

# LOT'S WIFE

>> JENN FARRELL

June couldn't make good coffee, especially not in someone else's house. The brew was thick and bitter, a marginal improvement over the brown water she'd made the previous morning. She drank it anyway, unable to face her morning run without it. It sat sour in her gut. Maybe it's this awful prairie water, she thought. Softened to the point of salt.

June quietly gathered her clothes and shoes from the bedroom and took them into the living room. She didn't want to wake Janey. Her sister's solicitude was a burden, especially before breakfast. Janey was good kid, but June couldn't help but think of her that way—a kid. Twelve years younger. She started kindergarten the year June graduated from high school. In three days, Janey would get married. June would walk down the aisle ahead of her, a 43-year-old bridesmaid in a pink satin dress with a husband she didn't think she loved anymore.

Janey, who should have been frantic with last-minute details, was calm and beatific. She wanted to talk about June, about her future plans, about the evening before the blessed day, when Gordon would finally roll into town for just over twenty-four hours and perform his duty as June's husband before turning around and heading straight back to work in Vancouver. And June had no idea what to say about any of it.

June thought about these things as she ate half a banana, stepped into her running shorts, and laced up her shoes. The sun was rising, and soon it would scorch the earth, making the air shimmer and bend with heat. Too hot to run.

For yesterday's outing, she'd gone in one of two possible directions down the long stretch of road beyond the crescent street of houses. The heat had already been oppressive, and she got a bit of a side stitch. A dull ache persisted for several hours afterward, on and off. June guessed it was the altitude. Even though the terrain was flat and smooth, the elevation was higher than what she was used to, higher than sea level. That, coupled with the heat, made it feel as though an invisible hand was pressing on her chest as she ran. Like when Gordon was on top of her and she had a hard time getting a breath in. It wasn't like that when they were first married. He was slimmer then, and took pains to support his own weight. As she ran, she had seen the occasional dead prairie dog on the roadside, some horribly mashed, but most just lying on the gravel shoulder, bloated like fat furry balls, their little legs poking straight out. They made a sound like a play-toy, June discovered, when they were alive. An unexpected high-pitched squeaking.

Today, she decided to run in the opposite direction. There were more houses along this route, and she'd pass through the tiny town if she went far enough before turning back.

She was into what she estimated was her third kilometer, settling into a steady pace that allowed for her more laboured breathing, when she heard the dog barking. She was approaching a farmhouse set far back from the roadway. Its mailbox looked to be made entirely of rust. She crossed to the other side of the road. The dog got louder as she drew nearer, but she couldn't see it. She hoped it was chained up. June didn't care for dogs. She got nervous around them, just like with children. Like they could see into her mind, like she couldn't be trusted, when really, it was they who were untrustworthy.

Then she saw it, a mangy black-and-white farm dog, not anything like the tiny, manicured specimens on Vancouver's streets. He began to trot to the end of the long driveway, his barks growing in intensity. June kept running. Turning around seemed like a bad idea, because it would show fear. The best thing to do might be to keep going, like a car. Dogs chased cars, but they gave up when they didn't catch them. Then again, June was no car. She could see his teeth. She imagined the dog at her heels, sinking those teeth into the meat of her calf.

She ran faster and faster as she approached the farmhouse, pumping her arms, her stride lengthening from jogging to running to sprinting, too terrified to slow down. The invisible hand pressed into her chest and she took great gasping breaths. In spite of her discomfort and fear, June found herself perversely enjoying the burst of speed, sweat running down her face and the hot wind pushing it back into her ears. Her lips were salt. The dog stood at

the end of the drive as she ran past, barking and snarling, but did not cross the road.

June kept her pace until she was sure she was far enough away. She could still hear the dog, but it sounded more distant, less interested now. As she slowed, she realized that she'd eventually have to turn around and go back the same way. Fields of yellow canola blazed around her, broken only by the grey ribbon of road that lay ahead and behind. Rapeseed, they used to call it. She was thirsty. She'd need to stop soon to budget her energy for the trip back. June turned her head to look back at how far she'd come.

As she looked over her right shoulder, something just above her right hipbone opened up into a blossom of electric pain. A searing sensation that made her momentarily wonder if she'd been shot. It threw her balance off. Her foot came down and rolled inwards on itself, sending the twist up her leg and registering the unmistakable popping sensation of a bad sprain. Her weight pitched forward and she barely had time to whip her head back around to watch the gravel shoulder rising to meet her face and then she put her hands up and slid into it.

June lay on the side of the road. The gravel stung her face and hands. Her ankle throbbed. The damn dog was still barking, and she blamed herself for looking back. And then the pain in her side took over again, a malignant blinding sun that burned through the dark clouds of everything else, and she knew there had to be more to it than just turning around. Something was wrong. The view through her tears of the gravel and the yellow canola and the relentless blue sky turned lacy and grey. She closed her eyes.

June woke in a darkened room that she instantly knew was part of a hospital. She had a mask over her face and tried to speak. A young man she didn't recognize pulled it off her face. Am I okay, she asked him, and he laughed a little. I'm supposed to ask you that, he said.

A surgeon came in and told June she had a sprained ankle, some cuts and bruises, and an ovarian cyst so large it had robbed its host of blood and oxygen. Picture a rotten fruit, said the surgeon, cupping her hands. It becomes so heavy on the branch that it drags it down and twists it. It must have been very painful. We had to remove it, she said. The ovary I mean.

The young man was there to watch June until she was well enough to go back to a regular ward. He sat at the end of the bed and read a book, looking up occasionally to remind June to breathe deeply. When some time had passed and she could speak again, she asked for water. The young man, whose name was Marcus, fed her ice chips on the end of a tongue depressor. They were the most delicious things she had ever tasted. He picked up his book. It was called Salt. He asked June to let him know when she felt well enough to go upstairs. She imagined her family, her husband, phone calls, her worried sister. She decided to stay in that cool white room for as long as they'd let her.