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WHERE TREES STAND IN THE WATER

WE WERE HUMPING A LOAD OF LUMBER SOUTH for Marv Mainplace, who operated out of The Hoito in Thunder Bay. My brother Aaron had gotten into a fight there one night with a mechanic from the bush camp, and Marv had stepped in to protect him by breaking off the shards of a beer bottle in the guy's belly. They'd been buds ever since.

Marv had hollowed out a half-dozen logs and lined them with dishonest cargo, and then he'd sunk those in the centre of a sincere load. All he needed now was someone willing to pull it down to Windsor.

"It's easy as piss," he'd promised. "Done it ten times. Well, not personally."

On the last attempt, the driver had spared a moose by stomping the brakes with such strength he'd launched the haul off a bridge, and Marv's cousin had been picked up the trip prior to that for knocking over a Tim's in New Liskeard. Things had gone all to hell from there. Other than that, though, Marv assured us the method was entirely sound. But just in case, he wanted someone with a legitimate big rig licence this time, which meant he needed Aaron.

Aaron said he needed me. In those days I was working in the emergency room as a sweeper and mopper, but we'd accomplished that bullet of an over-sized job to Vegas together the summer before, dragging a house down from Muskoka, drinking beer out of the cooler the whole way, moving so fast the tires melted on the asphalt below us. Still, for all our success, we got stopped at the border on the return, and Aaron had stuffed a bag of weed under the stick shift. They could smell it, of course, so they tore the cab apart and brought in the dogs. Twisted into a frenzy, even the dogs couldn't pinpoint the dope, so they had to let us go.

I quit after that and went to work at the hospital, where the drugs were easier and all I'd be risking was my job, but I eventually allowed Aaron to persuade me again. Even though I was the older of us, he always seemed to

have it figured out.

Coming down from Thunder Bay, we pulled into a truck stop and took a breakfast of black coffee 'til the sun caught up with us. For dessert, we shared a pack of cigarettes and I rolled a pinner, which we smoked as the sun chased us down the road. The icy surface flickered in front of the truck like someone had smashed a trail of wine bottles all the way home. As I nursed from my flask of Crown, my forehead pressed against the cool window and I nodded off.

“Hey, don’t lean too hard,” Aaron said suddenly, nudging me. “That door doesn’t shut right anymore.”

“You’re just telling me now?”

“I didn’t want to wake you before. You looked peaceful.”

“Don’t let a person sleep against a busted door in the first place!”

“Well, I thought it started creaking.”

“Jesus Christ. What if it’d popped open?”

“You would’ve woke up anyway.” Then he said, “Look at that.”

Up ahead on the left I could see a maroon pickup truck in the ditch, the driver slumped over the steering wheel.

The engine brake took over, and we rumbled up next to the truck. Aaron got out, and I scraped the morning frost off the road with my cowboy boots as I followed him. He knocked on the driver’s window, and the man groaned into the horn.

“Guy’s drunk,” I said.

Aaron opened the door and proved me right, as the smell of bad booze hit us hard.

“Had the sense not to let the battery run down at least.” He said to the man, “You gonna make it?”

The man leaned back, and his eyes almost opened. We could see that he was a giant oak of a bastard with a cast on his right hand and a once-hand-some face that’d turned milky and wrinkled behind a beard.

“What’s your name, pal?” Aaron shook him. “You live around here?”

“Ooh yeah.”

“Can you find your house?”

“Mm.”

Aaron turned to me. “You drive him home, and I’ll follow.”

“Why don’t you drive him?”

“You don’t know how to drive the rig.”

“I can drive it!”

“Russ, that’s not driving.”

“Oh, piss off,” I said. “Let’s just take him with us and leave the truck.”

“The cops’ll come along soon enough, and they’ll tow him off to the tank. Be a Samaritan, man.”

“Fine,” I told him. “Christ’s sake.”

My brother ran around the truck and dragged on the driver’s jacket as I put my weight into him, and we pushed him down the bench seat. I went to get in after him and bashed my head against the doorframe so hard my ears rang. I rubbed the lump as it formed, shouting, “I’m gonna beat the shit out of this goddamn truck!”

Whooping, Aaron jogged back to the rig. I took a tug of whisky and angrily turned the truck over to hear Tammy Wynette giving it her all. As I offered the flask to my new passenger, I caught my reflection in the rearview: all bloodshot eyes and cheeks as smooth and hollow as dented metal.

“Where to?” I asked him.

The man helped himself to the flask, and his eyelids sprung open. Like his finger ached to stretch it, he pointed soft across the reaped fields. I put us in gear, gave it some gas, and the truck climbed the ditch, slipping and barking with effort, an empty bottle of something rolling around on the floor, ignored. I followed the road while the man growled against the door like a feral cat. He sounded very far off.

We took the first left, veering deeper into the meadowlands for five or six kilometres. At a break in the trees, the man pointed insistently with his plastered hand at a crooked mailbox. The name on it was TWO RIVERS.

