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THE WALKING BIRD

CARL OFTEN FANTASIZED ABOUT his brother's death. Sometimes it was a strangling; in his mind, Carl dove towards his brother, enthusiastically squeezing the life out of his neck. Sometimes he would imagine a tragic series of natural accidents, culminating in a lethal confrontation with a carnivorous animal. Other times he dreamt of a shooting, the hot bullet carving a direct path to his brother's aorta. As it pierced his chest, blood would spray from the wound as his heart became a bloody volcano of redemption. It was a beautiful scene, but that fantasy was normally cut short by the realization that there were no guns on the island.

Carl was not sure what had aroused such a tremendous hatred for his brother. Growing up, they had always gotten along very well. They had been playmates and confessors in their best and worst times. Nonetheless, Carl felt that a great rift had grown between them in the months since they had washed ashore, and it was with great difficulty that he set his mind to anything other than his brother's destruction.

"Here's supper," Carl announced, dropping a rabbit at his brother's feet. It was light brown with flecks of black, and its fur was matted. This was an ugly rabbit, which made it easier to eat.

Captain Mike nodded gratefully toward Carl. "Thank you," he said sincerely. Captain Mike was the third member of their shipwrecked trio, and Carl always appreciated the gratitude that showed in the captain's voice. It was discernible.

"Yeah, thanks," said Carl's brother. "I'll get this sucker ready."

Of course you will, Carl thought. Rabbits were his brother's favourite island food, and Carl knew it. Carl's favourite island food was pig, but unfortunately, there were only a small number of pigs in the area, while rabbits thrived in great numbers. Carl was sure that his brother only liked rabbits to spite him.

The ugly brown rabbit was skinned and gutted and roasted over the fire. The three men sat in their usual silence until it was gently broken by the sound of the captain's nightly prayer.

"Dear God, Almighty Father," he began. "Thank you for giving us this rabbit to eat. I'm sure it'll taste good. Please don't forget about us, or our families back home, and forgive us for all of our sins. Forgive me for leading these two gentlemen to this lonely place, and for leading so many more to their deaths. Bless their souls and ours. Amen."

"Amen," the brothers echoed in chorus.

"Now let's get started on this little fella," the captain said.

With that, they tore roughly equal pieces from the roasted animal. It's not equal, though, Carl thought as he glared at his brother. He gets to take more pleasure in his portion than we do in ours. That's not exactly fair. Carl found that his piece of rabbit had something of a bitter aftertaste.

"Hey Carl," his brother began pensively. "Remember that big park behind the tobacco shop?"

It always began this way. He asked indirect questions that skirted the issue.

"Sure," Carl replied. "I remember."

"That was a good place, eh? Lots of memories back there. The rabbit reminded me. Used to see rabbits back there all the time." Though it was brief, Carl thought that his brother had shot him a disdainful look. He often caught these looks coming his way. They were intended, he was sure, as brief self-righteous reminders that Carl's soul was flawed.

The park behind the tobacco shop, like nearly everything else that his brother chose to mention, had other things associated with it. It was a place that alluded to sadness and fear, anger and love. It was a sacred place for Carl, and it had secrets. As always, Carl tried to shrug off the inference, but his brother's eyes reeked of insight.

When morning came, the captain woke first. For a short while he lay still, staring straight up at the sticks and boughs that formed their roof. They had made the roof well, so that no light could come through. Shifting about, he carefully made his way out of the shelter and onto a nearby log.

Captain Mike had broken both of his legs in the crash and had crushed nearly all of the bones in his left foot. While he was not altogether immobilized, it was on adrenaline alone that he had managed to cling to a piece of luggage and make his way to land.

Ever since that day, he had been plagued by the feeling that he'd died two hundred and fifty-three times—once for each passenger, once for his pilot, and once for every flight attendant. For each person on the plane, he felt that there was a part of himself that had sunk to the ocean floor. For a long time he had wished himself to have been among those who had drowned, and felt guilty at having thought himself worthy of the salvation that chance had offered him. His guilt, he thought, should surely have dragged him down. Over the months, though, he had come to realize that his greatest reason for living was his sense of responsibility toward these two brothers. He was intensely aware of how unjust it would be if he were to die before them. His death now had to be earned.

Sitting upon the log as the sky grew brighter, he positioned himself so that he could build up the fire for the new day.

Carl was the next to crawl out of the shelter. He was the older of the brothers. The captain had noticed early on that there was a great deal going on underneath Carl's skin, and that he would only ever understand the very smallest slice of Carl's mind. He struck the captain as a perplexing bird who could easily fly, but who chose instead to walk.

