

## Look For Something More

Man, was I wrong.

The whole story was just another version of a family gone awry. It wasn't *exactly* the same as mine, but it shared enough elements to make it almost a disappointment. I suppose I was expecting a more grand and angst-ridden tragedy, and realized I'd assigned to Dave and Brin a status based on situational misconception, where Dave was my savior, and Brin was the princess in the castle, awaiting rescue.

Grant, the grandfather, had been a prick like my own father, and Dave had just taken it in his youth, much like me. He learned and did what he was told to, also like me. He'd lost his mother, earlier than I had, but, c'mon. He and Dave were both misanthropes. Check. The only real difference I could see was Grant and Dave had found a single common ground, hunting. I'd no such connection to my father.

But, Dave had bristled against his father's assholic tendencies (pretty sure that isn't a term, but should be) in his late teens, and left home, and built a life apart. My dad did me the favor of dying, so I didn't have to make that choice, it just happened.

Dave met Brin's mom, and they made a family, and never looked back.

Brin said it exactly like that, the last bit.

"...never looked back."

I wondered for the first time whether she really knew herself, let alone her father. All we do is look back. Those who had such power over us can't be ignored, even when they are gone. We think we can forget, but it's just another lie we tell ourselves. And, what did Dave ultimately return to? I must have been lost in this, because she had to prompt me out of it.

"Jake?"

"Sorry. I'm listening."

"Really? What did I just say?"

I took the easy way out. Now wasn't the time to challenge anyone's self-perception. Mine included.

"Never looked back."

She huffed.

"Ok, that was several sentences ago, but close enough. What do you think?"

I shrugged.

"I don't think the story changes the choice, does it? You still want to go. I don't have anything better. We go."

She looked like many questions waited on the horizon, but ultimately didn't ask them. She just agreed.

"Ok."

We slept, and then we left.

The journey was an exercise in re-orientation. For her, and for me.

She followed behind the sled this time, a hand on the back portion of our bundled supplies. She didn't request a place on it, and I didn't offer one. She seemed to have perceived a hint of the shift between us, and adjusted without any commentary.

If you are wondering, I left the bodies where they lay at the water's edge, even the kid. If you are offended, my shoulder says fuck you, and the sled rope, and pretty much everything else.

We headed north up the valley again, looking for a place to cross the river, because that was where we needed to go, though now we were headed on a western diagonal, away from the compound to the east.

We were finally able to ford the river about five miles upstream. It was nice and shallow, but the current was fast, and by the time we reached the other bank, we were both tired, cross, and soaked through. We took an hour to dry out and not talk about it, then set off again.

Another hour of open meadow turned to trees again, but only for a few miles. Then they began to thin, and we arrived at our first sign of human intervention, in the form of what I was pretty confident was a fire-break. After that, it was follow one path to another more developed than the last, until we hit actual pavement, in the form of a county two-lane running roughly north-south through low, forested hills.

We turned north along it, and within a quarter-mile, we got a huge piece of good luck, in the form of an abandoned service vehicle, covered in dust. It sat in the shade of tall trees overhanging a gravel turn-out adjacent to the road.

It was basically a pick-up truck, with one of those utility beds with outward-facing compartments on both sides, and a narrow, open section in the middle. Most of the compartment doors were open, and the space behind empty, but the game-changer was under a tarp in the middle section. It was a wheel-barrow, one of those plastic ones with the big wheels and a deep barrow. One wheel was off, and sitting inside it. I couldn't fathom why it was still there, given the rest of the truck had been picked clean, but who was I to question good fortune. I folded the tarp and tossed it onto the sled, then pulled the wheel-barrow out.

I'd begun to narrate what I saw, as well as terrain concerns for Brin shortly after we'd left the cave, and pretty soon it became a sort of a sub-process that only rose to higher thought when she'd respond, or ask a question. I was doing it as I dug around in the detritus in the truck bed. I found a short clipping of solid copper wire that looked about the right gauge, and used it to replace the missing cotter-pin that held the wheel in place. I bent both ends so it wouldn't fall out, and then transferred all our stuff to the wheel-barrow.

