

## **There Is A Red Fox**

He is watching the trail that snakes upward into the hill that lives behind the red school. It's a thing of odd proportions - jagged and unkept in every aspect. He remembers something she said when they would walk this toward it every day: "What if we kept walking?"

The question that hummed over the treeline does again. The life of the question was never put to rest. He couldn't have given an answer to the devious direct line of question, as often simple questions are. In the moment it was just another one of her questions, and like many other moments in their short lives together, it was often left unexplored.

Now. Now while he steps on the threaded trail that leads to the bludgeoned hill, the hill she always looked at with wistful air, he would have drafted a book to answer her: what if we kept walking, indeed? Every question she posed but never answered would be explored, catalogued, and recorded as proof of some solution she could have, but not now. Never again in this mortal life.

Chris is left with it: the questions. The 'what if's' that plague memories of her, his companion, like some inevitable mold. Chris fears he will perish like his parents, who have succumbed to this virus of the mind. Their bodies now shell with a vacant premise of humanity. The cocoon they have wrapped themselves to cushion hindsight, whatever it may be in their mind's form, has ripped. They started these 'surprise excursions', as his mother called them,

shortly after it happened. He still remembers their frantic energy over his bed like they were going to erupt if they didn't leave for ice cream right then at 1 A.M. They drove for hours after they had the melting treat in their hands. It dripped over their perfect leather interior and they didn't notice at all.

Despite the hiking trips, barbecues, ice-cream runs, boat rides on the lake, cooking classes, season passes, the feeling was the same it had been one year ago. It may even be worse. He wonders why they keep pushing their lives forward so fast? He thought it was like when his mom and dad would fast forward scenes in movies when he and his sister were kids. Chris and his sister would sit in silence while the parents tried to find the parts worth watching and skipped all the small scenes that made the movie so good.

Looking back, he thought much of his life so far has been similar to those movies being sped up, and he was starting to lose track of the scenes that were important but skipped by his mother and father. He would wonder with a cold lump in his throat how many scenes they skipped over Sam's own life. They didn't even mourn for a full week before they woke him up for the first time at 1 A.M. But he understands no matter what they do, the void will be there, as it always has been. He can feel it growing more as of late. It is impervious to all their scene skips and ice cream trips. This lack that has only grown since her departure is a hole that will slowly devour each of them.

He can't help but think they know why she left. They must. Why else would they be doing this, he thinks. Are they going where she used to be happiest? The lake, the trees, the water - she smiled the biggest in those places. He recalls that moment on the lake so long ago. *Floating hair. Opened eyes. A distorted face.*

Or are they running from the truth they found, but wouldn't tell? He made the mistake of asking once in the backseat. 'Why would she do it?', he asked. They didn't say a word, even after they got home and ate dinner. His mom was shaking while she sipped her wine. His father revealed nothing but gripped the fork so tight he could hear his fingernail scrape the metal. They didn't speak for two days after that question, but it was enough for Chris.

A year later on this day, he tries to find a truth, any form of it really, where she would walk with him on lunch and talk of everything around them. At his side, muddy tracks and flickering anomalies lay in the brush with the overgrown bushes. It resembles the dusting of raindrops on leaves after rain. Water drips from above and soaks the tree bark into a deep, rich brown. There's a hum in the air, bouncing and folding over the wet landscape. In front of the trail, fifty feet ahead, a thin layer of clouds falls on the forest trail that turns the landscape into a hazey reflection at a sudden edge

