

Damselfly

a novel



Chandra Prasad

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ONE

IF YOU'VE NEVER HELD A FAKE EYE IN YOUR HAND, I'LL tell you what it looks like. It's made of glass and feels cool and heavy in your palm, like a big shooter marble or a stone from a cold stream. It's not a perfect circle, but egg-shaped. If you tap it, you'll hear it's hollow inside. The black pupil is painted on, and so is the iris. As for the white part, it's not true white. Tiny squiggles of pink give it a bloodshot look.

I clenched the fake eye in my fist, so hard my hand hurt. This I knew, and nothing else. I had no idea how I'd gotten the eye in the first place, why my clothes were dirty and soaking wet, or what I was standing on. Why was it so green and squishy? Looking around, I didn't know where my old world had gone. The brick, slate, and stone of Drake Rosemont Preparatory Academy were nowhere to be found.

I took a tentative step, then winced. I was aching everywhere. I had to vomit, too, but I didn't think about that as I looked around, mouth open like a dead fish. I was in what looked to be a jungle. The vegetation was thick, lush, impenetrable as a wall. I pushed away vines, mossy branches, and leaves the size of manhole covers. I closed my eyes against prickles and thorns, but when the branches snapped back like clawed hands, I opened them again.

“Mel!” I yelled, tears starting to stream down my face. I felt so confused. So lost. But if I could find Mel, everything would be all right. My best friend would know where we were and what to do.

Desperately, I looked in all directions. What struck me immediately was the violence. Everything seemed to be choking something else: Creepers twisted around brambles, brambles around vines, vines around trees. Every plant vied for space and the thin shafts of light that pushed through the greenery overhead. But there wasn’t enough space for all of them.

“Mel,” I screamed again, my throat scratchy and raw. My brown school oxfords made sucking sounds as I walked. I felt as if I were being pulled down, as if the jungle might consume me.

When my foot landed ankle-deep in mud, I was forced to stop and try to pull myself together. What I needed was some water. I reached for my bottle in a side compartment of my backpack, then realized I wasn’t carrying anything. I had nothing but the clothes I was wearing—and the eye. This fact panicked me even more. I didn’t know how to function without my cell, my iPad, and my laptop. They were as much a part of my everyday life as my toothbrush.

My head started to pound. I took some deep breaths. I tried to think of what Mel or her father, Mr. Sharpe, would do.

They would tell me to look for landmarks.

“Okay, fine,” I said aloud, just to hear my own voice, something human and normal. “Landmarks.”

I looked for exceptional things through the haze of green,

and I found them: a particularly knobby tree, a cluster of red flowers, a huge, stand-alone fern. I tried committing these things to memory. But I'd never been much good at orienting myself—that's what my phone's GPS was for—and my concentration began to trickle away with the sweat that poured off my skin. The truth was, I was too freaked out to concentrate.

It didn't help that dozens of mosquitoes were following me. Swatting did nothing. They bit my hands, face, legs, hair part, and ears—whatever naked skin they could find. I began to scratch the itchy bumps, but stopped when I realized how many cuts and bruises I had. The blood that streamed down my shins incited a new wave of dread.

What the hell happened to me?

"If you can't find landmarks, then at least walk in the same direction," I said aloud, my voice quavering. But which way? For the life of me, I couldn't remember Mr. Sharpe's advice on telling direction without a compass. Something about true north and the length of shadows? Something about where moss grows on trees?

"Damn it, Mel. Where are you?" I desperately needed her to make things right.

Suddenly, I tasted vomit, acid-sour on my tongue. It came up fast, hot, and wretched, a torrent that washed away my shock. As I wiped my mouth, it finally hit me what had happened: Our plane had crashed. I began to remember details: where I'd been sitting in the cabin, where my teammates had been sitting, how I'd been reading some tabloid and listening to

music. I must have drifted off—we'd been in the air for hours—and didn't remember going down. I must have blacked out the screams, the terror, the frantic voice of our pilot on the intercom. That was the only explanation. And now I was on the ground, lost in a jungle, my teammates and friends nowhere in sight. Maybe they were injured. Maybe they were dead.

My last iota of courage vanished. I crumpled to the ground and covered my face, a feeble attempt to block out both the mosquitoes and my own fear. I'm not sure how long I stayed like that—ten minutes, maybe twenty. When I finally opened my eyes again, I was numb. Though I was sixteen, I felt younger—*younger and helpless*. What got me back on my feet, finally, was a glimpse of the landscape ahead. The packed greenery thinned a little, giving way to trees. Enormous trees—the biggest I'd ever seen. I dusted off my filthy skirt and walked toward them.

