

Changes

I could describe it all in detail, I suppose. How well the place was set up, almost as if he'd anticipated this particular set of events. It was as perfect a reply as you could hope for against the new rules. Until it wasn't.

But I don't really want to, because it didn't save us when the time came. I guess just maybe the highlights, because it *was* a haven for a while. Long enough for me to get to know them both, and long enough for Dave to die.

Dave told me he'd put enough firewood away for five years, prior to this new wrinkle, but he figured he had enough for this one winter and change now. He was running two different wood-stoves inside the house for heat, and there was a wood-fired cooking stove in the kitchen that had to be kept going pretty much all the time as well, because it took so long to cook anything raw. We had to clear live embers out of them regularly to make room for more fuel, so we'd scrape them out into metal buckets, and put the buckets on brick pads in whatever room needed heating, until they cooled and we could dump them out in the snow.

Food was canned stuff and dried goods that had to steep in hot water for hours, out of a well-stocked basement, plus whatever Dave could hunt with his bow, or me a little later on after he taught me to shoot. Anything we got had to be smoked or dried, to be re-heated later. He had a pretty well disguised tree stand outside the inner fence, which had some supplies in it too. Not a lot, a couple of go bags and some bottled water, but it was near a deer trail heading off down the valley. In retrospect, I can see he knew the score, even then.

Water was from a cistern up the hill from the house, which had a rain-recovery system attached to it, but was mostly fed during the winter by a hand-crank well pump, or melt-off. Dave's favorite phrase in those days was, "Cold? Go fill the cistern, Jake".

Those were the basics. I had my own room, but when it got really cold, we all slept on mats in the living room, next to the sad excuse for a fire in the wood-stove.

There was more, but even as I re-read this, I realize I should've focused on the people, not the place.

Brin didn't like me. I think she didn't like the *idea* of me, so I didn't get a fair shake out of the gate, and nothing I did helped. It was odd that it didn't change how I felt about her, even though she was nothing but cold to me. I got some insight into that later, but that's for...later, I guess. That initial time passed with not a lot of interaction between us. She avoided me in what little ways she could. When she couldn't, I could tell she was leaning pretty heavily on the idea that "if I can't see you, you can't see me", as ridiculous as that was.

Dave was a great teacher, though he was pretty good at making me feel like I wasn't a very apt pupil. If I got something right, he would just nod thoughtfully, as though I had done something he hadn't expected. If I failed at something, he would nod thoughtfully, as though I had done exactly what he expected. At first, it was like living with a relatively benign version of my dad, but as I got to know him, his tells became apparent, and I could extract a modicum of satisfaction from the inclination of the nod. Ends on chin up? Needs work. Chin down? Good job, Jake.

But the increased coughing also told a story as the days passed, and he began to slow down a bit, too. Him letting me into this little world began to make sense, as well as that desperation I'd seen

for a second or two on the first day. It didn't take that long for the picture to be made clear to me, but we were a couple of months in before he decided to spell it out.

We were out hunting, probably a half-mile out beyond the inner fence. I'd just downed a doe, a small one, but a perfect shot from about twenty yards. We could hear the snow beginning to melt around us as winter started to pass into that brief holding pattern between seasons. I looked to him for the chin down, but his eyes were far away. I started toward the sled, intent on loading the carcass, but he stopped me.

"Hang on, Jake."

A coughing fit took him then, and I waited it out, slinging the bow across my back and adjusting the quiver as it finally passed. He looked tired and pale when our eyes met, but his gaze was firm.

"You know what's coming. I can tell."

I didn't hesitate. I nodded.

"Will you take care of her?"

I nodded again.

He shook his head, and there were constellations of emotion in his expression.

"No, I need to hear you say it."

"I will take care of her."

Nod. Chin down. He flipped his hand outward.

"Go."

I grabbed the leads for the sled, and went to load the deer.

I think that was the most content I'd ever been up to that point in my life. But I was also aware that what was true right then was ending. The achievement and impending loss seemed to have little power over me, though. I did what mattered in the now, and just that was enough.

Until, like so many things, it wasn't.

We made it into early spring, and the snow was gone. Everything living around was clad in that bright green of new leaves and virgin grass. We only ran a single wood-stove at night, and I did everything. Dave was a shell, unable to move more than a few paces under his own power, and the cough was the sound-track of our existence, wet and labored.

Brin would spend long hours with him, but not when I was present, so I couldn't tell you what their time together held for either of them. Her rejection of me was uninterrupted. He tried a few times to make excuses for her in the beginning, while he was still a participant, but after a while, I told him he didn't need to. He seemed relieved, and stopped.