If he walked right where she walked, following her erased footprints, would he get closer to her? He pauses at the forest edge and waits for something to occur – a jolt, a shudder of her in the air. Anything that could bring her close to him again. He stands still waiting for her to grace him with her presence but wonders if her spirit *would* if it even existed. The preacher always said "A spirit that leaves this land unbeckoned leaves behind true peace", and Chris shook all over anytime he thought about it because she did leave it, unbeckoned. She left it all: him, her father, her mother, and forests full of pockets of comfort she alone had access to. He knelt to the ground to place a shaking hand on the dirt. Was her spirit here, under the surface of this forest with the worms and birds and trees? Or was it lurking under the water's surface? *The* surface she was pulled out of. He remembers his mother screaming like her soul was clawing its way out of her and his father gripping the rails of the bridge so tight he thought it'd break the whole world. His

father's hands grabbed Chris's shoulders and turned him away, but before he did, Chris saw her body breaching the surface while two men guided her; her face was still under the surface, hovering just high enough where he could see her eyes staring up at the sky, but never breaching fully, and her hands outstretched like she was reaching for something. He began crying too because he thought she was frozen under the surface and begged his father to press play so she'd emerge laughing and swim toward the family like she always did.

He's shaking harder. He pulls out a yellow cylinder but can't seem to open it. His hands are wet and gritty from the soil. The trees above seem to be closing in. He sees the trail is getting farther. He still needs to keep walking for her. But he can't even get up. He can't even feel his insides. They keep falling through the hole there but it's never full. It'll keep growing until there's nothing left but a shell. His cheek is touching the dirt now. He wonders if he'll fall under his own surface. Will he be trapped under his own skin, trying to breach flesh and blood?

Then, before another thought, a fox emerges at the forest's edge.

He looks up at the creature. It doesn't move from where it stands. It's sleek with dew and looks like a smear of red paint upon grey from some artist's hand. The ancient gaze of the animal is like an old man observing a small child. It is big but somehow small - simultaneously collapsable but gargantuan. It plays with this depth the boy owns. It prances by the edge of this forest like a showman. But it observes the boy intensely all the while, like he was some thing that could just float away at a moment's notice. Perhaps he could. In minutes, it merges back into the forest with a seeming smile on its face.

Chris rises from the dirt. He feels his insides shift and swirl but stay put. He considers the haze that lays with a curtained flow into the forest. Inside the mist would be the farthest he'd

be on this trail without her. Was it the haze or the feeling of obligation that urged him into the unknown? He turns to see the trail he climbed to get to this point. Did it seem steeper? Greener? The red building he left from was not visible anymore.

He ducks into the space of grey and tries to follow the now fading silhouette of the creature. Everything is wet with a thin layer of dew. While the dew fills the air, infuses the dirt, and moistens the forestry, he feels he can breathe for the first time. In the droplets hanging in the air is familiarity. It's odorless but it can be traced to every moment with her: at the lake, in the playground balancing on the wet slide, the fall with her in hand. In front, the fox moves forward. It does not dart into the sides or look behind at the pacing boy; it follows its path with the knowledge he would follow.

And Chris does for many steps and many more minutes. Chris forgets about the watch on his wrist. He forgets about the school at his back. He forgets about a lot of things that many would prefer to forget.

The fox gradually holds his attention through a continuous unbreaking pattern of stride. The movement grips the boy's mind with the flick and occasional gaze from behind. Its sway becomes entrancing. The predictability in every swing, tap, twitch, and snap from the creature is constant. Soon, the green life around him takes on the form of repetition too. The grass on either side of the fox sways with the steps and drips in pattern. There is even a slight glow. The canopy of trees bends over like a tunnel forming.

He sees where he and the creature will step. For the first time in 365 days, Chris falls into a pattern of familiarity.

The creature suddenly makes a sharp right. It goes through the brush and tall grass. Chris follows blindly and in a moment he's at the edge of a dirt hill. His foot moves over the space without control. He realizes too late and fumbles downward. The ground rushes upward to meet his body, with it the jagged and unknown sources of pain. He feels the wetness all over him - on his face and his clothes. It breaches his clothes, his mouth, his nose, and it nearly fills him up. The world becomes a blur, a streak of grey and green. He thinks he's drowning.

The tumble stops after minutes. On the grass he lies but his body buzzes. He fills his lungs with air so pure, he almost cries. In front, by his right hand, a golden T glints. Chris stares at the T.

