call a “butt cut,” which refers not to the length, strangely, but to the way it’s parted straight down the middle, like the crack in your butt. She had grown up rich, with a doctor dad, in one of the mansions in downtown Charleston, where the household staff wore actual uniforms.

I liked King Park, or I liked hanging out with him. He was the only person on the Land who would get fucked up with me when I needed to, and that was slightly more often after Karen moved in with Geoffrey. I read this book of explorations one time. That was something I did, working for Dr. Bran—read old frontier narratives, looking for mentions of chestnuts, as a way of plotting the changes in their range. The book was by a Frenchman named Radisson. I can’t remember which tribe he spent time with, up in Canada, but they could be unbelievably cruel. There was a scene where they tortured some Frenchmen by ripping out their testicles, and the women played a game



with them, tossing their “stones.” But Radisson lived with this tribe for years and fell in love with one of those women, and he wrote this amazing sentence: “Friends, I must confess I loved those poor people entirely well.”

Humphreys had a wood-burning hot tub that had become pretty much communal. You could use it, so long as you cleaned up. One night, I was sitting in it with King Park and his girlfriend, who was also named Karen, but everyone called her by her last name, Kemp. I started telling Kemp about Dr. Bran and the chestnut fungus. I didn’t go on and on. But, when I was getting to know a person, I eventually always got around to those stories, and still do. Kemp got really interested. It was the first time I’d seen her perk up. And the last, in my presence. King Park did this thing he did, looking up at the ceiling and smiling, as if you’d asked him a question that was both amusingly simple and hard to answer. It was the same smile I’d seen on his face that day when he was running away from Geoffrey. His look said, “Can you believe this story? He’s my friend! Chestnuts!” Kemp, though—it was like she couldn’t believe it. Her brown eyes were wide.

“My dad is *obsessed* with chestnut trees,” she said.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes!” she said. “Not with the trees but with the wood. He’s building a whole house out of it.”

“How can he do that?” I asked. “They don’t exist anymore.”

She explained that he was into “reclaimed” chestnut. He would hunt for old barns and sheds that were made from it, little outbuildings from the nineteenth century, then buy them and tear them apart. He paid people to do the hunting, she said, country people who knew about wood. It sounded as though her father had probably destroyed some valuable historical buildings this way. His house was huge, she said, but it was only half finished. The boards were getting harder to find.

King Park tossed back his already tossed-back head even farther and said, “Ha! That’s awesome.” That was probably the decisive moment. But I was so slow. “Tell her about the mother nut,” he said. I did. I told her about how there were these special trees in secret places, and no

one knew how they could survive. And I tried not to make a thing out of saying—but did say—“I’ve seen one, but I can’t tell you where it is.”

When King Park asked me to go with them to visit Kemp’s father two weeks later, I didn’t see anything that odd in it, even though he had never asked me to go anywhere, and had himself never met her father. Plus it was an overnight visit. When I said, “Sure, man, thanks,” I must have given off a surprised vibe, because he said that he had been worried about me and thought a road trip would do me good.

**W**e drove through the mountains to the house. It was down a dirt road, behind a nice, expensive security gate: a combination I have learned to distrust. Kemp’s dad was insane. He had insane blue eyes, insane intensity. He looked like he was flexing his muscles all the time, like just before you walked into the room he had decided to flex as hard as he could. He was an expert in penile oncology. It turned out that being good at that was a way to make an enormous amount of dough. I guess it would be. When your penis has cancer, you want the best and you’ll pay any amount. His name was Steve Kemp.

When he found out that I knew something about chestnuts he did just what his daughter had predicted he would and freaked. He led me around, and I think he said something to me about every single board and log in the house, individually—where it had come from, how he had obtained it, how old he thought it was, how it had weathered, what curious knots were in it, what it had looked like when he got it compared with how it looked now, etc. His main problem was that it had been so long since the blight that, even though chestnut wood held up well to the elements, it was hard to find usable boards and logs. A lot of times, when he had finished taking apart an old shack, only a quarter or a third of it was any good, and the house he was building was huge, a mountain mansion.

It wasn’t so much that it was half finished, as younger Karen had suggested, but that the part that was going to be the nicest of all—a projected platform that would jut out from the ridge like a cockpit, giving views in every direction of field, forest, and distant mountains—was still just a dream. The house ended in raw beams and rafters and tarps. As if someone had run out of money. You could tell these raw places galled Dr. Kemp because he kept referring to them, and even though he would refer to them dismissively—saying things like “You know, it’s a project! It’s never finished, but that’s part of the fun!”—his insistence suggested real anxiety.

