

FICTION



Turtleface

ART TK

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We were paddling our canoes down a remote, slow-moving river, a full day's travel in either direction from the nearest road, when Otto decided to do something spectacular and stupid. Around a bend we encountered a sandy cliff rising up out of the water. Otto announced he would climb the cliff and then run down its steep face. We could all take pictures as he descended in long Olympian strides. At the end of his run, as he neared the base, Otto declared, he would launch himself into the river, a downhill running dive. It was late in the afternoon and we had all been drinking beer and whiskey.

Otto and I paddled to the cliff's base and he got out. Then he climbed. It was tough going due to all that loose sand.

"How's this?" he shouted down. He was about halfway up.

"Higher!" I shouted back. I was excited about the stunt and reasoned that greater height would maximize the effect.

I was feeling envious as well. Sheila and Maria were in the other canoe, watching intently. They wore cutoff blue jean shorts over their swimsuits. Sheila was a photographer. She pointed her large-lensed camera up at Otto. Maria, my girlfriend, was a nurse and on the verge of dumping me for a number of legitimate reasons. At that moment I wished I possessed Otto's imagination and daring.

There was one other person with us, a cousin of Sheila's, named Tom. He was a large fellow who had joined the trip at the last minute. He couldn't, or wouldn't, paddle because he had broken his thumb. Instead, he declared he would be in charge of doling out the beer, and he spent the day sprawled in the center of the women's canoe doing just that. His skin

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had turned from pale white to dark crimson over the course of our journey. Maria had warned him about the dangers of exposure to the sun but he dismissed that advice with a wave of his cast-bound hand.

“I’ll be fine,” said Tom.

Otto reached a point on the cliff where he could climb no higher. The terrain above him was too steep. He was perhaps a hundred feet above the water now, clinging to exposed tree roots for support. Clods of dirt tumbled down the slope and bounced into the water in front of us.

“Do it!” shouted Tom. He threw a half-full can of beer toward the cliff, where it landed without a sound in the sand.

“Are you going to pick that up?” asked Maria.

“Nope,” said Tom.

“I’ll pick it up,” I said. I paddled my canoe back toward the cliff.

“Are you ready?” shouted Otto.

“Yes!” I shouted back.

“Where should I dive?” asked Otto.

I could see that Otto was having second thoughts. But the cliff shot straight into the river and the water below it was dark and deep. It all seemed fine to me.

“Go to my left!” I shouted back, pointing to a general area.

“My steps are going to be so long, man!” shouted Otto. “Watch this!”

Otto gave a halfhearted whoop and leapt into the air. He took one huge stride, and then another. He was right about those long steps. He covered a tremendous amount of ground with each leap, such was the pitch of the terrain. The sun shone down and sand kicked up behind him, creating an impressive, superhuman image.

Sheila clicked away with her camera and said, “Oh wow.” Maria nodded appreciatively.

Admiration and envy swelled within me. I should have come up with this, I thought, or at least climbed up there and done it with him, a tandem performance. We could have shared the glory. The women would have rubbed our backs around the campfire that night while recounting our heroics. Otto’s body pitched forward as he neared the river’s edge. He was losing control, legs scrambling, barely able to keep up with his downhill momentum.

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“Ahhh!” he cried.

He dove forward, flying out toward the water, and hit the surface with a smack.

Ouch, I thought.

“Whoa, fuck!” said Tom, slapping his knee with his one good hand. “Damn!”

The women were silent, unsure whether to laugh or be concerned. I moved closer to where Otto had landed. His body floated up in an awkward manner, facedown, arms splayed out from his sides.

“Turn over, Otto,” I said out loud.

Maria yelled at me, “Get him, Georgie!”

I sloshed forward and flipped Otto’s body over. His nose was smashed. Something was wrong with his lip, too. Otto took a huge gasp of air. He was alive, a good sign. I recall thinking, *Oh, this isn’t so bad.*

“He’s okay!” I called to the others. “He’s

alright.”

“No, he’s not,” said Sheila.

