

Scottie: What are you thinking?

Madeleine: Of all the people who have been born and have died while the trees went on living.

Scottie: Their true name is *Sequoia sempervirens*. Always green. Ever-living.

—*Vertigo*, 1958

Barely had her prayer ended when a deep languor took hold of her limbs—a filmy bark enfolded her tender breast, her hair grew into leaves, her arms into branches; dull roots arrested her feet that were, of late, so swift, while her head became the crown. Nothing of her remained, except her radiant loveliness.

—Ovid

1895

Albert stood, hat in hand, feeding the brim round and round through his fingers.

Rising, Lindstrom threw his *Humboldt Standard* on the desk. “For God’s sake—what now?”

The boy took in the man’s unshaven condition and red eyes. He had never seen him like this but Mam said that was what grief did to you—made you hollow and sick and wondering why the world went on like it did.

“Sir,” said Albert. He didn’t know if the news would make Mr. Lindstrom wild, and, with him pacing back and forth like that, he already put Albert in mind of the caged circus tiger that passed through Eureka last spring.

“Well?” The man prompted. “Is that log bucker Derwent making trouble again?”

“No, sir.” Unless you counted that Derwent was sodden drunk behind Miz Etta’s and had been for days. Albert’s hat brim made another orbit, and he shifted his weight from one muddy, sawdust-crusting boot to the other, taking care to stay on the mat. “No, sir...I’m come to tell you that they found her things.”

Lindstrom made a small choking sound. Turning his back on Albert, he stalked to the window where the greenish panes sagged in their glazing bars. The boy knew well there wasn’t a thing new to see out there. He waited while Lindstrom got out his handkerchief. Pressed it to his eyes, his forehead. Replaced it. “Which...things...of Mrs. Lindstrom’s? And where were they discovered?”

Around went Albert’s hat again. Seeing Lindstrom halt and fix his eyes on it, the boy made an effort to hold still. “By the Overhang, sir. You know, downstream from where the footbridge washed out and there’s the big drop. Sir, it was her hat. The one with the ribbons wide as my hands. And then her basket, what she used to gather things in. There was still some dried-up ginger and bark in it.” Albert delivered this information with his gaze circumspectly on Mr. Lindstrom’s kneecaps, but he could tell the man was trembling, and the boy found this so unsettling that his hat slipped completely through his fingers, rolling some feet away—a dreadful scrape. If he chased it, he would get mud on the floor, and Mr. Lindstrom liked everything just so. But he couldn’t just let it be and go away because it was Albert’s only hat, and, truth to tell, it wasn’t that much cleaner than his boots. Not to mention what Mam would say if he returned home hatless. Some prankster had thieved Albert’s only other shirt and pair of trousers off the line last month, and Mam swung between accusing Albert’s friends and Mr. Kee the Chinaman.

“Nothing else?”

Albert wasn’t sure if Mr. Lindstrom noticed the hat problem, even though the man’s red eyes were burning a hole in him. Mam said the worst part about the man’s grief was that he had no place to hang it. “Without a body or even knowing what became of her—what good will the headstone be, when he knows she’s not under it? If you can’t be sad over something or feel sad every time you go a certain somewhere, well then it just haunts you. All the time and everywhere.” Mam clucked when she said this, and all the women she said it to clucked back. Mrs. Holloway said in her sly voice, “Looking haunted is nothing new for Pall Lindstrom—it

was indecent the way his eyes would follow her around when she was alive! Like he wanted to eat her up!” All the women clucked again—excited this time—and leaned their heads together.

“Boy?” Lindstrom snapped Albert from his reverie. “I said, did they find anything else?”

“No, sir,” he replied at once. He meant, No, sir, nobody found *her*.

Another silence fell, if you could call it that, considering the constant whine of the mill’s gang saw. Eighteen months without an accident, Albert’s father the foreman said. This was a point of family pride because Albert’s grandfather had lost his arm twenty years prior on that very mill floor. “Pa was on the platform running the logs past the saw. Chain gets wrapped around his arm—yanks it clean off.”

In a move so fast Albert lost track of it, Pall Lindstrom stooped for the runaway felt hat and shoved it back at him. “All right, then. You’ve said your news. You make sure those... items... get delivered to my house and get on outta here.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.”