For dinner, we ate bison meat. It turned out that Dr. Kemp kept a small farm, only a couple of miles from the house, where he raised bison, or paid someone to raise bison for his table.

As we ate, Dr. Kemp grilled me about the chestnuts and the blight. Did I really think that they had started dying that early, that long ago? Everything he'd read suggested otherwise. "Oh, yeah," I assured him. "In fact," I said, and told him about an article I had found from the eighteen-eighties—twenty years before the blight was supposed to have even arrived in this country—saying that "the chestnut is becoming a thing of the past." He acted as if he did not entirely believe me, which was obnoxious. What kind of freak invents false facts about chestnut trees? Which meant that every time he went "*Really?*" he was wondering if I might be that kind of freak.

"Roger says you know where one of the mother nuts is. Is that true?" He was the only person outside Dr. Bran's group of scientist friends I had ever heard use that term. It was also the only time I heard King Park called "Roger."

I told him that I did, that I had seen it, and told him all about the visit. But I didn't tell him where it was.

"How big is it?" he asked.

"Well," I said, "there were four of us on the hike, and at one point we all put our backs to the tree and held hands, and we couldn't get all the way around it."

You should have seen the look on his face when I said that. His tension passed beyond flexing and into paralysis. It looked as though he might never move again. Only his eyes would keep darting, blazing.

One thing about the house: it smelled good. Chestnut wood has a nutty smell. Also ever so slightly acrid, but somehow not unpleasantly so, like the smell of a very aromatic campfire.

**T**he next day, driving home, King Park was quiet. Young Karen drove. She said something apologetic about how intense her dad had been, and I said, "No, are you kidding? He's a really interesting guy." I said that it had been refreshing to hang out with someone as

into chestnuts as I was. That never happened anymore. She said, "O. K., good. I was worried!"

That night, King Park walked down from his place to mine. I was in the kitchen. There was really only one downstairs room in the house, but I was in the kitchen section.

"What's up, man?" I said.

"Two hundred thousand is up," he said, already laughing.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, knowing what he was talking about. He sat down. I kept standing.

"He offered a hundred. I said we could do it for three. He said he'd give us two, but only if we did the cutting."

That made sense. With us, he could count on mutual guilt to insure silence. Also, fewer people, fewer problems.

I closed my eyes and tried to think, but couldn't. When I opened them again, King Park shrugged, and then his neck got twisty, like the neck of some kind of water bird. He smiled that smile that I never did understand.

I told him that we would never be able to get it out of the cove it was in. We would have to divide it into small parts, and that would take multiple days, and that would mean getting caught.

"You don't understand," he said. "This guy has a helicopter. Or he has access to one."

"Oh, and nobody's going to notice that!"

"It only has to go about forty miles," he said, "to where he's getting it cut. And that's through the mountains. At night. It'd be over in minutes." The helicopter belonged to a drug-enforcement guy in Chattanooga, a friend of Dr. Kemp's. Kemp had slowed the progress of the penile cancer of not that man but that man's father.

For some reason, I didn't tell King Park this in the moment—didn't want to give it to him yet—but the helicopter might not even be necessary. There was a road less than a hundred feet from the tree. It was odd—when you were at the bottom of that cove, you felt like you were in one of the most remote places on Earth, but at the same time you could hear occasional traffic close by. The South is like that. It's hard to get really lost there anymore. Too many people have been there for too long.

King Park would not stop smiling.

“Dude, they're gonna solve the blight in, what, ten years? It's not even that big a deal. It just seems like a big deal to you because . . .” He didn't say why. I couldn't have told him.

Who even was he? Who was King Park? When all of this was over, he moved to Gainesville, Florida, and bought his own ice-cream truck. He became a Good Humor man. I'm not even kidding.

“Fifty-fifty,” he said. “I made the hookup, and you know where the tree is.”

I barely thought about the money. That didn't seem exciting. What I thought about was giving the money to Karen. Neither of them would ever forget it.

Actually, God help me, that's a lie. I didn't think about that. I thought about Geoffrey watching me give the money to him and Karen.

