

Beyond the Tree Line

I watched my first deer die when I was only six years old.

We'd gone hunting together, my father and I. Crouched down, I watched as the sun rose painting the autumn dawn with soft scarlet and auburn hue. A ribbon of mist hung low, caressing our midsections and continued onward dancing about in the field ahead of us. The fresh dew painted my ankles. My father pressed his finger against his lips, reminding me to remain silent. He gripped the weapon that rested against his forearm and eased the rifle up to his shoulder. Holding his breath, I watched his body tense as he squeezed the trigger. A single gunshot ripped through the tranquility.

And she collapsed.

He smiled at me, an unforgettably twisted grin, as we walked towards her. The once radiant being now lie motionless and contorted in a bed of dirt on the forest floor. I gazed into her eyes, vulnerable and subdued. I knelt down, curiously drawn to her lifeless body, and I touched her coat. Her body was still warm.

I remember the way he looked at me, the smile clearing from his face, replaced by grim sincerity. He dropped down to one knee and removed his glove, placing his hand on my shoulder. His cold eyes fixated on mine.

"You can't undo this," he said in a hushed tone.

He raised his head to the light of the rising sun peering through the branches above us.
The amber rays splashed his face in speckled transcendence.

He closed his eyes.

“This is how you survive.”

The wooden frame of my grandparents’ porch creaks as I sit upon the weathered steps. I pour lemonade from the pitcher beside me into an empty glass my grandmother left for me some time ago. I glide the glass across my forehead. The condensation cools my reddened face.

I exhale.

It’s late in the afternoon by the time I finish with the yard, my hands are covered in dirt from pulling the weeds and I smell of freshly cut grass. I survey the freshly manicured lawn. Pulling out the bag I have stashed in my pocket, I fill my mouth with a handful of sunflower seeds. A prideful smirk etches across my face.

“It’s a beautiful feeling, isn’t it boy?” My grandfather leans against the handrail just above my head. It stoops slightly under his stout frame. “Grandma’s lemonade always tastes better after a hard day’s work,” he says, as he pats me on the shoulder. Though I can’t see his face, I know he is lost in contemplation, trying to find the words.

“Y’know. Idle hands-”

“Are the devil’s workshop,” I say, cutting him off. “I know, grandpa.”

My grandfather, a devout Catholic, repeats a few of his favorite verses whenever he can squeeze them in. If allowed, and with the right audience, he’d proudly recite whole verses if a

situation calls for it. Or, if he feels like hearing himself talk. It always feels like he uses more emphasis when he quotes it around me, however:

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop; idle lips are his mouthpiece. An evil man sows strife; gossip separates the best of friends. Wickedness loves company-and leads others to sin.”

I’ve committed his favorite passage to memory.

He removes his hand from my shoulder and rubs my head. “Good boy,” he says in a low chuckle. “Now, hurry up, dinner is almost ready.” He turns and I listen to the boards groan below his feet as he ambles back into the house.

The nineteenth century farmhouse my grandparents live in has been in my grandfather’s family for a few generations. It sits on three acres of countryside that has long since dried up. My mother used to tell me stories about her childhood on the farm. Her spirits always uplifted as she spoke about the early mornings that she’d go out with my grandparents and pick ripe strawberries before she went to school. I felt the longing in her voice whenever she talked about her childhood. A simpler life.

One I have never known.

Unfortunately, a teenager in the twenty-first century doesn’t have much to do on a secluded rural estate sitting miles from town. That is, except for yardwork and nightly games of spades washed down by glasses of lemonade.

The glass is almost empty and a small pile of shells have accumulated on the ground by the time I notice the creature approaching me. The doe emerges from the tree line and slowly

inches towards me. Its eyes are fixated on me, on alert, and it pauses as I spit another few shells out of my mouth.

After a few wary moments, it continues to saunter cautiously in my direction.

Once it is about twenty feet from me, I extend a handful of seeds. A peace offering. Its white tail flutters rapidly as its head leans in toward me. Carefully calculated steps crunch in the dry grass as it approaches my outstretched arm.

The wet nose rubs across my wrist and its tongue cleans my palm of the seeds in one pass. Raising its head, it munches on the morsels and I find myself fascinatingly transfixed on its mouth gyrating as it chews. Air blasts out of its nostrils and sprinkles me in mucus. I groan wiping my face.

For a moment, we both stare at each other. Motionless, we examine each other in deep contemplation. After an eternity, it slowly turns and begins to walk back into the wooded area. Before it enters the foliage, it turns and looks at me, eyes begging, daring me to follow.

The branches from the ferns bend as my shins brush through them. The high canopy of the trees shelter us from most of the late day sun and I feel the temperature drop as we walk deeper into the forest. Occasionally, I stop to catch my breath, during which the doe stops as well. It turns its head to face me and grunts.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.”

I repeat various forms of “okay” and “I’m coming” as struggle to trudge through the thick forest.