But the manager had already forgotten him, running one hand through his unkempt hair (hair Albert had never seen but neatly pomaded) and taking a seat again at the desk. There lay the newspaper, and, with a grunt, Lindstrom swept it off into the waste basket.

Red Gap Woman Continues Missing, Believed Dead.

Albert hurried down the wooden steps.

With a scream, the gang saw broke another log into cants, the dark red heartwood sheared in rough planks.

Chapter 1: Wreck

It was hard to say if he hit the deer or the deer hit him.

Not that it much mattered—the end result was the same. Ben surveyed the damage: crumpled hood—a frozen wave of blue, paint-flaking steel—smashed headlight, leaking radiator. He had already tried to force the hood back down, but the latch no longer lined up. A quick check in the back of the borrowed car revealed only the manufacturer’s spare tire and jack. No rope to tie car parts shut, and given the plunging temperature and ominous grating sound from the engine, Ben had no intention of shredding any of his clothing to fashion one.

Damn it all! Now he owed Lance for a wrecked car, on top of everything else.

How far was he from Highway 101? California had upwards of 35 million people, but he looked to be the only one of them on this road, if it could even be called that. The map had it marked as a logging trail—pure dotted line.

Ben powered up his cell phone, more to cover his bases than from any hope it would prove useful. The welcome screen hardly flashed before the Low Battery indicator appeared. No bars anyhow.

What was it that couple had done a few winters ago, when they broke down on a logging road in Oregon? Burned the tires—that was it. Hoping the smoke would catch someone’s eye. It didn’t, and in the end they froze to death. Or was it starved to death? All Ben knew was that, whatever reasons for survival that couple had, he had better ones. He was already in disgrace and on the run. If this flight now cost him his life—hell, if it even cost him a couple frostbitten toes!—he would be damned if he gave his advisor or his girlfriend that satisfaction. Make that his *ex*-advisor and *ex*-girlfriend.

Ben checked the map again in the fading light. If he didn’t know any better, he would say it felt like snow, but this was freaking early October, and he might be at 2000 feet, but he couldn’t be more than ten miles from the coast. Still, he rummaged through the duffel bag in the back seat and pulled out his fleece and Gore-Tex. He had let Courtney keep his wool cap, so he was out of luck there.

He remembered her pleading expression as she took it from him. “Come on, Ben. Stay. You can’t just drive out of here by yourself.”

“Watch me.”

“It’s dangerous! What if you run out of gas or break down or something?”

“Then a mountain lion will eat me, and wouldn’t that be convenient for you?”

“You’re being childish.”

“It looks that way, since you clearly prefer older men.”

She stomped one booted foot then. “You know what—just shut up, Ben. I’ve already said I’m sorry you had to find us like that. That sucked, I know. I’m not proud of going behind your back. It just...happened.”

“‘Happened’? What the hell, Courtney? You just ‘happened’ to crawl out of our tent and into Wilson’s? And—what—I know it was dark, but you didn’t clue in when he got on top of you and you felt his freaking *beard*?”

Furious tears sprang to her eyes. “That’s not what I meant, Ben. I meant that I knew things weren’t great with us—”

“Who said things weren’t great with us?” Ben shouted. “Because it wasn’t me! If you thought things weren’t great with us, you think maybe you could’ve brought it up? Given us a shot at working through whatever the hell you thought wasn’t right?”

“Ben—”

He was beyond listening. “Just what the hell did you think it would fix—screwing a second guy who—wait—just happened to be your boyfriend’s boss?”

“Because that’s what this is about, isn’t it?” Courtney retorted. Panting, she got right in his face. “You say this is about me ‘betraying’ you or some b.s. like that, when what really fries you is that I did it with your advisor. This is about your career.”

Ben recoiled as if she had punched him in the gut. He would have sat down to ride out the shock, if not for the rampant poison-oak vines curling close by. *Toxicodendron diversilobum*. This time of year the leaves were brilliant orange. Objectively beautiful. If you didn’t mind the toxin.

It took a minute, but when he spoke again he was relieved to find his voice steady. “Courtney. I’d be lying if I said career didn’t enter my mind. I mean, Wilson’s one of, like, four professors on the entire planet doing canopy work and the only one doing coast redwoods. If you had to stab me in the back, you couldn’t have picked a better way to do it. But no matter who you did it with, it still would’ve hurt.”

