

One Easy Trick

Hiroimi Goto

MARNIE MORI HAD packed a couple of onigiri and a piece of chicken for her day trip so she didn't need to buy lunch or snacks, but she felt bad about just using the convenience store's washroom. And it was nice and clean, too. She was grateful. She exited the bathroom and walked down the aisle, pausing in front of the magazine rack. Maybe she would buy one... The glossy covers of women with their polished teeth, their svelte bodies, their chests, their long legs—gossip rags, fashion, housekeeping, bikinis, the whole shebang. There were men's magazines too: hunting, bodybuilding, fishing. But most of the publications were directed toward women and with the same old perennial message, shouting from every cover, for all the women to see.

More than Ten Ways to Lose Your Belly Fat! In fact, there were at least twenty effective tips on how to reduce belly fat. For those with less time and attention, there was always One Easy Trick.

Che! Marnie clicked her tongue. In gas stations, in the doctor's office, at the grocery store checkout, pop-up ads blooming on her screen when she clicked links on Twitter, looked up stuff on Google and listened to 70s songs on YouTube, the information, doctrine, religion, incantation, spell seemed to follow Marnie Mori wherever she went. The tall, lean white women with pony tails and rolled-up yoga mats who lived in her neighborhood did not help one bit. In time she grew numb to the refrain; she began to unhear and unsee it. If Marnie had never grown to love her belly fat, she had accepted it. They'd been part of each for so long, even longer than her marriage with her ex-husband and her previous committed long-term relationship with Cassandra, combined. Essentially, the past thirty years. And now she was alone, again. But belly fat was still with her.

Huffing with indignation, Marnie moved away from the magazines. She wasn't fucking buying one of them, that was for sure. She nodded at the middle-aged white woman who was working the till. Marnie squinted at her name tag—

June, maybe, or Jane. They were probably near the same age, but Marnie wasn't exactly sure. June had a really wrinkled face, from either too much sun, or smoking, or probably both.

"Mornin'. Almost good afternoon," June/Jane said. The country gas station was empty. Business was slow.

Marnie reached out and grabbed an overpriced tube of Pringles and set it on the counter. She was finally close enough to read the cashier's name tag.

"Those chips are tasty inside a sandwich," June said.

"Whoa!" Marnie said. "That sounds good! I'll try that next time." She wasn't faking being nice. It really sounded like it'd be pretty damn tasty.

June smiled wide. There was a Harlequin Romance novel next to the till, with the page marked with a stick of gum wrapped in silver foil.

Marnie grinned back. June looked like the kind of woman who'd be fun drinking beers with, while barbequing some steaks. It was a damn shame Marnie didn't drink anymore. She paid up, got her change. Tucked the stuff into her backpack.

"Thanks, come again," June said.

Smiling, Marnie turned toward the door. Caught herself in the glass.

Her eyes moved from her own smiling reflection, downward, to her belly fat.

She knew fat activists like her sister, Joan, would call her fatphobic for thinking her belly unattractive. Marnie resented that was she was supposed to feel ashamed of her own dislike, making it her bad exponentially. She had nothing to hide; she was a feminist and she wasn't ashamed of *herself*. She just didn't love her belly fat. And that was no one's business but her own.

Fuck those magazines.

The door jangled as she strode out the gas station store.

BELLY FAT HAD never stopped her from doing the things she loved. An hour later she was in her favorite Pacific Northwest forest, among the spicy sweet-smelling Douglas fir, pine, and cedar. Smiling, she picked her way through the land, breathing deeply, eyes scanning the ground, hearing the intermittent jangle of the bear bell hanging off of her backpack. There was a

quality to being alone in the woods that felt safe and dangerous at the same time. Kinda like how the sound of the bell warned bears of humans in the vicinity, so it was meant to protect her, but it also reminded her of the possibility of the danger of bears... The overlay of these emotions vibrated inside her. Making her aware, alert, and grounded. It was good to be out of the city, and on land that wasn't mediated by concrete.

The thick soft moss buoyed her, even as decaying logs and broken branches obstructed easy passage. Marnie zig-zagged through the forest, scrambling over the smaller of the fallen trees, going around the larger trunks too big to straddle, the jangle of the bear bell a constant reminder. She placed her feet carefully; a sprained ankle in this terrain could happen as easy as one misstep on a damp log. There was no cell phone reception this far north of major cities, and she'd have to make it to the car if she got injured. She slowed down her pace.

