

Ladybug, Ladybug, Fly Away Home

She stepped out of the forest and into the clearing with a mound of ladybugs cupped gently in one hand. She took no notice of me at the picnic table. Her eyes were fastened upon the gleaming bugs. It was moments after sunrise, and the meadow was still in shadow.

My dog Breeze cocked his ears at her and stretched himself to his feet. She noticed that. He took an aged step forward, too stiff from a night outdoors to wag his tail. She smiled and sat cross-legged on the ground. She ignored me. She held her empty hand out for Breeze to investigate with his nose. He pushed his head into her side and nudged her for a rub. She giggled aloud and pulled gently on his ears, and his tail began its rhythmic metronome. He nudged her again, closed his old eyes, and rested his head upon her lap.

I became acutely aware of the sounds of morning. Liquid bird melodies mingled with the drone of a billion awakening insects. The very air howled with a silent din of its own as the sun rose. The hairs on my body curled and tested the day for clues.

An axe into wood echoed from across the valley, and everything changed. The girl launched the ladybugs into awkward flight and Breeze's ears were abandoned. Her eyes turned to ice.

A rough voice called out, "Cally?" The voice grew louder. "Cally!"

Breeze turned toward the sound of footsteps crashing through the woods toward our camp. He stared into the myriad greens of the forest and rumbled low in his chest.

The little girl faded into the trees and disappeared. The heavy footsteps drew closer. Branches whipped and quaked at the edge of the clear-

ing, and a flock of quail exploded into flight. A man bulled through the thicket and came to a halt less than a dozen yards from where I sat. A shaft of sunlight illuminated him with terrible clarity.

He was thick in the chest, with massive shoulders and hands the size of stumps. From one of them an axe dangled like an afterthought. A mixture of sweat and hostility gave his face a wet, red gloss, and his pale eyes fastened themselves on me like boils.

A swollen bluebottle squatted obscenely on my paper plate and probed a lump of cheese.

Breeze retreated to my side, growling, and the hackles on his neck bristled.

The man glared at him and twirled the axe by its handle. A grey ponytail trailed down the back of his neck. He wore a flannel shirt beneath faded overalls, and thorn-scarred boots. He dropped to a crouch and ran his fingers along the ground, then got onto all fours and sniffed at the dirt.

He crawled toward us, dragging the axe behind him and smelling the ground. I felt Breeze tremble against my thigh. I wanted to run, but I couldn't move.

He reached the spot where the girl had played with Breeze, and stopped. He pressed his face into the dirt, then twisted his head to stare at me.

"She was here," he said. His voice spread across the clearing like vomit. His eyes were black pits.

I was mute.

"You saw her," he said ominously. He gripped the axe so tightly his knuckles whitened, and started to get up.

A shadow suddenly blotted the sun, and thousands of ladybugs swarmed into the clearing, swirling and whirling and fanning the air with their spotted wings. They settled on the man, cloaking his limbs, his neck, his face, until all I could see was a moving carpet of tiny, glossy backs. He

opened his mouth to scream and a mass of ladybugs coated his tongue and surged down his throat. They filled his nostrils, clung to his eyes, and crept into his ears. A throng of tiny insects writhed where he had been. Moments later the abandoned axe was the only evidence another person had ever been in the clearing. Breeze shivered against my leg.

The little girl reappeared, indistinct, emerging like smoke from the layers of shimmering ladybugs that used to be a man.

"If you ever hurt him," she warned me, pointing at Breeze, "I'll send them." A sprinkling of ladybugs settled on the scar on her face like jewels.

The bluebottle ceased probing the lump of cheese on my plate and its multi-faceted eyes glowed. It bowed to her.

I bowed too. Fear makes you supple. Breeze couldn't bow, but he wagged his arthritic tail and looked at me approvingly, waiting to be served his breakfast. That morning I gave him everything I had, and when I looked up the ladybug queen was gone.

END