“Oh,” she said. Her gaze dropped. “So now you wanna say you’re in love with me?”

“I was. In love with you.” He unsnapped the pocket on his thigh to fish out Lance’s car keys, ignoring her muttered curse. “You tell me, Courtney: if this was about career, are you 100% sure it wasn’t about yours?” He thought of her behavior around Wilson since joining the team: enthusiastic, helpful, soaking up the botany professor’s knowledge as if he were the Dalai Lama expounding on secrets of the universe. It had almost embarrassed Ben, especially since he suspected his own behavior bore striking similarities. He took a deep breath, finding sick enjoyment in the sight of her clenched fists. “Sleeping with the boss doesn’t exactly hurt you, does it?”

She made a strangling noise. For an instant he thought she might even hit him.

“You shut up, Ben,” hissed his former girlfriend. “Shut up and get out of here. Do everyone a favor and run away, like you always do. We don’t need you. The project doesn’t need you. Lance can do your job in the canopy—”

“—And Wilson can do my job in the sack.”

“Go to *hell!*” Courtney screeched. She kicked impotently at the soggy forest floor and turned on her heel.

“Hey, Silent Spring,” he called after her, “watch the *Polystichum munitum*. You’re a botanist, remember? You can screw everything but the ecosystem.”

What Courtney thought of Ben and botany and the whole entire ecosystem echoed to the outer limits of the North Coast Range, and with her malediction ringing in his ears, Ben jumped in Lance’s Corolla and drove away.

He leaned against the passenger side door to regroup. Okay. Ten miles to the coast, say, which meant fifteen miles to 101. It might be October, but there still had to be a few tourists driving up and down this remote stretch of the Golden State. It would be dark as sin before he was even halfway there, however, assuming the map wasn't out of date and that the logging road actually still connected. In the pitch black he'd certainly get lost, die of exposure, and be devoured by the local fauna, to Courtney and Ed Wilson's delight, Ben was sure. No, the walk would have to wait for first light.

Which meant he was going to spend tonight here. Even as he thought this, the first flake drifted down, alighting on his shoulder. A fluke, he thought. A fluke flake. But then another followed, and another. Ben groaned at his bad luck. Freezing temperatures meant he would have to sleep in the car and run the engine from time to time, the warped, grating, rumbling engine that would blow up or give out before long. The forest gods hated him.

"I tried to protect you," he said aloud. "It was Courtney who kicked the sword fern—why are you coming after me?" Of course, this could be about the deer. Involuntary deerslaughter was probably worth a year's bad karma, give or take a few months, depending on how much the deer resembled Bambi. This roused him. If it were still alive, he could at least put it out of its misery. How, he didn't know, since there was only the cheap jack in the trunk and his own Swiss army knife. Trying not to picture whether he would have to corkscrew or tweezer it to death, Ben made his way back along the road. A good, fist-sized rock could do the trick—bludgeon it into oblivion—but all he saw were ineffectual stones not much bigger than gravel. Maybe strangle it with poison-oak vines?

The snowflakes were falling faster now and beginning to stick, but after a hundred yards or so he was able to pick out the bloody smear on the surface where the deer landed after impact. Holding his breath, Ben peered into the ditch alongside, but no carcass lay there. He could picture the animal struggling up the farther bank, through that area where the huckleberries were trampled, on into the forest.

He hesitated. If the creature could scramble into and out of a ditch and slog through a tangle of huckleberry and *Rosa gymnocarpa*, maybe it was well on the road to recovery and he could get back to ensuring his own survival. But this smacked of cowardice on his part—Courtney would certainly call it that—and there *was* the blood, after all. "I'll give you another hundred yards," Ben said. "If you're not dead or down in the next hundred yards, we're calling it even." He considered getting his headlamp out of the car, but its batteries were nearly dead, and coming at the deer like a glowing Cyclops would only make its last moments more terrifying. "Man up," he told himself. "And get it over with."