Blood began to spill from Otto’s nose and mouth. Sheila was right. I had been too optimistic. He wasn’t okay at all. Where was this blood coming from? What was wrong with his face? It was punched in. Jesus, how did that happen? It was just water.

We hoisted Otto on board Sheila and Maria’s canoe. Tom got out begrudgingly to make room in the center. He stood next to me in the river while Maria, the nurse, attended to Otto’s face.

Sheila kept saying, “Oh Lord. Oh my Lord.”

Tom opened a new beer and together we scanned the water where Otto had landed, looking for the rock or tree limb that must have caused the damage.

Eventually Tom said, “There’s your culprit.”

He pointed to a dim, submerged object spinning in the current just below the surface.

“What is it?” I asked.

We watched for a moment as the object rose up, wiggled a bit, and then sank down.

“It’s a turtle,” said Tom, almost chuckling. “He hit a fucking turtle.”

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“Oh God,” I said.

It was a small snapping turtle, the size of your average pie. It was injured, too, and struggling to remain upright in the water.

I waded over and fished the creature out of the river. Its shell was cracked and I could see tender insides through the gap.

“Oh no,” I said.

“Tough day for him,” said Tom, shaking his head.

Over in the canoe, Otto coughed and moaned.

“What happened?” he stuttered. “What?”

“We need to get him out of here,” said Maria. “We need a hospital. A helicopter, something.”

Of course, there was no hospital or helicopter anywhere nearby. Our cell phones had lost any kind of signal long before we had even put the boats in the water that morning. I thought about shouting or blowing a whistle, but it really was no use. We’d simply have to paddle Otto down-river as fast as we could.

Our plan, before this happened, had been to camp out on a sandbar and reach the road crossing early the next day. From there one of us would hitchhike back up to the vehicle we’d left at the starting point. It was a plan hatched by a group of people in no particular hurry.

We fastened Otto down as well as we could. He was conscious, but dazed and in shock. The only lucky element to our situation was the presence of Maria, the nurse. She tended to him with improvised bandages and ice from the coolers. Even if there really wasn’t much that could be done for Otto right then, we all felt better knowing that someone competent was involved.

Because Maria was occupied with her patient, that boat needed another paddler. I took her spot in the stern and Tom, broken thumb and all, was given the task of paddling the second boat solo.

“I can’t do this,” he protested.

“Jesus, Tom,” said Sheila. “This is an emergency.”

We shifted most of the gear into Tom’s boat to make room for both Otto and Maria in the middle of ours. As we readied to leave, I made a spur-of-the-moment decision. I fished the injured turtle out of the river. Then I emptied one of our coolers and placed the turtle inside it, with a little bit of river water.

Tom watched this procedure with disdain. “What the hell are you doing that for?” he asked me.

“I’m taking the turtle with us. We can’t just leave him here,” I said.

“We sure can,” said Tom.

“We need to go,” said Maria.

Sheila and I set out at a frantic pace and nearly capsized the canoe right at the start. It would have been proverbial salt in the wound, dumping poor Otto into the water just then, but we managed to keep upright and soon hit our stride. It wasn’t long before we had left Tom far behind us, cursing and swirling about in the current. He was in for a long, rough trip, paddling one-handed all by himself, but we didn’t have time to worry about that.

We paddled past lush pine forests and stunning rock outcroppings, hardly noticing the landscape in our haste. The wild surroundings had seemed pristine and magical that morning, but now it all took on a desolate air, especially as the sun dipped lower and cast long shadows in the canyons. I kept hoping we’d meet up with another group or pass some lonesome cabin equipped with a radio, but there was nothing. At one point we startled a moose.

“Moose,” said Sheila as we cruised past it.

“Wha?” said Otto.

“Shh . . .” said Maria. She had been talking to him throughout our journey, gently waking him from time to time to be sure he didn’t slip into a coma.

“How’s he doing?” I asked.

“Stop asking me that,” said Maria.

“How’s the turtle?” asked Sheila.