After King Park left, I turned off the lamp and looked across the road. Geoffrey and Karen's light went off not long after mine. I rolled a new clip. Walking into their house. In the vision I had a bag of money. Which was ridiculous. I knew that in reality it would be a check. Or a wire or something. I had never had anything to do with an amount of money that large. But I imagined a grocery-store paper sack full of hundred-dollar bills. I was setting it down on the table without a word, and then I walked out. They opened it and looked inside. They embraced each other. I was already crossing the road as they started to weep. I had given them life, a life together.

Over time, the fact that I let Humphreys down has been what bothers my conscience the most. Wonderful, puckish, goat-bearded Humphreys. He was still our host out there on the Land, though he would never have described himself that way. He was the type to wave his hands in front of his face and say, “I’m not the leader! I was just the first one here.” But everyone knew he was the leader. And he liked me, for reasons that were never clear to me. He said he saw himself in me, which I didn’t. If there was one thing that really, really got Humphreys fired up, it was protecting trees. Two or three times in the three years that I lived on the Land, it happened that a wealthy couple bought a house right on the edge of our acreage. And these couples would always want to cut down all the trees in their back yards. They’d bought these places for the trees, but the first thing they wanted to do was cut the trees down. So they could get a better view, you see. They wanted to have their equally wealthy friends from Birmingham or Atlanta come visit, and they wanted to sit in the back yard and look out over the sandstone bluffs. The trees, some of which were very old and large, got in the way. Mind you, it was easy just to walk out past them and stand on the actual edge of the bluff—in fact, you could get a better view that way—but then you couldn’t sit in your stylish lawn furniture and have cocktails served to you by rent-a-servants. So they would always try to cut down the trees. And Humphreys would inevitably hear about it. He knew all the local tree guys they would call for estimates. And he would pay the new owners a visit. What Humphreys knew, and they never knew, was that we owned the trees on the edge of the bluff, the ones they wanted to cut down. We being the Land. They owned the land, the couples did, but we owned the trees, because of a clause in the paperwork that said we had control over the “visual enjoyment” of the bluff. I can’t remember the term that was used—“sight lines” or something. Humphreys had studied the relevant laws like a paralegal. And the people were always very, very unhappy to realize he was right. But Humphreys didn’t care. There was warrior hippie in him. When you piss off a warrior hippie, you’d better be prepared to do battle for *years*. These couples never were. They’d either cancel their tree cutting or they’d pay to replant the trees they’d already cut down, and they’d usually wind up donating money to the Land in the bargain, to keep us from suing. I think Humphreys secretly liked these tree-cutting incidents. It was good for morale.

I had no illusions about what he would think of the decision I was making. He would factor in Karen, the money, sure. He would “try to get his head around” what I “must have been thinking.” But it didn’t even matter somehow.

There were a few times when I interacted with him after having made up my mind, and he completely knew that something was up. “You O.K., man?” he would say.



“Yeah,” I would say. “Things are just kind of heavy.”

“Is it Karen?”

“Probably, yeah.”

“Yeah. I feel for you, bro. What’s hitting you hardest? Is it the breakup or the cancer?”

“Both? I guess?”

“Yeah, man,” he would say. “I one-hundred-per-cent get it.”

Then he would counsel me on how you had to really drink in and digest and bathe in the sadness, if you ever wanted to get past it, and how he hadn’t really understood this until he broke up with Ellen, his wife, who had literally turned into a witch (a Wiccan) after they broke up and had tried to put various spells on him, such that he had sought the help of other, friendly Wiccans to ward them off. But the friendly Wiccans were also her friends. There were feuds within the coven.

“I really do,” he would say. “I get it.” And I believed him.

Something I’ll never forget: when we were first hiking down into the cove, a tree fell. Not the one we were on our way to cut down but a random tree. I say “random” but, of course, in the moment it felt meaningful, as if the forest were marking our entrance. It was already dusk and too dim to make out the tree’s leaves and bark, but it was some kind of oak. It was big and old. It popped twice in the stillness, a champagne-cork sound but like two hundred corks popping at once. By the time we had processed the second pop, the trunk was already crashing through the woods. King Park located it first and turned his body toward it. We both pointed, I don’t know why—it was as if we’d been told to by a stage hypnotist. Afterward, neither of us said anything, or possibly one of us said “Whoa,” but we kept moving. It was darkening by the minute, and we were a good hike from the tree. If I had been able to recognize the spot on the road, we

could have entered there, but the parked car would have been conspicuous, and, anyway, this was the only way I knew to go. I could find the road from the tree, but not the tree from the road.

