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Where the River Flows

Even now, I keep my distance from those woods. I mean, sure, there's the allure of the damp undergrowth at the beginning of Fall, the appeal of lightly letting your feet sink downwards into the planet before you reject nature's embrace like you're removing a suction cup from a window. And, I guess I miss the birds flying overhead, since between the trees they act as flashing speckles playfully decorating the sky at around noon time. Perhaps those are just a few of the many traits I've loved about the woods, but even though Madeleine says there's nothing to fear, I know better. Heck, I of all people should know better.

Madeleine says it was a mere accident, the Lord retrieving his children at their due time, we could only grieve and move on. My aunt's a smart woman, don't get me wrong, but I still don't believe it's all that simple. She's always attempting to apply the most logical reasons to any given dilemma, especially when they are essentially unexplainable. She never even graduated from high school, but I think that if she did, she might have been one of those historians, you know, the ones who try and find meaning in things such as the war, the communists, and whatever the heck's happening in China.

Like, I asked her one day, as she was cooking Stratta for our evening meal, "Madeline! Why are the Reds trying to take over the world? The last guy that tried already got the boot, what makes them think they'll do any better?" She didn't answer me for a moment, not because she didn't have a response prepared, and not because she needs time to organize her thoughts. She was just too busy scrubbing the rusty brown metal pan in preparations for the eggs, and she was just too focused on purifying its entirety to answer my message. She was never very good at

multi-tasking, and she likes to complete her objectives in the order of request. And when the stack of tasks finally reached my question, she began cutting the tomatoes and took a deep breath. Now, she could've saved time by providing a simple answer like, 'The Reds are much larger than Germany', or 'Hitler didn't have as many allies', but instead she surprises me with a baffling perspective. "For a number of reasons, but I think the most prominent one that you should know is the fact that the Nazi's never had a desire for their citizens, not directly anyhow. Everything they sought was based on their own selfish ideals, but Russia's holding onto a different mindset. You see, Howie, they think that Communism is what's good for us, what's good for the world. It's like they believe it's a gift that they must spread, and they're caught up with the misconception that since they survived the war, that clearly their form of society is meant to last. It'll just be a matter of time before it crumbles before them, but until then, they'll continue writing their part in our history books".

She takes care of me now, well, she's always taken care of me. It's just that now, now there's no Father, and there's no Asher. It's kind of like the foundation of my upbringing is still here, but all the little extra supporting gears have all corroded away. There's no more baseball in the front yard, no more racing Asher to the school bus four days a week (Wednesday's were agreed to be truce days), and no more competitions to steal Bennet's sock and wash it in the basin. I suppose Bennet's still here, but he's not as fun anymore. Most of the day he just sleeps on the couch in the living room, his almost-furless yellow body twitching in synchronization to that Tennessee Ernie Ford song playing on the radio. You know, the one about Peter calling his friend who's working at the company's store. I don't really remember much about it, but Father always like to hum it before he went to work every afternoon.

And Asher, well, Asher was something else. Only a year younger than me and he could out-play, out-work, and out-class me in just about everything he did. Even Madeleine used to just call him ‘Mr. Energy’, and sometimes he’d go without sleep for entire days. That’s because during the weekend he liked to huddle up against Bennet, who still had most of his yellow fur back then, and listen to the news programs until eleven. He liked to know what was going on in the world. I never cared, we lived in some remote part of Maine, a five minute drive to the nearest paved road. We had a small yellow house that was attached to a trailer where Father slept. Our front yard was covered with makeshift baseball mounds crafted out of Madeleine’s old pie pans. A pink flamingo, three red-hatted gnomes, and two canaries with their wings acting as windmills once littered our lawn too, but countless of injuries involving flying wooden bats and heavy white balls deformed them into nothing but garbage. Although, I think Asher found some use for those things, but for the life of me, I could never get him to tell me what.