“Not so good,” I reported. I held the cooler steady between my feet. The turtle lay still, listlessly sloshing about in the water, retracted inside its cracked shell.

Night fell and still we hadn’t reached the road. Maria pointed a flashlight ahead of us so that it cast an eerie beam across the water, and we forged on. My hands were blistered and my shoulders numb. Sheila could barely lift her arms. She puked over the side of the canoe and collapsed. I felt a wave of admiration for her then, paddling so hard her body gave out on her. She hardly knew Otto, by the way. They had been dating for only about a week before embarking on this trip. We pulled over and Maria gave Sheila water and massaged her arms. Then they switched places. Maria placed a cool, wet bandana over Otto’s face.

“Don’t lift it up,” said Maria as she took the bow.

We made good time with Maria’s fresh arms and reached the bridge crossing around midnight. This felt like progress, except we soon found that there were no cars traveling the road at that hour.

“Fuck,” said Maria. “We should have paddled faster.” This comment seemed directed at me, since Sheila had clearly done all she could.

We dragged the canoe onto the shore and left Otto inside it. Maria grabbed a cell phone and ran down the road looking for a signal. Sheila and I stayed behind with Otto, both of us too tired to run around the wilderness on such an errand. Otto kept at it with his raspy wheezing and intermittent coughing fits. Awful as he sounded, the noises offered a bit of comfort. When he was silent we worried that he might stop breathing altogether.

Sheila and I fell asleep in the dirt next to the canoe and woke up hours later to the sound of a truck engine. It was nearly dawn. A logging rig had picked up Maria several miles up the road. They’d managed to contact the state police and a trauma unit was on its way in a helicopter.

I woke Otto up and told him help was coming.

“Help?” he said. “What’s the matter?”

“Do you remember what happened?” I asked him.

Otto was silent. I pulled the bandana away from his face and let a bit of light from my flashlight shine upon him. Maria had done a good job cleaning things off, but now the swelling had set in. It was a gruesome sight, hardly recognizable as a face. Something had shifted, or disappeared. *Where is Otto’s nose?* I thought.

Finally Otto said, “I’m in a canoe.”

“Right, right,” I replied.

“And you told me to run,” he said.

“Well, no, you decided to run,” I pointed out. “You were on a cliff.”

“And you told me . . .”

“No, you had made up your mind . . .”

“Stop bothering him,” said Maria.

“Okay,” I said.

I got up and approached the loggers who had picked up Maria. They

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were standing beside their truck smoking cigarettes in the dim light.

“Our friend is hurt,” I told them.

“We know that,” they said.

“Do you have any tape?” I asked. “Strong, sturdy tape?”

“Duct tape?” said one of the loggers. “You want duct tape?”

“Right,” I said. “Duct tape.”

The logger reached inside his truck and pulled out a dirty silver roll.

“Like this?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’ll give it back.”

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I took the roll of tape and found the cracked turtle in the cooler. I placed a strip of tape carefully over the break in its shell, as much to keep things out as to keep them in. The turtle’s head and legs remained retracted and it was difficult to tell if it was even alive. Maria watched my efforts with disdain.

“When this is all over you and I need to have a talk,” she said to me.

“Okay, sure, I know,” I said.

The sunrise brought a fresh round of blackflies and we swatted them away until the helicopter finally arrived. It hovered over the dirt road spraying dust and rocks in every direction. Three men jumped out with a stretcher and suddenly the place was bustling with activity. With crack precision they loaded Otto into the chopper and it was decided that Sheila and Maria would go along. I stayed behind with the canoe to wait for Tom.

The helicopter lifted off and things grew quiet once again. The loggers turned to me.

“You mind if we depart now?” one of them asked. “We’re late already.”

“Go ahead,” I told them. I gave them back their roll of tape and they left.

It seemed as if Tom should have arrived by then, but I figured he must have stopped somewhere when it got dark. He was probably sleeping in, waiting for the problem to get solved before he arrived back on the scene. I washed the blood out of the canoe and settled in to wait.