We each held one strap of a big blue canvas duffelbag that had in it two long crosscut saws, two axes, a smaller bag full of wedges, and ropes. Plus King Park wore a big backpack, one of those packs you wear when you go to the Himalayas or something. It held two chainsaws, for trimming. I had a smaller pack. Inside were snacks and water bottles. Also a small orange traffic cone that we had bought at a hardware store along the road. We hiked without talking.

I knew exactly how it was done. I had read about it so many times. It was as if I had dreamed about it, but my dream, instead of being surreal or fuzzy—instead of being dreamlike, I suppose—had been hyper-accurate and instructive. All those articles. Hundreds and hundreds that I had read in the course of three years, while putting together a comprehensive bibliography for Dr. Bran. He had wanted me to find every mention of the words “chestnut tree” between 1700 and 1900. There were plenty of how-to pieces in there. The men going into the woods, “girdling” the bark, hacking off a white band of exposed wood around the trunk so they could see what they were doing. Then cutting a big notch with an axe, opening up a maw in the direction they wanted the tree to fall. Then you started sawing on the side opposite the notch. As soon as the saw had buried itself in the tree (i.e., cut to a depth that equalled its own blade width), you set the wedges. These kept the weight of the tree off the saw and also started the slow process of cracking the trunk in the right direction. About the time the saw met the notch, the tree would be ready to fall.

We were a good team, in theory. King Park had that unexpected strength that skinny-wiry people sometimes have. His muscles were ropy. And he was athletic, “outdoorsy.” I had the know-how, or enough. And I was not weak, after having been on the Land for a few years. I wasn’t strong, but I wasn’t useless.

The mother nut was different than the last time I had seen her. She was not in bloom, for one thing. Other than that, she probably hadn’t changed much, but the way I saw her had changed. She seemed lesser. I guess that was the lack of surprise. It dimmed the wonder. At the same time, the tree seemed physically larger, because I knew what we had come to do, what we would have to do physically, and there was a sense of “Oh, my God.”

King Park was impressed but not impressed enough, in the way people never are impressed enough or in the right way when you introduce them to something like that, something that has affected your life. He said something like “Crazy.”

By the time we got to the bottom of the cove, in the shadows, it was dark enough that we needed lights to do the work. King Park had camping lanterns with bulbs you could angle. We set them on the ground, one on either side of us, and pointed the light toward the tree. It was already cool for August, and the effect of the cave in the cove made it cooler. The forest was not quiet. There was too much wind in the tops of the trees for that.

When the moment came to start, I didn't pause or think, not even about Karen, or maybe especially not about her. Questions like how I would explain where the money had come from—I hadn't gone near any of that. I shuttered my brain. It was like they say on shows: “My body took over.”

The road was too near. Two or three times an hour, a truck or a couple of cars would come along it, and we would be reminded for a second that we weren't as far from civilization as we felt, or as we wanted to be. We were just two Americans. Doing something bad in the woods and telling ourselves it was for a good cause.

We walked in circles around the tree, scanning up the trunk into the dark canopy. It didn't seem to lean in any particular direction. But we needed it to fall toward the road, so we marked a spot opposite that as the place to begin cutting. The plan was for Dr. Kemp and his friend to bring a semitruck up as close as possible to us. As soon as we had enough of the branches and limbs cut away, we'd winch the tree through the woods and onto the bed of the semi. They would cover it in a giant black tarp that Dr. Kemp had bought used from a defunct nuclear-power plant. Then they would drive away. It seemed both impossible and easy. My brain flicked back and forth between the two interpretations.

“O.K.!” King Park said.

Pretty fast we realized that the tree was much bigger than we had thought and that, by extension, the job was bigger. When my arms started getting tired during the notching phase, about twenty minutes in, I had a rush of panic. King Park and I were swinging the axes in a

pattern, one after the other. He did not look fatigued yet. I kept going on nothing but shame fumes for a while, trying to hide my fatigue, but there came a point when I knew that if I did that a minute longer I'd shred a muscle and become dead weight. I stopped.

“Want to have a smoke?” King Park asked.

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s take a break.”

I thought he'd meant cigarettes, but he took a pipe out of his zippered pocket, and we both smoked some crystal, and then he pulled out a different one, and we smoked some weed. This turned out to be smart. I couldn't feel my biceps or my head.