Up close, they were almost too massive to be believed. I'd never seen redwoods before, but these must have been similar—enormous and imposing, like a tribe of giants. One had a trunk so thick, six or seven Drake Rosemont students could have stood in a circle, hand in hand, and still not have reached around. The tree's massive roots poked up from the jungle floor and lay like long, sinuous snakes. I ran my hand against the rough bark of the trunk. I'd always liked trees: how they lived so long, how their roots sank deep into the ground, stabilizing them, giving them strength. I rested my head against the trunk. Soon, drops of rain began to fall. I was grateful for those drops, because the mosquitoes finally left me alone. I was grateful until the drops

turned into a crashing wave of water, the weight of it shocking and scary. Even under the branches of the giant tree, I was pounded. Droplets as big as robins' eggs pelted my skin. I'd never felt so vulnerable and alone.

Minutes passed—long, drenching minutes. I must have cried, but my tears meant nothing. The rain washed them away as soon as they appeared. I began to go numb again. Maybe that was better. Better to believe this wasn't happening.

When I saw her, I didn't believe it at first. I thought I was hallucinating. It would have been easy to conjure things through the blur of water. But the longer I stared, the more certain I was that she was real. Her Drake Rosemont blouse was untucked as usual. Her lank blond hair hung soggily down her back. Her stiff, awkward stance was instantly recognizable.

I ran, screaming her name. When I reached her, I grabbed on for dear life. Mel let out a wild screech and wrapped me in her arms, squeezing me hard. We both cried out in relief.

"Are you all right?" she demanded.

"I don't know. I think so . . ."

I detached myself long enough to catch a glimpse of gashes on her legs and a deep, bloody gouge on her chin. I touched it gently.

"Thank god you're alive, Sam," she said. Even now, under dire circumstances, her tone was the same: clipped and monotone. People always assumed she was cold or unfeeling. They were wrong.

"Have you seen the others?" I asked.

“No one. You’re the first.”

Filled with relief, I gave her another hug. Seeing Mel meant recovering hope. She’d take charge. She’d get us through this—somehow.

We huddled under a tree and waited out the sheets of water that fell one after another. At last, the downpour subsided. Mel got down to business immediately. She was still wearing her backpack, and showed me what it contained—some books and notepads. But no technology. No phone. As we double-checked zippered pockets, she told me what she remembered of the flight: After the layover in Honolulu, the pilot had said we would have to stop again. He’d called it “a precautionary measure.”

“We were all there when we boarded again—you, me, Rittika and Rish, Jeremiah, Chester, Ming, Avery, Warren, Betty, Anne Marie . . .” she said.

“And Pablo,” I added.

“Yeah, Pablo was there. The pilot said everything was all right, that there was no mechanical problem.”

“Well, obviously there was.”

Mel bit down on her lip. Her lips were always chapped. The Sharpe sisters didn’t believe in ChapStick, or any beauty supplies, for that matter.

“I wonder if Coach Coifman knows yet,” she mused.

“I still can’t believe she wasn’t on the plane.”

“Me neither.”

“And Mr. Singh—I would have thought he would’ve come.”

Rish and Rittika’s father, Mr. Singh, was the sponsor of our

teams, that is, Drake Rosemont's boys' and girls' fencing teams. He paid for everything: our equipment, uniforms, and travel expenses. We'd come to expect extravagance from Mr. Singh—he was a billionaire, after all—but he'd outdone himself this time. Normally, we flew coach, but for this tournament in Japan, he'd offered our teams the use of his private jet and his own personal pilot. It had been unbelievable, like a dream, that sleek silver jet with leather seats that reclined into beds. Before Drake Rosemont, I'd never even been on a plane. And now I was traveling like a celebrity.

We'd flown out of Logan International Airport in Boston, about an hour from Drake Rosemont. Our final destination was Haneda Airport in Tokyo. Coach Coifman was supposed to be traveling with us, but a sudden family emergency meant she'd arrive twenty-four hours after we landed. Everyone thought our headmaster would cancel the trip—or at least reschedule the flight so that we'd have an adult chaperone. But he'd surprised us by giving the green light.

"I'm letting you go under one condition," he'd told us. "I expect you to be on your best behavior, like the responsible young men and women that I know you are."

I bet that right about now, he regretted his decision.

"Do you think the pilot made it?" Mel asked me.

"I don't know. But I don't have a good feeling."

"Why?"

"You remember how you thought one of his eyes was fake?"

"Yeah?"