But, things were never boring, Father made sure of that. In fact, he was a lot like us, he just tried to hide it whenever he needed to put on his ‘adult-attire’ and parent us like a real father. But sometimes, late at night, Asher and I would sneak out behind the living room couch after he came home from working at the lumber mill. I didn’t know what he specifically did, but I could see the results etched as scars and bruises over his entirety. From our perch behind the rotting piece of furniture, hidden in the fog of darkness from the kitchen’s searchlights, we could hear Madeleine scolding him, “George, my God, you’ve bloodied yourself up again, slap your leg against the table to numb it while I fetch the wrappings”. And Father, crying throughout Madeleine’s lecture, “I can’t Madii! I can’t even move it! Can you just help me get it on the table! Madii!” We used to struggle to hold back our outburst of giggles. Father never really

seemed like a parent, he was more like an extended brother who happened to have gray hair, an untidy beard, and many sunsets ahead of us.

Father sometimes tried to parent us, like for instance, that time when we kept startling Bennet by making cat sounds all throughout the house, of which I still have no regrets about. When you can watch an overweight old dog fold his ears backwards, fly up onto his senseless feet, and shove his great wrinkled head beneath the kitchen sink at the sound of a simple and innocent ‘meow’, you know you’ve found the definition of ‘fun’ that a dictionary will never provide. And Father, attempting to refrain from enjoying the situation himself, had us sitting on the couch, separated by a large gap in the middle, each of us clutching to one of the moldy arms of the furniture. He coughed, as if trying to prepare a lecture, and only managed to say, “Asher. Howie. I’m very *very* disappointed”. After a moment he continued, “You should know better, Bennet deserves more respect than those childish antics”. And Asher, breaking into a wide grin that managed to reveal the dark hole where had pulled his loose tooth only days beforehand, began giggling and exclaimed, “And I’m sure Benny could sleep better if you stopped your whining when you come home every night”. Father still never found our hiding place on the couch, even though we observed him looking for us on several occasions. And when he wasn’t looking for us during those nights he’d continue complaining and groaning at Madeline about his injuries, work, and the Jews, who apparently were taking over the lumber mill and converting it for the Communists, whatever that meant.

But, one thing Father and Asher had in common, something that always kept me out of the loop, was the woods. Less than a mile west of our home was a rundown house, filled with decaying possessions that piled up behind the windows until it seemed as though it was going to explode and spill all its garbage before the entrance to the woods. I don’t know who owned the

house, but I do know it was the only place that Father, Asher, and I never explored. It was like Hell's Gate, and it's even more so meaningful now. Inside that house must have been the summary of some family's undesired items. And, if they didn't want them, no doubt they were things that were okay to be forgotten. Even worse, they were probably things that needed to be forgotten. It was like a box of sin from our perspective, not that I know much about what was actually inside, but that seemed to be the only logical determination from Father and Asher's creative evaluation of the building. Father would always tell us to stay away from that home, and nothing good would come from exploring it. He said it was nothing but a compressed representation of the many people who died in these parts, each leaving behind some part of their former life to add to the house's heap of memories. He said that it collected the souls of those who voluntarily passed its domain, seeking to heed the call of the forest spirits. It supposedly would trap their souls in the woods forever, a fitting payment for being admitted through Hell's gate. Not that I actually believe that superstitious lore, but now do you understand why I keep my distance from the woods?

But, Father and Asher barely took notice of Hell's Gate. They practically lived in the woods during their free time. I myself enjoyed traveling with them, but I never seemed to share the same connection. Asher would always lead us, beckoning us onward by singing the incorrect lyrics to songs he had recently heard on the radio. He could improvise most of the verses and make admirable attempts to recite the chorus properly. And Father would keep rhythm by clicking his tongue against the top of his mouth as he strolled along side me, trying to make sure that I was also having a good time. And I did, even if I wasn't as close to the woods or musically talented, I took great happiness in just observing them having their own delight in nature's embrace.