*The truth shall set you free.* It was told to him with scoffs over dim light, followed by a face and laughter that echoed in their room. Sometimes at night they'd pull whatever quotes were in the book and speak with such ironicism, they'd abolish the scripture completely. Sam's ability to mock the preacher at church always made him laugh so hard, he'd nearly suffocate.

When that phrase was repeated, it brought a new meaning. The casket was lowered slowly into the earth surrounded by people he didn't know. His mother covered her face with tissue after tissue while his father's hand was on his shoulder. The verse was repeated exactly the way she had done it. It was a near perfect rendition but he didn't feel any laughter. He had heard one of his mother's friends say to her husband 'weighted rocks in her *jacket*, Gregory' and he caught a glimpse of truth of her death. He watched while she was lowered again, as she lowered herself in that water.

In the face of that truth, he didn't feel free. Even when the small unit of family, minus her, went to church and was given the gold T by the pastor who spoke of eternal forgiveness and

the quest for salvation with crumbs of bread on his beard, it felt more like a cruel joke than divine intervention. The Spokesman of God. Chris took it for what it was: a truth that filled him up with cold nothing and weighed him down like lead.

In that moment on the ground, he is lead. He can't move, and when he considers the purpose of trying, it feels rather ridiculous to move ever again. Chris considers the possibility of staying there in the dirt. He feels sleepy and wonders if he'd ever wake. But he hears something in the distance. The murmurings of water moving catches his ear. It sounds familiar. He suddenly notices the quiet creaking of the forest around him. There is moss and vines that spread out before him. It's like laying on carpet. He realizes it sounds like that morning. At the lake in the woods somewhere away from here. They had shared a tent near their parents. They were sleeping off the wine from the previous night. Early in the morning, she woke him up with a grin and said, "let's go to the lake". She had never seemed so excited. He asked her why and she said "I need to see something", and she set her jaw and stared at him. "Won't it be cold?" he asked. She said no with certainty. The dawn light that filtered through the tent caught her face and it looked like she had specks of gold on her cheeks. Chris didn't know why but she saw the way he looked at him and agreed. They left their site and tiptoed with towels through a winding path. Their thin white bodies were like ghosts already layered on the dark green of the woods.

When they arrived at the edge of the lake, he saw it was clear and steaming, as if something had warmed it for them in particular. Chris saw the stars still gleaming, like her freckles had been transposed above. She stood at the edge like a statue. She stared at something in the middle of the lake. He could see her observing it with the same intensity he saw in the tent.

"What're you looking at," he said. She didn't answer. She gave a small nod and whispered "ok" but Chris couldn't hear it. Without warning, she jumped in with a shout - a pale

meteorite that set the whole body of water churning. Her own body sunk for a moment before catching under the surface edge. She looked up at him, the surface disrupting her form completely. Her hair was floating like seaweed. Her eyes were open like the moon above them. But he couldn't see her clearly through the ripples. *Floating hair. Opened eyes. A distorted face.* So stark an image, he can't picture her ever breaking from that lake. He couldn't even see her as any other way but that one moment. He realized it was so similar when they brought her up from the depths. Alive or dead, she is caught in that moment under the surface.

Chris presses his eyes closed. How long has he been lying there in the heavy mud? He glances at his watch but it is broken. Too long? He ambles upward from the mud. It clings to his skin. The bog-like hill rises behind him where the top is hidden beneath the fog, which seeps all around like a viscous fluid. Chris walks away from the area and deeper into the fog. There is no way to climb to the top with the wet mud and his bruised body.

He meanders deeper into the fog while looking for the red creature. It is nowhere. The silence is encompassing. He thinks he hears a sigh from somewhere deeper towards the right in the abyss of the fog, but nothing is clear anymore. His body is battered. He walks in a daze. The fog obscured his direction. What else is there to do but go forward then?