Hours went by. I'm not going to tell you everything that happened in a terse but detailed way. This is not a Hemingway story. This actually happened. The crosscut saw was like a ribbon, I remember that. It was so thin and long, and it wobbled at the ends, and it was as if we were sawing down the tree with a garrote.

We found things in the wood as the work progressed. I never mention this part—not that I tell this story, but, when I have imagined telling it, people doubt this part. We found a metal shoe, like an animal shoe. The saw raked across it, and we had to change saws. The thing looked like a horseshoe that had been broken in half and flattened. “Ox shoe,” King Park said. I asked him how he knew. He said he had grown up mostly on his grandparents' farm. Most of the other people on the Land had acquired their farming skills secondhand, through courses at progressive liberal-arts colleges, or just by living there, but King Park was more to the manner born. The ox shoe, he said, had probably been in the ground next to the chestnut when the tree was a sapling, and the tree had absorbed it as it grew. We also hit a bottle. The crosscut made a sudden rasp, and the vibration in the handle changed. I held one of the lamps up to the cut, and King Park used the tip of the axe to nose it out. An old bottle, like a pint flask, but with no label. He said he'd seen this before. Farmers would hide bottles of moonshine in the hollows of trees, and the bottles would work themselves down into the wood as the trees grew and get swallowed.

“Now you're kind of freaking me out,” I said. “How could you possibly know this shit?”

“This is a really old tree,” he said, not answering the question, seemingly not even acknowledging it. “Hundreds of years. All kinds of things happen.”

I accepted this somehow. I looked all about us, panting. King Park was changing. Everything was changing its aspect.

More time passed. We had started to move sloppily and sleepily. It wasn't even clear anymore how much we were achieving. At one point, King Park looked at his watch and said, “I don't think we're going to make it.” The plan had been for Dr. Kemp to pull up at four-forty-five in the semi. We were supposed to have the trunk down and mostly trimmed by then. It's funny to think that, if we did this these days, everybody would be communicating by cell the entire time. Back then, I had never even held a cell phone. Probably Kemp had one, the nicest one, but we wouldn't have been able to communicate with it, to tell him we needed more time.

There was a weird, bad moment, when I stopped to piss. I guess I had been doing that a lot, or too often for King Park's liking. “Quit stopping!” he said. “Nobody has to piss that much. You're just pussing out, man. Buck the *fuck* up.” His tone had an abrupt nastiness to it, a sort of barking contempt, that I hadn't heard him use before. Others on the Land had mentioned that he did this, or hinted at it. It had come up at one of the meetings when he wasn't there, when the question of his membership was being discussed.

“I have to *piss*,” I said softly and sort of viciously. It was a physical response—my body said it—the harshness had come not from anger, which I hadn't had time to muster, but from the stress. As I moved past him to the little incline where we'd been relieving ourselves, he hit me on the shoulder just a little too hard. I looked at him and said, “Hey!” He laughed and turned his back, moving toward the tree. That was King Park—laughter in conflict avoidance, laughter in aggression. Looking over his shoulder, he tried to chuckle, as if his shoulder punch had been fraternal. It hadn't. As I peed, dark thoughts flowed through me. I felt as though he had slipped and accidentally shown me what was really going on, but I still had not been able to grasp what it was.

Picking up my end of the saw, I asked him the time.

“Almost four,” King Park said.

“*What?*” I had been expecting him to say midnight, maybe.

“Yeah. That’s what I was saying. We should go ahead and put the cone out.” This was part of the plan. We were supposed to place the traffic cone by the bend in the road where the truck was meant to stop. I pulled it out of my bag and ran down there.

We had done a lot of damage. It wasn’t like we hadn’t made a dent. From certain angles, it even looked as if the tree should fall. But it’s hard to explain with those trees. . . . They have been fighting to stand for so long, you’re going up against powerful forces when you fell one. It’s not just physics. The tree had fuck-you power.

“What do you want to do?” I asked.

“Keep going,” King Park said. “At least let him find us working.”

We got the saw moving again, cutting as fast as we could, but that wasn’t very fast, and it felt as though only a few minutes had gone by when we heard a sound from the road that was different. A motor that didn’t fade the way the others had.

“Hold on,” King Park said. He ran off, down to the road.

I waited. I leaned against the tree. It was still as solid as a house. King Park came back much sooner than I’d expected.

“He’s pissed,” he said.

“We couldn’t have worked any harder.”