I turned down the slot in the brush, and a sky of chimney smoke drew us down the laneway. The thin tips of the branches brushed the side mirrors of the pickup, but their thicker middles stretched for the logs, their fallen brothers, like pallbearers, chewing up the rig and cracking on the frame. A mutt bolted from the thicket and roped between the trucks, baying in the voice of a banshee with strep throat. The path opened up and looped back on itself in front of a raised log-and-rock house. I parked and got out as Aaron wheeled around behind us.

A woman came out of the softly-lit doorway and on down the porch, cinching her housecoat above her hips as she approached. She had red hair and a freckled face and was maybe in her fifties. Her body looked chiselled out of bone rather than grown naturally around it as she knelt down and

patted the dog's side to calm the thing. In strong Irish she said, "What'd he do now?"

"He got hung up, I guess."

"He got drunk again, you mean," she told me. "You shouldn't of brought him here."

Aaron walked up to us and rested his arms on the mashed-up tailgate. The man poured out of the pickup in dramatic fashion and leaned against the woman, nearly flattening and then towering over her. As they staggered toward the house, she faced away from him like he'd knocked her eyeballs out and she was searching for them blindly on the lawn. We heard mattress springs squeak and then the man snoring on them. The woman came back with a pack of cigarettes and smoked one in front of us as she looked us over.

"He all right?" Aaron asked.

"Sleepin' it off," the woman said. "Thanks for helpin' him out. Jerry owes you."

"What's he got the cast for?" asked Aaron.

"He popped a guy at bingo the other night for makin' eyes at me, or so he said." She shrugged, eyeing us now in a way that suggested Aaron's facial hair or my worn clothes might confirm that we were, indeed, crooks. Finally, she said, "Come on in."

Cathy was the name she gave, and hers was a beautiful place. It smelled like coffee, smoke, and good wood, and every inch of the floor moaned beneath our boots. The windowsills were coated in opened envelopes—love letters or overdue bills—and a grand piano was nestled into the corner of the living room, layered in so much dust its size had doubled. It felt like a real home, and photographs of smiling people lined the walls to prove it, including a few of Cathy and a man who wasn't Jerry. It reminded me of a life I'd never lived but wished I had.

Cathy noticed me looking at the piano.

"You play?" she asked.

"Nothing. You do, eh?"

Aaron said to her, "You know that Burton Cummings song with the line about being all alone with nothing but an old piano? That speaks right to me."

Cathy stared at him. "It used to belong to my husband, the Mohawk boy I loved most. We moved out here after we got married, and he'd play me

anythin' I ever wanted. Guess I've been waitin' for someone to play for me since."

"Where's he now?" I asked.

"Dead for a long time. Darryl got leukemia."

"Rough way to go," Aaron said.

"Couldn't tell you. It's not what killed him."

"So what'd he die of?"

"He got skinny, weightless as an angel, but he said he wanted to go on a fishin' trip, same as every year. So we went, and we were drinkin' and yakkin' on the boat all day. Then one time I turned around, and he just wasn't there." She looked out the kitchen window. "There weren't a sound, no ripples in the water even, but the lake feeds into different fingers that all flow out and away from us, you see." She took a last puff from her cigarette and snuffed it out. "They pulled him out two towns away. I figure he just didn't want to rot away before me."

"Jesus."

"Better'n gettin' old," she said, and her saying it worried me.

"I'm not old," I said.

"I'm sayin' you'll get that way if you live long enough."

I went outside and drank amply from my flask. Across the yard I found that a junior river lanced the property out back where some sheep pocked the soggy banks, sipping from it. The area had flooded not long ago and surely would again. The strongest trees still held jagged glass engagement rings around their trunks, recording the high line for the water's promised return. Somehow, she'd have to hold on.

I scaled the ends of the logs to check the chains securing them. I squatted as I went, my soles slick. When I glanced up and over the cornfield, I could see the crops had been left to ruin, unfed and ugly brown. On the other side, a half-moon had been carved out by a big machine, the path swirling around a scarecrow before breaking through a beam fence and entering the wall of the shed, where a decaying combine was parked and preventing the roof from falling down completely.

The screen door clapped as Cathy came out, and Aaron led the dog onto the porch. It scampered toward Cathy and sat staring up at her. Aaron looked at her too, the way he looked at anything he liked. After saying goodbye, I climbed down and met in the cab.

"She's a looker, eh?" he said. "Knocks the wind right out of you."

“She’s not young, though.”

“Go back to sleep, Russ,” he said. “You’re nicer in the morning.”

“I need a joint.”

We drove to the Junction Motel for the night. The room smelled of fake flowers, which made Aaron want to puke, so he said he was going to get dinner, which I figured meant he was going to the local dive. I fished a beer from the fridge and skinned it in an instant before spilling across the bed the way my former wife used to lay her body upon mine. Once, the measure of a day’s worth had been in how close she slept to me. Now I slept alone.

