

False Flags

The open spread of sky, glittering faintly in the deepening east and still a smoldering ember in the west, brushes the world below in faint shadows of lilac. The sun, already beneath the horizon but reluctant, will continue to push its glow for the next hour. Though noticeably cooler than the needling heat of mid-afternoon, the coming night should not cool too noticeably this late into spring. And, too, when the waxing moon finally deigns to raise itself above the craggy skyline of the eastern forest, there will be sufficient light to keep a few extra degrees circulating. It is Charles Bickell's perfectly realized moment. His slice of the world without need for poetry or music, a place where he can forget himself, or find himself, or perhaps just distinguish between the two.

He stands upon the southern rim of the crater, little more than a third of the way up the mountain. Gouged into the slope by the stars untold millennia before, the bowl's northern rim now lies buried beneath the skree, soil and roots which time has drawn downward, nearly filling the crater. In fact, were it not for the map, and its obsessive attention to landmark and place names, Bickell would have thought this place simply a strangely rounded plateau, just slightly depressed from where he stands. Another thousand years and the bowl will fill, rising the twenty meters to mesh with the southern rim. Another thousand and the plateau will be erased, little more than a brief alteration in the generally consistent angle of the mountainside. Another thousand, and not even that. Just smooth slope and fresh soil where Bickell now stands, at the edge of a fading scar.

Of course, it won't be so simple. He knows, even as he stares at this future image, that more than simple gravity and uniform erosion are at play. A variety of rocks and runoff patterns, occasional seismic shudders and leaps, plus any of the unaccountable disturbances the unknown universe may have in store, all conspire to illuminate his smooth-sloped vision as a fantasy. No matter. Just the brain exercising itself, testing its hemispheres together. Besides, he reminds himself, look at what you've got here, right now! Just look!

Blinking briefly, rapidly, to dispel his overlaid images and receive this present thing, he breathes deeply into his belly button, just like he'd read, and feels the tender prickle of its circulation across his skin. The gentle tingle passes and he exhales, nearly a sigh, contented relief and tired melancholy co-mingling in his breath. His thumbs slip under the straps of his pack, and he gives an abbreviated half-hop to bring its weight a bit higher on his back. The adjustment unfortunately catches his wetgear coat and bunches it up in the hollow of his spine. Letting go of the straps, he reaches behind, grabs the coat hem and gives a tight downward tug, which movement also returns his pack to its initial position. Alright, whatever. And he steps forward, turning his foot inward to side-step down into the crater. *Journey of a thousand miles*, he nearly mutters aloud.

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The descent had proven misleading, with hidden pits, sudden drop-offs, and a deepening twilight to confuse both distance and definition. The lilac shadows of earlier had deepened into a dense, water colored plum. More than once Bickell had found himself unable to progress and forced either back up the slope or along its curve. By the time he'd reached the comparatively level floor of the crater, night had truly fallen. He is still standing where he stopped, leaning against the trunk of an old stalwart pine, staring downward.

"Why didn't you wait until morning?" Her question is asked with a shrillness of disbelief, of astonishment at his stupidity. The waitress sweeps past, glancing at their coffee mugs, and is gone.

"I don't know," he sighs. But the defeat in his own voice pricks him and he decides to continue more firmly. "I was excited. The slope looked easy enough—"

"In the failing light," she points out.

"—and I wanted to get down there. Set camp." His voice softens on these final words, and he knows he again sounds forlorn and pathetic. He offers the only statement he feels can't be attacked. "I wanted to wake up there."

"Fuck!" she laughs. "You had a week to wake up there! What the fuck'd it matter so much to make you go bumbling down there in the *dark*?"

He has his answer. Even she can't refute it. But her laugh, her sudden swearing, her goddamn *condescension*, push entirely different words out of him. "What do you care? Why does what happened to me piss you off? *I'm* not angry about it. It's funny!"

"I'm not pissed."

"Well, you're not superior, either." He immediately recognizes that this sounds like a non-sequitor, but he likes it, so he adds, "You didn't hike out there. You didn't try yourself and your choices against happenstance and potentially violent nature. You just stayed here, apparently thinking of ways to make me feel shitty about it."

"I was worrying about you."

"You're a fucking liar."

Ah, he shouldn't say that, and he knows he never will. No matter how satisfying, or the evil blackness she spits at him, he would never say something so directly angry to her. Besides, he needs to get this pack off, dig out his headlamp, and find a decent place to stake the tent.

The headlamp strapped securely and comfortably, he taps it on, slapping back the darkness and momentarily blinding himself. The cold blue light strips all possible colors from the scene, leaving him standing amongst scored, veined pillars of ice-trunks. The base of each blue-washed tree seems to burst up through a crystalline layer of pine needles, the illusion of which is unmasked only by the flatness of the light. No twinkles, no sharp glints. The scene before him

looks dead, or dying, like the dusty blue of television cadavers. A thin dismay sprouts beneath his collarbone, but it is easily swallowed. Don't judge it, Bickell; what goes around comes around. You don't want people condescending to your corpse someday. And it's just lighting! Smoke and mirrors! Shit, not even that.

He hefts his pack and moves away from the steadfast pine to find a suitable patch for camp.

Charles awakes instantly, his eyes clicking open as though unlocked. There is a faint luminosity seeping through the tent, enough to see his pack and boots, as well as the single pole in the center of the space. He doesn't hear anything outside aside from the fuzzy murmurings of pine tops in a light breeze; no padding feet, no yips or howls in the distance, no owls calling or rodents scrambling for cover. Was I dreaming something? No, his most recent memory is shucking his boots and sliding into his bag. So nothing woke me? Outside is calm, inside is silent, and he is awake as though prodded.

