

Clearing

by Mary Alston Capps

Forty years is a very long time to live with someone.

Ellen stood motionless at the curtainless kitchen window, staring at the autumnal woods, looking for signs of the various animals that frequented her property. She had done this every morning and every evening since Jim died almost a year ago. They were mostly invisible, but the treats she often put out for them, especially in the winter, were always gone, and the salt lick was regularly worn down. She rarely saw them, but they had been her constant and only companions, aside from her twice-monthly trips into town for groceries. Her friends would call or send the occasional email to try to coax her back into her old social circle, but as much as she appreciated their thoughtfulness, she wasn't ready yet. She didn't know if she ever would be.

She decided to go for a walk before it got dark, grabbed a bag of small apples, and headed out the back door. Munching on one of the tart, hard apples, she came to the clearing where she normally put food out. Six or seven large, flat rocks occupied that part of the woods, large enough to keep the trees from completely moving in. She took the rest of the apples and carefully placed them on several of the rocks. Ellen always made some kind of pattern with the fruit on one of the rocks. Jim used to gently tease her, asking if she thought the animals preferred the fruit in the pattern to those just randomly scattered. Well, maybe the animals didn't, but she did. Today it was a spiral, like a nautilus, starting just off-center of the stone, winding to the edges.

Ellen sat on one of the rocks for a while, as she always did, as she and Jim used to do together, hoping some woodland creature would deign to make an appearance. But they never did. She stood to go and stopped to listen. For what, she didn't know, but when she

finally turned to leave, she was startled to see a young man standing about twenty feet away, leaning on a tree, watching her. He was somewhat tall, lean but with broad shoulders, dark brown shoulder-length hair, with flecks of gold where the setting sun hit it, and dark, almost black eyes. She walked toward him.

"Excuse me, but are you lost? This is my property and I don't normally get hikers this far back."

"Oh no, I am not lost. I come this way pretty regularly. I hope you do not mind."

"No, not at all — but am I'm surprised we've not met before. I thought I knew everyone around here. My name's Ellen."

She extended her hand and he awkwardly shook it.

"Yes, I know you. I mean, I have seen you around here. I tend to keep to myself though, like you do. I am called Devin."

"Forgive an old woman her honest observations, but you're impossibly handsome. Surely there's a lovely lady or two who would be delighted to join you for a walk in the woods..."

"Oh, there are. There have been - beautiful, too - but flighty, self-absorbed, and none too bright. But it is not their fault. It is how they were made."

She looked at him, expecting to see arrogance in his eyes, but saw only a touch of sadness.

"And you are not old."

His proclamation made her laugh out loud and her resonant laugh made him jump.

"I'm sorry, Devin. Didn't mean to startle you — but I'm almost 60, and while there's still a lot of life left in this old girl, I'm afraid my better days are long behind me. But thank you for saying that. I haven't laughed in far too long, and had quite forgotten how good it feels."

"No, no. Your laugh, that was lovely. It just surprised me. Can you do that again?"

And, again, she laughed. It was and was not because he asked.

"You're not from around here, are you, Devin!"

She looked up to smile at him and was surprised that he was right in front of her. He slid his arms around her back, pulling her against him, almost inside of him, and kissed her. At least it started as a kiss. Her head spun and the colours of the trees and the sky blurred into one. It wasn't possible, but it felt like sex. She knew she was fully dressed and standing in the woods, but his skin was her skin and it was on fire and melting. Sex but not sex but more than sex. Transcendence and then...

Ellen stood in the clearing, trembling and very much alone. She called out to him several times but there was no sound except for the whippoorwills with their evening song. She sat down on one of the stones, taking deep breaths until she regained some semblance of composure. She called out one more time, waiting and listening and, when none came, she stood, took a last look around, and slowly walked through the woods back to the house. For the first time in a long time, Ellen wanted to talk to someone.

The following evening before she left to meet her friends, she walked out the back door to watch for the creatures that never came. It took her eyes several minutes to adjust to the darkening sky

and the autumn air had an edge to it that whispered of the coming winter. Just before she turned toward the house, she saw a magnificent buck standing where the edge of the woods began, staring at the house - staring at her, with dark, almost black eyes. He threw his head back, snorting, breath clouding the air and was gone.

Forty years is a very long time to live with someone, but a year is a very long time to live without anyone. And so Ellen returned to her friends.