Breath left her mouth in small puffs, sweat trickling from her armpits, moist heat spreading beneath the straps of the small backpack and her bra. She never sweated in the city. Walking through wild lands was the best kind of medicine. There was very little bird song. Now and then flocks of bushtits made their squeeze-toy noise, but otherwise the only sounds were what she created on her own. When she stopped moving, the quiet stilled around her like water in a pond.

Marnie scanned the moss, looking for hints of pale yellow flesh. Her vision wasn't what it used to be. The mostly coniferous trees were spaced widely enough apart for the light to reach the forest floor, but the day was slightly overcast and now that Marnie was fifty years old, autumn leaves, a discarded bit of decaying plastic bag, and a golden chanterelle looked pretty much the same from ten feet away. She supposed it was time to get prescription glasses. Blinking hard Marnie worked her way through the woods. She'd never taken orienteering courses, but she always knew in which direction she'd left the car. Her zigzag path ran parallel to the gravel road. She wouldn't go any deeper into the forest on her own.

When she'd been a child, about ten years old, her oto-san had taken her and her sister to look for precious matsutake, pine mushrooms. Her father had taught her how to identify them and she'd never forgotten. Huh, she thought. They could have traipsed past a thousand chanterelles without

knowing. All her father knew was matsutake. It had been enough, back then.

In that first forest, how sweet the air. Sweet and spicy, wet and earthy. How thrilling, to be on an adventure with her father. How rare and special a thing it was. Her heart thumped with excitement and joy. Her sister, Joanie, less confident and younger, stuck close to their oto-san, but Marnie was a long-time tomboy and considered the forest her second home. As the afternoon skimmed over the tops of the trees they began walking at different paces.

Marnie raised her head and tilted it to one side. Had she heard something?

...a whisper

Marnie's eyes widened. She held her breath. Listened with her entire being. The hushhhh of air between the branches of enormous trees, the long hair strands of grey lichen wafting back and forth.

Come in... a little further...

Forest... Forest was speaking to her. Marnie nodded, and picked her way deeper among the trees.

Just a little more, Forest whispered. Soon, very soon, you'll find the matsutake...

Yes. She was certain. If she looked a little more, the matsutake would be there, and how happy her mother would be. Her father so proud.

Come in deeper, and you will find what you are seeking.

On and on she followed the voice, the pathless path, wending between tree trunks wider than her father's arms could span. The soft moss beneath her sneakers felt rich, thicker than the carpet at her friend's house, pretty Julia, whose father was a lawyer.

A small branch snapped beneath her foot. The sound spread out, across the deep stillness, like rings of water expanding on a dark deep pond. Her ears rang. Marnie slowly raised her head and looked all around. Trees, tall, and dark and moss. Pale grey-green lichen hanging from crooked branches. She was alone. And she had no idea which way was out...

Marnie grinned, and shook her head as she peered at the moss. Joan never developed a liking for the forest, the mountains. And her oto-san never had the time to take her out picking wild mushrooms again. So as an adult she'd begun going back alone. She didn't hear the forest's voice like

she did that first time. Marnie didn't know if she was glad. Or sad. Maybe both. And maybe it hadn't even been the forest's voice—maybe it'd been her own...

Marnie stopped, placed her hands on her hips and arched her back a little bit. Her spine cracked into place and she groaned with relief. She rolled her shoulders and stood up straight to take a deep breath of the sweet air.

Her jeans fell to her ankles.

“Uh!” Marnie grunted, even though no one was there to hear her. She giggled. How embarrassing! Standing among the trees, with her middle-aged pantie-ass showing! She reached down to draw her jeans back up to her waist. Had the button popped off and the zipper fail—

Her waist...

The jeans fell from her nerveless fingers. The faded blue denim slumped back to the ground. Her eyes grew round as she stared at her front, her mouth dropping open.

Her belly fat was gone.

Pouchy and soft, her belly had been big enough to fold over, thick enough to grab with two hands. Nani? What! Nanda!

The elastic waistband of her underwear had enough tension to keep them up around her diminished middle but with no belly there to fill it out, the cotton material now hung loose and empty. She smacked her hands over the new flat plane again and again, as if she would find the answers in the motion.

Nothing to grab. No fleshly jiggle. What! Should she scream? Laugh?

A sob burst out.

