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"Chances"

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Chances

ROBERT CORDING

Chances are . . . I remember
a state policeman beginning. I don't remember
the odds, only how much depended

on what lay beyond our control,
a Hasidic girl from Brooklyn missing, lost
during a school trip

in our local northeast Connecticut woods.
Volunteers, we were told she was wearing
a long blue skirt, a windbreaker
that might keep her warm —

if she was still alive,
I couldn't keep from thinking.

Spring was cold and wet that year
and a rainstorm was taking shape
as the first day darkened.

I thought of her parents more than the girl.
That question they must have asked of themselves:
What can we do to do something?

How could they keep from picturing the terror
that could be happening, even then, to her?

Could they be sure they had loved her enough?

* * *

On the second day: six hundred Hasidim
arrived from New York, Boston, Montreal.
They brought truckloads of kosher food.
They prayed.

Helicopters blew over the tops of pines.

In the woods, one thousand volunteers
called the girl's name as if we were calling
our own child to come in.

The more we called, the more
we heard the wind in the trees, the distance
between us and the girl growing.

How could she be lost? her parents kept asking.

They'd watched their child
wave to them from a bus window
just the day before.

Now her Xeroxed face was taped
in every restaurant window.

I crisscrossed the woods with the others.
We kept looking for some sign.

Whenever the sun broke through,
we said, with forced conviction,
that chances were good we'd find her.

Chances

ROBERT COLEMAN

I kept seeing the girl,
then, in my mind, my own children,
as if part of me was looking for
the small child they had been,

still mine, still protected,
not already wandering in the half-tragic,
half-comic teenage years

of discovering how anything can happen,
but rarely in the way they had wanted.

Everywhere, walls of rhododendrons,
thickets of wiry brush. No footprints in the mud,

my own feet mired with the weight
of what I had always known
but mostly could forget: that some horror
is happening somewhere every minute of the day.

* * *

On the third day, a light rain.
We affected the expression of good cheer.
Someone was always calling on Hope,
someone was always shaking their head
and saying, *our chances were running out.*

And then, under an ash tree, the shadow of a girl
 slowly becoming the girl in the blue skirt,
 as if, this time, the woods were giving her back.

Cold, frightened, okay, she waved
 as if she had been expecting us all this time.

She let us lift her, exhausted,
 she said from traveling farther
 than she had ever before.

That night on the local stations:
 the girl coming out of the woods over and over,
 ringed by Hasidim dancing and singing,
 nothing held in reserve for a better day.

And her parents, draped over her, sobbing,
 their joy complicated with the intricacies of fear.

I remember how I wiped the tears
 from my eyes, then moved toward my car,
 as if I could simply go home now

to my family — which I did, still stunned
 by my hunger for light, my instinctive knowledge

of the dark; by what did not happen
 and what did, all efforts ending in those
 two possible chances.