I will have to admit to a worsening of my attitude up to that point. The pain in my shoulder, the constant battle against friction and the grinding sound of the sled runners on whatever surface I was dragging them over, and the warmth of the day had really put me in a bad mood. I could tell Brin felt it, because she responded to my commentary less and less.

As soon as I began to pull the wheel-barrow, and felt the ease of movement, and heard the quiet whir of the rubber treads against the gravel, I felt a deep relief sweep through me. A breeze had sprung up, as well.

I tell you, reader, sometimes it's the tiny hallelujah that makes all the difference. Brin must have sensed the sea-change in me.

"I can help pull now."

It was true, I realized. The sled had only had the one rope, but the handle on the wheel-barrow was wide enough for two to grasp, walking side by side. She'd obviously done a tactile inspection of it while I was fixing the wheel.

She made her way around it, and joined me at the front before I could even respond.

We both pulled together.

"Step up onto the asphalt...now."

She incorporated the step with an easy grace, and then we were walking with little effort, the tires even quieter now, headed loosely north again.

A little time passed, and then we drifted into a conversation. Not one out of necessity, or high emotional drama. It was a normal one, about next to nothing.

She was still pretty formal at first, and didn't laugh at any of my jokes, but I did get a few smiles. We talked about likes, dislikes, and other meaningless stuff. It was almost surreal, because the wall she'd put between us, sacrosanct except under extreme duress up to this point, was now almost all the way down. The glacier was mostly gone.

As the miles spooled out behind us, and the sun floated down along its westward decline, the cowardly and deferent parts of me reveled in her attention. The idea that things hoped for were now being released was like a drug, only growing my desire as she relaxed.

But the angry part stayed aloof, and kept me from becoming an utter fool. As captivating as she was, she did not have my full attention, and so we survived what came next.

I heard rather than saw the projectile that whispered past my left ear and tugged at the greasy curls of my hair on its way onward, as the sound of a bow-string released echoed across the roadway.

A lot happened. I'm struggling to tell it well, at least in my own mind, because though I am writing this down, I have little experience with writing. I have no idea whether I am any good at it. I guess that's for you to evaluate. I mean, I refer to you as "reader", but only because someone else I read a lot did that, and we are what we eat, right? Particularly neophytes like me.

The external stuff was pretty straightforward, and I'll get to that in just a sec.

It was the internal part that was...is...hard to articulate.

You've probably read in multiple narratives how "time slowed, as...."? Yeah, over-used, and lazy, which is probably why I reached for that first. But time didn't really slow in that moment. I kind of...sped up. No, I ignited. Yeah, that works way better. My rage caught fire, and I was moving before I even realized I was, and I was moving *fast*. I don't know if that's any clearer, but it makes sense to me, and it's not like you paid me for this intellectual property, anyway.

A figure, partially occluded by a tall oak just uphill of the opposite side of the road was fumbling out another arrow, trying to fit it as I closed the distance. I didn't scream a warning for Brin, or attempt to hide or cover her, and my own bow merely bounced across my back as I sprinted toward our attacker, forgotten. There was no fear in me, only a tidal rush of anger.

It was another boy, though this one was on the cusp of manhood, maybe sixteen or seventeen. He was gaunt, and filthy, and I could see the terror in his eyes as he started to pull for a shot he'd never get the chance to let fly. I soared across the drainage ditch at the roadside, and crossed the last few feet between us.

I obliterated him.

I don't know how else to say it. It was my fists, and my boots, and all the lines I'd already crossed. And I did it without saying a word. No screams, no cries of rage, no nothing. It was just fury, and then its instant and almost clinical departure once the act was accomplished.

I think that's the worst part. Not what I did. Hell, he tried to kill me. I'm going to guess to get to Brin and all our stuff too. No, the worst part was, I could now do this, and be fine with it. I could look at his misshapen body, and the blood bright in the late-afternoon sun, and count it as a win, and walk calmly back to the wheel-barrow.

Hmm. I guess it *was* foreshadowing, after all.

Brin waited, and to her credit, she hadn't said anything either, until she heard my footsteps approaching on the asphalt.

"Jake?"

"Yes. "

She didn't ask the question I thought she would ask.

"Are we ok?"

"Yes."

We both grasped the handle, and continued north in silence.