“Guys like that don’t give a shit,” he said.

I followed him out to the edge of the woods, in front of the truck. Dr. Kemp and I listened as King Park appeared to improvise a new and not hopeless plan. Tonight, now, we would use the winch to crack the tree and pull it down. The next night he and I would come back and do the trimming. The truck would return “at the exact same time” the following morning, and do what it was supposed to have done today.



This plan was maybe even a little better. Yes, it meant two nights in the woods and so double the chance of getting caught, but the tree would be better trimmed and draw fewer stares on the road. “And, if they find us, this way, we’re just two guys cutting on a felled tree. They can’t prove we cut it down.” I was amazed by King Park’s fluidity, and realize now that he had been silently working on this for hours. Kemp had his hands on his hips, akimbo. The sleeves of his expensive bomber jacket puckered at the elbows. He was visibly enraged, with his jaw thrust out. “Fine,” he said.

King Park turned to me. “Help me drag the hook up,” he said.

I wanted to apologize, to all of them. I could tell they were mad at me from how they refused to look at me. But I also felt, like, How bizarre . . . We were offering this guy everything, a unicorn. He had contributed nothing. He was mad about a schedule change. Sure, it would cost something to pay the driver for a second night, but what did the Kemps of the world care about that?

The driver had stayed in the cab the whole time. I never really saw him. He was looking at something in his lap, some piece of equipment. Brim of his hat pulled down.

King Park had the winch hook in his hand. It looked like something you’d see on the deck of a ship. “I want you to walk in front of me and kick down everything as we go,” he said. “Kick down all the underbrush, so it won’t get tangled.”

I did a goofy stomping walk as we moved through the woods, tearing up the scrub with one step, then mashing and smoothing with the other. Some sections I had to go back over, but it wasn’t that far, like I said, and seemed even less so now. I made a good-enough path.

King Park said he needed to stand on my shoulders, so I set myself, with my hands on my knees, and he climbed onto my back. His hiking boots cut into the skin by my neck. He got the line wrapped around the trunk at the highest level he could reach. Then he tucked the hook into the line, as snug as it would go without actually tying it.

We stepped back from the tree.

“Take a long last lingering look,” King Park said.

We walked down to the road together. Kemp was in the cab now, too. Apparently he wasn't even going to hop out for this process. He was just going to sit there.

I don't know what made me do this—I was sort of high, with fatigue mainly, by then—but I went over to the cab and waited till Kemp opened the door. “What's up?” he said. It was the most dickish thing he could say, like it was what he'd come up with instead of spitting on me.

“Do you want to see it, before it falls?”

He looked over at the driver, who looked once in the rearview mirror and then shrugged his shoulders. A bearded guy with a depressed face. Even now that I saw him I couldn't really see him. His eyes went straight back down to his gizmo.

“O.K.,” Kemp said, climbing down. “Let's hurry,” he said.

King Park stayed by the truck. I jogged back up toward the tree, along the path I had just made, and Kemp followed behind, power walking. When we got there he put his hand on the mother nut. The bark of a mature chestnut is thick and riven with deep, parallel grooves, like the wales in corduroy, but it's slick to the touch, and on this tree the furrows ran in a twisting pattern, spiralling down the trunk. We both looked up. The leaves seemed to be not waving but sort of shuddering. Kemp bent forward and ran a finger along the edge of the cut.

“It's a hell of a tree,” he said.

“It is.”

“Now let's go.”

“I’ll stay here,” I said.

“O.K.,” Kemp said, and started back toward the road.

I went and half sat, half leaned on a boulder about twenty feet away, opposite where the tree would fall. But as soon as I’d sat down I noticed that our packs and other stuff were still scattered around at the base of the tree. I didn’t know what kind of violence there would be, so I ran over and dragged everything back to my rock. I was in the middle of doing that when the winch tightened. I held one of the lamps above my head.

There was a wild sound right before the tree started to fall. Its last gasp. I wish I could have recorded it. To me, it sounded like the call of a bird, a giant bird. I can hear it better than I can describe it. It was not a sound of pain. It was just, as I said, like the call of a great bird that you might hear in a marsh. “Ah-OW! Ah-OW!” Except the tree made the call only once.

