

Machete

The kid came back. It was spectacular, and horrific, and I will never be the same. It was almost the end of this story.

In my distressed return to the cave, I'd not retrieved Dave's machete from where I'd left it in the entryway. Hell, I'd forgotten about it, and didn't even see it when I'd come back in, even though I must have almost brushed up against it given the narrow confines of the entry.

I'd let go of Brin, and gone to feed the fire, so I was center stage when a small figure burst out of the entry into the fire-light.

I am alive because I'd stacked fuel for the fire at the back of the cave, and was facing forward to one side as I fed it. The boy crossed the intervening distance in about the same time it took me to realize what was happening, but this time I did not flinch. It was action versus reaction, and all I could see was the narrow metallic shine at the edge of the black paint on the blade as it swung in toward me.

I had some sticks.

I used them to intervene against the inbound sharp edge, and extended my reach, hoping to at least bleed inertia away if the wood wasn't enough to stop the swing.

It wasn't, but it slowed it enough for me to twist out of the way, bringing one arm out of the path of the cutting edge by a very small margin. I pivoted, and slammed both fists now clutching smaller sticks down on the boy's head as his inertia carried him along, across the fire pit.

I dream about what happened next quite often, and it never diminishes. It's not like my waking memory of it, which has faded, and lost some of its impact on me. The dreams stay vivid, and I have to pay all over again, each time.

The boy had swung at me two-handed, but as he descended towards the floor, his hands separated, the arm holding the machete extending out, while the other tucked in like the rest of him, and he hit the floor in a single roll. It was balletic, utterly mesmerizing, and completely at odds with any expectation I might have of how a boy that young could move. I couldn't tell you if it was luck, or skill, or something else entirely. He came up against the back wall, and leapt to his feet, all without losing grip on the weapon. He was headed back towards me as soon as he'd turned.

I'd left the bow propped against the wall near the entrance, and might have been miles away for all it would help me. I had no knife, and nothing else was nearby, except the fire.

As he rushed back at me, I bent, lifting one of the fire-ring stones with both hands. It was quite warm, and my hands informed me that there was a price to pay here too. I straightened, getting a little back-swing in the movement before I pitched it at him just as he started his next swing.

I find myself wanting to soften this as well. Say it was a close thing, which it was, or say I won again, which strictly speaking I did, and leave it that. Maybe I should. Yeah, maybe so.

But....

Who am I writing this for? You, reader? Or me? If it's for you, then why bother? I don't know you, or if you even exist. These pages so far could be lost, or burned for warmth, or mulch on some forest floor next to my bones. Unseen, unread, and irrelevant. So why not.

The stone and the boy closed, and it was like he couldn't see it. There was no graceful duck of the head as the blade travelled its arc toward me. That's all it would have taken, something nowhere

near as complex as what he'd done previously. It was as if all he could see was me, and his face carried nothing in it except his hatred of me.

He didn't, and the stone hit him edge-on in the face. Blood exploded out behind the stone in a crimson halo, and his head ceased forward motion, his momentum carrying his feet forward and temporarily upward as physics played its part. The swing that would have probably disemboweled me whipped in too early, the blade passing within inches of my rib-cage as his hands released it. It clattered off of the cave wall and fell to the floor.

The stone flipped away, revealing the devastated mess of his face, and his body came to rest, feet in the fire pit. The stone came to rest as well, and I just stared as moments ticked out. It seemed like silence at first, but then I could hear Brin repeating my name in the background, a question mark apparent after each iteration, like an interrogative multiplier of the night in the tree stand.

"Jake? Jake?"

"I--."

I had to swallow, and I couldn't take my eyes off of the body on the floor. Because that's what it was, just a body, the kid inside it now gone. Her mounting distress brought me back, finally. I still had trouble at first.

"I--. I'm...ok."

I was so not ok.

"What's happening?" She hadn't moved from where she'd been, but she'd clasped her arms around herself, and was rocking slightly in panic. "Tell me! You said you would!"

I shoved it all down into the black water below me, hoping it would drown, but knowing it wouldn't. I responded as evenly as I could manage.

"The kid came back. He tried to kill me, but I...he...."

I took a moment before going on to kick the boy's legs aside, as his shoes and pant legs were smoking from exposure to the fire. The motion helped focus me, despite the awful prompt necessitating it.

"I'm still here, Brin. This is pretty bad, though. Not going to lie."

"He's dead?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I need to get him out of here, ok?"

She nodded, and looked down at her lap. It was her withdrawing, I could tell, but all I could see right then inside was the halo of blood in the air, and the need to escape the evidence lying in front of me. We didn't speak again for a time while I dragged the body out, and laid it with the others near the edge of the water. My shoulder raged, but somehow it didn't matter. It felt like moon-lit penance. I recovered what arrows were still viable out of habit, and then returned to the cave.

Brin had added fuel to the fire before returning to her sleeping bag at some point, so it was one less thing for me to do. I rolled out my bag, and lay down. She sat on hers cross-legged, and her inscrutable expression and long stare had returned, so it was surprising when she spoke after a minute or so.

"You were right, again."

"About what?"

"We can't stay here."

I sighed.

"No."

"Where do we go?"

"I'm open to any ideas." Then I could feel exhaustion washing over me all at once. The adrenalin was long spent, and the pain seemed willing to withdraw a little if sleep was on the table. "I'm fading, Brin. Can I have a couple of hours?"

"Um, yeah. It can wait. I'm wide awake, anyway."

At least, I think that's what she said. I was gone.