

Word Count: 2028

### The Vale Below the Old Pear Tree

Below a pear tree atop a grassy hill, the vale stretched out, opening itself wide to a dark sky and a bright moon which only partially illuminated the stream running at the vale's base. The space between the stream and the pear tree sparkled with lightning bugs ensnared in a net so thin it became invisible to the human eye. They blinked in and out of existence, the vale swallowing and regurgitating the bugs in tiny, charged impulses.

Nate Farmer woke up, his body entangled with Jack Stone, sweat beading on the naked flesh of both men, steam wafting upwards in the small tent. He felt restless from a nightmare, so he pulled on his pants and walked beyond the pear tree under which they were encamped. He followed the downward slope into the vale, his eyes on the stream below. His feet slipped on the slick grass, and he began to slide a little. As he caught himself, he began to hear a slight static in the flickering of the lightning bugs.

Then the moon disappeared.

---

Nate drove the 1939 Buick he and Jack had bought when they'd left Fort Benning, honorable discharges in hand. They set out in search of the vibrant colors the European theater had sucked from existence, believing their concrete reality—which had been pockmarked by bombs and bullets—needed to be firmly grounded in some abstract search for meaning. The war had left them tired, and they felt the fertile Southern soil might inject new life into the blood that had soaked deep into the gray matter of their brains.

They decided to go fishing. Jack had read in an old Hemingway book that this was what soldiers did in the aftermath of war, as the realization of lost innocence settled in. Old soldiers,

Jack claimed, wandered in the wastelands of their own design until the right fish pulled them out of the postwar stupor brought on by drugs and alcohol. Nate didn't quite buy it, but this trip had become an excuse to not leave Jack's side.

The drive had been perfect and poetic, hills rolling by the window at an even pace. They gassed up in Oxford and stopped to eat in an old, run-down barbecue shack, black smoke puffing in the back of the building.

Jack opened a screen door covered in grease to the smell of sausage and ribs slow-cooking in the back. His Southern sensibilities stirred with hunger but also something darker. He'd felt both hunger and sickness when the sweet smoke hit his nostrils. Something like Dachau triggered his synapses. Nate suggested they sit.

They ordered a couple of beers while waiting for their plates to be fixed. Under the table, Nate squeezed Jack's knee with his hand, just outside the view of anyone walking in the door. The woman brought out two bottles of beer. "Sorry, they ain't cold. Ice didn't get delivered today."

She wiped her hands on a dirty apron and returned to back porch, smoke flowing through the top of the doorway into the single room as she walked out.

The beer settled their stomachs. Each finished a bottle before their plates were brought out by the woman, who offered another round. Nate and Jack went to work on the ribs in front of them, chewing the meat quickly, swallowing loudly.

Any sense of civility became lost amidst the grunts and slurps and swallows and teeth ripping meat from bone. Disheveled warriors with red sauce dripping down their chins had replaced the two young men with clean fades and ironed button-up shirts.

When they finished eating, they leaned back into the benches on which they sat, staring at one another with lustful eyes. The meal had sated their physical appetite, but now they wished for something more. They settled for a short kiss when the waitress left the room.

The sun was setting as Nate and Jack left Oxford. They looked into the red horizon with awe, having not yet taken the time to appreciate the flames of a powerful sun since returning to the States. For them, dusk brought gray smoke and ash-covered forests. This sun, setting in the direction of home, carried with it a hope for rest, an end to their exhaustion. It gestured them towards the magic river about which Hemingway once wrote.

The air grew dimmer and dimmer until night set in. Nate felt Jack sleeping next to him, his legs curling into his body and head on Nate's shoulder. He worried gravel turning beneath the wheels might wake Jack, so, he kept as still as he could while the headlights warmed the darkness in front of them. After a while, he felt his own head bob up and down. He he pulled off to the side of the road next to a pear tree.

The tree sat on top a hill, giving them visibility over the vale below them, security in an openness where they could see anything coming. Nate spied a small stream running through the valley. Finally, a spot where they could fish.

Nate woke up Jack, and they set up a small half-shelter Jack had kept when they discharged. They set up the tent next to the tree, placed a sleeping bag in the tent and went to sleep, curled closely together in a warm pocket of protection, too tired to fuck in the middle of the night.

Sometime, when the sky was at its darkest, Nate woke up from a nightmare and walked down into the vale below. Not long after, Jack woke to the sound of static buzzing like the radio

he'd carried at Bastogne. He chalked it up to the nightmares he'd been having and went back to sleep, never realizing Nate was no longer next to him.