We'd follow worn paths that twisted in between trees, over sinking boulders and through insect-infested ditches until we found ourselves emerging out of the woods, into a field, and onto one of the many roads that lay on the outskirts of our territory. Madeleine never came with us, and perhaps she was like me, a stranger to the allure of immersing oneself in nature. She was usually busy working around the house or traveling into town, and even now, I think she still has her own doubts about the woods, despite her attempts to comfort me otherwise. Bennet was too lazy to follow us, and if he did, I wonder if he would react to Hell's Gate like he did to our cat sounds. And sometimes we'd meet people along the paths. Hunters, fellow travelers, lost families, procrastinating farmers, and scruffy-looking fishermen. Father liked speaking to the fishermen best, since he himself once worked in the boating industry, serving as a shipmate for a large vessel that supposedly retrieved lobster and other shelled sea creatures to sell on the market. And, he liked fishing, and perhaps he felt as though the woods existed to grant all his wishes, because in the midst of the woods he found Dimitra.

It was a river that he had named in such a manner to represent the mysterious way it always seemed to show up and follow Father and Asher during our travels. It was as if it didn't have a set course, but could bend and wiggle its way through the trees like a snake, altering its form each and every time we entered into the woods. It would pursue us in our travels, silently inviting Father and Asher to come play in its waters. And Father, armed with his childhood fishing pole, the same rod that he used to knock down hornet nests and Frisbees during the summer, never had to search far to find the river. Despite where we were, it always seemed to be a set distance down the path. In the quiet flow of its cool ripples we'd sometimes uncover the occasional spring lush with aquatic life in the form of swaying plants and circling fish. We could have just grabbed nets and cleaned the pools out, but Father liked to imitate his past dreams by

tossing the bait on the line, sitting upon one of the jagged rocks hovering above the spring, and acting as if he was on some lifelong mission to catch the monster of the pond. It was quite inspiring to watch this valiant actor take part in his own one-man plays before us. He played the roles of the brave and undeterred fisherman, the doubting and skeptical townsfolk, and the veteran fisherman who knew of the tricks to catch the behemoth. It was always a tale of patience, hardship, and triumph, but despite the redundancy of the act, it was always entertaining. It was one of the many traditions of our travels in the woods.

And then, Father was gone. It happened so suddenly, I can even recall the boundary between when he was here, and when he disappeared. One night we were playing chess together, well, more or less against Madeleine. We'd take turns trying to best her in that gambit. But, each round would simply end with her pushing her glasses up towards her forehead, smiling politely, and softly stating, "It was close", even though it never was. She was young, in fact, she still is. If we were twelve at the time, she couldn't have been much older than thirty, so I guess she'd be about thirty-five now? Father must have been twice her age, at least, and he probably only had half of her maturity. He'd always forget which pieces did what, and Asher had to constantly remind him that Knights can jump over other pieces, but must always turn at the end of their leap to land safely. Asher also said Bishops move diagonally because the path to Christ isn't a direct route. Once in a game against Madeleine, he asked her, "Madii, why do you think the King can only move one space?" And Madeleine, taking what I thought was the proper answer, stated, "Likely because the game would be unbalanced if it were any other way." And Asher, rejecting her answer, smugly corrected her, "Nope, cause he's so fat and lazy from being stuck behind all his soldiers, he just can't manage to move any faster." I don't know how much truth there was in his words, but it helped me to remember how to play, even if his reasons made no sense.

Anyhow, Asher and I awoke in the morning at the sound of Bennet dropping off yesterday's pasta on our rough wooden floor. Most of it was undigested, and I scolded Bennet for his lack of taste in good food, cleaned up the squishy mountain of rejected nutrition, and threw it in the toilet before Madeleine could discover that some of her meal had been denied by a member of our family. And Madeleine, with her brown hair tied back in a ponytail, was letting water run from the faucet through the arsenal of dishes until it managed to find the drain. It took a while for it to fill the pans and squeeze in between the bowls until it found the finish line, but at least it could find it. She told us that Father had already left for the woods; he was going upriver to find the source of the flow, hoping to find an even bigger spring than the ones we had previously visited. And that's when he was gone. I mean, we didn't realize he was actually missing until later, but that is when he evaporated from our lives.

