

Detonation

These West Virginia woods meant something different once. A golden-green paradise where they could pretend to be lost, where they found the old yellow bus shot full of holes, where they crowded together on a ripped seat in the back that was covered in leaves, where they kissed each other like animals, sweetly and ferociously, until the sun went down and they raced home, finding the way instinctually, holding hands and laughing. When they were so impossibly young, with no secrets or spaces between them. Before T.J. dropped his All-American football name and asked to be called Wolf.

These woods, once a refuge, were now simply cover.

Mary kissed him goodbye that morning, just as she had every other morning since they graduated and moved in together. T.J.—he was still T.J. to her, he would always be T.J.—averted his eyes.

He wasn't always careful, so she saw things—websites, magazine clippings, manifestos. She heard the reports too, the gossip at the store. Graffiti, fires, slashed tires on the coal company vehicles. Nobody got hurt, not yet, but she felt the hurt coming, like a car crashing in slow motion.

And yet she found it hard to believe that the boy who had blushed when he met her, who touched her in the dark, whose skinny calves made her smile when he hiked on a trail ahead of her, who smelled like patchouli and coffee, had become one of them. She didn't dare say the word, the one printed in block letters on the posters the company had tacked up around town.

"They're the terrorists," T.J. would sometimes say, turning red at the neck. "They're the ones we need to worry about." They who had transformed these woods, leveling the mountains to find those elusive seams, those black ribbons of coal that twisted through the landscape and strangled all that was good and lovely and safe about the place they'd grown up. Mary blamed them too. She tried to understand, to prepare.

"How are you going to do it?" she asked once. "Arson? A bomb?"

"You're talking crazy," he said. "Go to bed."

"Tell me, T.J.," she said, before catching his warning look. "Wolf. Please . . ."

"Drop it. I mean it."

That morning, she knew. Mary tried to convince him to stay home. "We could stay in bed all day, play Scrabble, make love," she said. She took off her nightgown and reached for him, disgusted with herself. He refused to look at her and said nothing. She stood in the doorway as he filled his backpack with water and granola bars, off on a "day hike with the guys," other boys who once had All-American names too.

She said nothing else, then, and kissed him goodbye, just like all those other mornings.

After he left, she curled up in a chair by the window, the one that faced east, toward the trees. She could imagine him, focused and serious, his thin hands shaking slightly. She closed her eyes and covered her ears, but it didn't help. In her mind, she could hear the explosion. She saw the golden-green woods, the old yellow bus, now filled with smoke. She saw the stags on the run and the crows flying away, taking the boy she once knew along with them.