The shaded timberland opens up to a field. I know this field well, but I haven't been to it in years. The manicured grass stretches on for several hundred yards. A sea of concrete gravestones dot the field, a few adorned with flowers, some with candles. Some smashed by vandals. A sprinkler feeds a light mist across the far side of the grounds.

The graveyard near my grandparents' house used to terrify me as a kid. The idea of ghosts and demons running amuck at the midnight hour sent chills down my spine. "Lost souls trapped in purgatory." Grandma used to tell me those ideas were nonsense. "The bodies here are blessed by God. A final resting place for his children before they ascend to heaven," she told me as I warily stood on the edge of the hollowed grounds. Her words never eased me.

The doe leads me up a hill that builds on the far side of the cemetery. The land takes an upward incline on the western border before it becomes a deciduous mountain reaching to the sky. I huff and lower my head. The doe grunts once more.

There is a momentary spot where the incline flattens to a plateau and spread about are a few gravestones. Some newer than others. My grandfather's lineage spreads across the area, important figureheads of the town's history, granted prime residency in return. The doe stops at a headstone and bows its head. It begins to munch on some overgrowth. I stare at the concrete; wilted roses rest against its base. I brush the elements off of the face of the stone.

Water fills my eyes.

I used to accompany my grandparents to this spot once a year, but as I got older, it got harder to make the walk.

What's left of my mother lies six feet below my feet. Though, by now, I imagine there isn't much of her physical form left. The doe raises its head. It watches me stand with weak

knees and tears in my eyes. I try to recall what I can remember about her. Her beautiful eyes, a joyous spirit, a warm heart, a compassionate person.

She didn't deserve it.

I hear familiar pained breaths and labored steps coming from behind me as she turns to the forest and hastily bounds away. My grandfather places his hand on my lower back as he approaches.

We both stare at the marker in silence.

He disrupts the stillness, "you know she loved you, right?"

"Of course," I say wiping my eyes.

We return to quiet reverence. I think about the long hugs she used to give me, her sweet smell of lavender, the kisses on the forehead, the warm cookies she'd sneak to me before dinner. Before he got home. Before he forcefully stole those hugs and kisses.

Before they'd argue.

Before I understood who my father was and what he became.

I was six years old when I watched my mother die. My father woke me early in the morning and quietly escorted me out of the house. He had me crouch down with him in the

wooded area across from our front door. I remember being confused and him placing his hand over my mouth before I could say anything.

I remember him raising the gun to his shoulder. I remember his speech about survival and choices that can't be undone before he turned the gun on himself. The twisted smile, cased in whiskey, erased by years of self-infliction.

I was found crippled between my parents, crying and trying with all of my might to wake them up. I didn't stop crying for days, just old enough to feel the pain, but not old enough to understand why.

Years later, after my mother's funeral, after my father was turned to ash and disposed of, after my grandparents took me in, I pieced together what had happened. According to reports, my father had been diagnosed with a mental illness he refused to accept and self-medicated with alcohol. My mother knew about it, but she had a hard time seeing it. Eventually, the illness started to take over. My mother would suggest medical help, medication, therapy, anything to keep the same man she fell in love with. Her love blinded her.

Plagued by delusions, he accused her of cheating, of trying to leave him, of trying to take me from him. He blamed his illness on her, laid his pain at her feet. The drinking. The unemployment. The bills. The hunger. It was all her fault.

Until he decided he couldn't take it anymore and resolved to end their struggles one day as she left for work.

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” my grandfather repeats softly beside me. His voice cuts painfully through the silence. I brush his hand off of my back and step away from him.

I drop to my knees.

“You know, you are nothing like him, boy,” he continues to speak. “He may be a part of you,” he leans forward to place his hand on my mother’s tombstone, “but you also have a part of her, as well.”

I bury my face in my hands. The fear of my father’s spirit terrifies me. The notion that I could become him, that some of him has imprinted itself on me. I fear the monster lingers in hiding, just below my skin, awaiting to be released.

“I don’t know that. None of us do.”

I hear a snuffle come from behind me. “I do,” he says with a crackling voice. “And I will never let you become him.”

My grandfather is a stern man and I have always admired his emotionless visage. In the years I have lived with him, I have never seen him cry. I’ve barely seen him laugh.

I sluggishly raise my head to the sky. The setting sun engulfs my face and I feel the warmth caress me. I curse my father in my head, then out loud.

My grandfather once again pats me on the back.

“I can’t...undo this,” I exclaim to the universe. The wet grass soaks through the knees of my pants and I hear the trees in the distance blow in the wind as the leaves dance harmoniously with each other.

For a brief moment, I notice the head of the doe emerge from inside the forest. Its transcendent observance wistfully glares into my soul. Then, it disappears completely in a silent retreat.

"I can't undo this," I think as I bend forward and place my hands on the ground at my side, atop my mother's final resting place. I focus on flashes of her smile, her endless caress, her beautiful blue eyes before they became lifeless.

Before *she* became lifeless.

I force a broken smile through years of trauma. I stare at the sky as the sun's rays paint my face with amber transcendence.

"This is how I survive."