She scanned about her, but she couldn't see it. She crouched to draw up her jeans and she held them up with her fingers scrunched into fists at her sides. Marnie's eyes leapt and darted as she spun around and started backtracking along the path she'd taken. She fought the urge to cry out for her belly, as if she were calling a wayward dog...

She had lost her belly fat somewhere along the way, and hadn't even noticed. It couldn't have been so long ago, because wouldn't her jeans have fallen down sooner? It must be somewhere, nearby, in the forest, not back at the last gas station bathroom...

What's wrong with you! Another part of her brain demanded. It fell off! Don't go *looking* for it! Are you hurt? *No!* Are you wounded? *No!*

She hadn't realized she'd been gasping until she came to a stop. Sweat trickled from her hairline and the bead of moisture followed a downward wrinkle that funneled to her lips. The salt spread inside her mouth like a kiss.

She slid both thumbs past the waistband of her jeans and underwear and held the material out in front of her, like the photos of the before and after women who'd lost hundreds of pounds and were now on magazine covers.

Her belly was smooth. The most pleasantly smooth outward curve, but without the voluminous belly roll she'd carried with her the most of her entire life. There was no ragged torn skin, no blood. Just like the Japanese folk tale of the old man and his wen... the oni had plucked it off the old man's face and it had come away as easy as a clump of mochi. Without rent nerves, blood, injury. And how pleased the old man had been, with his new smooth face. How grateful to the ogres.

Marnie pivoted forty-five degrees. She stuck her forefingers in the two front belt loops to hold up her pants as she strode the shortest distance through the woods to reach the logging road. In her haste she did not even notice a large patch of golden chanterelles growing in the moss.

SHE DROVE BACK to Vancouver like she was being chased by demons. The highway along the coast swerved and curved as she raced the setting sun. She arrived at her home just as dusk bloomed indigo from the horizon. Marnie ran upstairs, shucked her clothes off in the middle of her bedroom floor, donned a shin-length nightshirt, and threw herself in bed.

Belatedly, her teeth chattered. She shivered and shook as darkness filled the room. She ought to take a bath, but the thought of staring down at her missing front made her teeth chatter even harder. She pulled the blankets over her head. Every rattle of the lids of the garbage in the back alley made her twitch like she'd be electrocuted. The slam of someone's door. A dog baying. The smack-clack as the lid of the garbage wheelie was dropped back down.

What was that noise! Had her belly come back? Could it find its way back home? Would it be mad?

“I never loved you!” Marnie cried out. Guilt spread inside of her like bad blood. She whispered, “I’m sorry.”

When she grew too exhausted she fell into nightmares. Of bears eating vanilla pudding. Of someone locked in her bathroom, rattling the doorknob all night to be let out—she woke, heart so loud and fast she could hear her blood whooshing inside her ears. A metallic taste inside her mouth. Her palms pressed flat against her non-existent belly. She yanked her hands away.

No, Marnie thought. No, I don’t want to fall back asleep. She wished she still smoked. A thick housecoat and a cigarette on the balcony would cure what ailed her. Along with a triple dirty gin martini.

But she’d given up smoking and she’d given up booze. And what did she have left, now, except movies and hamburgers?

You have sweet chestnuts and mushrooms in the fall, and berries in the summer, her heart reminded her.

Marnie rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed. She nudged her toes around until they found her slippers. The open gaps. She sluffed across the wooden floors in the dark. She didn’t turn on the lights, just in case sleepiness might return to her. But it was probably a lost cause.

She stared at her charged cell phone on the kitchen table. She pressed the indented button and the small screen lit up. It was too late to call or text anyone. She and Cassandra remained friends, after the break up a year ago, but she had recently started seeing someone new. It wouldn’t do to text her in the middle of the night... Besides—who could really give her advice in a situation like this?

Marnie found herself at her laptop and opening a new document. She started typing a letter to her dead mum.

Dear Mum,

Sorry I haven’t written in a long time. I still really miss you... And I’m sorry I only write you when I have a problem. Next time I’ll write when something good happens. Balance is important, you always said. And I believe that too.

Mum—something weird happened to me and I don't know what to do. I'm not hurt or anything, but it changed me. I can't say it was something I willfully actioned. But who knows? Maybe I did, subconsciously? I feel all mixed up and strange. Like I'm not myself.

What are you supposed to do when you lose part of your body?