Asher and I entered the woods as we always did, not knowing where Father had gone, but knowing that once we found the river, it would be alright. And, for all the time that I searched, leading us forward, away from the typical paths, and deeper into the labyrinth of trees, I couldn't find that ever-changing river. It was Asher who, while humming some old big band number he had heard on the radio one night, pointed out the distinct sound of the whispering waters. Dimitra almost appeared to leap in front of us. One moment I was just walking toward a tree in the direction of Asher's prediction, and the next second it's there, right around a large pine tree. How could I have missed that stream? And so, this time we followed it, instead of it chasing after us, but we never got anywhere. Heck, we just wound up in familiar locations. It was like the river had no beginning and no end, like it was just a circular flow that could change its location on demand. And then it was dark, and we returned home, but our fears didn't take root until next morning when Father still had not returned.

And, I guess I recall the disappearance of Asher and Father as one memory, not two separate events. Because, you see, only a few days later, we went to try searching again. We thought that maybe Father trudged for miles and stopped at some distant town to rest, or maybe he did find the start of the river and was in such an awestruck state that he had forgotten to return to reality. This time Asher led, as he was convinced that I wasn't good at locating freshwater. Father and Asher used to always carry dowsing sticks when they traveled. I never believed in them, but Father and Asher liked to think that water acted like a magnet that would attract dowsers. They'd make a scene and pretend like they were being pulled by the sticks towards some unseen water supply. Luckily, since the Dimitra had a habit of showing up consistently throughout our adventures, they were never wrong in their predictions. But, Asher didn't have his dowser that day. We both had backpacks full of supplies. Against Madeleine's wishes, we gathered our survival kits and entered the woods on a rescue mission. We still believed that Father was safe, so our attitudes were unexpectedly light.

Asher pretended that he was a corporal separated from his platoon, and I was his right hand lieutenant who was adept at strategy and logical prediction. I don't think Asher understood the military ranks very well, he was always very creative in his skits, but he never had things very accurate. Now that I think about it, we've always been in two separate worlds. Madeleine and I have always been realistic, logical, and down to earth. Father and Asher have always been daring, energetic, and, I guess, they've always been ready to believe the occult and supernatural without hesitation, perhaps because it added some false sense of mystery and wonder to life. The river promptly found Asher, and we began our mission once more. Asher sang military tribute songs from a recent radio broadcast that celebrated America's soldiers, and I attempted to track down the direction of the river before it could twist and turn, a feeble attempt on my part to

prevent it from changing its path before our eyes. I wanted to know the flow of the river, where it was, where it was going, but it eluded, and we found ourselves moving in circles again. Hours later we had made no progress, but we had crafted a plan to thwart Dimitra. I say we, but, well, we each thought of it on our own, and, regretfully, we never discussed why it would work. But I know why. Asher would go in one direction, and I would go in the other. We both agreed this would double our chances of discovering something. But, what we unfortunately didn't talk about was why it would work. And, given what had already happened to Father, I didn't think much about what our plan would result in.

You see, I realized that only Asher could seem to find the river. And, Asher realized that the river never seemed to go anywhere when I was around. So, each of us thought, that if we separated, maybe the river could guide Asher to Father. It was as if we were going in circles because the river didn't want me, as if I wasn't worthy, as if I wasn't in the loop that it shared with Father and Asher. And so Asher went one way, I the other. And I remember his maroon backpack bouncing to some unheard music as he skipped alongside the stream. And I remember stopping to have lunch by a tree after the river brought me back to the same location for the fourth time. And I remember losing sight of the water after finishing my meal, giving up, and returning home to Madeleine, who, upon seeing my hopeless face unaccompanied by Asher's radiance, knew exactly what had happened. We ate some runny Italian soup in silence before I went to bed, knowing that Asher would not be around in the morning.