I watched the turtle in the cooler. Toward noon his little nose poked out cautiously and my heart jumped. He was alive! I dipped his body into the cool river and cleaned him off as best I could.

Tom showed up that afternoon, wet and angry. His canoe was half full of water and all of the gear was gone.

“Where the hell is everybody?” he asked me.

“A helicopter came,” I said. “They went to the hospital.”

“A chopper? Here? Aw, fuck.” Tom held up his hand. The cast over his thumb had mostly rotted away.

“I think I’m going to need a doctor too,” said Tom. “They should have waited for me.”

“Otto was in bad shape,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but . . . look at this,” said Tom. He motioned toward his swamped canoe. “I could have died back there. You assholes abandoned me.”

Tom was drunk. Although our gear was gone, he had managed to save a few beers. He offered one to me.

“Thanks,” I said. The beer tasted terrible and I felt immediately dizzy since I hadn’t eaten anything since the day before.

Tom peered into my cooler, looking for booze, and saw the turtle, cleaned off and wrapped in duct tape.

“Well look at this,” he said. “You’re a regular Doctor Dolittle.”

“He’s still alive,” I told Tom.

“He’s not going to survive.”

“You might be right.”

“Oh, I’m right. You know what we’re going to have to do?”

“What?”

“Eat him.”

“The turtle?”

“Right,” said Tom. “It’s the proper thing to do when you mortally wound an animal.”

“I’m not going to eat that turtle,” I said.

“Look,” said Tom, “it’s more respectful than letting him die in vain. That little fella was doing fine until you and Otto decided to fuck up his day. Now you just want to tape him up and flee the scene. Show some respect, Georgie. It’s the least you can do.”

“Hold on,” I said. “What do you mean by ‘you and Otto’? It was Otto’s decision to run down that cliff. I was just there to provide support. We all were.”

“I had nothing to do with it,” said Tom. “I wash my hands of the matter. Except this turtle here. I’ll help you make a soup if you want. I’m hungry as hell and the meat will go bad if we wait much longer. It’s the law of the

jungle, Georgie. Eat what you kill. Leave no trace.”

I had no response for this logic except to say that we were not going to eat the turtle and the matter was no longer up for discussion. About an hour later we caught a ride to our car in the back of a pickup truck. I held the cooler with the turtle on my lap, trying not to let it bounce too much on the dirt roads. Tom held on to his broken thumb and moaned.

Back at home I took charge of the turtle’s rehabilitation. I visited a veterinarian who offered a grim prognosis.

“It won’t survive,” he said. “The wound is too severe and infection has set in. I don’t know why it’s still alive, to be honest.”

Against his advice I paid \$800 to have an antibiotic IV inserted into the turtle’s small veins. I also learned that it was a female turtle, not a male, as I had for some reason assumed. I named her Charlotte, after an elderly woman I once knew who sort of resembled a turtle. I purchased a plastic children’s wading pool and filled it with rocks, water, and moss-covered tree limbs. This I placed inside my small apartment to provide a habitat for Charlotte. If she was going to die, I reasoned, it would be in relative comfort.

Otto was laid up in the county hospital for nearly a month. They treated several infections, brain swelling, and did their best to reconstruct his face. The doctors and nurses there kept commenting on how lucky he was to be alive.

“I’m not lucky,” Otto would tell them. “I ran into a turtle.”

I visited Otto often during his recovery, a gesture meant to be kind-hearted, but somehow interpreted as an effort to ease my own guilt.

“Ah, so you’re the accomplice,” remarked one of Otto’s attendants upon my arrival.

“I wouldn’t call it that,” I said. “I was just there at the time.”

“You told me where to dive,” said Otto, sipping on a blended fruit shake.

“When I told you that, there was no turtle in the water.”

“Well, how could you know?” said the attendant, smiling in an odd placating manner that I’ve come to believe is taught at medical institutions.