"Morning," the captain said as cheerfully as he could. Carl smiled and offered him some berries from the day before. They ate together, basking ambiguously in the unspoken beauty of the morning.

"I'm going to travel around today," Carl said matter-of-factly. "See if I can't find something good to eat."

"Bring me back a fat, juicy steak."

Carl smiled at the captain. "Sure thing."

The younger brother was the last to rise. He sleepily approached one of the log benches, where the captain sat patiently tending the fire.

"Nice day," the brother commented.

"Beautiful," the captain replied.

The younger man breathed in deeply, then slowly exhaled with a vivid sense of possibility. "I think I'm gonna catch us a big supper today," he said.

"That would be just dandy," said the captain. "Just dandy." He passed him what was left of the berries, which were quickly swallowed. Then, saying goodbye to his fireside host, the younger brother stood up, grabbed a sharp spear, and marched off purposefully.

Hours passed. Mid-morning became noon, which then became mid-afternoon. The younger brother had encountered very few animals, and

was becoming disappointed by the peculiar stillness that seemed to have engulfed the woods. Eventually, a small boar appeared, running along with great vigour. His spear pierced it, and after a brief chase and some squealing on both sides, the boar fell. Its conqueror swelled with pride, sure that his companions would be pleased; he knew for a fact that pig was his brother's favourite island food.

Carl, meanwhile, had spent much of the day thinking about the captain. As he strolled across the island, wandering through forests and open fields, he marvelled at the strength of spirit that must be required to sustain a man under a burden such as Captain Mike's. It was he who had stranded Carl on the island, and so it would have been reasonable for Carl to harbour a certain amount of resentment, but it was also he who held himself responsible for hundreds of deaths, whose body had been crushed by his own mistakes, and who was nonetheless up every morning to build a new fire, and Carl found this admirable. Captain Mike stood out to him as a man of great integrity and worth.

His brother, on the other hand, was hardly comparable. He was a cynic, at best; at worst, an opportunist. Carl knew that his brother saw in him only his worst qualities, to the exclusion of all of his virtues. He felt the weight of his brother's gaze upon him; he felt it more heavily with every day that they spent in isolation. It was the same penetrating gaze that his brother had thrown at him after the incident in the park. Although many years had passed, he still resented that feeling of having been convicted by his brother's eyes, as though Carl himself had pushed her, as though he himself had thrown their sister from the tree. His brother had never said it in words, but his eyes—those sharp blades of implication—had weighed on him ever since, had gradually forced Carl's shoulders to stoop and his knees to ache from the strain of withstanding their charge.

As he crossed the island, resentfully considering his brother's self-importance, Carl spied a wild pig sniffing at a pile of feces. The pig sensed his presence, and, as he moved toward it, fled through the woods. Without thinking, he gave chase. The pig led him on, disappearing further and further into the woods, becoming more desirable with each step.

As Carl burst into a clearing, he saw his brother happily removing a spear from the side of the pig, and almost immediately, the animal ceased to be his target. He saw that the pig for which he was really hunting was standing before him on two legs, grinning pompously at his stolen conquest. Carl

darted to his brother's side and snatched the spear away. Holding it high, he hesitated for a brief moment as ugly knowledge appeared on his brother's face. Hating the ugliness, Carl brought down the spear.

Whenever Carl had imagined killing his brother, he had been left with a sense of peace and satisfaction at having cleanly and effectively eliminated his enemy. Confronted with the act itself, he was startled to find it considerably less noble than he had imagined. It was messy and possessed an element of reality that he had not anticipated, and which he did not find appealing. Rather than fulfilled, he felt dismembered, as though the spear had wounded him, too. For a long time, he simply stared at the mangled mess that he had made of his brother. The blood seemed to solidify as it leaked into the earth.

Arriving at camp, he laid the boar near the fire. "Supper," he said quietly.

The boar was prepared in silence. As it was roasting, the captain abstained from prayer for the first time since their arrival. Carl did not ask why.

The meat, while somewhat dull of flavour, was replenishing. Having eaten, Carl felt more like himself than he had in a very long time. He wasn't sure that he liked the feeling. Slowly, he announced, "I found more than just the pig."

"Oh?" replied the captain.

Carl searched hopelessly for the right words, but no matter how it was worded, the truth was the same.

"I found another body, too," he said. This was met with a long silence—one that made him uncomfortable, and one that was full of recognition. "I didn't want to ruin your appetite."

The ensuing stillness was profound.

"Lots of death," remarked the captain.

"Lots of death," Carl said, and suddenly wept.