

## Archaeology After Dark

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“That’s it for me,” Roy announced, as he did every night.

Doris kept eying her cards.

“You’re going to stay for a while?”

“For a while,” she said. Why did he ask? Did she ever leave this early? And why did he bother to come here at all? He hated the noise and the smoke.

The Queen of Spades, reproachful, kept her gaze averted; she wanted no part of this. Doris sighed and glanced at her husband. His broad face loomed above her. His watery blue eyes regarded her kindly.

“I won’t be long,” she said, knowing this wasn’t necessarily true and knowing it didn’t matter: He would forgive her.

“Have fun,” he said. “I’ll meet you back at the room.”

“See you soon,” she murmured. Doris wondered if, with a queen and a seven, she should go for another card.

He patted her shoulder and walked away.

“Hit me,” she commanded.

She never really enjoyed herself until after Roy left. Even if he was at a slot machine at the other end of the room, she could feel his devotion wafting her way, settling over her shoulders like a shawl. This wasn’t the time or the place for that kind of encumbrance; this was supposed to be a free zone.

Already the lights seemed brighter, the laughter more boisterous. Doris swallowed the last of her Manhattan and gestured to the waitress with her empty glass. No problem getting service here—the staff wove through the crowd continually, bringing drinks, changing bills, guiding the elderly to the ATMs. They would trot out plates of food from the twenty-four-hour kitchen; they would guard the machines while patrons rushed to the restrooms; they would do even more if they only knew what.

Eddie, the most cautious player at the table, was tonight’s big winner. Grace had just finished her fourth vodka gimlet and was losing gleefully. Her husband kept closing his eyes and nodding off, and every few minutes Grace would look at him and shriek, “Time to put Ed to bed!” Next to them sat Evelyn, for whom a game of cards was no laughing matter.

They were all members of The Group, as they called themselves—a dozen or so fossil enthusiasts who assembled periodically for field trips. This time they were in Hawthorne, Nevada, looking for Cretaceous ammonites. As most of these ventures took place in the Nevada desert, they often stayed at motels with casinos, and after a day scouring the rocky canyons, it was customary to gather in the evening at a card table.

Doris, at forty-eight, was the youngest member; most of them were over sixty. Happily retired, they drove up in old vans and dented trucks, vehicles sacrificed to the dusty pursuit of prehistoric treasure. Eddie, who owned a vintage pickup much praised for its stamina, had surprised everyone by pulling into Hawthorne in a brand-new motor home. *What happened to the Ford?* they all wanted to know. Eddie shook her head. *Had to shoot it.*

The dealer slid another card to Doris. She lifted one corner and winced. A king. She should be playing poker.

"I'm out," she said.

"Again?" said Edie. "Honey, you gotta learn to say no."

Everyone roared at this. Doris gave a shrug and reached for her cigarettes. She didn't care about winning; she simply wanted to be in this loud, bright room for as long as she could.

Leaning back in her chair, Doris turned to the left, and her body stiffened. In the glow of the slot machines, she caught a glimpse of brilliant white hair. But it wasn't him. Roy did not own a green plaid sport coat. And he would never, ever wear yellow cowboy boots.

Roy was meticulous about his appearance. You wouldn't catch him at the supermarket in a pair of old sweatpants and sneakers. Even here in the desert, he managed to keep his shirts crisp, his trousers creased. Back home, sometimes Doris would slide open the drawers of his stern mahogany highboy and gaze at the tidy array of socks, the neatly folded sweaters. When had he become so fastidious?

She looked down at her own outfit with detached curiosity: faded work shirt (minus a cuff button), limp cotton slacks. Everyone else, she noticed now, had changed for dinner.

Edie yawned and got to her feet. "I'm buying breakfast," she said, sweeping an armful of chips into her plastic container. Taking heed, the rest of the group began to gather their money and cigarettes. It was eleven o'clock, a sensible time to leave. Knowing Doris would stay longer, Edie laid a blue-veined hand on her shoulder.

"We're headed for Hollow Canyon tomorrow. It's a two-hour ride, bumpy as hell." She paused. "Aren't you tired, darlin'?"

"Not yet," Doris replied. Wise Edie nodded and said nothing more.

Doris watched them file out. Only she and Earl remained at the table. Earl was not a member of the group. He was a local, the owner of a hardware store, and this was the third night in a row he had joined their party. From across the table, he gave her a winning smile and suggested they move into the bar.

Quarter after midnight. The roulette wheel spun, people cheered, bells rang on a slot machine. Out there, hungry coyotes jogged through the dark; here, it was festive as Christmas.

