

## The Old Withering Tree

The cigarette slips through his coarse fingers. The man takes one last puff, squishing the hide of his American Legend into the dusty dashboard of his beat up Ford. He drives on. He drives on over the old torn gravel road, the dust billowing beneath each crunch of the four slippery wheels. The soulless town sinks behind him, masked by the dusty red sun. The old Ford rattles on. Dust and stones stir, landing in the road's soft craters. The truck's red stripes fade into the dead-beat silver and the radio has stopped playing long ago. His eyes are painted with a glossy conception of no tomorrow.

She stands alone, waiting, unsure of the next step. It's sweltering. She's wearing her favorite frayed jean shorts and a ratty old white tank she stole from her younger sister. Glistening sweat drips from her soft pores, steadily beating the sandy earth below. The tank is unable to stretch past the shimmering flower that dangles from her pierced naval. She feels naked, exposed to the world's deadliest creatures. Perhaps it

was once a favored look because of the way it made all the boys mouths droop with drool, or a rebellious act against her father. She felt justified at the time. It was her stance with mother earth. But now it serves as a tortuous testament to all of the evils it brings. Her long legs are bruised black and blue, patterned with fresh walnut sized welts, making it difficult to walk. She picks at her cracked turquoise nails, desperate to distract her mind off the heat. The girl brushes her blood stained black hair out of her eyes and stares at the bright horizon. Her eyes are painted with a glossy conception of death's dark door.

The man whistles an old blues tune he learned from his father. There's a half bottle of cheap whiskey staring at him. It rolls across the crusty floor, clattering with each rhythmic beat of the truck. It calls to him. The man tried quitting once, some time ago, when his hair had seen its first gray, and his wife still loved him. He keeps to the bottle and the intoxicatingly beautiful girls he meets at the tavern, fulfilling every sinful addiction. They use him for his pennies, saving for the day they'll escape this town for good. But to the man, they captivate his fleeting heart. The unforgivable sun beats through the thin windows. His lips dry, cracked as a

desert with no water; the man reaches for the bottle, and slowly sips on the warm whiskey.

Tired of standing, she shuffles her feet through the gravel. Its' chalky perfume suffocating, choking her lungs. She spots a withering tree with large knots just a few deep breaths away. It's not far, just off the beaten gravel road. The branches intertwine, dancing towards the sky, covering the earth below in dark splotchy shade. The girl sprawls out on the dirt caked grass, feeling its cool touch, soothing her worn body. The whispers from the parched leaves are comforting, reminding her of the many times she'd sell lemonade with her sister, underneath their vibrant maple tree for ten cents a cup. And when all of the lemonade ran out, they'd lay underneath the tree dividing their earnings, listening to the soft wind chimes that stretched from it's long branches. The girl longs to travel back to this endearing memory, or for an ice cube so she could press against her sore skin.

The man enjoys the smoky after-taste of the whiskey. It burns. A smile runs across his wrinkly face. His grip on the wheel relaxes and his rugged face grows soft. He lights another damp cigarette, no longer caring his life is steadily slipping

to the shadows. After all he's slapped on the whiskey band-aid. He has his Ford, the old truck that's never let him down. The bottle is translucent when held up to the sun, suspending inches from his lips. The man takes each sip methodically, waiting for the drunken power to kick in. He's giddy for now, but knows his wake from this hallow stupor will be drowning in a bottomless pit once again. But for now he's living.

The blackberry bushes near old man Lewis' farm were not kind to her. She only trespassed because a couple of city boys dared her sister. But the sounds of old man Lewis' double-barreled shotgun sent them running through the bushes. The boys took them to an open field near the school. They wanted sex and so did her naïve sister. The girl left in disgust and begged her sister to follow, but she did not. Her sister stayed behind, but then had a change of heart denying these sex craved older teenage boys. It was too late. They raped her sister behind the school barn, sending her home sore and scarred. But they won't touch her sister again.

The man attempted to enter Hell's gates one dusty day. An afternoon spent lining up all of his beer cans along the porch. Everything that stood still moved, becoming an obstacle. Pain.

He only felt pain from losing everything. Mother Earth whispered in his ear to put mind out of misery. He tied a string around the trigger of his rifle and crawled ten paces from it, unable to stand correctly. The man chugged from the bottle, sloshing its contents, and yelled to the count of three.