The treetops whisper briefly louder, and a shower of needles ticks against the tent walls like a quiet burst of radio static. Slipping out of his bag, he crawls to the tent flap, unzipping it enough to poke his head through, and looks around. Outside is a fantasy.

Mist must have risen in the night and, re-condensing, fallen back on the duff and sticks and leaves. Great beads and pearls glisten in the moonlight. Above, in the patches between trees, the moon has cleaned the sky of stars, obscuring their light with its own opaque milkiness. But below, in perfect correlation to the empty patches above, the stars shine on every shrubby leaf, exposed root and otherwise undistinguished swath of ground.

Another muted shush above, another patter of needles, and the slight shift of shadows reveals new gleamings, and silences others, as though the stars ride on waves of susurrating light.

"You know what my name means?" she asks with a mix of poorly feigned pride and indifference. She stretches out in the grass, hands above her head.

"I do," he replies amiably. "You've told me before." No, forget that part. Just: "I do," he replies amiably.

"It means 'star'."

"You've told me before." He smiles and rolls to his stomach, propping his chest with his elbows. "I like it."

She's contented that he remembers and, slightly chiding, says, "Well, I won't remind you again."

"I doubt that," he laughs and reaches to touch her hand, which pulls away.

The stars, unconstellated and shifting, wink and twitter. Bickell smiles back, wishing she was here to share this. She would never share it, though. It would somehow become another rift. If not now, then given time.

Bickell crawls backwards into the tent, nearly knocking the support-pole out, stuffs his boots on, and crawls back out to squat just beyond the flap. The moonshine falls only on the back and side of the tent and, crouched as he is on the dark side, the chill of the surrounding shadow settles on his face, neck, and hands, crawling along his skin and nipping lightly at his nose and knuckles. Taking a deep breath, holding it below his belly button, just like he'd read, he pushes his abdomen's warmth up his neck to his face and down his arms to his hands. The nipping stops, but the crawling continues, almost pleasantly. Exhaling, though, the nipping immediately returns.

Rather than suffocate to keep only marginally warmer, he stands and steps forward into the light, silently apologizing to the stars crushed underfoot. The difference between shadow and light surprises him. He can still feel chillness around him, within reach of his nerves, but it is no longer within their grasp. Bathed in the miracle of sunlight from the other side of the world, he turns his eyes skyward in reverence and commonplace awe. Still a few days from full, the truncated circle of the moon is nevertheless bright enough to overload his peripheral vision. The treetops are removed, as well as the single bright surviving star he had glimpsed before the moon shouted it out.

The dark blotches on its face, craters and scars still unhealed after these long millennia, lie exposed and uncauterized in the heat of the sun. No protective atmosphere, no weathering to smooth the torn edges, not even the comfort of company. The moon's face revealed, the stars flee the heavens, dashing themselves to the forest floor, where surely they don't belong. But better to be seen here than near the purple-bruised fractured-bone of the moon.

Except for that one fleck of light, the one that did not flee. The one star strong enough to stand by and give this battered lump someone to whimper to, no matter how the moon might glare and try to burn its final friend from the sky.

"What did you expect?" she whispers. She draws her knees up defensively and rests her stubborn chin between them, the dirty red of her sweatpants mirrored in the hateful bloodshot of her eyes. The waitress sweeps past, glancing at their coffee mugs, and is gone.

His exasperated sigh, a sob barely withheld, somehow lets his retort escape unspoken. "It's done," he says instead, resigned to that simple truth. "But is this how you wanted it?"

"Give me a cigarette."

Making a production of it, Stella slowly takes a cigarette from the proffered pack, slowly takes the lighter from his other hand, flicks the wheel once, twice, and then studies the steady flame for a moment before applying it to the cigarette for twice as long as necessary. His patience

with her stalling is strengthened by the sudden awareness that he doesn't want to hear her answer. She inhales the smoke with a lascivious, painful savor, as though it is the first thing she's eaten today. She holds it. Finally, blowing smoke, she says, "I asked you to." She holds the cigarette an inch from her lips. "It was a fantasy."

"Christ, Stella, *please*." The beg in his voice sickens him, but it can't be helped anymore. "Please help me understand." Silence. "I want to help you with this." Silence. "I want to be here for you."

"All of a sudden," she spits quietly. "Here I am with wounds to lick and *now you're here?*" She flicks ash from up high, missing the ashtray completely.

"Fine. Lick this," she points to the bruise along her eye. "And this," pointing to the swollen cheek opposite. "And this," pointing to the split corner of her mouth.

"This is unfair," he manages.

A sudden backhanded gesture causes her to inadvertently ash in her lap. "Do you even know what that means?"

Appalled, horrified, hurt, confused, Bickell buries his face in his upturned palms. "Christ, Stella, you're killing me."

"Wouldn't that be nice." He can hear her blow a dramatic cloud of smoke.

His tears, silently shed, sting his cheeks as their trails chill in the night air. He stares at the moon. Its movement has brought it along its arc behind some sparse branches, and it now occludes its lone companion.

Goddamnit, no. She can't cut him off. Three years of eating daggers and dodging darts *does not* pay off like this. All the obvious attacks, the words her looks spoke for her, the actions her words did for her, deserve a more proper defense. A counter attack.

The cold on his cheeks, no longer lit from above, chills into an electric heat, searing and clean. It warms his face and his blood blazes as the wardrum begins to throb in his ears. He will not be the chump this time. She has beaten him enough, pulped his self-image, just to see how weak he would become. And now she'd tired of it. Even if she wants to see him somehow weaker, it's no longer worth her effort. No. It will not end with her discarding him. He will *not* be the chump. He takes a deep breath, right down above his pelvis, just like he'd read, and holds it, rejoicing in the heat which flares outward.

A cold smile begins to etch his face as he turns and, snuffing a hundred stars underfoot, returns to the tent to pack.