Marnie's fingers stilled. Rested gently atop the keys. She never printed the letters she wrote to her mum. But writing them made her feel a little closer to her, and sometimes she could hear her mother's voice inside her head. Not her actual voice, but she could imagine what her mum would say and the echo of her voice as she remembered it would rise up inside her... And even the times when she didn't hear her mother's voice, the act of writing down what was troubling made things clearer. Letters to her mum made more sense to her than writing a journal.

Marnie closed the laptop and went back to bed. She read from an overdue library book she hadn't yet finished. It was a little boring, and exactly what she needed to help her fall asleep...

When she woke properly later the next morning, she moved from groggy unease to heart-pounding horrified recollection within three seconds. With a terrible hope, she'd rolled off her bed to stand up. Pressed both palms to her stomach.

Her belly was really gone. It wasn't all a dream. The extremes of emotions made her feel sick and woozy. Marnie didn't know what she thought her sister would do or say that could possibly help her make sense of what had happened. But Joan was the only family she had left. Marnie wanted to talk to someone who knew what it is to be a fat woman in this world. Marnie's friends from work were not fat.

“HOW COULD YOU!” Joan said.

“Wha—”

“We said we'd never get cosmetic surgery. We promised each other!”
Joan's face was so red Marnie feared something inside her would pop.

“Let me expl—”

“How could you afford this! Did you get an all-inclusive at a clinic in Mexico?”

“What? I don’t even know—”

“Just shut up! Take off your pants and underwear. I want to see what you’ve done to yourself!”

“No,” Marnie said. “I’m not putting on a show for you.”

“I can’t believe you’d do this to me. You know what? I actually can!”

Joan didn’t slam the door shut—she left it open and the sound of her sobs were like punches to Marnie’s gut. Down the hallway, the elevator tinged, followed by the low mechanical roar of its descent.

Marnie sank onto her soft couch. She wondered if she was supposed to chase after her sister. Marnie’d done nothing wrong! Anyway, what could she possibly say to her—that her belly fat fell off in the forest? Joan would think that Marnie was out of her mind, or else she was making fun of her. It was better that Joan thought Marnie’d gotten surgery done: Marnie hadn’t even known such things were possible, for god’s sake.

When had been the last time she’d seen Joan? Three months ago? No, not since Easter. God—over half a year...

They weren’t close, were they.

Marnie took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Rolled over to face the cushions of the couch. The scratchy weave of the synthetic fabric smelled a little like day-old socks. Marnie wished she could buy a new couch. She’d had this one for over thirteen years. It was a little disgusting. But who had money for a brand new couch? She rolled onto her back, arms straight at her sides.

She wondered if she should call in sick on Sunday night. Joanie hadn’t handled the news well and Marnie didn’t feel up to fielding questions from her co-workers at the warehouse. And there’d be plenty during lunch break. Thank god she didn’t have children she’d have to explain to. She and her ex-husband had done at least one thing right after marrying straight out of high school.

Marnie sighed. What did it mean that none of her friends were fat? Not nothing, that’s for sure, she thought.

And now Joanie thought she’d betrayed her, and that she’d gotten surgery done in Mexico... Marnie groaned. She should go out and buy

some new pants. She didn't have any clothes that would fit properly for work.

Oh yah. She was going to call in sick...

Two tears slid down Marnie's cheeks. She should be feeling happy. What woman would feel sad that she'd lost her belly fat? For free! No cost, no exercise—it was a dream come true! It was a gift from the universe!

Why did she feel so sad?

Marnie dressed in a sweater and a pair of jeans, too big, cinching the waist with a piece of packaging twine through the belt loops, doubled against itself. She didn't have a proper belt, she hated them so much. Muttering, she gathered the things she needed: keys, jacket, water bottle. She grabbed her backpack and the strap caught against part of the chair. She gave the thing a decisive tug, it dislodged, and she ran out the door.

MARNIE WAS TIRED and hungry. She'd planned to stop at a Timmy's along the way, but she hadn't wanted to drive into the weird suburbs of Whistler, and when she reached Pemberton she learned, to her dismay, that they didn't even have one. So she stopped at the same gas station to buy a shitty cup of coffee and a packaged ham sandwich. June wasn't there. The meat in the sandwich had been kinda grey in the middle so Marnie tossed it out... She kept on driving.