Doris put a cigarette to her lips, and Earl snapped open his lighter, an old silver Zippo, chunky and reassuring. His hand was warm and heavy on her thigh, and she regarded it with interest, as if it had just arrived, as if it were sitting there all by itself, unattached to Earl. The long tan fingers fastened to her leg reminded her of a starfish. Gradually, like the approach of a distant train, the danger dawned on her: Someone might see them, a lingering member of the group. She looked at the people milling about, and her gaze fixed on a camera mounted near the ceiling—those damn things were everywhere; they were probably under the tables. Right now, someone could be watching the progress of Earl's hand on television.

Or maybe Roy himself would wander in, sleepless and missing her. Would he say anything? She didn't think so. She had yet to find the borders of his tolerance.

He had been this way for nearly two years, ever since he came back. She still didn't know where he had spent those ten weeks after Toby died: She never asked. It was

monstrous, her friends whispered, to leave her like that, only days after the funeral—and perhaps they were right, but the truth was, she had hardly noticed he was gone. She'd spent that time curled up on the end of the sofa, staring at the blue trail of cigarette smoke that spiraled into the lamp shade beside her.

Although she couldn't remember much from that period, she could still see Roy's face when he told her he had to leave. His eyes, wide and sick with grief; tears rolling down his red cheeks. He kept seeing Toby, he said—every time he looked at her, he saw Toby. She had made no reply to this, had merely watched him leave. She did register a faint wave of shock, maybe even anger, but the feelings came from a faraway place, as if part of her had sheared off and was stranded somewhere. Even now she would look at her husband, at the hunch of his shoulders or the mosaic of broken veins in his cheeks, and a vague tenderness would come over her, like a scent through a window, and she would remember that on some disparate plane she still loved him.

Unlike Roy, Doris was not haunted by Toby's image, though it was true they bore a remarkable resemblance to each other. From her he had gotten his lean frame, blond hair, gray eyes, and rather large nose; the wide crooked smile was hers as well. In the first few weeks after his death, she kept searching her face in the mirror, trying to catch sight of him. She would pause on the stairs, listening, waiting, as if she could breach his world by staying perfectly still. But the space around her was empty, vacant as a crater on the moon. He was gone from the rooms, gone from the mirrors, banished even from his photographs. They were eerie now, portentous. Pictures of a dead boy.

Doris placed a hand on Earl's wrist and leaned toward the wide yellow flame; she was growing very fond of that lighter. He lived nearby, he was telling her, two blocks away; they could walk there. Over the rim of her glass, she studied the rugged planes of his face and thought how pointless it was to be handsome in a place like Hawthorne.

She knew what his house would look like; she had walked down the rows of white boxes with their dirt yards and chain-link fences and green fiberglass carports. She imagined his bed, too large for the room, one side pushed against a wall. In the backyard, tethered to a slab of cement, a dog would be pacing. Every few minutes it would sigh and lie down.

Earl's hand squeezed her leg just a little. "You're a good-looking woman, you know that?"

Doris considered. A good-looking woman. No, she had no opinions about this.

"You are," he insisted, nodding his head. "Kind of skinny, but I like that."

He was wearing, Doris noticed, a class ring. At his age. A small gust of interest roused her and she said, "You've been here all your life?"

"Nope. I grew up in Sparks. Came here"—he rubbed his jaw, reflecting—"twelve years ago."

"Why?" was all she could think of to say.

He shrugged. "It's cheap. Can't beat the price of homes here." He leaned toward her, leering in a friendly fashion. "You want to see mine? It's no palace, but it's paid for."

Doris heard the echo in that last line, and she knew it was one of his favorites.

There was no risk involved: She would get away with it. She would slip out of Earl's bed and back into Roy's, and her secret would perish in the desert. People weren't punished for their sins. Punishment came willy-nilly, despite faith or precaution or good deeds.

Toby was twenty-six the day he died. He'd been rock climbing, and something had gone wrong, something had come undone. He didn't suffer, they told her; he fell from a great height, and his death was quick. Doris could not envision this violent, sudden demise. She saw him toppling slowly, with amazement, the sky and rocks and trees whirling around him. To Toby, the fall must have seemed never-ending.

Doris had never wanted to be a mother, had sensed the danger early on. All through her only pregnancy, she worried that she wasn't fit for the task. Certain mammals, she had heard, would sometimes refuse their maternity, would shrink in terror from their young—a phenomenon she didn't find the least bit surprising.

One o'clock in the morning. Earl was getting a little bleary-eyed. He was a collector too, he told her. He'd found all sorts of weird stuff in the desert. She should see some of the stuff he'd found. His hand, hot and damp on her thigh, waited for an answer.

Doris blew a stream of smoke out the side of her mouth. She pictured them in bed, their limbs entwined, their bodies straining in the moonlight. The image made her shudder.