The whole business of the falling was loud, and it went on being noisy after the tree was down, with branches crashing past other, smaller trees and settling on the ground. The part that surprised me was that the whole tree, the root ball and everything, got ripped out of the ground. The trunk did not crack, in other words, at the place where we’d cut, or it sort of cracked partway but the winch kept pulling. We had not sawed into the tree as far as we’d thought, or as I’d thought, at least. The root ball was the size of a small cabin, shiny rocks sticking out of it everywhere. Flint. I think there were bones, maybe human bones. And more man-made things. An archaeologist could have spent a year dismantling it all.



The noise seemed to last a full minute. It can't really have been that long. But it was long enough that, at first, I missed the separate sound of a helicopter maneuvering toward us, above and along the road.

When I did notice it, I thought, How weird that they didn't tell me about the change of plan. Why would they let me believe that we were going to come back the next night, to do the trimming, when in reality they had decided to fly the whole thing away with the chopper, branches and all? The guy in the semi must have signalled the guy in the chopper. That was what he had been doing with that device.

The helicopter's lights were red and green, not red and blue like on cop cars, so when they started to flash, I didn't get scared. Just confused. I wanted it to be over. I heard indistinct hollering from the area of the truck and figured that Dr. Kemp and King Park were yelling to the pilot, directing him. The chopper was hovering low, and its blades were making that sound they make, which always makes me picture some huge creature lapping water up out of a lake. *Thup, thup, thup.*

I was watching for King Park to come back from the truck. I knew we would have to disconnect the winch line fast, so that the helicopter could hook up whatever line it used. A voice came over some kind of loudspeaker telling us all to stay right where we were. It said, ". . .knees and . . .your hands in th—"

I was running before I was thinking. I was up a tree before I knew it. It was a white oak. I just climbed the first one that had a hold low enough for my hand to reach. I jumped and grabbed and clambered up like a kid. I had that momentum you get when there's no choice, when you're not so much climbing as running up the trunk. Seconds later, I was about twenty-five feet up the tree, in a little bowl formed by three big limbs. I made myself as small as I could. My face was against the moist bark, down where the limbs met. There were acorn shells and soil there. It must have smelled ancient, but I can't get that scent back. I was breathing hard and saying strange boy things, like "I will go down with you. I will go down with the forest." The fear had made me a boy again.

"Come on, John," a voice said. It came with crashing footsteps that stopped. They knew my name. How did they know my name?

"Where are you, John?"

“I’m up here,” I said quietly.

“John?”

“I’m up here,” I shouted, as if to someone far away.

It’s possible I could have waited them out, hidden for days. But it’s also possible that they’d have had dogs there in a couple of hours.

The deputy sheriff asked me to climb down, and I did. It was harder coming down than climbing up. As I lowered myself and felt for notches with my toes, he asked me if I was armed, and I told him I didn’t even own a gun. He said, “I didn’t ask you that. I asked if you had a gun.” I had such a perfectly balanced mixture of fear and relief running through my blood. They combined into a numbness. The deputy sheriff had an unexpectedly young, kind face. “Well, that was extremely fucking stupid,” he said.

“I know,” I said, laughing. The tone we were using—it was as if we’d just been in a fender bender together and weren’t yet sure whose fault it was.

“I doubt you do know,” he said. “That tree you boys chopped down was not just any tree.”

I stared at him. “Oh, no,” I said.

He told me to turn around.

**I**t was either sad or funny, how cleanly everyone wound up getting off. A whole machine went into motion to clear us all. At every stage of the process, the authorities basically refused to believe that we could have known what we were doing. Dr. Kemp agreed to donate a boatload of money to protect the cove and the square mile or so around it. And, once he’d bought his way out, they couldn’t go after the rest of us too hard. A bunch of people wrote letters on my behalf, including Humphreys. Including even Karen and Geoffrey. Theirs talked about the “emotional shocks” I had “undergone.” That was maybe the worst moment, for me. There’s a philosopher who said something



like “The cruelest stroke of all is realizing that you are the author of your own misfortunes.” But I would say it is much crueller to realize that the people in your life consider you too much of a dipshit to have authored your misfortunes. It reminded me of one summer when I was a kid and I started a fire in the woods near my house. No one would believe that I had done it. People kept saying things like “No, that was a controlled burn. The fire department burns that stretch of woods every so many years.” I couldn’t get anyone to believe me. By the end, I was almost boasting about it, in desperation. That kind of thing leaves you feeling lucky but also ghostly.

King Park got community service. He laughed about it the next time I saw him, which was also the last time I saw him. He said, “You know what happened, right?” I told him I had no idea. “It was the guy driving the truck!”