I was constantly on the move. Brin did a fair amount in the house, but, as I said, Dave was a great teacher, and I had all the motivation I needed to learn. I was lean, and worked sixteen to eighteen hour days keeping our little enclave running. Part of it was how I felt about the two of them, part was being grateful for a place to belong, and part was to confront the challenge of it. Yes, more of that triune motif for you, reader. I'm not unaware.

Dave passed while I was out hunting one morning. It was a gorgeous day, but nothing went right. I had both a rabbit, and a big buck dead to rights, but both times something ruined the shot. I don't know what, a sound or movement not mine, but each startled at the last possible instant, and I came away with nothing. I gave up at mid-day, and trudged back to the house.

I knew, before I even made it to the front steps. Couldn't tell you how, I just did. I stopped, and just looked at the living room window, shrouded in the gloom of the porch enclosure. The loss felt like an internal forest fire, and I couldn't move for quite a while. As I burned, I remembered how little I cared when my dad passed, and that was more fuel. I didn't cry, or cry out, but inside I was a white-hot scream.

Then it slowly diminished, and I came back to myself. My muscles unlocked, and I was able to move forward again, but there seemed a slight taste of ash in my mouth.

I climbed the steps, and passed through the screen door, sticking out a heel to keep it from banging shut behind me. It was muscle memory from a thousand entries, and this spoke of home more than my own home had ever had. I crossed the porch, and went into the living room, where Brin sat next to the sofa, holding her father's hand in silence. I stood just within the doorway.

"I'm sorry, Brin." I think it was the first time I'd spoken her name aloud.

She didn't reply, at least, not right away. When she finally did, it came as no surprise to me.

"You can go, now."

I shrugged off the bow, quiver, and my pack, and then sat down in the chair in front of the window facing her. I ran a hand through my hair, now long, lank, and unwashed, and blew a breath out through puffed cheeks.

"You hate me that much?" I asked.

"I don't know you to hate you."

More silence between us. I broke it.

"That's true. And it's not true. What is it? That he chose for you? Or that he had to?"

She didn't move or respond, but I could tell I'd hit it, or at least part of it. I could almost see her vibrating. I just waited.

"Just go. Please."

"I can't."

She cried then, for a while. It was quiet and reserved, like her, and I continued to wait. I didn't have anything to offer that she would want, anyway. But I would not leave her.

I put my head in my hands, and waited to see what she would do.

We sat there in silence, until the light dimmed toward late afternoon, and the fires in the stoves burned down to tiny embers. I think we both knew that the path forward wavered in front of us, like a heat shimmer. What would it be? My intent was set. My love for Dave, and my unrequited love for her made my choice straightforward.

She was the unknown. Her possible choices were many, and I could do nothing until she did something, and yet one of her choices could be to do nothing. The idea made me want to scream, or to disappear, or....

She stood, and left the room, heading up the stairs.

I sat there for maybe fifteen minutes, toying with angst of it all, but then got up. I rebuilt the fires in the stoves, and turned my mind toward dinner, knowing that we'd missed several steps to our grief, and any meal would come late now.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was her last stand. Would she stay up there? Starve herself, rather than continue to coexist with the interloper her father had chosen to take care of her? My anger and longing were interchangeable, and flitted about within me like agitated fish in a small pond. I

cooked on autopilot, warming jerky and jarred veggies on the anemic heat of the stove. On a whim, I opened the cabinet above the stove. It was the one that most kitchens had, the one that housed the vent above the range hood, and those kitchen bits that were deemed so unnecessary that they were stored somewhere rarely accessed. It was mostly empty, with one grease-covered cook-book, and a couple of bottles of different kinds of vinegar. And, a small jar of bacon bits.

Life brightened, and I grabbed it.

I sprinkled a generous portion on the tepid mess in the skillet, and the most wonderful aroma wafted away, making its sinuous way upward into the rest of the house.

She came down into the kitchen maybe five minutes later.

"Is that bacon?"

"Kind of."

"Are you sharing?"

"My kind of is your kind of."

She didn't say anything for a minute or so, but then looked straight at me in that far-sighted way, no trace of a smile.

"Feed me, Seymour."

I'd seen the movie based on the play, and had hated it. What a waste of time.

Except that one line had stuck. It was lodged in my lexicon, for better or worse, and obviously in hers, as well. Here it was, strung between us now, the tiniest bit of "in common". Not that she could know that.

Yet, it seemed like some small piece of ice between us melted. There was a glacier left still, I could tell. There was nothing warm in her tiny bit of humor. There was only the idea that glaciers moved, and diminished along the way.