The last time had been—what, a year ago? Longer. Roy had been very careful, had searched her face for signs of distress, had held his breath as he touched her—and, slowly, like ice breaking on a pond, she had responded. She clung to him, astonished, and he smiled down at her with such gratitude that she had to look away. And she noticed then how thin her arms had become, how pale his skin, and as their bodies began to move in rhythm, a terrible sadness welled up in her: They could not do this; they were still broken. "I can't," she whispered. "I'm sorry." He had not approached her since.

Earl wanted to know what kind of rocks her group was looking for.

"Fossils," said Doris. "Ammonites." She drew a spiral in the air with her finger.

Oh yeah, he nodded, he had some of those, he had lots of rocks. But she should see the *bones* he'd found. He had seventeen steer skulls, most of them without any bullet holes, and a snake skeleton with *two heads*. Swear to God. People got a big kick out of that snake—this week he had it coiled around the sugar bowl.

Behind her glass, Doris grimaced. She could see herself an hour from now stumbling toward his bathroom, her hands groping for a light switch and finding some animal part tacked to the wall.

Roy wouldn't see any humor in a two-headed snake; the sight of it would probably pain him. He would make a special box for it, would treat it like a totem. She thought of the beautiful maple cabinets he had built to house their fossils; the weekends he had spent milling, sanding, and varnishing; and all the small moral debts he imposed on himself, the research and the data cards he compiled for every specimen. These things still mattered to him; he seemed, in fact, more scrupulous than ever.

She remembered the Shasta trip, when she and Roy had labored side by side on a rocky outcrop. They were a mile in the sky, and the wind blew cool on their skin as they swung their hammers and broke open chunks of limestone, grinning and sweating, shouting in triumph over each new find. He had not lost that exuberance, while she, who had spurred his interest in the hobby, who had found her first fossil at the age of six, was beginning to wonder if maybe they had enough of them.

Quarter to two.

“How about a nightcap?” Earl said, signaling the waitress. Doris opened her mouth to say no and then didn’t bother.

He was divorced, he mentioned again. Three kids. Did she have kids? Doris shook her head. He paused, drummed his fingers on the table. Out of ideas, he winked and gave her another huge smile.

What was it Roy had said this morning? Something about a trip to Canada. Oh yes—the dinosaur park. Was it next month they were going? He was the one who arranged these things.

He had sold his construction company last year and invested the considerable profits; presently he did consulting work, helping other business owners out of the red. Nothing could be drearier, Doris thought, than examining financial statements, but Roy never complained about it, and she wondered now, swirling the ice in her glass, if it soothed him. A red pencil, a sheet of paper. All those small repairs.

On this trip, he had brought along several home and garden magazines. He wanted to build a modest deck and was trying to come up with design ideas, but the more pictures he saw the more elaborate his visions grew. His latest whimsy was a water garden. *We could put it beside the bedroom window*, he’d mused. *We could put a fountain in it and listen to the water.*

Doris had leaned back in the hotel bed and pictured this water garden. Murky water. Sluggish orange fish. The constant buzz of the pump.

*What do you think?* he asked, showing her a picture of an exquisite rectangular pool surrounded by glossy plants; a cougar made of stone was crouched nearby. You’d be filling it every two minutes, she was tempted to say, and you can’t grow those plants in Sacramento. But what did it matter? Let him build his water garden. *It’s pretty*, she said, and nodded.

How did he manage to keep making plans? From where did he wrest the interest? It wasn’t just his projects he enjoyed—the smallest things stirred him: clouds, spider webs, palm fronds moving in the wind. Something had happened to him those ten weeks he was gone. There was a quietness about him now, a painstaking—she could see it in his hands, in the way he buttoned a shirt.

And just then, staring at the white webbing on the red candle holder on the bar, she understood: He was trying to save himself. He was trying to emerge from grief the way people ascend from madness: one fragile achievement at a time.

And though she hadn’t helped him, not once in all these months, he was still waiting for her.

It was 2:05 a.m. Earl tilted the candle back and forth; with a tiny hiss, the flame went out. “Whoops,” he said.

Doris looked at his perfect jaw, his bronze-colored skin, the creases around his eyes. Earl, encouraged by this scrutiny, moved his hand higher up her thigh and launched another oppressive grin. He leaned closer, so close that she could feel his breath on her cheek, and suddenly, more than anything in the world, she wanted to be with her husband. Setting down her drink, she grasped Earl’s hand and placed it on his own thigh.

“Gotta go,” she said.

Earl's face fell. "But—"

She got to her feet and walked unsteadily across the blue-and-orange carpeting. It wasn't like jumping out of a plane—she could come back anytime. Still, she was afraid as she stepped outside the door and the dark pulled in around her. The night was cold, and it smelled of rock and mica, of sage and clean white bones. She glanced out into the desert, where only the stars could be seen, and there, maybe thirty feet away, a pair of yellow eyes appeared. They watched her a moment, and then they were gone.