

Notes from the Field Winner
Cassandra Kircher

On Not Marrying a Ranger

When I wake in the tent it's completely dark. Outside is a silence that means no wind, no rain. Inside I am floating, swaddled in the same blue sleeping bag I used in the backcountry when I was a ranger. Over me the tent's dome feels smooth and taut, but more flexible than the A-frame roof of the backpacking tent I used before my marriage. I can hear my daughters breathing beside me. We are triplets, soaking up what we need.

What I should feel is contentment, the magic humans sometimes experience when our minds intersect with our bodies and both are at peace. What I feel instead is the hum of my own radar, the nag we feel when we have lost something that we just had within reach. Even before groping in the tent and sinking my hand into the softness of Kevin's sleeping bag, I suspect that he's gone, and when I slip on my boots and fleece jacket and unzip the two tent doors, my stomach feels hollow.

Outside, the stars are scattered over the universe like salt. The moon is a shy one, but I can still make out the campsite—the long picnic table with no Kevin priming the stove, the soggy fire pit with no Kevin arranging the kindling, the collapsible camp chair with no Kevin lounging about. Hide-and-seek, I think without humor. I'm not used to my husband disappearing into the night.