Nate's knees collapsed as he yielded to the darkness suffocating the stars above until they disappeared one by one. He called out for Jack, but his voice cracked, the weight of this new reality beginning to crush his throat. He couldn't breathe through the liquid thick of the dark—it began choking him, drowning him, taking away any energy to fight, zapping his body of any resolve.

He tried to orient himself, but he could not tell from which direction he had come. There was no light, no top or bottom, no left or right, no indication of where forward might be. Nate felt alone, weak against the hopelessness he found himself in.

Jack woke the next morning, static still in his ears. He peeked inside Nate's tent to find an empty sleeping bag halfway unzipped. Nate's canteen and coffee remained untouched, so he assumed Nate must have gone for a short walk because he couldn't sleep.

He brushed his teeth and ate a candy bar he'd picked up from a service station in Nashville. Then, he went to sit in the front seat of the car. After a half-hour, he packed up Nate's supplies, as well. He wanted to get down to the stream before it got too hot.

Around ten in the morning, Jack began to worry. The static in his ear had gotten louder and louder, building into his anxiety, and it wasn't like Nate to walk off somewhere without saying something. They'd just survived a war together—Jack couldn't stand to be alone just yet.

He began to consider the animals who might roam the Mississippi countryside—snakes, bears, alligators. The old rednecks on whose property they might be camped. The cars who might not have seen him cross the road while walking in the middle of the night.

The static in his ear cleared just enough to hear a voice through the buzz.

“Jack,” Nate gasped into the void, “Help me.” He could feel the tears streaming down his cheeks, a warmth contrasting to the coldness of the dark expanse, a small comfort in the extreme sensual deprivation of his present predicament.

The white noise in Jack’s ear faded away into silence. He called out for Nate but received no response. He switched on the radio in the car, turning the tuning knob in search of whatever frequency Nate might be calling on, but he only found more static. At one point, he thought he heard a frizzled voice call out *Jack* but the voice faded into to the white noise.

Jack drove the Buick back towards Oxford. Perhaps someone had picked Nate up and driven him into town for something. Just past the city limits, a radio tower rose above a small building situated between its legs. He pulled onto the dirt parking lot next to the building and knocked on the front door.

A short, balding man in a wrinkled white shirt and loosened blue tie opened the door. “Can I help you?” he asked.

Jack nodded and explained to the man he needed to borrow the radio tower to speak to someone. The man agreed to let him project on a few frequencies.

With a small radio next to him to receive Nate's transmission, he began sending out a short message on several frequencies. *Nate, can you hear me?* played over and over again into the porous veil of atmospheric pressures.

Nate's throat began to feel scratchy, his voice barely croaking in his cries for Jack. He couldn't keep this up for long. He decided to conserve his energy and move somewhere, anywhere, though there was no indication of a somewhere or anywhere even existing in this space.

He began moving in a direction which felt like forward through the thickness of the void. It seemed like hours when he took a knee, exhausted, warm tears flowing down his cheek. He attempted to cry out for Jack again, but his voice had gone completely dry.

In this moment, he heard the staticky *Nate, can you hear me?* and began walking in the direction of Jack.

After a few hours of receiving no response, the short man tugged on Jack's sleeve and told him he needed to leave. "I need my radio tower back. Why don't you go check where you lost your friend?"

Jack considered raising his fist, knocking out the short man, and taking the station by force, but he recognized his response was simply the war trying to define him. Tears flowing down his face, he resigned himself to finding Nate through other means. He hopped in the car and drove back to the pear tree sitting above the vale.

Starting atop the hill and moving downward, Jack searched the trees and the stream and the valley for Nate. He called Nate's name over and over again until his voice grew hoarse. Just

as he considered giving up, the bright lights of Mississippi Delta daylight went dark. He found himself in a liquid void with no sense of direction until he saw a small circle of light like a dim incandescent bulb in the distance. He swam through the thickness towards it. When he reached the circle, Jack stood at its edge, looking around for some sign of Nate.

Jack's voice had dissipated into the vast emptiness, but Nate kept walking in the direction from which it had originally come. He placed one foot in front of the other, just as he'd been trained, to keep from straying left or right. When he felt his resolve weaken, he thought about the warmth Jack's embrace would bring, the brushing of Jack's lips against his, the tingle of Jack's fingers running through his hair.

He kept pushing, legs once again losing strength. His knee dipped, then he saw a light in the distance. He crawled towards it, reaching the edge of the dimly lit circle. He looked up to see Jack standing on the other side. And as Jack stared across the luminescent ring, he noticed for the first time, the radiation reflected on the floor between him and Nate, like glass glowing green, telling Jack to go to him.

The two men embraced in the middle of the glassy green light, curled close to one another on the floor, and closed their eyes, content to never leave the safety of their vale.