The swelling in Otto’s face had subsided, but what was left now was an unsettling tableau not unlike one of those big rubber masks you sometimes see kids wearing on Halloween. His nose had been rebuilt into an odd nub and remained shifted off to one side. He was missing a cheekbone, or

something, below his left eye, so that side of his face was sunken significantly. He'd lost several teeth as well and now spoke out of the side of his mouth. It was an odd sensation, watching Otto heal up in the hospital. At times I felt jealous for all the attention and care he was receiving. He was the hero who had braved the cliffs and survived, albeit scarred. I was just the petty coward accomplice, the one who had watched from below and directed him toward the invisible turtle. I knew it made no sense to envy a man with injuries such as Otto's, but I did.

A wealthier, better insured person would likely have had more options for reconstruction than Otto. As it was, he had no insurance at all, and once his condition was considered stable, he was given a mix of prescription pills and asked to leave. I was the only one there on the day of his release.

"Where's Sheila?" asked Otto.

"She's not here," I told him.

"Great. Fantastic."

As I mentioned before, Sheila and Otto's relationship had extended only a week before his accident, and throughout his stay at the hospital I could see her performing an awkward calculus in her head. How long must she stay with him? I guess she had determined his release date was as good a time as any to move on, and I couldn't truly blame her.

You will not be surprised to hear that Maria dumped me as well. She had come to visit me in my apartment and gazed disdainfully upon Charlotte, resting in the pool I had set up for her.

"This is ridiculous," she told me.

"She's doing better than expected," I pointed out. "She's begun to eat the food I give her."

"Your best friend is in the hospital," said Maria, "because of this turtle."

"Otto is not my best friend," I pointed out.

"That's not the point," she said.

"And it wasn't Charlotte's fault," I continued. "If anything, she's the victim here."

"That's not the point either," said Maria.

I had thought Maria might be impressed with my rehabilitation of the wounded turtle and see that I was indeed capable of compassion and

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competence, but that was not the case. She pronounced the whole situation disappointing, and left.

Once the paperwork was complete, Otto and I departed the hospital and located an organic food shop, where I bought him a fruit smoothie. He sipped it and gazed at the hustle and commerce on the street outside. You could see people walk by and do subtle double takes when they saw Otto's face, startling as it was.

"I guess everything just moved along without me," he said.

It was true. In fact, Otto had been evicted from his small home while he was laid up as well. Apparently he had fallen behind in rent long ago and his crafty landlord seized upon his absence to move his belongings to the curb.

"Can I stay with you for a while?" asked Otto. "While I figure things out?"

I said yes, of course, though my place was small, and already made more cramped by the presence of Charlotte and her pool.

I had meant to tell Otto about Charlotte before we arrived, but it was a hard subject to broach, and so he simply came upon her when he arrived.

"What the fuck is this?" he asked me.

"That's Charlotte," I said.

Otto moved closer and saw the ridgeline on Charlotte's shell where the crack once was. It was a vicious scar, but few would have guessed at the sorry state she had been in. Charlotte was quite recovered at this point and, seeing Otto and the turtle together, it occurred to me that despite her smaller size she had fared better in the collision. Although it was also true that she was now confined to a plastic wading pool as opposed to living free in the wild. I suppose a sound argument could be formulated for either conclusion, now that I think about it.

"Is this the turtle I think it is?" asked Otto.

"Yes, Otto," I said. "It is."

"You kept this thing?"

"She was going to die out there," I pointed out. "Tom wanted to eat her."

"Eat a turtle? Like in a soup? Is that what he wanted?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think he mentioned making a soup."

Otto reached into the tank and pulled Charlotte out. He held her high

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in the air as her stubby legs flailed about.

“Careful,” I said, “she might bite you.”

“I ought to chuck this reptile out the fucking window,” he said.

“Please don’t do that,” I said.

I moved toward Otto and he held Charlotte away from me, his damaged face twitching in anger. We stood there in an uneasy standoff as the water bubbled gently in the pool beside us. Charlotte retreated into her shell, ready for yet another shock to her system at the hands of my friend Otto. But he didn’t have the stomach for such cruelty in the end. He flipped Charlotte back into the pool, where she landed upside down, and I quickly righted her.

