

# In The Pines, An Excerpt

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## Introduction

*In the pines, in the pines*

*Where the sun never shines...*

*Tell me where did you sleep last night?*

**I didn't know anyone**, in that small world, that cold place. It was beautiful, in the southern climes. The small battered houses facing the rough sea, fortified by the high hills. Once, those hills were wild with forest: trees harvested for houses that later leaked or rotted in

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the salt air, for furniture and bric a brac and childrens' toys and writing paper. Now there is gorse, there are wildflowers pink and blue and white as splattered paint.

I came here to see those things. I had a year of research at the University. Climatology is what I study and what better climate than here. Wilder than where I grew up, where I lived with students headed for law and medicine. Finally, that part of my life was over. I had left home. I rented a place on my own in the far southern bays. From the start, it was cooler than I had expected. There was little insulation. The gales curved chilly off the ocean. The real estate agent had promised partial sun, but mostly that sun came only weakly, in the morning, milky pale.

*She was not a local. That was something I liked. Not because she was exotic. She wasn't exotic at all, really. But before her, everyone had known everything about me, about where I was from and where my parents lived, how Karen and I met at Upper Bank College and how later it all went pear shaped. I saw this one -- she looked at me like I was something new, something she had never seen.*

My place was a musty old cabin behind the owner's house. To the left of the house, from the cabin, and which I was allowed to use, was a long wooden staircase that rattled all the way down the sea. In the mornings, I sat in the morning sun with my coffee in the open doorway. I first saw Him -- and that is all I am going to call him, by the way, for now -- Him, because naming people draws you closer to them and I should rather be trying to move away. At any rate, it was ten in the morning. A patch of white flowers dripped down the hill. A slash of light passed between the houses, and it was in this light that I first saw his bare thick muscular legs in black shorts and a pair of heavy work boots. He was from the city council. His t-shirt had the council logo on it. He had a sprayback on his back and a sprayer in one hand. His council truck, white with black lettering was parked above. He was coming down the hill. To the left, the sea wind blew salt onto the thick leaves.

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I didn't make a sound. I was just watching. But as a sound is heard sometimes almost in advance, as a movement is sensed by our bodies before our minds, so at this moment did this ginger haired man, with his broad chest and industrial knapsack, so at this moment did he look at me. Look at me, the way only a stranger can -- both directly and impersonally at the same time - as one looks at a tree or a bird in landscape. His hair was short and thick the color of scrub. He had very clear blue eyes. Bright, feral, clear blue eyes: not a glint of darkness in them, not a flint of black or grey.

Hey, he said.

Hi.

I'm from the council.

I nodded, waiting.

Your neighbors called in some nightshade. There was some up at the ridge, but none down here I don't think.

What do they look like?

White flower, black berries. He laughed. He had a wide mouth, a wide smile. His teeth were square and slightly short, slightly yellow from smoking probably.

Do you want me to look on your side?

I was only renting. He went and looked anyway, tramping down the path in his heavy work boots, pushing through leaves with his sprayer.

Nah, he said, coming back.

He was a solid man, a big man. His legs were thick as posts. Maybe he was thirty-five, maybe forty.

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Do you like your job? I asked.

Are you kidding? He looked around. I've got a company truck. I get to be outside, all day. How long have you been here?

Three months.

Oh, yeah? You working?

At the university.

He nodded, grimaced slightly the way people do when they're not sure how they feel about something.

You like it?

So far.

My coffee was cold. I stood up and my limbs were stiff. Well, I said, I should go to work.

You work at home?

Sometimes.

There was a pause then, the pause of indecision, when you realize a decision is in fact being made. I don't want to say that he rushed towards me, but he did move suddenly. He stepped up to the doorstep where I had been sitting. I saw faint reddish brown hair on his forearms and legs. The white of his t-shirt was the same clear white of his eyes. H, he said, and told me his name.

*People say she was inviting me in. I don't think so though. I'm not the kind of person things like that happen to. I said hello, that was all. She looked sort of all by herself there, maybe that was it. And she was attractive. And single, maybe. But I wasn't thinking of anything. I wasn't thinking much even after I left. It wasn't till later in the car, on the way home passing Melling Station, that*

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*I started thinking on her seriously, thinking of how she looked, how she was just right there like I was meant to see her.*

*I'd finished that job. But it was easy enough to drive past again the next few mornings, to sit in the truck and see if she came out of her door again. Then when she did, I made out like I was there for business, that I didn't even see her as I walked down to her neighbor's with my spray pack. But by the time I did look at her, it was just the same for both of us. It was one of those moments, when you just know, this is it. This is something I am going to connect with.*

*I was lucky maybe, she was new in town and hadn't met many people. I couldn't believe she wasn't married. A good looking girl like her. Hair too short, but otherwise nice looking. And it turned out she was alone. No partner back home or anything. Man, I said, when she told me that, don't they have eyes there?*

It was that he worked for the city council that made me feel alright. He could hardly drive around in a council truck, as a public employee, and be dangerous. He asked if I wanted to come out with me for coffee at a place called The Bach, on the water just past Island Bay. The coast had one small bay after another that far south.

His truck was clean inside. Except for the ashtray, with was overflowing with the discards and ends and ashes of roll-your-own cigarettes.

You don't mind do you? he asked, pulling out a pack.

No.

He rolled a cigarette with one hand.

Impressive.

You want coffee right now, this second?

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I don't mind.

Been around to Red Rocks yet?

No.

Want to go that way?

Sure.

We passed the cafe and the tarred road stopped and became broken gravel. Then, as we hugged the rocky coast, the road turned to dirt. With his truck he could go further than people in cars. And having the council truck meant nobody paid us any attention. We went past Owhiro Bay. We passed a quarry and into another small bay and he pulled up to the ocean as if it were the end of the world.

Not bad, eh?

He lit his cigarette. The tips of his fingers were slightly yellow, from nicotine, but also pollen. He rolled down his window, then leaned over to me with his right arm to roll down mine. The skin of his elbow grazed my chest.

Sorry, he said, which I thought that was sweet, how he would admit to such a little touch, just brushing me really.

The sky was overcast, but clear in patches. The water before us seemed to run in four different colours: dark gray and pale green and blue, purple at the edges of the shore. The crisp wind blew through the open windows. The ocean crashed slowly, almost lazily,, onto the dark wet rocks. I kept thinking he would turn on the ignition, start up the truck and drive us back around the bay to the cafe. He didn't though. He just sat there, looking out at the water. I didn't know anything about him. If he had anyone in his life or any children, if he lived in town or in the suburbs. I didn't know and I didn't ask, and he didn't ask me either. We just sat there like we had nothing to do and nowhere to go.

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Finally, a good half hour must have passed, and I asked, are you always this calm?

He had a beautiful smile. It was so gently warm and almost sorrowful. It would have been sorrowful if not for his bright eyes.

Pretty much, he grinned.

I'm not, I said.

No?

He flicked his butt out the window. It had no filter so it wouldn't exactly litter up the beach.

We'll see, he said.