

Thursday
by Kara Lindstrom

If it was Thursday, it must be potluck at the Knutsons, and it was fucking Thursday.

Maxine and her father set the spinach from their garden on the Knutsons' counter.

"The fish were too lumpy," her father said.

"Lasagna it is," Mrs. Knutson said.

"They've had lumps for weeks, now," Mr. Knutson said.

"I don't know why I bothered checking. There's moss growing on the staff-gauge at ten."

Maxine's lungs felt pinched and puny, her skin, hot. Her hormones were roiling.

It was normal at 17, the endocrine cycling, but still, it felt like an engineering fail -- homeostasis blown to shit. She jostled to sit at the table -- as close to the door as possible.

"You're the one always saying, 'Anything other than twelve is a world of pain,'"

Mr. Knutson said.

They were off: the river level conversation. Twelve feet was the sweet spot.

Anything under meant fish lumpy with effluent, over was flood threat.

Mrs. Knutson was layering noodles, spinach, sauce, cheese. Mr. Knutson was uncorking the wine he made from berries growing alongside the farm road. Her father was getting out the plates and silverware. Maxine got up to set the table.

They ate everything. Maxine estimated forty-five minutes left for wrap- up chat and clean up.

"We have desert," Mrs. Knutson announced.

Desert was rare. This was going to mean another 90 minutes, min.

“I made apple crumble,” Mr. Knutson said.

“Where’d you find fruit? The store was cleared out,” her father said.

“The trees at the edge of Miller’s place. Weird time to be fruiting, but there they were, and I went for it.”

“I kept telling him they’d shoot, but he’s like, ‘No, no, I got this,’ and then Bang!” Mrs. Knutson said, clapping on the word.

“They shot at you,” her father said.

“Yep. They’re a rough bunch.”

Maxine had had Driver’s Ed with Damien, the youngest Miller. He was tough; some people said “arrogant.” It wasn’t a stretch to imagine him with a gun, but not shooting it.

“They’re crazy,” Mrs. Knutson added.

“Well, vigilant, that’s for sure, her father said. “But I don’t know what they’re protecting. The house is sinking -- hardly worth fighting for. I know I’m saying the same old, same old, but the man built too close to the river.”

“Maybe it’s finally all catching up with him,” Mr. Knutson said. He signed like he felt sorry for Mr. Miller, but it was fake sympathy. More standard potluck:

The Millers had foolishly underestimated the region’s devilish geology before building. Land made from an ice-age collision was nothing but unstable.

Mrs. Knutson leaned for the wine, jostling a hanging basket of onions to knock against Maxine’s head. A pallet of 50-gallon bags of de-icer crowded the back door; buckets of fermenting yogurt hung from coat hooks. Depending on who was talking, the

Knutsons were either hoarders or proactive when it came to the area's fragile supply chain. "They're garden-variety troublemakers," Mrs. Knutson said.

The air was thick with breath and cooking smells. Maxine wanted to defend the Millers, but if she talked about Damien's beautiful hands and voice, they'd know about her crush, and she wanted that to be her information to keep.

"Well, they won't be our problem forever, because they'll be flooded out," Mr. Knutson said.

Maxine dropped a serving spoon – the sharp sound of metal against Pyrex. "If they've made a mistake and built on a flood plain, they'll fix it. I took Driver's Ed with Damien. He's not a cretin."

The Knutsons stared at their hands. Her father looked at her with his eyebrows raised like they were in on this together. She raised her eyebrows back. *Sometimes I just have to let loose.*

"I didn't say they were idiots, did I?" Mrs. Knutson asked.

Mr. Knutson shook his head. "Nope."

Mrs. Knutson dished out the apple crumble.

Mr. Knutson started adjusting the sink's pipe coupler for correct dishwashing water flow, because their pipes were fragile and needed to be babied.

Her father took a spoonful of crumble. Maxine knew he'd close his eyes for the first taste, and he did. Mrs. Knutson added a dollop of whipped topping to hers. She's going to pause and add a second spoonful. And Mrs. Knutson did. Mr. Knutson grunted and yanked on the pipe wrench. He'll say, "That should do it," and he did.

"I think the Millers are just private," her father said.

Backpedaling. He had seen that she liked Damien Miller. Shit.

It would be so easy to overturn the table. She'd scream, "I am Shiva, queen of destruction," and every time another stray glass shard was found, they'd remember Maxine as ferocious.

Mrs. Knutson said, "Well, they've got plenty to be private about. I heard they have a rocket launcher in their storage shed."

Maxine let her teeth slide across the spoon. Rocket launcher.

The trail leading to the Millers' was wet and getting wetter. Creeks appeared, and she tucked her pants into her boots to ford them. The evergreen canopy was dense. Her headlamp caught a deer and then an owl, and it was like they were in an unheated house, together. There was a splash: a fish or maybe someone harvesting wild rice from a canoe at night – stealthy to avoid run-ins with river-front property owners who claimed ownership because the rice brought in serious cash.

A floodlight shone from the ranch house's eave. Its dark siding matched the muddy ground, and the house looked like it was melting.

A creek followed the driveway's grade through the front lawn -- ryegrass ringed with half-buried tires. A wheelbarrow, its wheel submerged in the mud, acted as a footbridge. Maxine turned off her headlamp and crossed.