“It wasn’t her fault,” he admitted nobly.

Otto was not a good roommate. He snored loudly and was up at all hours, pacing about and muttering to himself. Whereas he had once been a great outdoorsman, he now preferred to stay inside most of the day. On the few occasions he did venture outside, people could not help staring at his odd features. I even caught myself staring at times, such was the severity of his injury. Every so often someone would approach me privately and ask what had happened. The story was always met with such incredulity that I took to simplifying it greatly.

“A diving accident,” I would say.

On the rare occasion that someone asked Otto directly, he would usually answer, “a hockey fight.” This explanation was always accepted without question.

Sometimes I would return to the apartment to find Otto deep in conversation with Charlotte. He would whisper things to her, observations about the TV show he was watching or snide comments about my house-keeping habits. Otto’s injuries required him to blend up most of his food and he expected me to maintain a steady supply of fruit and yogurt as well as clean up the mess he made preparing his shakes. As he drank down his meals he would sit beside Charlotte and gloat.

“No, Charlotte,” he would say. “You can’t have any of this! Turtles can’t eat citrus.”

These conversations would go on at all hours, sometimes becoming so heated that I feared for Charlotte’s safety. But for the most part it was just companionship. Where Otto had once seen Charlotte as the agent of his destruction, he grew to view her more as a comrade in arms. No one else

understood what they had been through. I sometimes felt that they were forming an alliance against me, despite all I had done for them. We rarely spoke of the accident, but when we did Otto would always be sure to centralize my role in encouraging him.

“We all know why you took Charlotte home and nursed her so carefully,” Otto explained to me. “Because of what you’d done.”

“She needed help,” I said. “If anyone should feel guilty it’s you. You landed on her.”

“Ha!” laughed Otto. “I should feel guilty? Look at me. Do I look like I should be feeling guilty about anything?”

Throughout this period Otto ingested vast amounts of pain medication and I began to suspect that he was playing several doctors at once for prescriptions. Meanwhile, preposterous bills relating to his hospital stay showed up in the mail.

“One hundred and forty thousand dollars!” screamed Otto. “How do they expect me to pay that?”

One of the bills suggested Otto call a helpline to discuss his situation, which he refused to do. I decided to call the number myself one afternoon. It turned out this wasn’t a financial helpline, as I had thought, but rather a connection to some kind of support group for people who had experienced traumatic injury. I signed Otto up for one of their meetings and told them I’d bring him there myself.

“Why would I want to attend some shit like that?” asked Otto, after I told him what I had done.

“It might be helpful,” I said. “You stay in the house all day long. It isn’t healthy.”

“Healthy? What does that even mean, ‘healthy’?”

Otto retreated to the corner near Charlotte’s pool, as was his wont. He stared in at her and whispered something I could not understand.

The next day Otto fashioned a small leash for Charlotte and announced he was taking her outside for walk. At first this idea seemed ridiculous to me, but it turned out regular constitutionals of this sort are recommended for captive snapping turtles and the practice proved to be enjoyable for both Otto and Charlotte. Of course, the walks were anything but brisk, and the two of them together presented an odd tableau, eliciting even more attention than Otto had when he’d ventured out on his own. But Otto clearly took comfort in Charlotte’s companionship, and I was thankful for the time alone in the apartment. Around town, Otto became

known as “Turtleface,” a moniker I did my best to hide from him.

When the time came for the first support group meeting Otto put on his coat agreeably, then casually picked up Charlotte and wrapped her in a thin blanket.

“She’s coming with us,” he said.

“Okay,” I consented. It seemed a small price to pay for progress.

The meeting was held in a classroom at the local community college. Otto and I walked in late and scanned the room, a semicircle of wheelchair-bound amputees and various examples of disfigurement. One man had a leg swollen up the size of a barrel.

“Oh fuck,” said Otto, “would you look at this?”

“You’re one to talk,” said the man with the swollen leg. “And what’s that, a turtle?”

Otto covered up Charlotte with his coat, a protective gesture.

“It’s my turtle,” said Otto. He seemed to think the man wanted to take it from him.