So he does, and the fog slowly thins into strands of white, revealing an ocean stretching on towards infinity. The woods that he walked through cut off abruptly to a beach of jagged rocks holding tidepools large enough for multiple bodies. Waves crash heavily upon blackened rocks and explode in foamed arches. Chris stops in his tracks to realize where he is for the first time. He turns wildly behind to see the trees gone, dissipating the moment he turns like an eye trying to focus on a floating protein. In their place are jagged rocks leading to the base of a sandy cliff browned by wet. He can't understand it. He stands in a state of shock to wait for this illusion



to pass. A trick of the mind, perhaps, from the earlier fall. But no - after five minutes of standing, the sting of salt in his nose and the layer on his skin are real.

The coastline continues with jagged rocks of all sizes for miles. He looks right to see the ocean with a grey translucent hue, churning and gurgling upon the pools. The sky now has otherworldly qualities. The clouds spiral in small circles like whirlpools but spill ovals of light upon spots in the ocean like random points from God. Chris sees the pools. Some are small, holding only small mollusks and stones. Others are large enough to dive in. The bottom is clear with starfish, sea urchins, small fish, and other creatures. He feels a desire to jump in; an odd desire he didn't understand but an urge to submerge himself completely to feel the temperature of the beckoning water.

Instead he stumbles forward. He looks above to see birds circling in a perfect circle. Are they real or figments of his imagination? Maybe even the distant oval of yellow floating and glimmering behind the drifting clouds is just a poked hole through a canopy.

And yet, he walks despite himself with the knowledge that this place should not be.

He pauses. In the distance upon a jagged rock is the wet fox. It stares at him with a humanlike tenderness, sitting as a red flame upon a canvas of grey and black. Chris feels a rush of familiarity for the animal, followed by confusion. He begins to tread toward the animal while maneuvering the sleek stone. The fox turns and makes its way away from him, down the other side of some slope. He yells at the animal to wait with the assumption it can hear and understand him.

He arrives at the peak of the small mound and sees the fox at a large tidal pool below. It faces away from him.

Chris eagerly climbs down to the side of the Fox. In front is a massive pool of water. The tidal pool is larger somehow, the size of a small meteorite. The fox barely registers his presence while he carefully kneels.

He glances at the creature's eyes. The irises now take the form of swirling clouds. Scarlet red shifting in-between the miniature chasms that flow freely with its eyes glued to the tidepool.

Turning to the pool, Chris begins to see the extent of its magnitude. The edges go deep below, fading into a sapphire hue of blue, while others are shallower and easy to touch. Sealife flows swiftly like dreamlike fragments caught in watery ripples. Starfish hug the wall, crabs skitter underneath, and fish of all kinds swirl in pods and release suddenly like chaotic fragments. Clear and glassy, everything is transparent from his height.

At his feet, on the edge of the tidepool, Chris peers down and sees a massive hand reaching out and upward under the water. The fingers graze the surface softly while the forearm subsides into a murky blackness below. The hand drifts with the gentle pull of the tidepool's current. The skin is clean of any marks or wrinkles. Schools of fish swim between the valleys of the palm that's cupped. It looks soft like a woman's hand. He finds it engrossing and utterly beautiful. He drops to his knees and stares at the thing for a long time. The skin moves ever so softly, as if itself were made of silk. It's alluring, beckoning him. He reaches into the warm water. Very slowly, he touches the large hand; it feels a moving stream of water. He holds on to it tighter. It feels familiar, in a way. He laughs and places both hands on the giant palm. The fingers curl slightly. He sees the skin move and feels the ripples of skin flowing on his fingers. It pulls him into a trance. Images emerge of bottomless oceanic pits; clouds opening into chasms; fire sprouting like a weed, spiraling upward. Heat rises everywhere. It grips every pore and every hair and every portion of skin this boy has and he doesn't see or feel anything else in that

moment but an endless, encompassing warmth. It reverberates across his arms like earthly tremors. On the skin's surface emerges mixed variants of colors and fluids, some flowing and swirling like a snake, others jagged and violent; each type is a different color: black, turquoise, yellow, violet, varying in form and aesthetic. They emerge from his body like spirits. Chris laughs in a panic as he watches his feelingless skin erupt from the budding substances, some stretching over his skin, some spurting outward.

