

Casserole Man

The first day he moves into his post-divorce apartment, he finds in its river-rock driveway a knife. He checks the knife for blood, hones it on a stone from the driveway, puts it away with his web gear. He tries to remember where he got the web gear, but it doesn't come to him.

When he goes hiking, the web gear holds a canteen filled with water, and an olive drab pouch of the type Case, Small Arms, Ammunition, which case hasn't seen ammunition since before it came into his possession, however that happened. This case is the place where the knife spends most of its time, except for those occasions when it is out and being made sharper still. The case, when fully outfitted for hiking into desert or mountains, holds beyond the knife also matches, a lighter, and (whenever possible) a granola bar.

What he would actually do with a knife on a hike, he does not know.

This weekend, the approximately two-hundred-and-twenty-fifth since his divorce, he takes a hike, up into the Watermelon Mountains. He brings his web gear, making sure he has fresh water in the canteen. The mountains, or so the story goes, were so named by the first Spaniards to visit. They were very thirsty.

He hasn't hiked the Watermelons in slightly more than two hundred and twenty-five weekends, since the last time his ex-best-friend's ex-wife and he hiked all the way to the top, where she told him some more of the things a woman probably ought not tell a man. She's since moved, by the way, to the Blood of Christ Mountains. Those Spaniards! The sun was always setting when they were naming the parts. He can see the Blood of Christ off to the north, and he can imagine his ex-best-friend's ex-wife immersed in it in some fashion.

There is a place he finds today in the Watermelon Mountains, just up the road from where he and his ex-wife picnicked the summer they moved here, he just remembers as he's driving by — not that he has any real place in mind, he doesn't — but he knows it when he sees it. He pulls over, parks and gets out, straps on the web gear, and hikes.

The trail opens quickly into the bed of the old road, wide and level, with gravel and stones still showing from its former life, on a hairpin that hasn't been turned since Tin Lizzy. The new road runs just above it, on the other side of pines and aspens. He can hear traffic, but not much. There is a shattered windshield on the old road, from a vehicle once dropped in from above. There are also old beer cans, like a rusting fungus infesting the meadows and woods.

He passes through a small meadow with a spring. Some ways beyond it he find the place: a small clearing with two small boulders. He sits. Soon enough — that is, within seconds — flies find him. And with so little fur! He pulls a few long-stalked seed heads of the mountain grasses and whisks lazily with them. The flies persist.

He sits; the sun suns; the flies fly; the seed-heads flop. At random moments, all the flies fly away for a few seconds; if there are no cars struggling up the mountain road above, all there is in the ears is the breeze in the tops of the trees.

There is also the Watermelon Mountain ant, a fast-moving little black kind. He switches boulders. A little later, the water from the canteen is good.

He wanders the woods a while before he leaves.

He sees under a tree the shards of a casserole dish, clean and white from rain, in the moss on the north side of an old pine. Some pieces sport a standard casserole-dish pattern in blue.

He stops and contemplates the shards. He opens the Case, Small Arms, Ammunition, hanging from its olive drab belt around his waist. He pulls out a granola bar and the well-sharpened knife. Tearing the wrapper off the bar, he slices the bar in half, bending to place one half on the shards. The other half he pops into his mouth and chews, wondering a while about Homo hot-dish, also known as Casserole Man, who wandered the Watermelon Mountains, drinking beer out of rusted cans and sleeping on beds of broken glass.