

CHRISTINE ERWIN

## Caught In The Headlights

I SWITCH OFF THE SEA-GREEN lamp and crawl into bed beside him—already asleep it seems, because he doesn't understand me. I tell him, Roll over. He mumbles, You're cryptic. And I laugh under my breath, turn my face into Grandma's old down pillow, shake beneath her comforter: a throw. Throw him out. Wish I could with the snorting and sawing he does in between courses of him turning onto his stomach. I don't feel guilty about my roughness anymore if he can produce such a roar.

He directs his two unblinking beams at me when I speak. I see this because the moon spills its juice into our bedroom, over the sill coating the comforter. And because I can see them so clearly, I figure they must know I am here, can find me too. I say, Turn over. Turn *over*. I poke him. Prod. Kick. Sometimes I ask personal questions: Who are you dreaming about? Did you masturbate in the shower today? Yesterday? I try nonsensical questions too, questions with no bearing on anything, just to see if he'll drop a clue. He has talked in his sleep before.

My grandmother's old lamp is set on a wood pedestal. The original shade, dulled by smoke, was impossible to clean, yet for years we didn't replace it—not out of expense, took road trips to Key West but couldn't justify a new shade. A sacrilege? She was not difficult, knotted that way. One day I carried the lamp by its elephant trunk handles like an urn and took it to a lighting store. The sales-help crowded at it saying: So unusual. Elegant. Don't make them like that anymore. The wire hoop arching over the light bulb was different from any they'd seen before, and no linen-white shade could be attached until a saleswoman rifled the storeroom, returned with pliers and spare brass nuts. God, this is ancient, she said.

I have short conversations with him in bed while he stares at me, his stillness like a deer caught in the headlights of a car heading south. Three o'clock in the morning, him asleep beside me, my driving shift, and a fog hovering on either side of the car encasing us in muffled darkness, complete faith in the few feet ahead, that the road will continue.

A police patrol car appears behind me (I'm speeding, but not excessively), hangs on, and I don't like the shadow. Either haul me off the road for a ticket or pass. Eventually it creeps up beside me, drives parallel into oncoming traffic studying my car with a flashlight, my slumped passenger, our luggage, then it speeds into the black. I'm stabbed by loss, missing the company. Any company.

There are warning signs of leaping deer, I can't possibly fall asleep at the wheel for dread of the thump. He sleeps on, needs to before his next stint as driver, the switch in town at six: coffee, wash my face, wonder how I can look so crummy from simply sitting on a seat, staring out a window.

I spot the deer alert on the shoulder. So many thoughts fill a penny of time, cupped in the moment the deer ventures out onto the highway inevitable as the suck of love. I take a guess and hope he's skittish, will return to the shoulder or at least pause. I swerve on the road, over the double painted lines to be sure. But he is a bold one. Or is drawn by my headlights.

The night is powerless to help those who don't open their lives to it.

He doesn't remember what I've said to him come morning. Doesn't recall the commands, the deals I make: If you haven't stopped snoring, if you're not over on your stomach when I get back from the bathroom, I get to pinch you. He stares at me as though I've told him terrible news, so heartbreaking and penetrating his eyes are no longer in his head. Elated, I think, at last he hears me. But no, it's an illusion. His eyes face inward. I return from the toilet and he's supine. Defiant. I think, he doesn't care about me, the dreams, the aching knee joints, the her who needs to travel for a rest before returning to land. I say, *Get on your side*, and I elbow him. He turns, turns away. In the morning, he remembers nothing. How often does this happen? A lot.

It does not, he says.

The arrangement I've come up with for the carved stand of her lamp is to fit the sections together so that no one knows but

me it's split in pieces and couldn't weather an absentminded nudge, an insult, a bump of any sort. It has fallen apart in three places, the 1920s glue unstuck. I'm not exactly sure why the glue shrinks into itself, why it withholds from the wood, flakes, and like overexposed skin, rejects the place it came from. I could take it off the way I used to pick dead skin off my brother's back and shoulders. My mouth watering as I worked, I'd peel off the opaque skin to see his freckles surface, uncovered like new islands after a storm.

At one point, I smeared more cement onto the pedestal. It didn't hold. I need to slough off the shreds of old glue, and I can't. I'm afraid. It's beyond my hands to scrape at the ornate root. Perhaps in another ten years, I'll be ready to take it to a carpenter and hear, I've never seen a pedestal like this, and I'll cringe when he pulls out a scraper.

Sometimes I am driven with desire to hear my grandmother enter my bedroom. She didn't kiss me good-night, not her way, she concerned herself, checked the sash and blind were up, the rush of trees in the wind, leaves fluttering like a bird under the eaves. And always a lone car heading out into the country.

I need to know, can't abandon the deer perhaps panting, retching with life so I pull over onto the side of the highway. The gravel, abundant as stars, shifts under our feet while we make our way down the bank. The deer is lying as if asleep, as if his nostrils will quiver with lust and sound the alarm in his head. His barrelled chest is still. I'm glad we didn't bring the flashlight, although the fog is damp and heavy at my neck, because I want to see the whole animal. I squat by his head fearful his anger might leap with a hoof at my throat, suffocate me, but his eyes are unmoved.

Perhaps my grandparents would have roped the animal to their car roof—to waste is as much of a sin, and there is a truth to that. My grandmother knew how to cook deer. She would have divided the meat, prepared and wrapped the cuts. Hers was a practical sight.

I leave the deer, knowing he has seen me with other eyes, perhaps out of the whites, perhaps when I stroked his muzzle, cheekbones, the chestnut hair warm and finer than I had expected. I know you don't have to stare at someone to see them. Especially if one of you is dead. There are other senses at work.

Some day I too will arrive on the other side. I will carry on my back a canvas knapsack with tools which are a help. Tools for a maroon. I will not be empty-handed as I am now in bed, staring

into the two small pools in his face while he lies stretched out on his back beside me. I think they must speak of inner coral, fish, a bottomless well. I don't follow his beams, see what he sees, make copious notes of the terrain. No. I pore over the eyes themselves and am baffled by each iris sectioned off.