One...two...three. He yanked on the string, the rifle clicked, thundering silently through the warm air, but yet he still breathed whiskey from his lips. He forgot to load the gun. The man cried and drank himself to sleep, only waking again to Mother Earth's prison.

There's an old raven standing in the middle of the road. It picks at the two ensanguined rodents that lay helpless. Their hearts weak, beating for one last time. The raven is waiting for death to come knocking, it only has the strength to pick at its last meal. The girl watches it intently from underneath the tree. She sees its wings are weathered, its beak broken, and it coils with each croak. The raven's eyes droop. It's closer to Death's gates in the middle of that dusty old road. The raven will join those two city boys on Judgment Day. The girl grows tired next to the old tree. The night is catching quickly to her, and she feels like the old raven.

The man belts out an old country song. Each thump from the old Ford, gives him a steady beat. He takes his hands off the wheel, emptying the last drops of the bottle, and disposes it out the window. The pale Ford cuts fast through the gravel, when the man spots the old withering tree. He stops off the beaten road for a closer inspection. It's the only tree in sight for a mile. The large knots remind him of his grandfather's tree he and his cousin climbed many years ago. The tree's branches are twisted mischievously and there's one green leaf that sits at the top branch mocking the world. The perfect place for a piss.

The girl stole old man Lewis' double-barreled shotgun one night, and followed those twisted city boys down the train tracks. There was no plan but cold revenge for her sister. They were taking a midnight stroll, smoking cigarettes and drinking out of a flask, reveling in their latest conquest. She called to them and took aim. They had until the count of three to clear the hell out of town or she'd spit on their dead carcasses. They didn't listen. They laughed, spitting out racial slurs, and told her she was going to get the same as her sister. One circled and the other lunged. The girl pumped once, and shot the one in front. He went down with a crack, screaming helplessly. The other threw her to the ground and began kicking her senseless.

The girl tried to get up but he pushed her down. She could smell her own blood. The boy climbed on top, holding her arms to the ground while he unzipped the frayed jean shorts. He slapped her across the face with every fiber in his hand. He pulled the girl's shorts down to her thighs, grabbing at her underwear, fending off her feeble attempts. She screamed, bit, and kicked, until finally freed from his clammy clutches. The girl crawled to the old shotgun, pumped, and didn't hesitate to pull hard with her index finger. The boy dropped with three cackling whips the girl sent at him. The girl spat on each of their bodies, delivering the only justice these privileged misguided young men would receive, and slowly walked towards the dusty gravel road.

There's a young girl fast asleep underneath its long branches. At least the man thinks there is. He's unsure of his reality, unable to separate it from his drunken mirages. She is the spitting imitation of the young girls he picks up at the Wild West Saloon. The man thanks the whiskey gods and sways out of the truck, taking a few steps to find his balance. Her dark blue mascara, ruby red lips, her low cut tank, and her long spidery legs is his first sight. The man closes his eyes and listens to his heart pulsate. The beat grows heavier and quicker with every drunken step. Although upon a closer look she seems

different. And that's when he sees the girl has been marked by someone else's terrible sins. The man sees there is nothing beautiful about her fresh cuts, bruises, and the tremendous amount of blood flowing from her side. He's no longer drunk, but sober with sadness.

The girl wakes to find this man standing above her. She recognizes him. She's seen some of the older girls in town go home with him after long nights at the tavern. But she's not afraid. She's heard stories of his kindness despite his string of misfortunes. He stares at her with his empty eyes. The girl sees that he's lost. Somewhere behind those eyes, he's drowning. The man brushes her soft face with his grizzly hand, but she does not scream nor shiver. The girl is sobering to the man. Her bruised legs and deep cuts marking her face shows her incredible pain. But it's her vacant brown eyes that tells him she's hurt beyond her physical makeup. His heart is no longer gloating with glee, but weeps for what mankind has taught society. The girl hears the man croak out one last song before she closes her eyes, resting peacefully in his arms.

Let us walk,

Let us walk to the old tree.



Gather round,  
Gather round this tree.  
See the branches,  
See them swing.  
Feel the breeze,  
Feel it bleed.  
Hear their souls,  
Hear them sing.