First a mossy woodpile and a garden with a broken deer fence, then the storage shed. If the Millers' security ran to the sophisticated, she'd have to turn back; she had brought only bolt cutters. A river rock kept the shed door shut.

Maxine paused. Twenty minutes since leaving home where her father was reading in bed, Miles Davis on repeat. His reading light illuminated only his half of the bed, the other half was reference books forming a lump that could be a woman if you didn't know that no woman had been there since Maxine's mother had left, 14 years ago.

Most people bounded forward like dogs after squirrels, but not Maxine. Pauses were often necessary. She was good with time. She moved the river rock and went inside.

No flashing lights or buzzers. She turned on her headlamp. There was a workbench with a vice and a "have-a-heart" trap, big enough for a possum. She turned off her headlamp, slipped out of the shed and shoved the rock back against the door. All rumors about rocket launchers were false.

Damien Miller stood on the other side of the wheelbarrow footbridge, and adrenalin burst in her chest. He flicked on a Maglight.

She had broken into the Millers' shed. They shoot when you pick their apples. The Millers are troublemakers. She should run.

"You going to run?" His voice was his tag. Always low and always only for the person he was talking to. And he was talking to her.

"No." She crossed the footbridge into the Maglight beam.

"Why are you here?"

"I heard you had a rocket launcher."

Damien laughed.

He laughed long enough that Maxine smiled along and clicked on her headlamp. "Rumors, right? Sorry about disturbing you. It was stupid." She started toward the trail.

"We got Kalashnikovs."

She turned back.

Damien held up his hand against her headlamp, and she turned it off. She followed him behind the shed where he lifted brush to reveal a door in the ground and punched a code into a security panel. Of course -- weapons are fortified.

He clicked on the bare bulb hanging from the low ceiling. Red-taped cardboard boxes were neatly piled on plastic shelves. Damien pulled a flick blade from his pocket to slice open a box, and Maxine felt the adrenalin, again. "You always carry that?"

"When needed." He began wiggling the molded packaging to slide out the product.

Once when it had been her turn in Driver's Ed, he had leaned from the back seat to say around the headrest just to the left of her ear, "Your hands. Nine and three." She would've been docked points. Her hands were at four and twelve.

He pulled out a Kalashnikov. "Ta-da. Want to carry it?"

She hung the gun revolutionary style over her shoulder to pace the cement floor. She smelled the river behind the wall, and she imagined reeds, wild rice and fish swaying in the dark water pressing against the concrete. She caught a smell, darker than the river's, like something charred.

"What is all this?"

"My dad had access to some stuff. He sort of liberated it."

"What do you do with it?"

"He sells it. I impress girls."

She handed back the gun, clicked on her headlamp. "I should go. Thanks for the tour."

He blocked the ladder. “You can’t tell anyone.” He clicked off her lamp.

Her mouth got dry.

“Really.”

“Got it. If I do, you’ll hurt me.”

“No, my dad will.”

This wasn’t like the fear when she had first seen Damien or when she had understood that he carried a knife to threaten intruders. This was heavier.

“Everyone’s scared of you guys.”

“That’s how we want it.”

“Some people think you’re crazy.”

“I know.” He leaned down to kiss her. “I meant girl, before. Singular.”

There were automatic weapons, threats and a flick blade, and there was this too, the way kissing Damien Miller made her vision stutter to break everything into strobing stop action. The pores on his cheek, and then the flare from the bare bulb, then his skin again, and his hair, the ends split and fine. And his smell like dry cardboard was there, too. The disconnected pictures stretched the kiss and time until he clicked on her headlamp and stepped away from the ladder.

Maxine ran. The Knutsons were right; the Millers were dangerous, but not if she kept her mouth shut. Only when she kissed Damien Miller would her mouth budge.

The ground got drier, and she stopped to dislodge dirt clods from her boots. Messages hovered above her like thought bubbles she could almost read.

At the river, the staff gauge lines were reflecting the moonlight – 10 feet. No, the thought bubbles weren’t sentences. They were more like cells on a spreadsheet. Minute

hands. Geology. Troublemakers. Hoarders. Smart. Stupid. Teenagers. Crushes. Real love. Jazz time signatures. Staff gauge. Security codes.

The metrics were killing her.

Shooting a gun would be great. Seventeen was prime for going nuts with firepower. Another metric. Well, too bad, because the shot's spectacular echo would be a fantastic release.

She sat on the bank and hacked at the cattails with her bolt cutters. Short of guns, maybe wrapping herself in teenager-in-love bullshit could release some of the tension. She'd make playlists. Chat with floating heart emojis. Yoke everything to Damien Miller. She'd sext. It would all act as a handy benzodiazepine, making her stupid and thick to help her wait through the years. Twenty, 21, 30, 35. Finally she'd get to the point where reading in bed with Miles Davis on repeat was good enough. Not terrible, but not great, either.

There was snap. Not a deer -- a wolf. But she didn't have a gun, and she wasn't stupid and thick. She was right here, waiting for the next move. Prey. Predator.

She looked away, and then back. The wolf turned and disappeared into the trees. She wanted to run the rest of the way home, but the wolf would take it as challenge and run after her, so she walked.

Maxine didn't have to look at her watch to know that it was Friday.