Once among the trees, the snow stopped like magic, none of it able to reach the ground through the thick canopy of branches overhead. Second-growth redwoods, Douglas firs, the occasional hemlock. What light remained of the day came only in a few oblique slants, fingers clawing their way inward. And there was the silence. Even the birds had left off, and his footfalls made no sound in the spongy mulch of plant debris. Had Ben not spent the last couple months in

an even denser pocket of redwoods, he might have felt fear, but as it was, the woods acted as a balm. The faint lemony smell of redwood enveloped him. His crises assumed their proper proportions beneath the towering growth. Before post-doctorates, before academic backbiting and machinating, before Ed Wilson's betrayal, before Courtney, even, there had been the forest. The forest and his love for it. He found his attention divided between the spectacular overhead views and the rich flowering of fungi at the roots, humble parishioners in a Gothic cathedral. There was no sign of the deer, and he was easily 150 yards in. He should go back before he got lost. Definitely. Or maybe after getting just one sample of that cream-colored Indian pipe because he'd never seen one so huge—

“H-h-h-help me.”

Ben rocketed to his feet, the *Monotropa uniflora* tumbling from his hand.

The voice could have come from any direction, and he spun in place, his heart racing. Who could be out here?

“Hello?” he called. He was glad he had his knife out, inadequate as the blade seemed.

Movement through the trees caught his eye, and he winged up an instant prayer that what he glimpsed would not be human. Better a bobcat, even, than a human owner to that pitiful cry.

It was the deer.

Above him, where the forest floor angled sharply upward, it took another limping step and sagged against the nearest trunk. Ben could see the sheen of blood on its right hind leg, the one that was dragging at an unnatural angle.

“Jeez,” he breathed in relief, shaking his head. He was hearing things, obviously. A combination of anxiety and anger and deerslaughter-guilt were doing things to his brain. He would end the animal's suffering, get back to the car, down a granola bar, and sleep it off.

The deer was too spent to flee, but it took a few more stumbling steps as Ben clambered toward it. He debated the most merciful way to kill it. Cut its throat, most likely. But with only his three-inch army knife, he was likely to get kicked while he sawed away at the jugular. Maybe if he kept to the deer's damaged side he could avoid this.

Even as he drew closer, breathing harder with the effort, the deer sank down, its good legs giving way beneath it. Its head drooped, and the heaving of its flanks mirrored his own shortness of breath. Death was coming. The creature had no need of further help from him, then.

When he reached the peak of the slope, Ben sighed deeply and crouched beside the corpse. God, what a crappy day. Crappier for the deer than for him, he had to admit. He felt he ought to say something, since he had killed it. Apologize, at least. “Hey,” Ben murmured. “Deer. I'm...sorry. For the collision, I mean. Bet you don't see too many cars up here. Can't blame you for not looking both ways, and I was driving angry...”

That was it for inspiration, such as it was. He fell silent. What was the point? The staring eyes were indifferent to his remorse.

After another minute Ben snapped his knife shut and rose to his feet. Only then did he look around. The North Coast Ranges were no Himalayas—King Peak only cleared 4000 feet—

but what drama they lacked in elevation they made up for in weather and vegetation. Ben found himself on a nameless summit, the ground falling steeply away to the south. Although that downward slope was forested, his trained eye easily detected a recovering timber field. You could see it in the scattering of mossed and lichened stumps, the relative uniformity of the new trees' sizes and ages, the gap through them winding southeast where the skid road had passed. The logging must have been done many decades ago. Between the trees curled shreds of fog, precursors to the blanket the North Coast Range pulled up to its ears nearly every night.

Curiosity stabbed him. He ran his fingers lightly over the Douglas fir the deer had collapsed against. Although 95% of the coast redwoods had been logged before conservation efforts kicked in, the remaining 5% were not fully charted, usually hiding in remote pockets of the mountains where it was too laborious and therefore too expensive to log. Every redwood botanist dreamed of finding undiscovered trees. Every redwood botanist and every *wannabe* redwood botanist, Ben corrected himself. Absolutely there wouldn't be any around here—not so close to where loggers had passed—but he couldn't help wanting to make sure. He would just get a little higher and take a quick look before heading back to the car.