When I woke up, Cathy was sitting on the bed. She wore a fur-lined coat over a green nightgown, and her hands and the room key pooled in her lap. Her calves were purple, her feet bare, and her skin looked as if she’d just been released from the morgue.

“You gotta come with me,” she said.

“What?”

“Your brother come over to show me some songs he knew on the piano. We had a few drinks. We went to bed.” She breathed out raggedly. “We were fuckin’, but the dog started barkin’ and woke up Jerry. One second, I was gonna *come*—!” The way she shouted it sounded like something scared the words out of her. Her lips curled back, and her eyes leaked. “Then he come in with an axe handle and just hit him, and kept hittin’ him, like a downed powerline snappin’ over and over on wet pavement.”

“Christ,” I said, and my stomach turned over.

“I hit him with a picture frame, and he hit the dresser on his way down and didn’t get up.” Her voice swam toward me through grease. I grabbed a pipe and the baggie from my pack, loaded a bowl, and set fire to the mossy crumbs. Soon there were pixels in my vision and layers to the tragedy. I offered Cathy a puff, but she shook her head.

“Dope gives me a sore throat.”

“You want a beer then?” I asked. She didn’t answer, but I cracked one anyway, and she polished it off in three gulps. I went back to my bag for the bottle of Crown and refilled my flask as she said again, “You gotta come with me.”

“I can’t be around when you call the cops.”

“I’m not callin’ the cops,” she said. “I already know what happened.” Her long, curly hair hung down and hid her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“What the hell for?” I replied, tapping out the ash in the pipe.

“I should’ve saved him.”

I took a slug from my flask and cradled it in my elbow.

“Nobody saves anybody,” I told her. “Not really.”

She pressed her cold palm to my shallow cheek. Her eyes were wet and still as groundwater. “You gotta come with me.”

She drove us in Jerry’s pickup with the window open, her red hair dragging like a wave of fire as she smoked. Neither of us spoke. I just shivered in my clothes while her naked feet worked the pedals.

The rig was parked in front of the house, which looked dead and empty in the pickup’s headlights. The dog had been napping on the porch, but now his head and ears shot up.

Inside, Cathy led me down the hall to find Jerry splayed between the bedroom and the bathroom. He was breathing shallowly into the floorboards, blooms of dry blood on his head and his cast. The axe handle was lying next to him.

My brother was out cold in the bed to the left. The flesh of his torso glittered with old scars and blood darkened the pillow around his head, but his breathing was steady. Jesus hung from a crucifix on the wall above him, staring down like some kind of pervert.

Cathy retrieved a salad bowl of ice cubes and a cookie tin full of sewing stuff. I cleaned and sewed what I could of his scalp, eyebrow, and lips, avoiding the splintered nose, but it was a hatchet job. The stitching was already popping out.

He eventually came to, and I got him into his coat and out the door. He held the towel to his head and leaned on me as we went, trembling and gasping. In the passenger seat, he loaded a shaky cigarette into his mouth to help cure what must’ve been a cratering headache.

“You all right?” I asked.

His face was running pale around the black map of stitches, and his lips were tight. I don’t think he had an answer.

Cathy swept up the shards of glass in the bedroom and peeled the photograph from the broken frame—a picture of her and a man who must’ve been her dead husband, both smiling in front of this very house and holding a sign that said SOLD. She folded it into her coat pocket and then threw the frame and the axe handle into the fire. We stripped the bed, and the linens went into the flames as well. In the hallway Jerry emitted the noise of an

untuned radio, and Cathy seemed to be trying to decode his words as she stared into the fireplace. Suddenly, she went to the bathroom, plugged the tub, and opened the faucet fully.

She returned to seize Jerry at the ankles, and I mirrored her intentions by grabbing the man by his armpits. The bastard ogre was unliftable, so we dragged him across the floor into the bathroom and together rolled him gently into the bath, pound by pound, using his own weight to move him, though his long legs still stuck out and hung over the rounded rim. He gurgled only once after he'd been swallowed up.

Cathy nodded as if watching something sail off into the sunset, and all expression went with it. As the water rose, she turned away and went down the hall and onto the porch without closing the door. I followed to find her crouching as she smoked a cigarette and stirred her fingers behind the dog's ears. Inside, the bath overflowed and water trickled onto the tiles.

"Guess I'll make it down to Lucan tonight, stay with me sister," she said. "You and me, we're outlaws now."

I hadn't realized that's what we were until she said it, but it didn't change me to hear it.

I eventually went to the truck and eased it up the laneway, jumping awkwardly between gears as Aaron creaked against the door. I saw Cathy get to her feet in the rearview as the water leaked out the front door and skirted down the steps, washing everything away. Sometimes late at night, when storm clouds roll in and pour down upon the meadows, I can picture her standing there, and I wonder if she made it. She didn't, of course, but I still wonder how far she got. That must count for something.