And then I attempted to return to the woods a day later, and Madeleine didn't motion to stop me. I think she knew that I'd return. I wanted to discover what had happened, but I knew deep down, that what I really wanted was for it to happen to me. I wanted to be where Father and Asher were, I wanted to be in the river's loop. So I left, figuring I'd try locating the river, and

somehow, if I was lucky, I could at least find the direction that Asher had departed. But, I never found the river, and I didn't enter into the woods. I discovered something, although, perhaps it wasn't what I expected or desired to reveal. And perhaps, it was best that I didn't waste my time stumbling through the woods, perhaps it was only fitting that I should have been reminded of the futility of my endeavors.

And just like any other day, I trudged west with my backpack weighing down my body and my dowsing stick by my side. I knew it wouldn't work, because I didn't believe in such things. But, well, I figured some effort was better than none. And as I walked, I approached Hell's Gate as we usually did on those mornings when we gathered up our supplies and gained entrance into its domain. And as I approached, I realized that the morning air was whispering to me. 'Mr. Sandman' was playing softly in the morning background, and although it took me a moment, I stopped walking before the rundown house in time to realize that somewhere inside, a radio was playing. And, as I examined the structure, my gaze fell upon a second story window. Junk was still piled up behind the first floor windows, but what I had not acknowledged beforehand, was the fact that forgotten possessions had also been crammed behind the second floor windows, which seemed impossible given the inability for anyone to traverse through the obstacles in the lower part of the house. The second floor windows seemed to glare down at the outsider below, and all I could concentrate on were the repeating lyrics, "Bring me a dream," and the bizarre way the building seemed to await my next action, as if it was about to retaliate if I failed to respond properly. And, perhaps I had not noticed it beforehand, or maybe someone intended some cruel prank, but behind one of the windows on the second floor were three red-hatted gnomes that grinned wickedly down at me.

The radio continued eerily playing, causing me to shake slightly as a rhythmic clicking joined the song. In another window on the far right, I could see a large fishing pole. In another window on the first floor, I could see the outline of the tips of two dowsing sticks wedged between the glass pane and three lawn ornaments: two clipped birds and a broken pink flamingo. And, finally just like the other possessions, in the midst of piles of other foreign debris, behind a window on the second floor I could see a maroon backpack, still new and filled with supplies. The music continued mocking me, as if Hell's Gate was satisfied with its acquisition of memories, and the clicking served to hasten my retreat, but if had stayed, perhaps I could've heard the childish sounds of an adult whining and a boy meowing softly through the woods.

And, even now, I still avoid the woods when possible. Madeleine says I have nothing to fear, and part of me knows that there's some truth in that statement, although I often ponder why. And, I sometimes have gone through the woods with others, it's only been a few years, but our world has changed. Madeleine says we ought to move into town, for the sake of my education. Some construction workers demolished the rundown house one weekend. Apparently, aside from the vermin and furniture within, the house was essentially empty when they checked inside. And the woods still exist, although they seem empty, as if its spirit has retreated deeper into its interior, perhaps wherever the Dimitra went. And Madeleine says that what happened was an accident, but I disagree. I keep my distance from the woods when possible, but I still am sometimes drawn to it, knowing that one day I'll be gone and I don't want to forget about them, I don't want it to steal all my memories. Maybe it doesn't want me, but I still return sometimes. I like the emotions it stirs. I like the sway of the trees in the autumn breeze. I like the feel of the moss-covered boulders scattered throughout the area. And, I like the sound of the distant stream

coursing in route to some unknown spring where only the chosen are admitted, even if I, for the life of me, still can't find that river.