Stowing his knife in his pocket, Ben studied the tree for climbing routes. It was relatively young—he estimated distance to first limb at a merciful eight feet or so. Still it was no cakewalk. He had no ropes, no gear, no helmet. All back with Ed Wilson's crew. Long ago he used to free-climb, but as he grew older and the trees he tackled grew higher and higher, he had lost that easy confidence. If he fell now to his death, he could picture Ed Wilson and Courtney shaking their heads over the *Eureka Times Standard* headline. "Ironic," Courtney would say. "Wonder why he was climbing without his gear." "Trying to prove something," would be Wilson's comment.

Ben hunkered down, took a couple running steps and leaped for the lowest limb, cursing as he swung himself up, trying to gain purchase with his soft-soled boots on the trunk and running a long splinter up his palm. But he got up and wrangled into a sitting position. Locking his thighs around the branch, Ben pincer the end of the splinter and extricated it. Then he tucked his feet under him, rose to a stand on the limb and worked out the next step in his ascent.

It was glorious. Risky. Free. When he was thirty feet up, he cast one look down. The deer's broken body lay far below, already part of the past. The branches were getting skinnier at this height; he couldn't go much further and expect them to carry his weight. At forty feet up he knew better than to look down—the descent was a problem to be dealt with later. Instead he balanced himself in the crotch of the branch, wrapping his legs around it. He took a deep breath and looked out.

From this altitude the treetops below formed a seemingly unbroken sea of green and he could look across that sea to where the ground rose again. Trees, trees and more trees. He was right—whatever logging happened in this area happened long ago. In fact the slope immediately below him might be the youngest second-growth as far as the eye could see.

And the eye could see far, thought Ben. His gaze traced the contour of the narrow valley, winding west and south and then rising again abruptly a couple miles away. Even in the time it had taken him to free-climb the tree, the coastal fog had crept further in and begun to swallow

the forest. Not all of it. The lowest-lying parts of the valley first. The taller trees and those over the slope had the appearance of rising from clouds. That one tree for example—

He did a double-take. Blinked. Squinted. Patted his chest for the binoculars he wasn't wearing.

There shouldn't be any old-growth coast redwoods for miles around. Not with the timber companies so busy in here. So what was that honking-big thing sticking up even past the trees on the summit? A monster—head and shoulders above its nearest companions, although it leaned a good ten or fifteen degrees off vertical. No way could they have missed that one. 500,000 board-feet of good solid redwood, if it was an inch. Huge like the Dyerville Giant that crashed to earth in 1994. The Giant had been a leaner as well, though at what angle he couldn't remember.

"*Sequoia sempervirens*," he murmured. "The Ever-Living Tree. You really are. You ought to be long gone, but there you stand."

Ben tried to estimate his location. Without money or car, compass or rope, he couldn't go explore this now. It would have to wait until he'd returned to civilization and cleaned up the mess that was his life. But return he would.

A wave of excitement washed over him, the first positive emotion he'd felt since coming upon Ed Wilson and Courtney going at it, and he felt kind of tipsy with it. Which possibly explained what happened next.

"I'm coming for you, big guy!" Ben cheered. Lying along the branch, he hitched his leg back over and, getting a firm grip with both hands, swung himself down. He had to rock himself over to the limb beneath, but he managed, his right foot skidding across it at first enough to make his heart leap to his throat. When he reached it safely, he gave another whoop. Hell, this was awesome! Why did he let stupid academics tame him into using gear? "Screw belays!" Ben hollered to the forest at large.

The next step in the descent looked easy enough. With reckless joy still thrilling along his veins, Ben almost laughed as he swung down, dangling until his toe made contact. No problem. Or, it would not have been, had not two things happened at once: first, in all the swinging and kicking and dangling, his army knife worked its way from his pocket. It tumbled out, and, instinctively, Ben let go with one hand in an attempt to catch it. When he realized his idiocy, he scrabbled again at the branch above, feeling his toe lose contact with the limb below. He might yet have recovered, but the forest had one more thing for him.

It echoed from every direction—louder this time—rushing up to his ears with almost physical breath.

"*H-h-h-help me.*"

With a cry of shock, Ben's hands released their hold, and he hurtled through the twilight. Ricocheting against the branches with painful impacts on his right leg, then left hip, then left shoulder on the way down—collisions which probably saved his life—he finally landed shoulder first on the cooling carcass of the deer, his head rocking back to smack on the tree roots. Pinpoints of light exploded across his field of vision. Then everything went black.

