

Foolish

Carol and the therapist sat facing each other. The room was bright, furnished with pieces of cherry and leather, a rainbow rug covering the floor. A wall of windows overlooked the woods behind the building. Across from the windows, three large framed portraits hung on the wall, studio portraits of young girls with yellow and blue ribbons in their hair.

"Are those your kids?" Carol asked, nodding toward the portraits.

"Yes," the therapist replied. She tapped a few words into her iPad.

"Very nice," Carol said. She shifted in her seat and watched through the window as a pair of squirrels scampered around on the ground among the autumn leaves. They chased each other up a small oak tree in a corkscrew pattern, then scurried along a thin branch and leaped to another tree, then jumped to the ground and disappeared into the brush.

"They do that all day long," the therapist said. "I can never tell if they're playing or fighting."

"Fighting would be my guess," Carol said.

After a pause the therapist said, "Tell me what you're feeling."

What are you feeling? The banality and obviousness of the question always grated on Carol. What do you think I feel? she'd said to a psychiatrist years ago, in the hospital. *Carol, you're the only one who knows that*, he had replied, in that an aloof, almost snide tone that Carol had heard so often in her life.

"What I feel seems to change every day," she replied.

"Okay, then," the therapist said. "What are you feeling today? Right now."

She closed her eyes and thought about it. "Today I feel...foolish."

"Tell me more about that," the therapist said.

"I feel foolish for marrying a man I didn't love. And then even more foolish when I finally did fall

in love with him years later, just in time for him to leave me. I feel foolish that we agreed to see other people before the divorce was final. Now he's making plans to move in with another woman. I tell him, *Paul, I am so happy for you, I just love Afsaneh*. I tell him he deserves someone young and vibrant, a career woman who also has a traditional side and will cook exotic Persian meals for him and his friends, wash and iron his clothes, change the bed-sheets every week, scrub the toilets, manage the household finances, all the things that I never did. I tell him all these things with a smile on my face while inside I'm seething, despising them both for their happiness, for being so goddamn perfect for each other." She pulled a tissue from the box and wadded it into a ball in her hands. "And I feel foolish for convincing myself that I didn't want children. Most of my friends did the same thing, but still. I even convinced some of them not to when they were wavering. Then of course I wake up on my 40th birthday, absolutely bawling in bed because I will never have a child, with or without Paul. And I feel foolish for having no friends any more, for losing them in the divorce, for sitting here telling all my problems to someone who gets paid to do it. Here in this office, which is nothing but...appearances, a stage set in a concrete building behind a strip mall."

She glared at the therapist, who was busy again tapping notes into her iPad. "I'm listening," the therapist said. "Please, go on."

Carol noticed that the squirrels were back, performing their territorial acrobatics. They really did repeat the same pattern, over and over. They looked more like wind-up toys than living creatures.

"Carol?" the therapist said.

"That's all," Carol said. "That's what I'm feeling today. Foolish."

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