At long last she neared the turn-off for the logging road. A lone dog trotted along the shoulder, going in the opposite direction. Marnie did a double-take. Where had the dog come from? Oh—it was a coyote.

The coyote didn't even glance her way. It had serious business somewhere—

What had she been thinking? Her belly fat was probably long gone. Eaten up by a bear or pecked away by ravens. Nothing fell to the forest floor to be wasted. And it had been a good piece of fat. Delicious for someone, no doubt.

Marnie couldn't help but gag a little in her throat.

She'd stopped pressing the accelerator and her car had come to a complete stop in the middle of a flat stretch of road. Guiltily, she glanced up at her rearview mirror. But the road was empty, just a buckling ripple of air caused by the heat of the sun.

Marnie shook her head. How had she become so citified that she hadn't thought of this before she left home? What an embarrassment. She was so embarrassed with herself she wanted to scream.

"What the fuck!" she shouted.

Shouting did not make her feel any better.

Her foot started pushing down on the accelerator once again and the car surged forward. Why was she still driving? She should turn around, and get her fool city-ass back home. Wash her laundry and make sandwiches to freeze for the coming work week.

But her foot pressed harder and her hands steered, turning the tires up an unmarked gravel road that wound deeper into the coastal mountain range.

"Okay," she said, although she didn't exactly know why. "Okay, might as well take a look, we're all the way up here anyway." Maybe she'd find some chanterelles while she was at it.

When she finally pulled up to the good spot it was early afternoon. If the clouds rolled in she'd have very little daylight left... It was always hard to tell where the weather was coming from inside a forest. Marnie shuffled out of the car and stretched. The air was so sweet she felt like crying. A rapid tok-tok-tok-tok of a woodpecker. The sound, loud and deep. Pileated, she thought, and grabbed her backpack. The familiar jangle of the bear bell did not happen. Marnie turned the pack around. A short piece of string dangled from the strap.

"Che," Marnie exhaled. Now she'd have to whistle. She rummaged in the backpack and pulled out her folded knife, tucked it into the front pocket of her jeans. There were no more power bars. She sighed and took a drink from her water bottle. Slung the backpack on and stepped back into the forest to retrace the path she'd taken only the day before.

The only tune she could think of was the repetitive refrain from the *Andy Griffith Show*. Unhappily, she whistled it in an infinite loop of whiteness. The horrible sameness of the melody made her nervous. Like someone might come creeping up from behind while she distracted herself with her own inane whistling—

She spun around. The forest was quiet. Awash in a slant golden light. It was so beautiful her heart clenched with a kind of pain. Fuck it. She hadn't started using a bear bell until two years ago and she'd never seen a bear in

these forests. Did bears even eat mushrooms? Because there were no berries in these woods. She wasn't going to whistle the ugly tune all day for no reason. She'd only started using the bell because it'd been a Secret Santa gift from work and she kinda thought it might be that adorable worker with a Yorkshire accent. Or Manchurian. No, Manchester. She didn't fucking know...

The far-off nasal crow of raven. The staccato chatter of a Douglas squirrel, warning her to keep away from their tree. Marnie settled into a steady pace, the back and forth sweeping gaze as she searched for her lost belly.

"Belly come back," she crooned to the melody of that 70s Player song, "Baby Come Back".

Something pale flashed in her periphery. She spun towards it. An extra quiver of a leaf still clinging to a low bush. A fallen log with a tumble of branches. There might be a small hollow under there... Did something rustle? Marnie's breath came shallow, fast. She crouched beside it and tilted her head sideways to see if—

It burst straight towards her face.

Marnie bellowed, toppled backwards in a flail of arms. The pale thing, rabbit-sized, leapt past her. Marnie turned her head as she fell, to get a real look, and as the details of what she thought she saw moved through her brain on the slowest of neurons, her face landed on the ground, a twig piercing the fleshiest part of her cheek. She screamed again.

The pale thing on the ground screamed.

Marnie scrambled to her feet and the twig that had been stuck in her cheek fell out. The puncture wound throbbed as hot blood began to drip, cool upon her skin.

Marnie stood, arms rigid at her sides, legs slightly spread.

Six feet in front of her stood a pale lumpin thing. It had two stumpy legs, and two stumpy arms, the roundness of a head. But it didn't have a face. Only two indents, where eyes could have been, and dimple of a mouth. On the dark moss tumble of forest floor it glowed as pale as a grub. The soft white texture and its shape made it look like a hanpen starfish...