“Actually the turtle belongs to me,” I pointed out. “I was the one who nursed it back to health.”

“We share custody now,” said Otto.

“Why don’t you two sit down?” said a small woman named Nadine. She was the facilitator. We sat down and joined the semicircle.

Although they were in compromised physical shape, the people before us seemed to be a fairly well-adjusted bunch. They told stories and laughed at their wild misfortunes. One woman had been mauled by a chimpanzee at the zoo.

“It was my own fault, really,” she said, showing us the scars on her neck, back, and shoulders. “Everyone knows how strong a chimp can be when it’s angry.”

Another man had a mental affliction that compelled him to dump scalding hot liquid on himself whenever he discovered it was within reach. The coffee machine was kept in another room on his account. His face was shiny from all the burns and much of his hair was gone.

Otto had no sympathy at all for this person. “Well, I can tell you how to solve this problem,” he said. “From now on don’t pour any more hot water on yourself, okay? Just stop doing it.”

The burned man looked Otto up and down. “Suppose I told you to stop

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running into turtles,” he replied. “Would that help?”

Otto pulled Charlotte out of his coat and handed her to me. “Hold her,” he said. “I’m going to kick this guy’s ass.”

Nadine stood up and expertly talked Otto down. Apparently this sort of confrontation was not uncommon when someone new entered the group.

“You seem angry,” she told Otto.

“Of course I’m angry,” he said.

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Afterward, I felt that the support group had done little for Otto, but the next day he told me he had experienced an epiphany overnight.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that we need to return Charlotte to the wild,” he said.

I was resistant to this idea at first. I liked Charlotte and had imagined that when Otto finally left my home the two of us would lead a content existence together. Perhaps you are aware that snapping turtles have life spans nearly as long as humans and as such make for good long-term companions.

But Otto laid out his plan and I couldn’t deny the simple logic of it. We would return to the location of their misfortunes. Charlotte belonged back in her homeland now that she was well. And the journey would be cathartic for us all, he claimed.

Maria wanted nothing to do with such an endeavor, but we managed to persuade Tom and Sheila to join us for the trip. It was late fall, and chilly, by the time we got everything together and set off. Tom brought a cross-bow along with him because he claimed it was bow-hunting season and he hoped to shoot an animal of some sort.

“I’d be more than happy to dress and cook it for everyone while we’re camped along the river,” he said.

“No thanks,” said Sheila. She was a vegetarian.

Tom refused to apologize for wanting to eat Charlotte back when she had been injured.

“It would have saved us a lot of trouble,” he pointed out. “Though I do support returning her to her natural state since the resources have already

been wasted bringing her back to life.”

“She was never dead,” I pointed out.

“Close enough,” said Tom.

Otto was stoic throughout the journey down the river. He spoke softly to Charlotte, who rode in a large cooler beside him, pointing out the sights along the shoreline.

Tom and I took to drinking whiskey from a tin flask and by the time we reached the sandy cliffs where Otto had crashed months before, I was feeling sick. We had gotten a late start that morning and the days were shorter, so it was nearly dark.

“We’ll camp here,” declared Otto, “and release Charlotte in the daytime. She might get disoriented if we let her go at night.”

“I’m going hunting,” said Tom. He donned a headlamp and smeared mud on his cheeks. “I’ll go get us some dinner.”

Tom stumbled off into the woods and that was the last I saw of him.

I helped Sheila set up the tents and then passed out inside of one of them. Outside, I could hear Otto making a fire and chattering away with Charlotte. He was full of energy and kept calling out for Tom. At some point Sheila crawled inside my tent and said, “I’m cold. Can I sleep with you?”

I woke up in the morning, naked, holding on to Sheila, who was naked as well. My arms and head were freezing, having been exposed to the cold all night. Sheila shivered and huddled further beneath our blankets. She felt wonderfully soft and warm and I tried to remember what we had done together.