“*What?*” I said. “Why did he even care?”

“He didn’t care about the tree,” King Park said, doing his swivel-headed smile, “but he had been busted growing weed the year before. By the same chopper. Ha ha . . . The guy thought he could get himself clear on the other charge if he handed over Kemp.”

Naturally, I had to leave the Land. Apart from Humphreys, who hugged me and said the nicest thing—“This is not the end of our knowing each other”—nobody said goodbye. Maybe they would have, and I was avoiding them. It was all part of the growing ghostliness. Moving on. I co-manage a coffee shop now, not a chain, one that’s slightly higher-end than that. I have actually learned a shitload about coffee—which, not to get off on another subject, but coffee is going extinct from a blight that may be related to climate change. I also got medicated, which has been amazing.

I never heard a word from Dr. Bran. I passed him once, in the parking lot before our hearings. (I was there to read a letter of apology they had made me write—like I was a teen-ager!) He either pretended not to see me or genuinely did not see me. His glasses could make it hard to tell. I have never had the guts to contact him. It seems like it would just be bad for both of us. But one kind of great thing: about two years later, I got on the Internet and did some searches about the chestnut blight. I wanted to see if my research had ever percolated into the consensus. (It had not.) I came across a paper, written by Bran and about twenty-six other people, the way scientific papers are. It was all about the tree we had cut down, the grand lady. They had really gone nuts on it, dissecting it, studying its cells. Bran, et al., wrote that

the tree's "regrettable destruction" had proved to be "an unlooked-for boon to an obscure corner of dendrology." (Can a corner receive a boon?) From what I could tell, they hadn't learned much. Or else they had learned a lot about chestnut biology but nothing about the fungus. The detail that stuck out involved these balls they had found in a hollow space near the center of the trunk. "Five round balls of decayed wood, larger than a fist." When they broke them open, each had a beetle inside, about two and a half inches long. The beetle proved to be of an unknown species. What that had to do with chestnut trees and the blight the paper "left up to further investigation."

Every now and then I can't resist getting online to look for more old newspaper mentions. It's wild what they have now—you have probably seen these new databases. It turns out that I barely knew the half of it, about the blight. The die-off began as early as the eighteen-fifties, spreading from Pennsylvania down through South Carolina. It's like the chestnut trees were always dying. Of course, it may not have been the same disease, killing them then, as the one that showed up in 1904. Scientific training would be required to prove that. Given the way things ended with Bran and me, I doubt he'll pursue it. Or maybe he did and decided it wasn't important. I found a poem in a small-town newspaper from Elizabeth City, North Carolina, published in 1871:

The chestnut trees is dead, John,

And, what is sadder now,

The broken grapevine of our swing

Hangs on the withered bough;

I read our names upon the bark,

And found the pebbles rare

Laid up beneath the hollow side,

As we had pilled them there.

I'm not sure if "pilled" was a typo for "piled," but I love it. You can see it. I don't think the poem is terrible, over all. I sent a copy of it to Karen. Not trying to get back into her life, just thinking, She was an English major, she'll appreciate it. Crickets.

Karen: last thing, then I'll stop. I heard it from Humphreys. We talk maybe twice a year, and he keeps me updated on Land gossip. He's always very careful to mention Karen and Geoffrey, if he mentions them at all, in the most neutral, matter-of-fact way. But one night I gave in and asked how "those guys" were doing, and he told me that, not long after the incident with the mother nut, about six months later, Karen had been getting firewood from their woodpile and a baby copperhead bit her on the hand. The babies are the worst, because they haven't learned to conserve their venom. They just give it all they've got. Karen was already weak from all the treatments and medications. She developed a fever and became really sick, but did eventually recover, enough to be walking around again. A few months later, she's in Atlanta getting her scans, and her doctor is, like, "This is weird, and don't get too excited, but your tumors have shrunk." The doctor did some reading and found that there was a group of researchers in Boston working on the miraculous effects of copperhead venom on breast-cancer patients. (Completely not making this up.) He contacted them, and they went nuts, wanting to fly her up and use her as a guinea pig. In return, they offered to give her the best cancer care in the country, for free. She's totally going to live.

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*John Jeremiah Sullivan is a contributing writer for the Times Magazine and the southern editor of The Paris Review. His forthcoming book is "The Prime Minister of Paradise."*

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