All the tiny hairs on Marnie's spine shivered erect. What the holy hell

"Belly?" Marnie croaked. "Bellyfat?"

The lumpin took a step backward.

“Bellyfat,” Marnie cajoled, infusing warmth into her voice, “I came back for you.”

What the FUCK! Marnie’s brain shouted.

The lumpin jerked, as if electrocuted. It bolted across the forest floor. Running in great leaps, hopping over and under logs as carefree as the Gingerbread Man.

“Wait!” Marnie cried, as she crashed after it. “Come back!” Deadfall snapped beneath her hiking boots, as she thudded after her fleeing belly. Her cheek throbbed with every pounding step she took. How could her belly fat be faster than her?

“It makes no sense!” Marnie shouted.

Bellyfat ran even faster.

“Don’t be scared!” Marnie panted. She had to stop. She couldn’t breathe. It felt like her intestines were coming out of her gullet. She slumped over at the waist, hands atop her thighs, gasping and heaving. Almost gagging for air. Lord Jesus, she prayed. She felt like vomiting. Jesus, please help me.

Slowly her dying fish gulps returned to normal breath. She crouched onto her haunches. The moss was still damp from a night rain, but she plopped down on her butt, anyways. Cold wet seeped through her jeans and underwear. She dropped her head onto her raised knees. Her jeans smelled a little like ham sandwich. Her stomach growled, with both hunger and nausea.

She should just go home. She felt sick. Her belly fat had turned into a small person and had run away from her, so that was that. Marnie had done her due diligence. Or her duty. Whatever obligation one had with one’s belly. She had *tried*, and that was all that mattered.

A sense of relief seeped from her chest and spread through her body. She took one long shuddering breath and exhaled slowly. She was allowed to be happy, now.

She raised her head, eyes bright.

Six feet in front of her stood Bellyfat. Bellyfat stared at her with indent eyes. Six feet behind Bellyfat stood an enormous adult black bear.

Marnie’s eyes bulged. Run! her mind shrew screeched.

Her feet kicked weakly. No strength left in her legs. It was true. What they said. In Japan. Koshiga nukeru. Paralyzed with fear.

Behind you! Marnie silently mouthed the words at Bellyfat. With exaggerated lip movements. *There's a BEAR!*

Did Bellyfat even understand language, let alone lip read? Could it even *see*?! She didn't know! Shut up! The bear must be able to smell the oily richness. While the bear fed on the fat Marnie could crawl away...

The great beastie snuffled the air with their great snout. Their head weaved from side to side, their small brown eyes staring. At her.

There was intelligence there. Marnie could see it. Her heart clattered fast and thin. Her breath a whistling wheeze. She quickly dropped her gaze. You shouldn't stare at animals. Don't stare at the gorillas, the sign in the zoo had said. It's a sign of aggression. No, Bear. I'm not staring. I swear.

Not me, Marnie wished, fervently. I'm small. My flesh is bitter and tired. See! There's fat. Smell the delicious fat.

The great bear swung their quivering nostrils toward the pale lumpin on the ground. They opened their mouth, as if sucking in the flavor of the air. A long bead of saliva dangled from their jaws. Hoosh! Hoosh! They drew in huge draughts, then swatted at the moss with massive claws, a great clod of green and humus sailing through the air.

Bellyfat turned with slow motion gravitas, toward the bear.

Now, thought Marnie. Now I should run—No! Never run from a bear!

She remained seated. Sweat trickled from her hairline, down her cheek, to burn salty in the wound on her face. Oh yah, she thought, distantly. I hurt my face...

She watched Bellyfat tip back its head, back, way back, to take in the enormity of the black bear. The bear's jaw dropped open, into a long-snouted grin. A long pink tongue. Such teeth.

Bellyfat quivered.

Marnie was standing. She didn't remember doing it. She was on her feet. Her folded knife open. Gripped tight inside her hand, the sharp tip of the blade shivering with fear and adrenaline, pointed at the bear.

"Odd idea," Bear said. "Give me the pricking stick." Bear held out their paw.

It was true. The knife was not a good idea at all. Bear's paw was bigger than her head, and the claws massive—thick and deadly. Marnie's

knife was no more useful against the bear than a Bic pen. “I’m sorry,” Marnie said, feeling embarrassed that she’d pointed a knife at the bear. That she hadn’t known they could talk. “May I keep my knife?” she asked in a small voice. “It was a gift from my father... He’s dead now.”