Eventually I wandered out of the tent and found the fire still smoking. The other tent was empty and one of the canoes gone. On Charlotte’s cooler I found a note. It said:

“WENT LOOKING FOR TOM—OTTO”

The sun rose and things got warmer. I made myself some coffee and began to feel quite good. I splashed some of the cold river water on my face and looked around for signs of Otto and Tom. It was all trees and wilderness. Sheila and I seemed to be the only humans for miles.

Up above me loomed those tall sand cliffs. Sheila was still sleeping and I decided Charlotte had been left in that cooler long enough. It was my understanding that Otto wanted to make some kind of ceremony out of

releasing Charlotte back into the wild, but I overruled him. I placed the cooler in the remaining canoe and paddled across the river to the cliffs and the spot where Charlotte and Otto had collided earlier that summer. It was difficult to determine the exact place, but when I'd gotten close enough I opened the cooler and dumped Charlotte in the river. She landed sideways and spun about, bewildered at her new surroundings. She paddled up to the surface and poked her hooked snout into the air. She stayed there for a moment, floating, that sealed-up scar still visible on her bumpy shell. I imagined the other turtles would wonder at it, and perhaps she'd tell them of the strange land she had visited and the strange behavior of her caretakers. Readjusted now, Charlotte sank down below the surface, swiftly paddling her sturdy legs, and disappeared into the murk and sway below.

I turned my attention once again to finding Tom and Otto. I thought I might climb the cliff to get a better vantage point. From there I could call out for them and see the lay of the land. I fastened the canoe to a nearby tree and began to climb up the sandy slope, just like I should have done earlier that summer when I had meekly watched Otto from below. Stopping several times to catch my breath, I eventually ascended even higher than Otto had, until my feet were scratched and sore and my chest heaved from the exertion. I stood there gazing down at the ribbon of river beneath me and tried to steady my breathing.

I called out, "Hey Tom! Otto! Tom! Otto!"

But no one could hear me up there. The river down below was just a whisper. I pictured Otto standing near this spot, trying to discern the directions I had called out to him. It wasn't my fault. It had all been his decision, of course. I could see that plainly.

Far below me I saw Sheila emerge from the tent, stretch her arms, and gaze about. She was stark naked, a female beauty in the wild. I felt like a god, or a ghost, peering down upon her, unseen at this great height.

And I thought I might do something daring then, something a little spectacular, and unexpected. I launched myself forward. One, two, three, four, five . . . giant long jumps down the mountainside. I cleared thirty, forty feet per stride! I was a monster, a freak of nature, hurtling toward the water.

"Hey Sheila!" I called out, glancing her way, trying not to land on my face as I hurdled down the cliff side.

She looked about her, started.

“I’m over here!” I shouted. I was nearing the bottom now, carrying impossible speed. I leaped out, shooting into the water, sleek like a dolphin, waiting for the pain.

A crashing noise filled my ears and then coldness walloped me from all sides. Fuck, the water was so cold. A sharp, aching pain shot up my genitals and I struggled to the surface, gasping for air. The current carried me downriver and I kicked a rock hard with my foot. I sputtered to the shoreline and flopped myself into the canoe, wheezing, unable to fill my lungs with enough oxygen. My big toe had been cut open by the rock when I’d kicked it and now it started to hurt, and bleed. I’d cracked the toenail and my head ached as well.

I heard a voice, Sheila, calling out to me. “Georgie! Georgie! Are you alright?”

“I’m okay,” I said, holding up my hand, waving it above the gunnel so that she could see it. “I’m all right.”

A moment of time passed during which I imagined Sheila standing there, still naked on the shoreline, worrying about me. I wondered if she’d even seen my great feat, that perfect running dive into the cold water. Again, I raised my hand up, and again I said, “I’m all right. I’m fine.”

“I’ll make us breakfast,” called out Sheila. “Vegetarian sausage and eggs.”

“Thank you,” I called out. “I’d like that.”

I stayed down there, lying on the canoe floor, not wanting her to see me just yet. I lay back on the bottom of that canoe and I listened to the water flowing underneath me and I began to feel damn good indeed. 🍷