The substances sprout and spread over his arm like wildfire on dry bush. It encompasses his pores and inflaming every inch of skin in seconds. His body is composed of only these substances. But he feels no physical change except the terror. He tries to rise but the swirling substances take form in force. They move autonomously and uniquely like tentacles lost in the current of waters. The hole sighs deep inside crusted with panic and fear. He cannot see when his eyes are open, so he closes them and sees her floating under that surface, preserved, unmoving. He holds the giant hand tighter. He can't let go of the hand. He doesn't want to.

Then, he sees her. He sees his sister as if she were right in front of him, under that distorted surface of water looking up. He cannot do anything but stare as she sinks and waits for the rise that'll never come. He can feel hot tears running down his face over the chaos on his skin.

The only sound is the endless whirring from his skin. Like an endless freefall, it is everywhere and does not stop. He just watches that still frame of his sister hovering below that surface.

Then he feels something watching.

He looks up, peers past the blossoming substances, and sees the red fox watching him from across the tidepool. He thinks he can see its mouth moving as if speaking to him, but only hears the ocean wailing in the distance.

Something pulls him to the fox. He looks down at the massive hand and sees how beautiful and perfect it is. But he has to let go of it to get up, so he does, leaving it floating for a moment before it gently submerges far below the depths. He rises slowly and limps toward the fox. The substances ebb softly now but he senses a light flame under his skin and a budding strength waiting to burst. It rushes up and grips him. With every step, he sees her. They sit laughing on a park bench outside an old school. They sleep on each other's shoulders in the car. She carries him on her back in the pool by their house they grew up in. Chris rounds the corner of the tidepool and sees the fox pacing away from him. But it looks over its shoulder, watching. At the lake that morning, her features were prominent; her blazed brown eyes lined with wriness and a knowing glance. She laughed and jumped over branches with joyful yelps. She was running toward the lake at a sprint and knew exactly where she wanted to be. He watched her amazed. She was what he wanted to be. Chris stops upon a mound that overlooks a million tidepools and an ocean with no land or ending. The fox sits next to him on the mound. He still sees her under the surface, that moment frozen in time. *Floating hair. Opened eyes. A distorted face.* He knows in that moment he'll never see her and he'll never know why. There is an acceptance of that.

He blinks and feels himself moving forward. What came after that indefinite submersion was a final breaking of the surface, the rupturing of the distorted water while she flipped her hair in a highlighted arc to catch the glowing light behind. She turned and laughed for him to join with water dripping over her face like a veil. Chris jumped in to see her swimming toward the

middle of the large lake, her pale body like bleached driftwood. He didn't know what she swam towards. Something he couldn't see. Maybe no one could under the water in the depths below perhaps. He may never know. But he remembers she swam with excitement, her laughter carrying through the trees of that quiet morning, and he wanted to follow her to wherever that may be. He still does, but he will let her go toward

He is crying on that hill when the images subside. The substances shimmer over his skin like a smoldering fire, and the fox watches at his side. The sky is opening for the sun, and the tidepools glitter like beached stars in front of him. In the distance, the curvature of the beach appears infinite.

Chris snuffles and walks down the slope to one of the many tidepools. The tidepool goes deep into the earth. The water is warm as he cleanses his face. It is clear like glass. It drips over his face as he looks up at the sky. He closes his eyes as the sun cracks through the clouds. The fox leans into him. He feels the fur on his arm like a sweater. It moves and rustles his elbows like he's in a blanket. He feels the fur envelop him completely and he opens his eyes from the pool to find himself lying down, looking up at the sky. There are two people looking down at him, one on the phone, the other propping him up with a bottle of water to his lips. A drizzle of rain is falling over everything. He sees puddles and mini streams all around him. Small bits of leaves and bark flow out of the ground. It fills his yellow cylinder and carries out the pills inside. It glossens his face and blends with his salted tears. He smiles and cries quietly on the arm of this stranger. It purifies everything.