Bear exhaled, a snorting blast, before lowering their outstretched paw.

Gratefully, Marnie closed the blade and tucked the knife back into her front pocket.

Well, she thought. Well, well. A chunk of laughter burst from out of her. Marnie clamped her hand over her mouth. If she started laughing she didn’t know where it would lead her.

Bellyfat looked from Marnie to the bear, back to Marnie again.

She cleared her throat. Pain crinkled, then beat a steady metronome inside her cheek. “I’m sorry to have left part of me in the forest.” Marnie gestured toward Bellyfat. “I’ve come back for them, and we will be on our way, now, if we may.”

Courtesy seemed key, here. Who would try to bully or insult a bear? Make demands? Who could feel so entitled? Marnie bowed, a little. It made more sense than smiling. Baring teeth, for most other mammals, was not a sign of friendliness. Humans were weird. If she made it back to the city she would stop smiling. It was ridiculous. Well, maybe just smile a lot less. Definitely. Smiling was overrated. Especially for women.

A sob burst out of Marnie’s diaphragm. Had she lost her mind? The bear spoke to her. Her belly fat was a lumpin animate. All she wanted was to pick mushrooms. Was this what the fortune from her fortune cookie meant when it said, “Unexpected events will bring excitement into your life”?

The bear sat down, on their bum. Like a person. Heavy furred legs in front of them. They lowered their forepaws atop their belly. Bear said, “How long will you hold your breath?”

Marnie gasped for air. Light burst around her, like sparklers. She closed her eyes and breathed in and out until her dizziness passed. She opened her eyes. The bear was still there, sitting on the ground, and now traitorous Bellyfat sat between the bear’s legs, just like a small child.

“What. Are. You. Doing!” Marnie hissed through gritted teeth. “Get over here, Right Now!”

Bellyfat scooted backward until they were pressed against the bear's autumn-round tummy.

"I feel the awkwardness between us," Bear said.

If Marnie were to describe Bear's voice she'd say it sounded one octave higher than she would have expected. The pronunciation was completely recognizable, but the bear seemed to gulp at the close of each word, as if trying to stop food from falling out of their prehensile lips.

"Bellyfat wishes not to go back to you."

Marnie's eyes widened. "What?"

"Bellyfat knows you ran away. Abandoned." Bear raised their right front paw to scratch their outer thigh. The coarse sound of claws against fur. "Hard to forgive, yes?"

"I came back, didn't I?" Marnie said, indignant. She turned to Bellyfat. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to leave you!" Heat and pain prickled in her cheeks. She was lying and she was pretty sure everyone knew it. "How do you even know?" she asked the bear. "Bellyfat can't speak!"

Bear blinked slowly. "Bellyfat spoke. A different wording than our utterance now. You don't understand this other language."

"Stop-stop bearsplaining my own body to me!" Marnie snapped.

"Gr! Gr! Gr! Gr!" The bear shook his head.

The saliva dried inside Marnie's mouth. Why was she arguing! For the principle? What principle? And now they were enraged. Were going to swat her out like a fly—

"Gr! Gr! Gr!" the bear smacked their paw on the ground, then clapped the coarse pads against their head.

Marnie's mouth fell open. The bear was laughing...

Bear swiped their paw across their eyes. Shook their head hard, dust flying from their fur. "You are a funny person," Bear said. "Funniness was in the air. I am going now. I need to eat more to prepare for Winter Dream. Bears want more fat. We love our fat and need our fat." Bear, still sitting, raised one paw, great coarse pads facing upward.

Bellyfat, who had been sitting snug against the bear, leapt up to land upon the bear's outstretched paw.

Resentment or jealousy pinched Marnie from inside. She had no idea why she was feeling this way. But it wasn't a good feeling and she didn't like it.

“I’m taking back what’s mine,” Marnie said.

Did the bear’s eyebrows rise? Marnie wasn’t sure. Because Bellyfat leapt from the bear’s paw to land, plat, against Marnie’s face. It stuck there, like a hanpen starfish. Plat! Plat! Plat! Plat! Bellyfat smacked her cheeks, a rapid alternating series of slaps, with both of their stumpy hanpen hands.

“Ugh!” Marnie shouted, her lips pressed against the firm moist of Bellyfat. “Get off me!” She tried to bat them off, but Bellyfat leapt away, to dash back to their new friend.

“Stay here, then! See if I care! Because you won’t last long!” Marnie said. Bellyfat’s one hand was sullied brownish red. From the mess on her cheek, Marnie realized. Even more delicious for the bear. An icing of human blood.

Marnie remembered to be scared.

Bear slowly shook their head. “You have strange ideas.”

“Are you reading my mind?” Marnie whispered.

Bear shook their head again. “Your body says things, always. The changes in your scent. The muscles you clench. The sound of your heart. Your body is yelling because you do not listen. But that is you. Time for Bear to go, now.” Bear looked down at Bellyfat. Bellyfat seemed to nod their little nubbin head.

Bear raised their massive paw and seemed to somehow tuck their claws right into their rounded middle. Then they gently pulled outward.

Marnie stared.

Like a seam parting, a kind of slit was exposed. But there was no blood, nor the flayed red of exposed flesh. Inside the thin gap Marnie could see something white...

Bear reached with their other paw, to hold out the flap of skin, several inches wider. It was almost like a pouch—

Bellyfat leapt up, high, then jumped, feet-first, into the slit of the bear’s middle. Without a backward glance at Marnie, Bellyfat slid right in, disappeared. Bear pressed down at the crease, then ran their paw sideways, once, twice, like they were sealing Velcro.

Bear rose to their paws, stretched and yawned, then slowly swung their head to the east, nostrils waffling, snuffling up the air. The great beastie began ambling in that direction, with their slightly pigeon-toed, bow-legged stride.

“What!” Marnie yelled.

The bear continued walking away, old branches beneath the moss cracking beneath their weight. The snap, snap rang through the forest. An angry squirrel chattered harshly from a tree.

Belatedly, Marnie reached for her cell phone, jumbling through the pocket of her backpack. By the time she retrieved it and inputted her password the bear was a dark splodge between a stump and a cedar tree. She took a photo anyway.

The bear disappeared.

Marnie looked down at the screen of her cell phone. The bear’s butt was too blurry to look like anything. A tear landed atop the screen.

She shook her head. Something gleamed, pale, a faint yellowish hue, in the moss, at the edge of her periphery. Not again...

As her eyes focused, the differentiation between moss, gaps, branches, fallen leaves, resolved. A chanterelle. Three, four, six fungi, more than a dozen, growing from the forest floor, forming a broad and loose circle.

“Oh,” Marnie said. She knelt upon the moss. She began carefully picking some of them, the slightly peppery sweet apricot smell filling the air. She closed her eyes to breathe it in. “Thank you, chanterelles.” She gathered half of what she could see, and left half for the forest. As she tied the fruit up in the red bandana she kept in her backpack she thought about what the bear had said.

She sank backward, onto her butt, and sat with the small bundle of wild mushrooms between her outstretched legs.

Bellyfat was gone now. Marnie took a deep breath. She turned her face toward the east, in the direction the bear had gone. She cupped a hand around her mouth. “I’m sorry!” she shouted. “I really mean it!” She truly felt sorry. She didn’t know why she felt sorry, but she would start by not pretending she didn’t. “Thank you!” she shouted.

The bear did not answer. From somewhere further in the forest came the slightly sad sound of the Varied Thrush’s liquid vibrato.

She should get going. The sun would set soon, she had about half an hour of daylight left. Darkness bloomed especially fast inside a forest. But she didn’t want to hurry back to the city. To her apartment, her job, the daily commute. Joan’s disappointment. Her own. Because of how alone she felt...

Her cheek. It hurt.

Shhhhhhhhh.

A sweet fir breeze wafted over her face. *Shhhhhhhhh.*

Marnie closed her eyes. The coolness felt good against her swollen skin.

You're not alone...

That voice. The hairs along Marnie's spine shivered upright. She opened her eyes and they fell upon the bandana. With trembling fingers she picked at the knot and folded the corners flat.

The plump golden chanterelles smelled rich of humus and moss, the afterscent of sweet apricot twining in the air.

We are Forest, the voice swelled from the fruiting bodies. *We are everywhere. And we have always been a part of you. Eat of us. Be of us.*

A smile trembled across Marnie's lips. She chose the fattest fungus. Pale cream-yellow, meaty and dense. She bit into the flesh with tenderness. Love.

Know me.